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Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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## Growing Up with the World Trade Center

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

I watched the twin towers go up, three blocks from my father's store in lower Manhattan. To my family and me, the towers were distant relatives, large and always looking down on us.

We knew all about being low to the ground, actually underground since the Subway Stamp Shop was in the subway arcade, trains rumbling the walls. I spent Saturdays and summer days in the arcade that housed an enchanting candy stand, horse-betting station, shoe shop, barber, jewelry shop, and a tiny diner with mosaics of Greek temples I studied over a chocolate malt.

Our shop was the size of a postal stamp with enough room for a desk where I drew primitive abstract art that my chain-smoking grandfather hung on the walls among stamps from Antigua and Argentina. Maybe because I spent so much time underground in a tight space, I became pre-adapted to love Kansas where enough space (except in the Lawrence housing market) isn't an issue.

Above ground, I wandered the city alone, never mind that I was eight years old. Over time, I climbed out from beneath the towers after lunching in the concourse, and rushed past them as a teenager looking for cool clothes. Later, I passed them with my husband in search of the world's best Greek restaurant. Like other large buildings, the twin towers made their own weather. I used to marvel at how trash would fly the wind currents, never imagining that when the towers fell, there would be millions of flying

papers. The towers were my North Star, always showing me how to make my way back home or out into the world.

When the first plane hit, I thought: crazy pilot, small plane, a fluke. When the second plane hit, I called my father who, eight years earlier, had moved the store and my step-family to Pennsylvania for more room and tax breaks. Then I called my mother to track down my brother, who still worked in the city.

My brother's office was six blocks from the towers, and we couldn't reach him. Over the next hour, my family heated up the phone lines until my brother found a way to send an email. His story, like many others, included face masks, people covered in gray dust, and a determinedly fast walk to get home.

On the one-year anniversary of 9/11, I was on the phone again with family. My father was telling me he had pancreatic cancer. He would be gone in four months. Everything changed for this nation a year before, and in 2002, everything changed for me.

Now when I think of the small underground store where I grew up, I realize most of its inhabitants are dead. What blocked out big portions of the sky above ground is gone too. When I visited the site last year, I only found a large fence. I longed to peer over the top, but instead, I walked around the perimeter, the size of the Trade Center's absence somehow bigger than its presence.

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