

“Refuge,” a Memoir by Susan Saiter Sullivan

Never had the Hamptons seemed more of a refuge to me than on that night. And never had I needed one more than I did that night.

The misty air wrapped around our small dinner party in the backyard of the J. Harper Poor Cottage, which was not really a cottage but an Elizabethan-style manor house on East Hampton's aristocratic Main Street. A few of the people were bed-and-breakfast guests; others, like me, were old friends of the owners, Gary and Rita Reiswig.

Pouring the Pouilly-Fume, Gary, in the patient Oklahoma drawl he'd never completely lost, said, "It's wonderful you all could be here tonight, after all that's happened. I know everyone's feeling a whole lot of things."

Yes, "a whole lot of things." We were stunned — with anger, fear, horror, disbelief, disgust, and sadness. And yet the genteel peacefulness of the grounds and gardens, lush with hydrangeas, and the genial company were stunning to our senses, too.

The young man seated next to me said, "What I feel most is . . . guilt."

"That's interesting. Can you elaborate?" Rita, in her crisp New England boarding-school tone, asked as she served the grilled sea bass, fragrant with citrus and fresh ginger.

"I'm not sure how to explain it."

"So do I," I heard myself say.

Forks clinked delicately on china as they waited for me to go on — I was the only one who had been at the World Trade Center four days earlier when it happened. But I, also, wasn't quite sure what I meant.

Moonlight dappled the wisteria-wrapped trees and, as it fell through the clusters of leaves, cast puzzle-piece shapes on the lawn and the pool. It made objects, and the faces of my dinner companions, ghostly white, like in dreams. I felt as if I were in that half-state of sleep where one is drifting back into consciousness, not knowing where the dream stops and reality begins.

I had noticed the moon that Tuesday, too: a translucent, rimmed one, high and tiny, slightly southeast of Tower Two. In the midst of unthinkable horror and chaos, I was momentarily transfixed on the only safe thing in the sky, and wondering: How can the moon be out? It's only a little after 9 in the morning. Why is it going on, so indifferently, about its business of orbiting

the earth, when the earth just stood still and the world in front of me exploded?

Maybe it was a mirage, and I couldn't be sure I was really seeing it, any more than I could be sure I had just seen a jet explode into orange fire and black smoke. Or . . . maybe I had died, and this was the afterlife. Perhaps you carry into eternity the last image you had in life.

But then I knew I wasn't dead, because the contents of my guts had turned to churning liquid, and my keys were knifing into my palms from the death-grip I had on them. Wait — maybe I was dreaming. Already, I couldn't recall the sight or sound of the moment of impact; my brain had protected me.

But as bodies pressed in next to me, I began to accept that it was real. The crowd grew silent as the orange fire lashed up to devour the building. We could also hear muffled explosions inside the building, as well as the sizzle of fireballs shooting out. As windows cracked, wild torrents of white papers fluttered above, as if an insane copying machine were hurling them out.

Helpless, we stood mesmerized, horrified and silent, until the first tiny black form — it reminded me of the jack in the child's ball game — fell from the top, then grew larger, and became recognizably human.

As another flew down, I became two people: one paralyzed, and another, who thought, "If you don't get out of here, one of two things will happen — you will collapse, or you will go completely crazy."

An hour earlier, I had been in my TriBeCa apartment, three blocks north of Tower One. My husband, Sonny Kleinfeld, a reporter for The New York Times, had already left to cover the primary election. My daughter, Samantha, was getting ready for her second day of ninth grade way uptown at Trinity School, and I was slipping on my jogging clothes. Before I walked her to the subway, I opened all the windows — four of which faced the World Trade Center — wanting every molecule of that sun-soaked morning air to sweep through the apartment.

As she boarded the Number 1 uptown, Samantha turned and asked, "Are you taking Princess jogging with you?"

Princess was a pit bull, as gentle and trusting as she was scary-looking. We'd adopted her a week earlier from the Southampton Animal Shelter.

"No, I can't because I have to pick up my pills. No dogs allowed in the pharmacy. I promise I'll take her for a long

stroll when I get home."

Samantha had gone with me the night before to shop for school clothes and to drop off prescriptions in the basement mall of the World Trade Center.

I decided to get my exercise first, before going to the Duane Reade. I still have the little paper with the 9/11 pickup date on it.

The women's complexions were pearly in the moonlight; the men's eyes, against their summer tans, were lit up. Considerately, they would now and then check me to see if the conversation was too distressing. But what other conversation was possible?

So they offered their various thoughts: "The world sees us as imperialists."

"Everyone's jealous of our success."

"The U.S. is based on decency — look at all those firemen who died."

I said, "I'm still sorting it all. But I do recall that, as I heard the gears shift, saw the plane deliberately aim down for the tower, I understood, for the first time, what pure hatred is."

My family didn't find out that I was alive until that afternoon.

Somehow, I had made it, stumbling and falling, in the riot of people running uptown; I found myself, completely in shock, on a ferry to New Jersey. I was frantic to let my family know I was alive, but phones weren't working. A volunteer in Hoboken managed to get a call through to my husband, who had been reassigned to cover the terrorist attack; he was a few blocks away when the first tower fell, and he returned to the newsroom, covered in ash, and wrote the lead story for the next day.

My husband's sister, Dawn, picked me up. She fed, clothed, and housed me for the two nights that entry back into Manhattan was banned.

Once we knew we were all alive, we began to fret over our rescue dog stranded in the apartment. Some rescue we gave her! Frantic calls to animal organizations drew great sympathy, but no one could go near our apartment. Who knows what went through Princess's mind when the first plane skirted the top of our building, the apartment shook, and dust and papers flew in through the open windows.

When I returned to New York, wearing my sister-in-law's clothes, the Times newsroom became our home.

The human relations department people gave us warm sweatshirts, ordered my medications, fed us meals catered in for the staff working round-the-clock on the terrorist attack, and let us use computers in the newsroom. I pounded out a 3,000-word story for my hometown newspaper in Michigan. My friends and relatives who didn't subscribe to The Alma Record read about it because my article had been posted on the bulletin board at the dry cleaner's.

The Times had gotten us a hotel, but before going, Samantha begged her dad to try to get Princess. We assumed the dog was dead, after three days, but he set out for Canal Street, talked his way through the National Guard men in gas masks, and got the Red Cross and some firemen to break into the blackened, dust-filled loft.

He returned to The New York Times with our ashy, ravens pit bull madly wagging her tail. Apparently she'd been drinking out of the toilet — thank goodness the top had been left up! We walked her over to the Sheraton, a sight for the tourists to behold as we entered the lobby.

Once the hotel elevator began its shaking, rattling ascent, I panicked. I couldn't ever go up into a skyscraper again.

That weekend, my husband stayed to write about 9/11, and my daughter went to help the Red Cross. I came to my refuge in the Hamptons.

Gary poured after-dinner liqueurs as we sat under the frame of oak trees, alive with the singing creatures that populate them in late summer. Rita served coffee and local peach pie.

We had finally been able to put into words what we all felt: survivors' guilt. And with the help of the peaceful surroundings, our post 9/11 healing was to begin.

Susan Saiter Sullivan, the author of two previous novels, is just completing another that is set in the Hamptons. A former news reporter for The Chicago Sun-Times and a freelance writer for magazines and newspapers including The New York Times and The East Hampton Star, as well as managing editor of The Evanston (Illinois) Review, she is an adjunct professor in the English department of Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City.