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ANNIVERSARY

Letters to the Lost

ON A CLEAR DAY 10 YEARS AGO, NEARLY 3,000 PEOPLE DIED. THEY WERE THE SISTERS, BROTHERS, BOYFRIENDS AND MOTHERS OF YOUNG WOMEN WHO MOURN THEM STILL—AND WHO WRITE INTIMATE MESSAGES TO THEM HERE. COLLECTED BY SHEILA WELLER

Dear Shell,

How I wish I had the power to turn back time, to protect you. That's what sisters are supposed to do.

I was two years older, but we were inseparable. When we were little, we dressed alike. At night we'd push our twin beds together and talk till we fell asleep. In college, when I was miserable after a breakup, I got a delivery of beautiful roses; I thought they were from my boyfriend, begging me to come back. But they were from you.

And so of course we were roommates in New York City, each working for a different company. My office was in Midtown Manhattan; yours was at eSpeed, a division of Cantor Fitzgerald, in the World Trade Center.

When a mysterious explosion rocked your office and you called me that morning, how I wish I'd stayed on the phone and comforted you through the unknown. Our conversation was so innocent. I said, "It wasn't a bomb; it was just a plane that hit your building. You're going to be OK!" *Just a plane?* What did I know? We bitched about how you'd lost your cute shoes in the blast; I told you a pedicure after work would fix everything.

Within an hour of our conversation, my building was evacuated, and I realized this was serious. I made a sign, SHELL: MEET ME AT THE PLAZA, and hung it in the lobby of my office building. You didn't show up at the Plaza! When I finally got through to Mom and Dad on the phone, I figured that maybe you were back at our apartment. But they'd talked to you, heard your pleas and knew you were scared. They'd said their last good-byes.

Shell, you know me. I don't do anything alone. But after you died, I had no choice.

Where was my dance partner, my soul sister? The pain was very hard to soothe. But slowly, day by day, you helped me see life through a different lens: your lens. You'd been attending grad school at night to become a teacher. Well, we both know: School was not my forte. But I went to college for a graduate degree in education so I could do school counseling. And guess what? I found my niche. Helping others. Making a difference. Does that sound familiar?

Remember, Shell, that big millennium New Year's Eve party we went to? We didn't have a care in the world. This was the glorious beginning of our lives as adults. Our request to the DJ was Whitney Houston's "My Love Is Your Love." I can still hear you singing as we danced:

*If tomorrow is Judgment Day
And I'm standin' on the front line
And the Lord ask me what I did with my life
I will say I spent it with you.*

*I love you, Shell!
Always, Erin*

ERIN BRATTON, 35, OF GOSHEN, NEW YORK, LOST HER SISTER, MICHELLE. TODAY SHE IS AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELOR.



Sisters forever:
Erin, left, and
Michelle Bratton at
a party the year
before Michelle
died at the World
Trade Center

“
Where was my dance
partner, my soul
sister? The pain was
very hard to soothe.
I can still hear you
singing Whitney
Houston's 'My Love
Is Your Love.'”

—Erin Bratton