

Quakes

Everyone remembers where they were when they heard the news. I was in my father's tiny, sweltering apartment in Montreal, having breakfast, when the radio bulletin came on at about 8:45.

I still don't know who to ask forgiveness from, but when I heard about the World Trade Centre, all I felt was excitement that something had managed to strike that icon of imperialism. Not a thought entered my mind about people, the office workers, the cleaning staff, the visitors, the people who were in the building.

I headed for the TV and watched as 18 minutes later the second plane slammed into the second tower confirming the first crash had been intentional. Then the Pentagon was in flames and there was news of a fourth hijacking.

Whatever this was, it was not going to end.

With the serenity reserved for calamity, I began to search the television footage for my sons, both of whom live and work in New York City — both of whom easily could have been there. Noah works for a company that rented several floors at the WTC, but his office is in another part of the city. Many times I was sure I spotted my kids among the frenzied people running for their lives away from the crumbling monoliths.

I tried and tried, couldn't get through. The calls that ricocheted back and forth between family members were a balancing act: concern for Noah and Daniel's safety, confidence that they were okay — and clarity. When I said to my daughter, Joey, in Toronto, "it's like war", she said, "it is war."

For about three hours my life stopped and when my sons were at last able to contact me, my knees buckled with relief and gratefulness. My children were safe. Nothing else mattered.

Before long I was overcome with revulsion as I listened to the various kneejerk reactions. The mouthy Madeleine Albright proclaimed "America has the best system in the world, we are the best country," her words exemplifying the insufferable arrogance and sense of superiority that provoked the attack. Sycophantic Billy Graham declared of the victims, "they're in heaven now and don't want to come back." And they say Osama bin Laden is a fanatic?

After that, not a moment of escape. My father, usually blasé about television, was mesmerized by the coverage, and when I suggested he turn it off, he said "No, no, this is really good." This was not a political but a spectator's statement. His fascination with the visuals of the event, played over and over and over, epitomized Susan Sontag's concept of "disconnect": that we view actual violence with the dispassion and distance with which we watch Hollywood disaster films.

My father's neighbourhood in Montreal is an international village of working class people. The next day the street was rollercoasting with stories. In just an hour I met a woman weeping on the sidewalk because she'd lost seven relatives at the WTC; giggled almost hysterically with a shopkeeper about her nephew whose employers, the New York Rangers, rented a limousine to get him home; choked back sobs as the appliance repairman told me, with tears pouring down his face, about his brother and sister who had recently died in their 30's of leukaemia after living as civilians during the war in Beirut. They'd been killed by chemicals. Collateral damage.

Daniel said "Yesterday was the most beautiful day of the year, the sky was the bluest, the air clear and crisp. Today it's raining. Natural literature." Noah told me, in a small, awestruck voice, "I almost took a job at the WTC. Where I would have been, on that floor, everyone, they're all gone."

Suddenly it all hit home. It became a feat to focus on even the most basic daily activities. Each night I'd wake up shivering, hoping I'd had a bad dream. But I never did emerge from the horror, how we were blasted into living like the rest of the world, never to be able to take peace and security for granted.

In tandem with the earthshaking news of September 11, my family's small tragedies were being played out — personal quakes with their own aftershocks. My father's biopsy confirmed he had lung cancer from having been exposed to asbestos when he converted the SS Letitia into a hospital ship during World War II. Abe is an otherwise hale 87 year old, and had he not lived this long the cancer wouldn't have surfaced.

Before he got sick, my father had spent his time with his friend, Dahlia, 85, who had been diagnosed a couple of years before with Alzheimer's. But because he needed to rest at home, Dahlia was alone more and couldn't remember to wait for the companion her family had hired to help her. She began to leave her apartment daily to shop for meat to cook, though her stove had been disconnected because she'd been forgetting to turn it off, and to buy ever more ham for her overstuffed cat, Queenie.

Alarmed strangers would phone to say they'd found Dahlia wandering around frightened and lost, sometimes miles from where she lived, asking us to come for her. My father's was the only number she could recall.

After several such incidents, Dahlia's distraught children tricked her into a residence, sans Queenie, on September 12. They told her that the images she saw on television of the WTC burning were really her building that was on fire. Monsieur P, the operator of the boarding house, a converted Victorian mansion, insisted that she be isolated for the initial week to quell her rage, after which she was allowed to receive visitors.

Dahlia's new home was an obscenity of drabness. The chirping of the recorded birds and the abrasively bright Christmas lights twinkling in the living room only emphasized the gloomy atmosphere. The walls were the colour of rotten mushrooms and the windows were lined with vertical metal bars. Dahlia, who'd kept a lovely and light-filled apartment, was usually lucid enough to know she was in hell. She begged to be released from the prison to which she'd been condemned.

My sister, Sandy, who lives, as I do, in Vancouver, stayed in Montreal for two soaringly hot months before she had to get back to her job. Cooped up, we sometimes roared over family foibles. But

mostly we fought, in hisses and hushes, about everything from the smallest daily irritations to the most profound issues of our sibling relationship. We pitched primal battles in whispers. At any other time these fights would have resulted in weeks of us not talking as we licked our wounds. But since we had to get on with caring for Abe, we learned to forgive each other very quickly. It was good exercise.

Abe had the only bedroom, so Sandy and I took turns sleeping on the sofa in the living room and in the kitchen on an air mattress. The air mattress is a marvellous invention once you become familiar with its vicissitudes. If you lie motionless and distribute your weight evenly, it's fine. But if you reach up to pull a bagel off the counter, or roll over to turn off the light after reading *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris, or *Fraud* by David Rakoff, both perfect air mattress books, some unexpected part of the bed will slowly but surely rise up and, with a loud farting sound, punch you.

When my father was told he had cancer, I said "Dad, you've been living with it for a long time and you can still live with it." At this stage there is no treatment. I hid my anguish.

Three different doctors subsequently told me (and I'd phone to tell Sandy) my father was lucky if he had a year left. But Abe himself never asked about the prognosis. Instead he went into denial and began to look and feel much better.

However, my presence was undermining his self-confidence. He was starting to rely on me for things he could easily do himself, like address an envelope, or make an appointment.

The Smell of Deconstruction

Thanksgiving, my favourite holiday, was coming and I wanted to spend it with my sons, in New York. I'd always been enthralled by the city, by its energy, but it had become simply a war zone which I wanted my children to leave. I also needed to test whether my father would be able to cope on his own.

On the Amtrak down (I kept thinking "I'm taking Anthrax"), I sat next to a young man who would be deemed by many to be Public

Enemy Number One, who'd come to live in Montreal via Germany. "Oh boy," I thought, "this guy will never make it across the border." He was pleased I knew his native language was Urdu and that I too was from Montreal. But within minutes he began to criticize one of its neighbourhoods, because of its many immigrants, who, he claimed were bringing down the economy. I reminded him that he too was a newcomer and revealed that I'd been raised in the very neighbourhood he found so offensive.

Though I twittered at the irony and figured his maligning was a matter of him trying to find someone lower on the pecking order, I was also ticked off and said nothing as he squirmed with embarrassment, "I can't explain myself." When I let him off the hook by changing the subject, he was so grateful he invited me to his cousin's wedding in New Jersey.

Aside from a charged interlude when a customs officer strutted through with a nightmare-sized bomb-sniffing dog, the group was very chatty. Partly out of nervousness about our destination.

A middle-aged civil servant from Ottawa tried to strike up a conversation with an attractive young *Péquist*e from Shawinigan by saying "I never learned to speak the language but I sure know how to French kiss." He seemed incapable of making anything but obnoxious remarks and was eventually shunned by everyone except for a four year old to whom he introduced himself by saying "call me anything, but don't call me late for dinner." But even she got fed up with him.

I couldn't help overhear the elderly American couple behind me, who had their speaker phone on as they engaged in a boisterous discussion with a caller about their mutual friend, also an American but of Mexican heritage, who'd just converted to Judaism and was now in a quandry about how to describe himself.

When the train pulled into Penn Station, I was thrilled to see my sons, who seemed as well as ever, though I could sense their fatigue. But soon I was rigid with alarm because we were in a packed, enclosed public space in New York City — an ideal target. Then I realized that the Lower East Side, where the kids live, is within range of the Empire State Building, thought to be a symbol likely to be hit next. The area, by the river and near several bridges, was swarming

with police because it was considered extremely vulnerable.

Their apartment was also close enough to the WTC that Noah and Daniel had seen the attack. It took us about 40 minutes to walk to Ground Zero the next day. Enroute we passed several shrines: small memorials in windows and on street corners, fresh flowers left beside tattering pictures of those who'd died in the disaster. Throughout the city the air was putrid but the closer we got to the site the more poisonous it got. Acrid, bitter, corrosive — think of a combination of sulphur, burning rubber, singed hair.

The stores in the vicinity whose doors had been open when the blasts occurred were now coated in soot and ash, strewn with furniture and broken glass. I felt I was in an eerie old ghost town from another century.

Several blocks had been cordoned off to separate the visitors from the soldiers and volunteers probing, examining, sifting through the rubble. Many of the surrounding smaller buildings had been totally razed. The ground had been reduced to muck.

Mephitic smoke rose from the epicentre — the layers beneath the Twin Towers were still burning. Oddly, the smoke was the freest thing there. To be at this wrecking ball of history made me disoriented, dizzy, as if I'd fallen off a steep cliff and landed in an alien landscape, on another planet.

Looming over us were monumental ruins, twists of cement and steel, melts of iron, bursts of concrete guts. Massive, mangled heaps. All on the verge of toppling over. A giant had slammed his fist down on another giant's sandcastle. *Debris* — from “de briser” — to break to pieces.

The worst was to look into the abyss and to see nothing but to imagine the dread of some, the determination of others on the doomed planes, the ghastly phone calls from those who knew they were about to die, the bodies buried in the buildings, the victims holding hands with each other or hurling themselves alone off the fiery towers. Plunging to their deaths. The rescuers who'd gone into those death-traps and never come out.

Throughout my life I've had the privilege of peace and had never seen, unless in the media, the ravages of war, what people have had to live with, or die because of. Though there were hundreds of

visitors that day at Ground Zero, the quiet was astounding — we were witnesses to something too enormous to absorb. There were no howls at this heart- and head-smashing scene.

Many bystanders were wiping tears or else taking pictures — dabbing, snapping; snapping, dabbing. Framing, capturing the mythological postcard. Some were just standing slack-jawed, gaping at gaping holes, at what was and what wasn't. What had become expanse of sky and cloud. Incongruous. It is hard to lament the sky. How to lament the sky?

Grey matter spat down, spun around, flickered into us, particles, motes of who knows what infiltrated our eyes, our nostrils, our lungs, god knows what we were breathing in — the fragile stuff of flesh.

The aroma of apprehension, spoor of the startled, the threatened. Panic was the most pervasive odour at Ground Zero. The frantic were attempting to control an out of control reality, bewildered that others could hate them so much they could kill them so randomly, deeply anxious about how to continue, wretched with disbelief that this degree of atrocity, previously inconceivable, could happen again. Nothing jibed.

Everywhere reeked of rabid helplessness, as helpless as tears, eau de helplessness, of disgust, of powerlessness, of disgust at powerlessness. I too stank of insecurity — emitted a cloying noxious odour, the cult/ure of panic, whose very own perfume clung to me as I clung to it. The smell of deconstruction.

The Tropes Come Marching By

Sunday morning was relaxed until Bush's face stretched across the TV screen, announcing he was bombing Afghanistan, already decimated by decades of war and the tyranny of the Taliban. The undeniable truth of September 11 had been driven to its most false conclusion — war. Once again the battlefield was remote.

His message was "be alert, be vigilant" (watch your neighbour), "this will be a long war" (we will slaughter all opposition), "expect a "100 percent chance of retaliation" (be prepared to die).

More jolts to the trauma ward that was New York.

Newspapers at kiosks were at a premium, bookstores were mobbed with customers buying histories of the Middle East, the Koran, anything to help them comprehend. The learning curve was visibly compressed.

American flags shot up by the minute. The largest one I'd ever seen was in the East Village draped outside the headquarters of the Hell's Angels. Low-flying helicopters circled overhead in a relentless patrol.

There was no sleep for me that night in my sons' glassed-in apartment on the 17th floor, as I cowered in bed waiting for the explosion, the flash to finish us off. In the morning, my sons went out to work and I went out of my mind. All the news was propaganda transmitted by lunatics about other lunatics until I found a public radio station, WNYC, whose voices were resolved to analyze rather than to revise history.

The interviews were with people from some of the many places where American foreign policy had propped up terrible regimes or else had turned deaf to terrible cries. Lethal interference and deadly indifference had led to boundless suffering, countless dying.

That it was still possible to hear points of view other than the bellicose refrains of the mainstream media, gave me a centre, the courage to go out on the street. The police, the National Guard, were visible everywhere — they, along with any uniformed security, even doormen, were being acknowledged with nods and bobs, gestures of gratitude by passersby.

In New York you have to look like you know where you're going and you have to look everywhere. But I'd always found New Yorkers friendly, warm. Today they were kinder than ever — even on Orchard Street where a vendor pretended to be insulted because I wouldn't buy a cellophane-wrapped shirt marked "seconds" unless he let me inspect it. He ripped the shirt out of my hands, but chastized meekly, "Lady you don't trust me, I don't trust you."

At any other time he'd have yelled at me. But these days no one was yelling. Despite their tremendous exhaustion and edginess, or maybe because of it, everyone was cordial, patient, respectful, accommodating to one another. Tender.

I ventured over to the Marion Goodman Gallery on 57th street to see a show by German artist Gerhard Richter. If listening to the radio station saved my sanity, looking at this work saved my soul. The paintings were neither black nor white, they were hues of grey, with no polarities, no dichotomies. Fields of colour free of dogma and moralism, they allowed me space in which to contemplate and reflect, rather than to react. To become embodied.

Wandering through Chelsea galleries I kept hearing remarks about how depressed people were. When others found out I was Canadian they'd comment on the great support Canada was giving the U.S. and that we have the best navy in the world — what??

By late afternoon the atmosphere was slingshot taut, as the city braced itself for the counterattack. To be above ground was hair-raising but to descend underground required another act of faith. New York was rife with reports of anthrax and nowhere was the risk greater than on the subway where it could be invisibly inhaled. The paranoia was palable.

Now passengers were cringing from me because I happened to be the only one carrying a parcel, (an explosive, a batch of anthrax?). What was in my bag that was scaring everyone so much was a book, *The Joy of Cooking*, which I'd just picked up for my father. After 87 years, he'd finally run out of women to feed him and wanted me to teach him how to cook.

When I returned to the apartment, I made a huge roast chicken dinner, so that Noah and Daniel would have tons of leftovers for meals to come.

During this fraught time, we'd kept casually vigilant about the whirl around us. We were seeking and giving each other reassurance that the crisis would soon pass. But before I left, I asked the kids to consider moving away from New York, though I anticipated correctly that they would see leaving as surrender and choose to stay in this great city.

I can't describe what it was like to say goodbye to my sons. They did not see me cry.

Separation

On the Amtrak returning to Montreal, I went through three security checks with the wrong date on my ticket (Amtrak's error) and when I mentioned this to another passenger, she said "Nothing bothers me anymore, my husband was on the 86th floor of the WTC. He still can't sleep but he's in therapy. All I care about is that he's alive."

When we were rerouted because of a bomb scare at the border, everyone (including the armed marshall, I suppose) got involved in guessing which one of us was the agent who we'd been informed would be on the train. The only person who was detained at customs for questioning, because she had a set of tiny woodcarving knives, turned out to be Vancouver artist, Lynda Nakashima, whose work I'd long admired, but whom I'd never met.

Lynda told me she and her New York hosts had barely slept since Bush had declared war. They were petrified that the city was about to be attacked again, horrified that the government had chosen to respond to a conflict about economics and entitlement with military action rather than diplomacy. We both saw Canada as a bit of a haven.

Montreal was reeling from its own anthrax scares and feeling its proximity to New York. At a sidewalk cafe, when a wooden box fell off a passing truck, we all leapt to our feet. But I could tell things were superficially back to normal a few weeks later when CJAD, my father's favorite radio station, was again airing the airless debate about its most popular topic, Separation. The familiar harangues — *oui ou non* — now a comforting litany.

Abe's repertoire of dishes was expanding. Though I'd taught him a bit, he'd also learned by osmosis from being around so many good cooks all his life. He was still driving, doing Tai Chi for seniors at a community centre, and taking Dahlia out of her dismal residence whenever possible.

On the stifling flight back to Vancouver I beam peaceful vibes out the window just in case the plane that might be escorting us thinks we're hostile and decides to shoot us down. My seatmate and I compare tales of dealing with the pandemonium, the huge line-ups

and disorganization at the airport because of heightened security checks. We laugh over the ludicrous plastic knives we're given with which to eat the rubbery food we're served.

He tells me that in Switzerland, where his son lives, this is *Vacances des Patates*, a holiday which originated when kids had to stay out of school to help their parents harvest potatoes. That's exactly what I intend to do when I arrive: dig up the potatoes I'd planted. My luck, my luxury to have a garden. I missed it viscerally, it had grown roots in my body.

Though I know we're all vulnerable, the West Coast feels more removed from the fray and I wish my whole family were with me in my kitchen. I try to follow my friend's mother, Ashrafbi's advice, to leave my kids free to meet their own fate. I try to not drown in a sea of shock and sorrow.

September 11th has been entrenched as 911 — a state of perpetual emergency making us prisoners of state protection. Protest against both American foreign policy and our collusion with their campaign is now tantamount to treason. On this bad patch of the loop, politicians, in an orgy of amnesia, are forgetting that destructive governments can be stemmed.

If fear has needled into our nerves, tattooed itself onto our psyches, it has also given us a gift, a chance to determine what really matters to us. In this trying time, it is time to try everything. When the dust settles, who knows what will emerge from the mammoth shakedown?

As I dig into the earth on my hunt for potatoes, I notice a lot of comings and goings next door, jubilant visitors dropping by with food and flowers. Finally the star appears with her adoring new parents. She is eight days old, the best sight I've seen in months, the most sustaining image.