

Nine Eleven

Judith Davenport

“There is some kind of a sweet innocence in being human - in not having to be just happy or just sad - in the nature of being able to be both broken and whole, at the same time.”

C. JoyBell C.

I saw the slash, a horizontal wound to the building. Wisps of smoke rising from the corners of a sardonic mouth. I turned my head this way and that trying to figure out what I was looking at. The words under the picture say it was a plane. Yes, that’s the outline of a plane, but where is the plane? I see but do not see what my brain cannot register. It must be something else. I was in front of one of the two huge televisions that kept us informed of world events, a necessary tool, lest we send clients into areas that might endanger American citizens—corporate almost-big wigs. The really big had private jets.

No one stood with me. Some passed by with papers in their hands as if on important missions. I looked around because no one seemed to see what I saw. I needed some verification. A horizontal slit with wisps of smoke from the corners. I had gotten off the express bus not more than ten minutes before, taken the elevator up. Everything following the familiar pattern. Until I passed the television. No sound, just the blue sky, the tower with the slash. Looking around, co-workers passing not looking, not seeing what I see. Is it because New Yorkers see everything? Numb to the slash? Nothing unusual about a slash. From far away on the television screen it was six or eight inches, the slash. But I knew it wasn’t. It spanned almost the whole side of the building. The building, or one like it, that I went to every week for the Cornell-American Express Off-Campus College Program.

Then in the background, I see the plane, it's in back of the tower-with the slash. Then it hits the building, I feel my stomach flip. "Look, look," I'm shouting now. "Look, look." I grab someone. They are still not looking. I start bawling and wonder how no one but me can see, understand that someone was sitting at a desk. Did they run away from the nose of the plane as it pushed its way into their space? Did they see it through their windows and have a chance to jump out of the way?

Every Thursday, I had stood on Broadway waiting for the express bus going back to Queens after attending classes held in one of the towers. On many occasions, as I stood waiting, I looked and marveled that a tower that touched heaven seemed to be balanced on such small legs. Many people could walk between them with plenty of space. Hell, you could fit another building under it. I would wonder, how did those columns support all the desks, computers, bathrooms, chairs, filing cabinets, cubicles? I added little-thought-of items, too, like the shoes every woman has under her desk; they must contribute some serious weight. Yet, the columns did not seem to feel the burden. I thought of silly things like that while waiting and marveling at man's ingenuity and wondering why he can't stop killing the other.

"Oh my god!" someone said; at last, someone was paying attention. "Isn't that the building where Marsh & McLennan is?" Bridget's sister was a co-worker. Someone said to go get her. I forget her name now. Now some of the office was no longer in the New Yorker coma where nothing is news. Now they could see what I see. It's their turn now to join me where I've been since walking into the office. I haven't moved to put my pocketbook down or go to my desk. I'm sure someone will ask what's going on, ask what I am looking at. I can only look and try to understand. Bridget's sister and a group of us stood eyes fixed. "What floor?" someone finally says. Bridget's sister named the floor. I think it was seventy-three. Pointing and counting, the group began at the top subtracting seventy-three from the total to see how many to count down. "No," we decided in unison. We must have miscounted. Start again. I don't know how many times we counted before someone said to call. Someone asked if Sigrid was supposed to be there for a meeting. Nothing said to confirm her whereabouts, only that she hadn't come in yet. No, I think Sigrid was supposed to come to our office for a meet-

ing. Anyway her name was mentioned. We never saw her again.

Some disperse to make their prioritized calls, but my feet are lead, my eyes trying to make sense of what I see. For a half millisecond, there is some part of me that tells me that I'm supposed to be working. My supervisor walks by but I don't move. She doesn't say anything, doesn't look up at the horror unfolding, keeps walking. We count again. Bridget's sister returns, no answer. Now screams of realization escape from the depths of our bellies and sear our throats, we stop counting and begin crying and shaking our heads no, no, no, as if that will nullify what we see.

I am wrenched away from the screen. I can't look anymore. Thoughts of my family. I pray. We go through the names of who, besides Bridget, works at Marsh. American Express is a big company, but Corporate Travel people know each other because we move from account to account. There is hardly an account you can transfer to where you don't know at least one or more people. I knew people at Marsh including Bridget. I knew Bridget before I knew her sister; maybe that's why I can't remember her sister's name.

I tried to comfort her sister by telling her lies; lies that I had to tell myself, too. The TV's sound was turned up. It was seventy-seven and above. It was going to be OK. Bridget and the rest of Marsh were OK. They were four floors down, they had a chance. Didn't they? I imagined pictures of the plane sitting cleanly on the seventy-seventh floor. I couldn't imagine reality. I didn't see the mangled bodies and desks. I saw confetti falling in the air. VJ said it was bodies when I spoke to her later. She said she almost got hit by one. She worked there and was just coming out of the subway on her way to work. She managed to escape into a doorway when the building came down. She said the daylight had turned blacker than midnight. Someone pulled her to survival.

Melissa was in Florida. I called Christine. She said she was OK. I called home. Sandy said Robby had been deployed to the site, no contact. She was scared. So was I, but again I lied to comfort her and Bridget's sister. Hailey was going to turn four years old on September 13th. Daddy had to come home. I had my ticket to visit Melissa that Friday. She was so upset, cry-

ing hysterically, especially when she knew her brother was down there and couldn't be reached. Lying didn't console her. It broke my heart that she was so far away, too far for a mother's hug.

Sandy told me that Robby was just getting off his tour and they sent him down there to help. He, his partner, and their ambulance. Robby came home late that night covered head to foot in ash. His partner did not. I met him at the front door. He disrobed outside, putting his uniform in the garbage bags we offered, and washing off some of the dirt and death before he came in. I saw the second plane in back of the tower. Saw it circle around and hit. I was relieved. My son was alive. I could breathe again. I hadn't realized that my breath had been locked in my chest since I saw the slash.

Bridgette, Lucy, Lisa, Ben, I had worked with each of them. Sigrid was supposed to come to our office that morning. Someone said she stopped for coffee at Marsh that morning. Lisa Yvonne was born July 13, 1966. I worked with her at the Young and Rubicam account. I have her funeral card, too. She left a husband and a little girl-child. There was a slide-show of her life at her funeral. Her little daughter was too young to fully grasp it all. I was a grandmother and I didn't grasp it all, at all. Gennady, Yvonne, Anne, Karen, Loretta and Paul, eleven American Express Corporate Travel employees in all. There were separate funerals and one joint memorial service at The Riverside Church in Harlem. It seemed the funerals would never stop. Lucy was never found. Maybe she was close to a window. Though she was grown, she still lived at home as was the custom in Italian families. Females went from parents to husbands. Lucy didn't get that chance. I liked her. I liked them all, the ones I had worked with.

Robby went to funerals a lot, too. As an EMT, he knew many first responders. Only fate and the traffic from Queens to get down to the WTC saved him. His partner's wife was also an EMT working for a different company. She had also been sent. Robby's partner knew that and when the buildings started to come down, thinking that his wife was in the building, he ran in rather than away. He left a baby and an inconsolable wife. Robby corrected me about his partner. His partner's wife was working in the second building. She had been evacuated; he didn't know. My son ran away from

the falling building; ran for his life. His partner ran toward his wife.

I asked Robby about that day, what he remembered about that day. He said: He was deployed. When they got there, they were stopped at a staging area. They gave their badge numbers and I.D.'s to a fire chief. They helped the injured. He came home. End of story. No mention of what he saw, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted during the more than seventeen hours he was out of communication with us. I didn't press. I know when to leave it alone. I left it alone. His job sent him for counseling.

I asked Robby's wife, Sandy, if she remembered how I got home. She remembered more. She remembered that I got home about 4 or 4:30 PM. I thought I got home at night. I remember looking out the window from work. I could see Third Avenue. It was a sea of people, no cars, just people walking in the middle of the street. I'm sure that's what I saw. Sandy said I tried to console her by saying that everything was going to be OK, and that Robby was OK.

Judith Greenberg contends that "Trauma creates a struggle between the 'urge to know' and the 'need to deny'." I needed to deny.

I realize now that I probably should have sought some therapy. I didn't really talk about it too much. Did not go to see Ground Zero or to any remembrances. The funerals were enough, too much. I guess I just felt lucky that my children and closest friends survived. My son doesn't talk much about his feelings, not even to his wife. I don't talk much. Pushing to remember is not an easy task. The office where I worked closed. Sixty people had sixty days to find another job or we would be terminated. I was unable to and became one of the "displaced employees". I didn't have time to think about whether I needed help. I had to find a job.

The years have vanished; I've hidden from that day. Some days, I feel guilty for not focusing on how fortunate I am. But underneath there is "the feel of disaster still and forever in my bones" as Ruth Kluger says in her Holocaust memoir. I don't want to seem cowardly about the whole thing. After all, I didn't have to run for my life, watch bodies rain from the sky, beg for water, inhale the dust of death or bandage a wound. I didn't or lose a limb, a family member, or my life.

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