A 9/11 account through the story of Ms. Fineberg, located in Tribeca with her son during the Attacks

A MOTHER

I wrote the following article in Padua from the 26th to the 28th of November 2014. It's relevant to Prof. Fiengo's class of the same year and concerns a series of journalistic works on the events of 9/11. It follows the storyline of one of my contacts in New York City starting from 8:30 a.m. of the day in question. Sorry about the length.

Looking up, Roberta Fineberg knew it was a splendid sky. When you're a freelance artist below the shades of a Manhattan morning, hand in hand with your only son, you don't lower your gaze. It was early September, warm as an Indian summer, the lightest blue stretches above the lines of the skyscrapers. But it was Tuesday and she had work to do: First she needed to drop off her child, Paris, on Greenwich St, in Tribeca; then she would reach the Sports Illustrated offices in Midtown, where she had a job as copy editor. But not so fast. Between Greenwich St and the subway station of Chambers St there's a tiny French bakery called *Duane Park Patisserie*. It's a rustic room studded with cakes, baguettes and frames on cream walls, popular among those who are about to dive into the throbbing, working heart of Manhattan. She would always get coffee there before hopping on a crowded 2 Line Train's car.

At 8:43 a.m., Roberta was ordering a croissant when she heard the engine of a plane. That was unusual. She had never heard a sound of a plane passing by, not in the bakery nor any place further than ten miles from the nearest airport; and Greenwich St particularly is not a path for aircrafts. She noticed the dull, fading rumble, eventually remarking it to the cashier through a dazed glance. About a minute later, a sonic boom accompanied by a trembling shook the place. On the shivering ground Roberta turned around, facing the window and the hedges of Duane Park across the street, where cars were stopping and pedestrians (heads up, mouths open, pleated brows) were looking above. The man in front of her, a middle-aged Tribeca resident who was waiting for his latte seconds before, threw his hands up and ran outside. Roberta followed him, thinking how much he looked like a cartoon character – his head bent to one side, his arms in the air, his body reminding her of a stick figure. They went to the street corner and looked up. Five blocks away they saw the North Tower. Seeing the hole hit them like a slap.

Thirteen years later, Roberta Fineberg, 49, records the story of that day on her iPhone sitting in the parlor of her Upper East Side apartment. She has just concluded her latest project, a photopolymer intaglio collage series called *Oh, the webs we weave*. She's an

award-winning photographer, author, teacher and entrepreneur. Based in Paris and New York, her photography is exhibited in the US as well as France and Russia, both in private and public collections. After starting her editorial career with the publication of photos and text in the Saturday Review followed by photography in Le Monde, Paris Match, L'Officiel Femme, Ms., Weltwoche and La Vanguardia, among other magazines, she moved on to catalog covers and photographs for book jackets. Macmillan published her first book in 1997, *City Riders*, a project on girls and horses. She led groups in *Literacy through Photography* for middle schoolers in Queens, created and taught *Autobiography through Photography* and *Shot After Dark* for 92Y; lastly she conceived *Island Hopping* for Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. In more recent years Ms. Fineberg has launched *Spark Your Creativity*, offering participants photographic adventures to engage in the process of making photographs. She is a tall single mom with mulberry hair and an evergreen smile. She met my mother first – having refined her French, she wanted to learn Italian. The only circumstance I've seen her grumpy occurred in the summer of 2011, when she scolded our taxi driver for being rude.

When she knew I had started writing about 9/11, she accepted my interview right away. She remembers the flurry of shredded, scorched paper whirling in front of the Tower like in the prelude of a photograph – the lens inside asbestos fibers, or pointed at flocks of white birds above the ruins of a cathedral. The North face was lacerated. All kinds of things were twirling about; she felt like she could almost see the tail of the plane. Of course she connected. People around her were astonished, talking to each other in distress. «Well, was it a little plane, was it a big plane?» asked a nearby blonde girl. «No, it was an accident. It was a small plane that went into the building» replied another one. Roberta hadn't seen it so she just thought about the hole, the dark thickening smoke coming out. Duane Street kept still for another minute. Then the month of sirens began.

If you're a single mother facing a major crisis, the first thing that pops into your mind is your son. At the time, Roberta was moving Uptown and for eight-years-old Paris that was the last week at PS 150, a small public elementary school located between Jay and Greenwich St. It wasn't far from her, just one block away. She started walking West and when she reached the school she went ahead throughout the hallways. Most classrooms were open, the children still at their desks. On teachers' faces, sticking out from the doors like weeping willows, she could see the shadows of surprise. Treading quickly, Roberta found the principal in her office. «There's a plane in the building» she informed her. «I think it could be really dangerous if the kids stay here. It's pretty close. Close enough. There's gasoline and it can explode, there could be a major explosion.»

She guessed no one really knew what to do. She would later recount that people didn't know exactly how to react, nor how fast they should act. In New York City public schools there is a protocol which states teachers can't do anything until they get directives. Parents can take their children, but at around 8:30 a.m. of a Tuesday many drop them off and leave for work. At that point, even Roberta wasn't sure what to do. She went out and stood on the steps of Greenwich St, her eyes fixed on the rising smoke.

And then the second plane hit.

She more or less saw this one. If you were facing South in Tribeca, you could clearly see the silhouettes of the Twin Towers rising from the surrounding residence buildings. Differently from the previous one, the second plane crashed into the South Tower exploding on impact in a fire ball. It was 9:03 a.m.. From that moment on it was chaos. Those who were silent started screaming and talking, running in every direction. Police cars and ambulances began crossing the neighborhood. Roberta's knees became weak. In panic, she couldn't get up the stairs to go and get her child. A pair of thoughts gripped her mind: «The situation is bad. This must be an attack.»

Once she got up, Roberta knew she had to bring her son to a farther and more secure area. She also figured out they wouldn't be able to get home. Their apartment was on the other side of the bay, on the Staten Island waterfront. A British woman, an architect whose daughter also attended the school, had recommended it to them as a temporary location until they moved to Manhattan. It was a beautiful flat – tall ceilings, a lovely view of the Ocean, they were traveling by boat each day. But Staten Island is a far and impractical venue for commuters. On that morning subways had already stopped running South, boats were blocked as well. The only way out was going Uptown, she thought as she made her way back to PS 150 to get her son. Of course from that point it was very hard to move. Like her, dozens of men and women were running around trying to get taxis. «There are people jumping!» she heard from an old man who was indicating South. By this time, two hundred of those trapped in the North Tower had decided to jump and there were visible dark figures falling before the grey vertical surface. Roberta and her son Paris were able to leave the neighborhood only several minutes later, sharing a cab with other people. She would take him to 45th St and 6th, she decided wrapping her arms around his shoulder, watching the scarlet glares of the flames receding from the windows.

The headquarters of Sports Illustrated are located in the historic Time Life Building in Midtown. Inside, short ceilings follow a maze of white-painted hallways concluded by green paned windows, the offices separated by big glass doors. At the time, almost half of the 48-story building was occupied by Time Inc, publisher of Time, Life, SI, Fortune, House & Home and Architectural Forum magazines. Ms. Fineberg worked at Sports Illustrated for Kids. Being a freelancer, she would have jobs all over the City which lasted for a week or two several times a year. In 2001 she was called by Time Inc whenever the Sports Illustrated Kids' copy chief was on vacation. She would sort of “mind the fort”, sitting at his desk doing editorial work – usually production assignments such as copy editing.

She thought it was a good place to stay, at least for the morning. They got out of the cab and walked into the elevator. Fear hadn't abated a bit. One of the issues right after the attack was that people didn't know what was next. They were waiting for something else to happen. Should they be on the street or in the subway? Roberta wasn't even entirely sure the Time Life Building was safe: «Would it be hit too?». They weren't far from 34th St and the Empire State Building nor the Chrysler Building; anything could be hit for all she knew. At SI, the entire staff was no longer working. Everybody was glued to televisions, watching the reports and trying to figure out what was going on. Images of the Penthagon were passing on the screen. It was covered in flames. It was hit a few minutes before by another plane.

From there, they watched the Towers falling.

One of the many stories that are told about that day says that after the North Tower was hit, during that fifteen minutes lag before the collision of the second plane, people from the South Tower left their offices to go downstairs. They were told to go back to their desks, and many of them did. This was among the first information Roberta received from the event. While the sunlight grew dim in Manhattan, leaving the night to the sounds of firetrucks and ambulances, the beacons of the helicopters turned up above the ruins of World Trade Center. The noxious odor remained along with debris and sirens. As police closed the area and firemen worked endlessly, many locals left their homes.

At a friend's apartment, Roberta laid her head on the window. While the entire world was watching, her careful eyes realized people had experienced the day differently depending on their proximity to the Towers. She remembered the little girl she had seen at the school a few hours before; her name was Gracen. She had seen her walking

in a classroom saying: «Oh, a plane hit the World Trade Towers!». She could still hear her acute voice echoing in her head. Paris, her son, had been whisked away from the tragedy almost immediately. The other children had waited inside the school more than an hour before their teachers figured out how to get them out. Roberta asked herself what they would feel or remember. She also thought of an apartment she had gone to see during the Summer. It was right there, near Battery Park. Something had happened, there had been problems with some documents and the deal had fallen through.

They stayed at their friend's for a couple of days and then they moved to another friend's place. A week later, on a windy evening of autumn, they went home.

It was a very dramatic period, filled with tears and uncertainty. It took months for the fear to go away. If you were in the City and heard planes passing overhead, or saw people who looked like they were carrying something big, it was hard to get a grip on your emotions. Was the worst yet to come? That's when Roberta started having a deep-rooted fear of flying, even though she had never liked it. In previous years she had done it every once in a while in the States but after 9/11 she couldn't go back to Europe, where she'd spent most of her youth. When she lived in Paris she used to fly frequently. After that day, though, she had to go into therapy to get over her fear. In several occasions she thought how much everybody felt vulnerable. New York had always been a tough metropolis (people there have seen everything – they have thick skins and shimmering eyes), but it was then, underneath the rubble of September, when thousands of names were lost in its deformed pillars, that the rift of its soul began straining. A week later many were still looking for their loved ones, wandering throughout the barricades. Some people remained missing, some of them were in hospitals because they were taken there by firemen or police agents. Hundreds of posters of missing persons were scattered on Manhattan walls, street lamps, stations – «If you see this person please call», «If have any informations...». Some would die later. In the five months following the attacks, poisonous dust coming from the pulverized buildings continued to spread in the air.

She didn't go back there for months, but every time she'd see the neighborhood on the newscasts Roberta would recall it as the crown jewel of New York. Over the years that used to be an exciting part of the city. Many young families and kids had found their home in its vibrant streets; there were three schools, many parks and sports centers. Major cultural events were constantly hosted at the Winter Garden, likewise at the Towers. Most of those people dispersed after 9/11. Many couldn't go back to their homes and if they did it was impossible to keep living there. Ground Zero looked like

a war zone. The neighborhood was broken apart; the community torn away. Roberta moved Uptown and after one week Paris already had a place in the new school, but his classmates who remained in the area could not continue their studies for a long time. Hundreds of children were relocated to other schools. Many lives were disrupted for at least one year, many for more.

At the same time, however, people helped each other. They talked about it, grand initiatives were organized. The Red Cross was wonderful, it gave a lot of support, Roberta still remembers it. She was among the beneficiaries: Once a week the Government offered free sessions at St. Vincent Hospital Downtown. She would go in and have acupuncture done in her ears, one of the different therapies offered, among which there were meditation and hypnosis, all kinds of modalities for relaxation. These programs went on for a long time, and little by little her stress dissipated. Of course there were still a lot of negativity, sadness and anger stirring through the boroughs, but she got the feeling that a sense of community was emerging first. People were concerned, they were helping each other, reaching out. For Roberta, those would be the initial steps to her later travels to Paris and Rome, then back to the orphan skyline of New York.

Of course, loss was a different matter. Everyone knew somebody who knew somebody who died. Roberta knew a father at her son's school: He was a fire marshall and on September 11 he was helping in the building. He never came out. She knew another man who worked at Cantor Fitzgerald (the financial company which lost 2/3 of its staff in the North Tower), and everybody on that floor had died. People were reuniting Downtown bringing candles and flowers. There were quiet torchlight processions and mournings under the night sky. By day many would just stand in silence in front of the wall of photographs.

It took a while for New York to get back to normal.

In the Summer it's very exciting to be along the water, close to where the Towers used to be. If you've ever been strolling on the Hudson esplanade – your face to the sunlight, the tranquil river glittering, every kind of people around you – you know what I'm talking about. The green fronds of Battery Park, the implacable, rumbling West Side Highway and the whole West Side strip from the Staten Island Ferry going all the way up to Chelsea Piers, spread out a lush playground for everybody. Whether you want to lay on the grass and fall asleep with a book on your nose, or gaze at the cerulean blue speckled by the leaves of an umbriferous tree, ride your bike, skateboard on the

opalescent hills, roller-blade or jog in the Atlantic breeze, you know you feel at home. That is the area where most of the people in the Downtown community live. There's never been anything more. People didn't think of the Financial District as the point of arrival, the Towers as a symbol of American capitalism. They never did. It's alway been about a community.

The subway car was crowded. When it reached the station, the stairs filled up with New Yorkers climbing into the morning. Roberta gathered her class and explained the photograpic theme of the day. She uncovered the lens of her camera, studied the light and faced the Avenue. Then she went back to work.

November 28, 2014

Gabriele Nordio