What He Knew Before It All Changed: A Narrative from Ground Zero

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Linda Mills lives in downtown Manhattan in the neighborhood known as Tribeca. Her loft, located on Murray Street, is just three blocks from where the World Trade Center once stood. Peter Goodrich, her husband, is a professor at Cardozo School of Law. Their son, Ronnie Mills Goodrich, 5, started kindergarten at Public School (P.S.) 234 on September 6, 2001. The school is located three blocks from where the North Tower fell. Linda and her family were displaced for 6 weeks following the attack on the World Trade Center. Ronnie’s school has been relocated twice. P.S. 234 was not occupied until four months after 9/11.

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September 5, 2001

3:12 a.m.
Ronnie enters our room sleepy-eyed searching for the warmth of his parents’ bodies. We oblige but not without its effect on our sleep. I am awake. It is the day before Ronnie’s first day of kindergarten and we are conscious of his fear. It will get better, I say, just give him a few days.

8:30 a.m.
I put everything in my red bag. I walk toward the Twin Towers and enter at the Borders bookstore located three short blocks from our house. I browse, as I always do, when I enter this important neighborhood landmark. The “new nonfiction” offers nothing “new” to the frequent shopper. I carry on down the escalator and through the shopping concourse. I fleetingly glance at the Gap window, the Banana Republic display, the sign for the Thomas Pink store to come. I enter the World Trade Center tower and notice a few people taking the express elevator to the Windows on the World restaurant. I remember with fondness the evening we spent there when the Brits came to visit.
The Marriott entrance located across from the World Trade Center elevator bank embraces me. I feel cared for by this remarkable place that provides solace and comfort to the city worn. I nod as I walk past the bellhops who are yawning and standing by. I make my way to the hotel elevator. It always takes too long to get to the 21st floor, I remark to myself. When I finally arrive at my destination, I and a few other adventurous souls enter the designated health club elevator. I hand the receptionist my Fitness Company card and make my way to the dressing room. With bathing suit and cap on, I enter the cold water. Twenty minutes later I am in the steam room. I take in the warm air, shower off the sweat, and blow dry my hair straight. I am ready to start my day.

September 6, 2001

8:45 a.m.
The day has finally arrived. Ronnie dresses without resistance. He is a mixture of excited and scared. We are aware of the difficulty Ronnie has separating from his parents; we want it to be smooth. We have spent much of the summer talking about P.S. 234. We reassure him that if he needs to, he can cry.

As we enter the building on Greenwich Street—a fantastic tribute to modern education and to its ranking as one of New York City’s finest public schools—we find Ronnie’s name on the class roster. We are relieved by the news that his class will include his two closest friends from preschool. We are now confident that the transition—our leaving Ronnie behind—will be smooth.

As we make our way to “Abby’s” class, Peter and I are struck by the meaning of this event. Ronnie is in school with his peers, but also with kids twice his age. His biggest fear—“the bullies”—is not unwarranted. We reassure him through our glances.

Abby is the perfect kindergarten teacher. She moves from erect to her knees with ease; her speech is sufficiently slow to be understood by all ages and infirmities. We hesitate but trust that Ronnie is in good hands. When he is ready, he pushes each of us out the door, a ritual he perfected at preschool. No tears on Ronnie’s part. Once he isn’t looking, I let myself go.

September 7, 2001

2:30 p.m.
We pick up Ronnie after his second day of school. It is an early day today. Next week Ronnie will start the after-school program and our lives will return to normal. We are anxious for these developments; Peter and I are both finishing books with deadlines and every “lost” hour makes a difference.

* * *

September 10, 2001

8:30 a.m.
Today is Ronnie’s first long day at school. “Do I really have to stay the whole day, mommy?” he asks as he holds his ears plugged with his fingers. He knows the answer to his question; he just doesn’t want to hear it. Just at that moment the phone rings. It is Caty, our downstairs neighbor. “Linda, how about if I pick Ronnie up at 2:40 and bring him home with Nick?” Nick is Ronnie’s best friend. “Okay,” I say hesitantly. I am aware that my own desire to routinize Ronnie’s life need not conflict with his desire to play with his best friend. I tell Ronnie that he and Nick will have a play date and he won’t have to go to after-school. “Yay,” he shouts. “Okay,” I tell him, “but tomorrow you will go to after-school.”

September 11, 2001

6:30 a.m.
I really need to swim, I tell Peter as we start to stir. The idea fades as I get my morning coffee. I
am too exhausted to exercise. Instead, I tell Peter that I will take Ronnie to school. Peter agrees to come along.

8:30 a.m.

When we get to the lobby of our building, I realize that we are leaving without Ronnie's sweater. I mistakenly ask my meticulous son if he thinks he needs one. "Yes," he says emphatically. By the time we are outside, I realize it isn't cold at all. "I still want my jacket," he insists. Peter runs upstairs to get it and I carry along to P.S. 234, Ronnie in hand.

8:43 a.m.

As we enter the schoolyard, I am given a leaflet encouraging me to vote for Mark Green for Mayor. I am annoyed that I have one more thing to carry. We search for the "Abby's class" sign that differentiates Ronnie's group from all the others. The sign is posted on the far brick wall and we make our way across the playground. Ronnie surveys the other kids. You know he is looking for bullies.

Like the days before, Ronnie runs as he gets closer to the collection of kids called "Abby's class." He spots Yohji and Sebastian and joins their imaginary game. They start horsing around. As Abby tries to gather all the kids together, I encourage Ronnie to take Yohji's hand. Eventually the little people make their way into the building and Peter and I are left standing in the schoolyard with the mothers of Ronnie's friends. We chat aimlessly for a moment about how cute it all is and how we need to "get on with our day."

8:47 a.m.

Our leisurely anxiety is interrupted with the familiar but all too proximate sound of a jet. It is so close above our heads that it seems it is aimed for our very group. In the few seconds we are given to reflect, we become paralyzed with anticipation. Peter, 6'4" tall, sees above the school building. I watch him look up. I search his eyes for meaning. I listen. The plane is braking. The plane is stopping overhead. I listen harder. I do not look up. I search Peter's eyes again. I whisper to myself, "This doesn't happen in America."

Somewhere inside me I know what this is. The screeching changes. The plane is no longer braking. The plane is accelerating. The engine is struggling to regain its speed. Boom. The ground beneath us shakes like the earthquakes I know so well.

"We need to find Ronnie," I scream. Peter is dazed but follows me anyway. I run up the stairs, as do the few dozen other mothers who just witnessed the event by sight or sound. Tears and measured hysteria engulf each of us as we search the unfamiliar building for our children. When I finally arrive at Ronnie's classroom, Peter is a few feet behind me. I run inside. No kids. My eyes are immediately drawn to the large picture window. Red smoke billowing from one tower. Flames, smoke, glass. I am searching for my breath repeating the words "no, no" over and over again. "That's what I saw," Peter said. I melt into his arms.

A few seconds later, I gather myself again.

"Got to find Ronnie." "Is there a bomb shelter in this school?" I scream. "No," I hear a parent say. "How does she know?" I wonder. We had one in my elementary school. Up and down the stairs three times, I go looking for the person most precious to us in the world. He is nowhere.

Peter gets me to calm down. "He is here, honey," Peter says, "we will find him." When I see Abby leading a group of guys up the stairs, my heart sinks. "Where's Ronnie? Where's Ronnie?" I am hollering, trying to control myself. "Right here, mommy," I hear. He runs from the pack and I hug him with my shaking body.

There is some confusion about what we should do next. One parent, the wife of an NYU English professor, organizes the kids into a group for story time. The kids and parents slowly congregate on the hallway benches for a ritual they know well. "The dog . . ." her voice trails off.

8:52 a.m.

"We need to leave here, Peter," I am saying, "this isn't over and I don't feel safe." Peter is still dazed. When I reflect on my words, I am not ex-
exactly sure why I am saying them. An announce-
ment comes overhead: “If you are the parent of
a child, we think it is best if you take your child
home.” That’s all I need. I encourage us to walk
quickly. “Come on,” I am urging them along.
The familiar faces of parents we hardly know
line the hallways of the school. Some are chat-
ting, others are wandering aimlessly. I am scared
shitless.

We go outside the schoolyard when Angie,
Yohji’s mother, says she needs to be at work for
a 9:00 meeting. “We would be happy to take
Yohji for the day.” “Great,” she says, with some
relief. Angie is an artist. A beautiful and cre-
ative woman, someone I have known from some
distance as the parent of one of Ronnie’s pre-
vious friends.

“Angie, I need to say something,” choosing my
words carefully. “I don’t think you need to go to
your meeting. This day will be remembered as
one of the most significant in American history.
I think if you skip your meeting your o
ffice will
understand.”

Thirty seconds later we hear another boom.
Again it feels like the earthquakes I have felt so
many times before. This time I look up. A big
black cloud of smoke emanates from the top of
the second tower. The smoke is tinged with
shimmering glass and a papery substance. It is
beautiful in its way except that it is chasing us.
We start to run so as not to be overcome by it.

Peter picks up Ronnie and we, with hundreds of
other parents and children, run down Green-
wich Street as fast as we can. It is organized in its
way. We are all running together.

By the time we get to the Traveler’s Insurance
building 10 blocks away, I am exhausted. My
stomach is tense; I have held it without air for
several minutes. We are meeting people now
who had been a safe distance from the explo-
sion. They are different, much calmer. We look
back with only the slightest interest in the fires.
These are the first of many differences we will
experience between those who are in it, and
those who watch from afar. There is a fruit stand
where I buy a banana.

9:16 a.m.

About three blocks later, and what felt like a
safer distance from the black cloud, we ask two
women standing on the street whether we can
use their phone. They are obvious “Tribeca-ites”
and I think they will take pity on us. No cell
phones are working and so one woman escorts
us to her loft. Angie calls her office to apologize
for missing the meeting.

A moment later, I am connected to Los Ange-
les. It is dawn in the City of Angels. I am aware
that I don’t want to alarm my 80-year-old father.
“Dad,” I say in measured tone, “you will see
something terrible on television. I just want you
to know that we are all fine.” I continue. “We
watched a plane go into the World Trade Center,
but we escaped. Ronnie is with us.” I tell him I
will call him again from our next destination.

“Okay,” he says in his groggy and naive state. I
call my friend Ed who has an apartment in the
Dakota building on West 72nd Street. “Can you
help us out with some place to spend the day?”

The Dakota building, so far north of downtown,
is named for its mountainous distance. The ma-
chine does not respond. I am aware that I have
no family here, that I have no second home. We
have no other place to go.

We continue moving despite our exhaustion.
We walk away from everything we know and
love. In our wandering state, we decide that
NYU is probably safe. Nothing seems safe, but of
all the places to target, would you hit NYU? We
decide against Cardozo Law School, where Peter
is a professor, because of its connection to a Jew-
ish university. We enter NYU’s School of Social
Work where we learn that a tower has collapsed
and the Pentagon has been hit.

3:45 p.m.

My office phone works only intermittently.
Angie cannot get through to her husband’s cell
phone. He is on a business trip and will have no
idea if his wife and child are safe. The television
images often include P.S. 234. If Koji is watching, he will know that the school is still standing. Ronnie and Yohji enjoy the freedom we offer them. They throw cars up and down the grand staircase and make pictures on the computer. They play PowerRangers.com and find the Powerpuff girl website. They seem oblivious to our state of high alert.

We start to realize that we are not going to be able to return home tonight and that we might not ever be able to return home. We have $200 in our pocket. No credit card, no checkbook, no cell phone. I am wearing my slippers. I ran out to take our son to school; I hadn’t prepared for evacuation.

I call Carol Gardner, personal assistant to John Sexton, NYU’s incoming President. She offers me a guestroom in the townhouse of two law professors. I am touched by their generosity. I prefer a hotel stay. I call my dad for his credit card number. It isn’t much use. No hotel rooms are available. Over the next hour, several offers of places to stay trickle in. We settle on either the Garlands’ apartment or the Dakota building. We know the Garlands have two wonderful kids and we think this will be of comfort to Ronnie.

5:30 p.m.
We arrive at the Garlands’ apartment, a few blocks from my office. The family isn’t home. Upon entering, I realize that I will probably feel more comfortable in my own space. Every noise, every plane, every movement reminds me of the unthinkable that had happened and how the unthinkable happened to us. We leave the Garlands a note of thanks and reenter the empty streets to look for a taxi uptown. Nothing is running in the city and I don’t have the strength to walk 60 blocks. We return to the Garlands’ apartment just as they are coming in. We settle into their guestroom den.

8:30 p.m.
David Garland makes us chicken nuggets. I enjoy them immensely. My husband, being English, always finds comfort in fried foods. Tonight I understand why.

10:00 p.m.
We “go to bed,” television blaring. We don’t sleep a wink. Every real and imaginary sound was a plane overhead, screeching, accelerating, boom.

**September 12, 2001**

8:00 a.m.
Ronnie wakes up refreshed in his childlike state. We make our way out into the world in the same clothes we were wearing the day before. We have to get back to our home soon. Ronnie is already restless for his room, for his toys. I want clean underwear. What would our insurance cover? Was our apartment still standing?

10:00 a.m.
We start our search for the sympathetic department store. Daffy’s would take our money but they are unwilling to let us charge something on my father’s credit card. Peter buys a few t-shirts, but I refuse to spend our precious cash in a store that isn’t more understanding of our situation. They lose a customer for life.

We make our way to the local Kmarts. I am by this time on a razor’s edge. I ask the manager what he can do for us. Yes, he would take a credit card number. He understands our predicament. After we shop, I return for his assistance. “Oh,” he said, he will need to call the credit card company. I break down crying. I call the VISA company myself. Between sobs I explain our predicament. They approve our purchase and agree to send us a new card when the Fed Ex service is resumed.

2:00 p.m.
We call Ronnie’s baby-sitter, Aja. “Could you watch Ronnie for a couple of hours while we try to get into our apartment?” “Sure,” she says, she would love to see Ronnie.

3:00 p.m.
We walk toward Aja’s NYU dorm where she is a resident assistant. We realize that we need
“equipment” if we are serious about going downtown. We need masks—the smoke and stench in the Village is terrible, what would it be like at ground zero?—and I need more than just slippers. We stop at a friend’s house and borrow a pair of tennis shoes.

After we drop off Ronnie at Aja’s dorm, we start to walk downtown. At this point there is no car traffic from the Village to the World Trade Center, what remained of it, and so we are on foot. We will walk a total of 14 miles today.

As we make our way towards Canal Street, it becomes clear that we will have to do a lot of persuading. All we have on us is Peter’s Cardozo Law School identification and a World Trade Center Fitness Company card. The Fitness Company card links us to the World Trade Center neighborhood, at least that’s what we believe. I have nothing with me but my emotion.

Peter and I debate the best way to get us into the neighborhood. I will do the talking, we agree, as Peter is British. We are uncertain how the cops will react to Peter’s accent. The problem is that Peter has the only identification we have. One stop after another we get through. When we arrive at Chambers Street, three blocks from our apartment and six blocks from the specter of the World Trade Center, we meet “Officer Bob.” He obviously takes pity on us and persuades his supervisor to let him escort us into our building.

There is no electricity and so with Bob’s flashlight we walk up the stairs to the fourth floor. “How are we going to get our stuff out?” I wonder quietly. We enter our apartment and the sun fills us with sadness. “Great kitchen,” Officer Bob says, “my wife would kill for it.” “She can have it,” I say almost seriously. We rush around to gather our things into the two suitcases we think we can wheel. Computer, cell phone, credit cards, identification. Everything we need to function. We are in and out in 15 minutes. I am crying by the time we finish. “Thanks Officer Bob,” I say, “I can’t tell you what you have done for us.”

12:00 midnight
I am retching over the toilet. My stomach has finally had it, and so have my nerves. I am throwing up the garlic pasta we ate for dinner. I resolve to find a hotel room in the morning.

September 13, 2001
The Doubletree Hotel on 43rd Street offers the comfort of two rooms and the excitement of PlayStation for Ronnie. Ronnie loves hotels and so we pack a few things and make our way to our new home. The room is fine and we can arrange childcare for Ronnie and his two school friends. There is a playroom. We can pretend everything is normal.

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September 20, 2001
8:30 a.m.
Ronnie goes to school today for the first time in 9 days. He is nervous but reassured to know that Yohji will also attend this new school. After much confusion and wrangling, the school district has arranged for P.S. 234 kids to attend P.S. 41. P.S. 41 is located near NYU and Cardozo and so we are both relieved. We arrive this morning to a schoolyard full of children. I see familiar faces. I am relieved to see reporters who are interested in our children’s well-being. When I see the sign for Abby’s class, I burst into tears. I am looking away so that Ronnie doesn’t see my reaction to his new first day of school. So long as Yohji is there, Ronnie is happy to go.

We make our way up the narrow staircase to Room 206. There are 60 kids in this small room before Ronnie’s class of 21 enters it. I see the anxious, teary-eyed faces of the other mothers and I am comforted that their reactions parallel mine. 2:00 p.m.
The Doubletree has served us well. Despite our gratitude, the food is sufficiently bad and the
space sufficiently small that we begin to think it is unworkable. Our neighbors are renting apartments for a month or two. We start the search for the next move. On a colleague’s suggestion, Judy Mishne calls me to say that she has a friend who has an empty apartment on 56th Street. Do we want to stay there?

I am reluctant. Peter is clear. He is too large for a small hotel room. “Okay,” I agree, “let’s move.”

* * *

**September 23, 2001**

8:00 p.m.

Our neighbors arrive for a meeting at our new digs. There are five owners at 37 Murray Street. Melvin and Helen, the condo’s sponsors, agree to come and put people’s minds to rest. They come despite the fact that their best friend, Herman Sandler, died 12 days before on the 104th floor of the World Trade Center. Two of the women in our building are pregnant. They are beaming. We share “what happened” stories and the evening provides the first comfort of our ordeal. We are among friends who understand.

* * *

**September 27, 2001**

9:30 a.m.

Melvin and Helen invite us to Long Island. Their house, they say, will be empty. We are torn between staying in the city and never coming back. We reluctantly agree to go.

10:30 a.m.

The phone rings. Melvin and Helen call back. “Linda, one of the plane’s engines landed on a terrace on the top floor of the building. The piece tore the roof open. The rain penetrated the fifth floor apartment and probably yours,” Melvin shouts into the phone. “We won’t know if there is damage until the building is cleared for reentry. The FBI is investigating.” “Thanks,” I say, a bit dazed by what I am hearing.

4:15 p.m.

To our surprise, the Building Department announces that the north side of Murray Street can reoccupy. We feel mixed about the news. It’s got to be better than living out of a suitcase. I arrange for the hazardous waste cleaners to come the next day.

**September 28, 2001**

8:00 a.m.

I open the door for the people who have been hired to remove the dust. I see that the rain damage is significant but contained. I survey the damage from the roof. A large piece of the fuselage sits atop my building. Just landed there on a 2’ x 6’ terrace. I am grateful that it is plane and not body.

9:30 a.m.

The crew that cleans works hard without masks. I worry about them. They tell me that it will take three full days, six people working full time. When the boss calls me, he lets me know that he has been prevented from entering the “frozen zone.” I tell him that I will meet him at Broadway and Park Place.

1:00 p.m.

Peter arrives. We discuss how the apartment is a shell of its memory. It is a military zone, a police headquarters. It is a bombsite and a graveyard. We decide that Long Island is just what we need.

2:15 p.m.

We pick up a rental car and arrive at Ronnie’s school early. Abby is teaching the kids to think about concepts: above, beyond, underneath.
They are taking this lesson in a janitor’s closet, 21 kids in a room no larger than 3 × 6 feet. The kids are totally engaged in the story. They are totally oblivious to the tragedy.

3:00 p.m.
We drive to Southampton, uncertain what we will find there. In the dark, we miss the entrance. We finally find the gravel road and feel blessed by our good fortune. We enter the estate with some trepidation. This is the most beautiful house we have ever seen. There is a heated swimming pool, an empty beach. There are full-time housekeeping services. Despite our good fortune, nothing seems to penetrate the darkness of our mood.

October 1, 2001

8:30 a.m.
As we return to the city we are struck by the changes. Trucks and cars are stopped for inspection. Long lines to enter the bridge. We barely get Ronnie to school on time.

2:00 p.m.
We learn that the asbestos levels in our apartment are okay. The dust will be kept to a minimum by keeping our windows shut. We can move back in if we want to. We hold our breath and take the plunge.

October 2, 2001

1:30 p.m.
We see Steven through the window at his salon, Lapin Paoli. Steven rents the apartment we own next door. He sleeps there in the evenings and Peter works there in the days. Steven’s presence helps defray the outrageous mortgage bill we pay each month. He is especially thrilled to see me. He thought I was dead. He had heard that some woman had been killed on Murray Street. His business, a thriving and beautiful hair salon, is destroyed. His customers—which include the likes of Judge Judy—are refusing to come downtown. He can’t afford to keep paying rent on our apartment. We are not at all surprised by his decision to move out.

* * *

October 21, 2001

I am 44 years old today. It is Sunday and we are in our apartment after 6 weeks of hotel rooms, friends’ guest beds, and weekend stays in the Hamptons. Murray Street is “cut off” from the rest of the world, divided by a blue painted wooden horse and a few wooden police officers. No residents have returned here, save us and the neighbors in our building. When we enter the frozen zone on West Broadway, we bear witness to the skin of the World Trade Center.

I feel both privileged to live at the site of the nation’s greatest tragedy and burdened by the questions I am asked upon entry. I am privileged because our street serves as the thoroughfare for trucks hauling the 1.2 million tons of debris from the World Trade Center disaster site. The 24/7 activity turns out to be our source of inspiration. We are particularly impressed with the “truck” wash that involves 4 men in yellow slicker suits hosing down every vehicle that leaves the site. We are saddened by the occasional ambulance: A body or two is removed several times a week. We are comforted that somebody knows that the remains of a loved one have been recovered.

I am struck that our privilege should, on the one hand, be extended to others, and on the other, be reserved for those of us who experienced the most direct hit. I understand why the families of the dead return to the WTC site over and over via boat and truck routes. As they should do. The healing occurs in this hallowed space. I want to offer it to everyone; I want to protect it for myself.
Some people return to look; I return to live. Every day I wonder if I am making the right decision. The *Daily News* reports that we are living in a toxic wasteland. My son is coughing. I wake with a sore throat. Yet I remain determined.

From my work on domestic violence, I know that people deal with trauma differently, so why should this be different? Some run and hide forever. Others will return more slowly. Still others think that the only way to heal is to face the demon head on. How to approach the trauma is a question that haunts each and every parent at P.S. 234 and one that haunts me.

Some parents think that we should never return to P.S. 234: It is the site of America’s greatest atrocity and should never be faced. Others think that we should return only after new construction at the WTC site is complete. Only a few others, like me, think our children’s mental health is best served by returning.

When I ask Ronnie what he thinks, he is full of hope: “I want to go back to P.S. 234 Mommy, I want to walk to school so I can learn more.” When I ask him about what happened, he is full of optimism: “I feel bad about the people in the building, the people who died, but I think a hundred people got out.” “I want them to develop one World Trade Center that is real high so only a little tiny part falls off, instead of half.” “I feel it is special to live here Mommy because there’s a gate so if a part of the building falls down it will land on the gate and none of the people will die.” And sometimes he is full of surprises: “I thought all the planes were dead,” he tells Peter when he notices a plane in the sky six weeks after the event. “I thought all the planes crashed into the World Trade Center.” I realize that my son is not so oblivious as I may think.

Encouraging my son’s trauma narrative is not something I was conscious of before 9/11. Before 9/11, I encouraged my son to talk about his difference from a kid who was born with very short arms. Before 9/11, I encouraged my son to ask me why I was sad when I was crying. Before 9/11, I encouraged my son to explore how it felt when his best friend Nick rejected him. Now I just encourage him to do what he feels: “I’m just a kid, mom,” he says, “I just want to be a kid.”

Michel Cohen, a pediatrician in the neighborhood, has observed that he has not seen an increase in asthma or rashes in children; he has, on the other hand, witnessed several anxious parents. Ronnie and all the children at P.S. 234 are both the source of our freedom from fear and the reason we feel terrified. To manage this tension is to provide a child of war the life he desperately needs: a semblance of what he knew before it all changed.