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Twenty Years Older

by MaryPat Campbell

I'm on my phone googling exercise bikes. You couldn't buy one new or second hand last year because everyone else was doing the same, making sure they could take some exercise at home during the pandemic. I look up suddenly and there it is again, as if it was yesterday. I have to remind myself to breathe – almost to remind my heart to beat. I'm sweating and feel shaky.

I put down my phone and stare at the screen, it's Newsnight. Emily Maitless talking about what happened twenty years ago in New York City and the fall out ever since. The Twin Towers, the planes crashing, the people who died, the ones who jumped and the ones who made a lucky escape who are being interviewed right now for the umpteenth time on this and other news programmes. Some of us are twenty years older and still surviving .

It started out as a beautiful morning, crisp with sun and autumn leaves whispering on their branches, I remember that. It was my day off, my next shift not till the following afternoon. I was texting Max who I hadn't seen for a while, to see if we could book a court and play some tennis later in the day, when the TV programme was abruptly interrupted and I heard this panicked voice speaking too fast, telling the world what we couldn't yet comprehend.

Without thinking, I grabbed my gear, got in the car and drove to the station. Within minutes the fire truck was hurtling through the streets, past crowds of people covered in grey ash running towards us along the river, through the noise and the chaos to what was fast becoming hell on earth. All I could hear were strange unfamiliar sounds that I will never forget; inhuman screaming, the moaning of steel girders bending, crashing and falling under their own weight, followed later by a thick and deadly silence.

Emily is asking her usual succinct questions of the survivors still living in New York, and one like me, living here. All of us twenty years older. Perfectly reasonable questions, like where were you when you heard the news, who told you, how did you get out of the building? Did many of your colleagues die? The interviewees look a bit blank, and sound practised with their answers. No one shows any emotion now, it's become banal yet still shocking the way they speak of it. I sit there and continue to sweat and shake. By now I have developed ways of protecting myself, but this time I've been caught off guard and am not prepared.

I've been interviewed numerous times, probably because I'm a woman. The first and second time I cried and trembled, and the words got stuck in my throat. But after that a strange fatigue set in and I found myself saying the right words, I was able to speak reasonably eloquently about my courageous colleagues who didn't survive. I've never had the courage to speak about Mick though, who grabbed my arm and shouted at me to run, but I was slow and couldn't run. Mick died.

I carry a note from a child in my helmet. It's still there neatly folded up and tucked into the headband. Its written in pencil on a tatty piece of paper from 8 year old Jimmy thanking me and the fire service for saving his dad. That letter was the only thing that got me up in the morning for months afterwards. I often think of Jimmy, he would be 28 by now.

All of what can be said has been said and told and written. Is there more? The memorial is designed to look like an empty crater with all 3000 names of the dead etched into bronze parapets, which surround the two reflecting pools at the World Trade Centre site. Four hundred oak trees fill the area around the pools. Beneath them are buildings that reach far underground, chambers and halls below ground evoke emptiness and absence. One wall survived the attack and has been incorporated into the new underground building to represent survival and determination.

Under my helmet there are hollow chambers, which haunt me with their reverberations of loss and hopelessness, while I remain alive.