The House on West 11th Street

Three Decades After Young Radicals Blew Up an Elegant Brownstone in Greenwich Village, Echoes of the Blast Linger.

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The cross streets off lower Fifth Avenue just north of Washington Square are among the most historic and quietly residential in Manhattan, a haven in a city that thrives on its hyperactivity. Writers and artists as varied as Mark Twain, Leonard Bernstein and Thornton Wilder once lived and worked here. Even those less famous have prized this neighborhood for its classic beauty and its privacy. Eleventh Street between Fifth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas is one of the choicest streets, with brownstones evoking an atmosphere resonant of the last turn of the century.

For three years in the late 1960’s, my wife, Ann, our son, Ethan, and I lived on the second floor of a brownstone at 16 West 11th Street. The house was owned by Joe Hazan and his wife, Jane Freilicher, the painter. The parlor floor was occupied by Dustin Hoffman, his wife, Anne, and their daughter, Karina. Mr. Hoffman had become a movie star but partly because this was West 11th Street had continued to live a relatively secluded life. The street seemed destined to remain a kind of sanctuary, until just before noon on March 6, 1970, when the house next door, at 18 West 11th Street, exploded. The explosion, which became front-page news and sent a shock wave through the city, was caused by the accidental detonation of dynamite in a subbasement bomb factory. Young radicals from the Weathermen were making bombs to destroy property, beginning with the main library at Columbia University.

Three bomb makers, Theodore Gold, Diana Oughton and Terry Robbins, were killed. Two others, Kathy Boudin and Cathlyn Wilkerson, escaped and remained fugitives for more than a decade. The first was the
daughter of the civil liberties lawyer Leonard Boudin, the second the
dughter of James P. Wilkerson, the owner of the house at No. 18.

During the years since, I have thought about the explosion often:
every March on the anniversary, and on other occasions; when Cathy
Wilkerson resurfaced in 1980 and was tried and convicted, and served a
brief prison sentence; when Kathy Boudin took part in a 1981 robbery
in which two police officers and a Brinks guard were killed. She was
tried, convicted, and sentenced to serve her time at Bedford Hills Correc-
tion Facility in Bedford, N.Y. Every time I walk by the house that was
built on the site, I am ineluctably drawn back to memories of when it
was a place of destruction.

In the interim, children have grown up and married. The Hoffmans
were divorced, and married other people. The surviving bombers are in
their 50’s, and they have refused to talk about the explosion. Yet 30 years
later, the event still shadows those affected by it.

Houses have personal histories. As they pass between owners, they
become carriers of family chronicles. The house at 18 West 11th Street
and those surrounding it, beautifully matched four-story town houses of
Federal design, were built in the 1840’s by Henry Brevoort Jr. and were
known as the Brevoort Row. Early in the 20th century, No. 18 was
owned by Charles Merrill, a founder of Merrill Lynch & Company. His
son, the poet James Merrill, was born there.

In 1930, Charles Merrill sold the building to Howard Dietz, a suc-
cessful Broadway lyricist and a movie executive. Merrill followed up
with a note saying that he hoped the new owner would enjoy “the little
house on heaven street.” Dietz lived there lavishly with each of his three
wives. When he gave a party, sometimes for as many as 250, all the fur-
niture was placed in a van, which was parked on the street until the
guests finished “dancing in the dark,” as Dietz phrased it in his most fa-
mous song.

James Wilkerson, an advertising executive, bought the house in 1963
and moved in with his second wife, Audrey. He continued the high style
of living to which the house had become accustomed. The dwelling had
10 rooms, including a double-size drawing room, a paneled library, where
the owner kept his valuable collection of sculptured birds, and a sauna.
He restored antique furniture in the subbasement workroom. The house
still had the original mantles on its fireplaces and was filled with Hepple-
white furniture. In the garden was a fountain with a mirror behind it.
In 1964, Mr. Wilkerson celebrated his 50th birthday with a masked ball for 90 people, dancing to an orchestra until 2 a.m. Among the guests were two daughters from his first marriage, Ann and Cathy. Several times my wife and I came home from the theater and saw the Wilkersons welcoming guests in formal attire.

At 11:55 on Friday morning, March 6, 1970, Anne Hoffman was coming home and the cabdriver accidentally drove past her house. As she got out of the cab, No. 18 exploded. If the cab had stopped at No. 16, she and the driver might have felt the full brunt of the explosion. She rushed into her apartment, where she found her frightened baby sitter with the family’s terrier. Back outside, she was met by a wall of flame.

At the moment of the explosion, my wife was at Fifth Avenue and 11th Street with our son, whom she had just picked up at nursery school. Leaving him with a friend, she ran toward our house.

Arthur Levin, who still owns the building at No. 20, was at home at the time of the explosion. At first, he thought it had occurred in his house; when he went outside, he realized that it was next door. He immediately telephoned the police.

Further down the street, Susan Wager, a neighbor, was in her kitchen. “I felt my house tremble,” she said. “It was like an earthquake.”

She rushed to No. 18 and saw two grime-covered young women coming out of the downstairs door. One (Cathy Wilkerson) was naked. The other (Kathy Boudin) was partly clad in jeans. The assumption was that their clothes were torn off in the blast.

Mrs. Wager took them back to her house, gave them fresh clothes and offered them the use of a shower. Then she went back into the street to see what was happening. By the time she returned home, the two women had left, one wearing Mrs. Wager’s favorite boots and coat. She never saw the women again. “I thought they were in an accident,” Ms. Wager said. “I never thought they could have been responsible.”

By the time I arrived, the street was swarming with firemen, policemen and sightseers. Seeing the smoke pour out of No. 18, we felt that our house would also be destroyed. That afternoon, each tenant in our building was allowed to make one quick trip inside and rescue items of property. In our apartment, the walls creaked, as if a ship had been torpedoed and was about to sink beneath the sea. None of the tenants of No. 16 ever spent a night in that house again.
On the evening news, there was a picture of a red tricycle and the suggestion that a child might be missing in the explosion. It was Ethan’s tricycle. It had been in the lobby of the building and the fireman had put it outside. Our upstairs neighbor, a playwright, rescued his tax forms, a Picasso drawing and a tin of truffles. His top hat and tails, worn for openings at the opera, were never recovered.

Devastated by the explosion, the splendid house at No. 18 had been reduced to shattered walls and windows. Mr. Hoffman’s living room wall had a huge hole torn in it. His desk had fallen into the rubble next door.

Late that day he stood in the street with his daughter. It was her fourth birthday, and he was trying to reassure her.

“Don’t worry, Karina, everything will be all right,” he said to his daughter, and then said it again. She looked up at him and replied, “If everything is going to be all right, why are you shaking so hard?”

On Saturday, we were allowed to go up and retrieve a few more things. What we did not know was that buried in the rubble were 60 sticks of dynamite, lead pipes packed with dynamite, blasting caps and packages of dynamite taped together with fuses. An F.B.I. report later determined that “had all the explosives detonated, the explosion would have leveled everything on both sides of the street.”

When the Wilkersons returned from St. Kitts, where they had been on vacation, the police took them and the Hoffmans to a warehouse on the Gansevoort Street pier. Mr. Hoffman remembers seeing huge mounds of debris, five feet high, the remnants of the Wilkerson house. His wife tripped over a blue coat; thinking it might be hers, she went through the pockets. She found a penciled map of the underground tunneling system at Columbia University. Most chilling to her was that her father was the head librarian at Columbia and would have been at work had the explosives been detonated in Butler Library.

Later, the police—or was it the F.B.I.?—showed the Hoffmans photographs of Weathermen and the remains of the three victims. In some cases, Mr. Hoffman had difficulty even recognizing the body parts.

Several years ago, in pursuit of long buried facts, my wife and I went to Washington and looked at sections of 10,000 pages of once secret or classified F.B.I. documentation on the Weathermen and at papers of the New York Police Department dealing with the investigation. Several things seem evident, even as other mysteries linger.
Kathy Boudin and Cathy Wilkerson were deeply committed to civil protest against what they saw as injustices, in particular the war in Vietnam. They met in 1964 when both were arrested for protesting against segregated schools in Chester, Pa. The F.B.I. had followed them for years.

Cathy Wilkerson had often stayed at her father’s house when she was a college student and had asked to stay there in March 1970 while the Wilkersons were in St. Kitts. Mr. Levin, who was often on the street walking his dog, remembers once seeing people carrying boxes from a car into the house. Later he surmised that the boxes contained explosives.

As time passed, the explosion faded into history, but for some of us, it remained a vivid memory. During the last few years, in search of questions, if not answers, I talked to some of the key figures in the event. One was Mr. Wilkerson, who was living near Stratford-on-Avon in England. Sipping tea in a Stratford hotel, he reluctantly drew himself back to the experience.

“Talking to you about this subject is like talking to somebody about a bad case of poison ivy that I had many years ago,” he said at one point. “I survived it, and I’m fine, and thoughts don’t well up in my mind about it, because either consciously or subconsciously I put them out of my mind.”

“Possessions are fine, but when the chips are down, they’re not all that important,” he added. “We were concerned about our daughter Cathy.”

Before the explosion, his house had been up for sale. His wife was English and they had been planning to move to England. They simply left earlier than intended.

Mr. Wilkerson said that for 10 years he did not hear from his daughter. Then in 1980, her younger sister got in touch with him to say that Cathy was about to surface. She was tried and convicted on charges of illegal possession of dynamite. She served 11 months in Bedford Hills.

“I keep repeating, what my wife and I lived through, what you lived through, what Cathy lived through, so many other people have lived through worse experiences, and survived,” Mr. Wilkerson said. “People have children killed in automobile accidents and houses burn down every day of the week. Human nature keeps you going. You forget the bad
things. Here I am, no visible outer scars.” He paused, and added, “I’m sure there are some inner ones.”

Had he ever asked his daughter why she was involved in the bomb making? “Never,” he answered. “And she never offered.”

Audrey Logan, Cathy’s mother, also preferred not to discuss the subject.

“I understand what it must have done to you,” she said by phone from her home in New Hampshire. “I can’t begin to tell you what it’s done to me.” She paused. “My daughter has so much integrity and has tried to reconstruct her life. She’s made a constructive life for herself and for her child.” As to whether the explosion was simply a thing of the past and no longer mattered, she responded: “It matters. In some ways, it seems like yesterday.”

In contrast to the Wilkersons, the Boudins were often in the political spotlight. Leonard Boudin was on the front line fighting for civil liberties and human rights. His wife, Jean, was a poet; Jean’s sister was married to I. F. Stone, the liberal journalist. Kathy grew up surrounded by activists and artists. Her social consciousness came naturally. As Mr. Boudin said at his daughter’s trial, “We are responsible in a large sense for our daughter’s views on life: the prelude to a long prison sentence.” Leonard Boudin died in 1989, his wife in 1994.

As an inmate, Kathy earned a master’s degree in education and has been active as a teacher and in counseling other prisoners. Her activities formed the basis for her petition to Gov. Mario M. Cuomo for clemency, which was rejected in 1994.

Next to the Wilkersons, the Boudins and the Weathermen themselves, the people most affected by the explosion were the owners and residents of the adjoining buildings. The landlords of Nos. 16 and 20, Joe Hazan and Arthur Levin, were faced with repairing their houses. Mr. Levin, who publishes a health newsletter, said the bombing “was a seminal event in a very turbulent period.”

He added: “It was an interesting kind of victimization. Here I have good politics and I’m still getting blown out of my house.”

Looking back on the explosion, Mr. Hoffman said it was a life-changing and philosophy-changing experience. Before it happened, he said, he was “in a chrysalis,” away from reality.

“It remains an abstraction until it happens to you,” he added. “Since then, we’ve seen killings of abortion doctors, killings by Christian funda-
mentalists. At a certain point, the radical left and the radical right merged. They shook hands.”

Mateo Lettunich, a writer who lives in California, lived on the top floor of No. 16 at the time of the explosion. Recalling his Greenwich Village days with affection, he seemed to have no angry feelings about the explosion. “I’m afraid I never dwelt on the sociological side of it all,” he said. “The Weathermen were a sign of the times, which ended, or fizzled, not too long after, only to be replaced by much worse: the violence of the 90’s.”

Gino Sloan, a textile designer who lived in the garden apartment, suffered the most damage to his home. His floor collapsed and his bedroom caved in. He lost all his clothes except for a polyester suit he hated. Although he was appalled by the explosion, he feels that it offered him an immediate freedom. An avid collector of books and other objects, he felt suddenly liberated from his possessions. “I felt as light as a feather and free and unencumbered,” he said, except for his concern about his pets.

He finally found his orange cat in a closet, terrified and turned pitch black by the fire. When he brought the cat outside, the crowd greeted him with a cheer. But Leona the Lion Head Goldfish did not survive; too much sediment had fallen on her aquarium.

Mr. Sloan moved to another apartment in the Village and has again surrounded himself with possessions. An odd thought enters his mind: perhaps he needs a metaphorical bombing to simplify his life once more.

Catless, he now has a dog that he walks daily along 11th Street. He says the dog “makes a statement” by habitually relieving itself in front of No. 16 and never in front of No. 18, perhaps out of some atavistic canine memory. Mr. Sloan says politically he felt kinship with the Weathermen, and “except for the bombing,” would have been on their side.

At the time, the explosion had a profound effect on my life and family. I had recently started a new job and was awaiting publication of my first book. Our son was not yet 4, and for a time everything was “before” or “after” the explosion, as in a reference to a toy “I used to have before the explosion.”

We were without a home, moving from a hotel to a sublet to a friend’s house and back to a hotel. The objects we had rescued were kept in storage. When finally reclaimed, they were still heavy with smoke. Years
later, we would occasionally open a book or drawer and be met with the lingering smell of the fire. It was a long time before my wife or I could speak about the explosion without tears. After a year, we moved to West 10th Street, where we live today.

When all the rubble was gone at No. 18, a fence was erected in front of the property. There was a door in the fence, and one day I opened it. Behind the door was a bombed-out war zone: ashes, rubble, broken beams and the charred remains of a book, “Catch-22.”

Eventually, Hugh Hardy, the architect, and Francis Mason, then an executive at Steuben Glass, bought the land. Mr. Hardy designed a startlingly modern structure. After considerable debate, the radical design was finally approved by the Landmarks Commission. The Hardys and the Masons planned to turn the new house into a two-family dwelling. But as time passed, the two couples changed their minds and put the property back on the market.

For eight years, the plot remained vacant. Then, in 1978, it was sold to David and Norma Langworthy, a wealthy Philadelphia couple. They used Mr. Hardy’s design for the exterior, with a facade jutting out toward the street. They moved in the following year, and Mrs. Langworthy remained after her husband’s death in 1994.

Inside, the new one-family house has 10 levels, with perspective-distorting angles and open spaces allowing for dramatic views. The former bomb factory is now a laundry room. Nowhere is there a hint of the building’s past.

The signature touch is a Paddington bear in the jutting window. Its costume is changed according to the weather. On rainy days, Paddington wears a raincoat. During a storm, he switches to snow wear. For the first day of school, he is decked out in his schoolboy outfit. By special request, one day two bears appeared in the window dressed as a bride and groom; on cue, a neighborhood doctor fell to his knees on the sidewalk and proposed to his girlfriend.

Every March 6, people place flowers around the tree in front of the building. One day in the early 1990's, Francis Mason invited James Merrill and his mother, Hellen Plummer, to see the house that had replaced their former home. After her son’s death in 1995, Mrs. Plummer, then 95, reminisced about the original house at No. 18. She had lived there when she was first married 70 years before. Her son spent his first five years in the house and went to Sunday school at the Church of the Ascension around the corner.
“We were happy there,” she said. About returning to the site, she added: “It didn’t feel like our old house. It was totally different architecture. But it was soothing to us that someone cared enough to put something else on the property.”

It is not surprising that a poet would have made one of the most moving statements about the house. After the explosion, James Merrill wrote a poem titled “18 West 11th Street,” mourning the memory of his birthplace. He writes about the “dear premises vainly exploded.” Later, he observes:

Shards of a blackened witness still in place.
The charred ice-sculpture garden
Beams fell upon. The cold blue searching beams.

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(Editor’s note: Kathy Boudin was released on parole in September 2003.)