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ON THE WEB

Mourning Rooms



Felicia Sullivan mourns hers with early visits to South Street Seaport.

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Two weeks ago, when the body of a Juilliard student, Sarah Fox, was found in Inwood Hill Park, 150 of her grief-stricken classmates gathered in the school's Room 304. Normally used for classes in movement and rehearsals, this spare, unassuming studio has, over the last five years, taken on a grim secondary purpose as Juilliard's unofficial grieving space. Students filled the room a few years ago when another drama student was found dead, for example, and after Sept. 11, of course, the room was full of mourners.

Normally, we think of grieving as a process confined to places religious - church, synagogue, mosque, cemetery - or domestic. But people can mourn anywhere, and as social changes have made such customized grieving more common, they do just that, selecting unlikely places that are nonetheless imbued with personal meaning.

Perhaps because so much of New York life is played out in public - on the subway, on the streets - city residents, like the students at Juilliard, often seem to find consolation in the city's varied corners. On Sept. 11, when people gathered on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, in Union Square and at the sites of hundreds of makeshift shrines, all of New York became a Room 304.

But, in the end, grieving is a solitary process. Here are the stories of a handful of New Yorkers who have chosen to reflect on the loss of a loved one in an unexpected place.

The Skating Route

In the spring of 1996, when the weather turned warm, Heidi Snow and her fiancé, Michel Breistroff, a young Frenchman who played hockey at Harvard, began spending nearly all their free time in Central Park. "He was an athlete - and I'm not, really - so he loved to be outdoors, doing things," Ms. Snow said. "We used to rollerblade around Central Park. He taught me how."

On July 17 of that year, Ms. Snow, then 24, kissed Mr. Breistroff goodbye as he headed off to Kennedy Airport to catch a flight to Paris. "He was leaving to go back and play for the French national team," she recalled. "I was going to meet him in a week."

Mr. Breistroff never made it to Paris. His plane - T.W.A.'s infamous Flight 800 - exploded shortly after takeoff. For two weeks after the crash, Ms. Snow stayed at a hotel near the airport, along with others who had lost their loved ones.

When she returned to Manhattan, she started, not entirely consciously, to follow the routine she and Mr. Breistroff had established, especially the skating. "I remembered being there with him, in Central Park, going around the park in a circle," Ms. Snow said. "So, by myself, I'd do that same route, the route he taught me, and look at all our landmarks, all the places we'd stopped together to tie our Rollerblades or rest. It became my routine. Every day. I'd enter at 76th Street and then go all the way around to the 50's, to the Plaza Hotel, and then back up. I'd sit on those benches behind the Met, where there's that green area."

Ms. Snow, a flaxen-haired woman with large brown eyes who now runs a support group for people whose relatives died in plane crashes, retraced the couple's path all through the rest of that year. She stopped skating only when the weather turned cold; after that, she took walks around the same route. "I know it sounds abnormal," she said, "but every day, I kind of hoped he'd be there, sitting on a bench.

The Theater

Jennifer Paddock is an Arkansas native who entered New York University to study creative writing in the mid-90's. But, less than a year after arriving in Manhattan, she had to return to her hometown, Fort Smith. Her father had committed suicide.

After the funeral, Ms. Paddock, now 34, returned to New York and holed up in her Macdougall Street apartment. Soon, however, she noticed that Savion Glover was appearing at the Public Theater, in the musical "Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk." On one of her family's childhood trips to New York, Ms. Paddock had seen Mr. Glover in an earlier musical, "The Tap Dance Kid." Given that connection, she felt, with the desperation of the grief-stricken, that she needed to see Mr. Glover perform.

The production at the Public was sold out. Soon after, the show transferred to the Ambassador Theater on Broadway. Ms. Paddock bought a ticket. "It was a beautiful theater," she said. "The chandeliers. And I just felt really happy being there. Maybe because the tap-dancing, which is loud and rhythmic, felt kind of meditative to me."

For three months, Ms. Paddock attended several shows a week, occasionally dragging along less-than-enthusiastic friends, none of whom knew the extent of her obsession. She also uses this episode of her life in "A Secret Word," her first novel, published this year.

"I loved the show, but I also loved walking through Times Square," she said. "It was so crowded and loud. I liked being lost in the crowd. Sometimes, I'd walk up from my apartment and that, I guess, was a meditation, too."

The Seaport

A lifelong New Yorker - Borough Park-born, Columbia-educated - Felicia Sullivan didn't spend much time around water until she moved downtown to Pearl Street in 2002. Five years earlier, on the eve of Ms. Sullivan's college graduation, her mother disappeared. "She had a significant drug problem, which started early on, from when I was 10," Ms. Sullivan said. "I found out when I was 17. When I went to college, it spiraled out of control."

Over the ensuing years, Ms. Sullivan, an effusive 28-year-old who founded an online magazine called smallspiralinotebook.com, searched for her mother, following every hint of trail. But last July, after moving to Pearl Street and just before leaving on a fellowship to Russia, she decided to give up. "I made every effort to find her," she said. "I have to assume that she's passed, to give myself closure."

When Ms. Sullivan returned from Russia, she began rising early for her job as a project manager at Time Warner Cable, and walked along the cobblestone blocks to South Street Seaport. "There's a little coffee shop right there," she said. "I would get coffee and sit by the water. Every day. I would go in the rain, even." Just that 15 minutes of being by yourself helps you go through loss. When people go through a difficult time they say, "Make yourself busy. I feel the opposite. I want things quiet and calm."

At such an early hour, the seaport was deserted. "No tourists, no music, just quiet and seagulls and water," Ms. Sullivan said. "You hear the birds moving, you see the glinting of the sun off it - things you don't normally pick up in a hectic life."

The Veterans' Park

Dominick Bonanno has lived in Co-op City for 30 years, but only last September, when his mother, Maria, died at 93, did he really spend time in Veterans' Memorial Park, a small green area near his apartment and the nursing home where his mother had spent her final years.

"Co-op City's a very congested place," said Mr. Bonanno, a 58-year-old social worker. "But that park, though it's very pretty and quite appealing, is never crowded. The children, I guess, go to the playgrounds."

Mr. Bonanno began visiting this quiet oasis several times each week, reflecting on his mother's life - and his own.

As a social worker with Cancer Care, an agency that offers psychological support to cancer victims and their families, Mr. Bonanno has seen his share of grief. "I've come to realize that it's important to have a safe, sacred space, where you feel away from everything in the world, where you can face the sadness and emptiness of losing someone you loved," he said. "That really helps, having a ritual. I worked with a woman once who was from Staten Island. She'd lost her husband. And she would ride the ferry, back and forth, after he died."

"When I go there, I'm kind of in another realm," Mr. Bonanno continued. "There are lots of trees all around and four benches. Each overlooks the monuments to veterans. The lawn is very green, and in the fall the colors of the leaves are beautiful. And now, in the spring, there are flowers."

The Bookstore

In the months after her father's death, Stacy Grossman found herself unable to set foot inside Barnes & Noble. "He was an avid reader," explained Ms. Grossman, 33, who works as an intellectual-property lawyer. "The walls of his apartment were lined with bookshelves. I think he spent 90 percent of his disposable income on books. He was just so curious about everything. He would, say, read a story in The Times about genomics, get interested in the subject, and immediately go out and buy a book about the human genome."

On weekends, Ms. Grossman would meet her father, George, at the Barnes & Noble on the Avenue of the Americas and 22nd Street, halfway between her apartment in Chelsea and his near Union Square. "We'd wander through the aisles, and he'd pick out something he wanted me to read," she remembered. One week it might be "The Reader," by the German novelist Bernhard Schlink, which her father, the child of Holocaust survivors, loved dearly, and the next it might be "Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses," Isabel Allende's book of recipes. "We would get coffee and just walk and walk, carrying our new books," Ms. Grossman said.

But in March 2003, at age 54, Mr. Grossman died unexpectedly of a heart attack. And so began her avoidance of any Barnes & Noble. "He was too much there, with all those books," she said.

That fall, however, Ms. Grossman developed an overwhelming urge to revisit the Barnes & Noble where she and her father had spent so many hours. "Eventually," she said, "I felt I wanted to be reminded of him, to feel his presence." These days, she wanders the aisles on weekends, just as she did with her father. "I feel him with me when I browse," she said, "and I sense him smile when I choose something that will broaden my horizons."



Nina Roberts for The New York Times
HEARTACHE, HEALING "I feel him with me as I browse," said Stacy Grossman, who visits the 22nd Street Barnes & Noble, in homage to her late, book-loving father.

The Restaurant

Ms. Grossman said her father had a second passion: food, specifically, the food of the chef Mario Batali. Nine years ago, when Ms. Grossman's parents separated, her father moved from Riverdale in the Bronx to SoHo, and became a regular at Po, the Cornelia Street restaurant that launched the chef's career. "He always ate by himself at the bar," she said, "and I guess he was there enough that he became friendly with Mario. They would talk about cooking, and soon he started cooking himself."

Mr. Grossman, whose kitchen repertoire was previously limited to what his daughter described as "goofing around with eggs," became an accomplished cook. "He'd come over and look in my cabinet and say: 'Why don't you have chicken stock? Why don't you have truffle oil?'"

"Why do I need all that?" she would reply. "All I need is pasta and Ragu." In response, her father would run out to the store and buy her all sorts of delicacies. "They're all still sitting in my cabinet, of course, since I don't know what to do with them."

As Mr. Batali's fame grew, Mr. Grossman remained a dedicated fan, frequently dining at other outposts of Mr. Batali's expanding empire of Italian restaurants, in particular Babbo, on Waverly Place. "His favorite dish was the mint love letters - pasta with spicy lamb sausage," she recalled. "He always ordered it. But he loved everything."

As with the Barnes & Noble, Ms. Grossman avoided Mr. Batali's restaurants after her father's death. "It was just too difficult to go to those restaurants, Babbo especially, where I'd eaten with him so many times," she said. But as the weeks passed, Ms. Grossman changed her mind.

She wrote to Mr. Batali, explaining that one of his regulars had died. Mr. Batali responded, saying the staff had been wondering why they hadn't seen Mr. Grossman for so long. Then, on May 25 of last year, on what would have been her father's 55th birthday, Ms. Grossman and her sister went to Babbo, dined on Mr. Batali's rich meats and pastas, and were consumed with a sense of well-being. "Now," she said, "when there's something to mark, any occasion, we go there, my sister and brother-in-law and I, in his memory."

Only recently, more than a year after her father died, has Ms. Grossman come to realize the extent to which she avoided certain places sacred to her father, just to return to them enthusiastically.

In truth, avoiding those places didn't really do much good. "He was such a New Yorker," she said. "We walked all over the city together, and ate everywhere and saw everything. At first, it was terrible - every corner reminded me of him - but now it's such a blessing. I walk around, and he's everywhere."

Joanna Smith Rakoff, a contributing editor and columnist for Poets and Writers magazine, is completing a novel set in Brooklyn.



Nina Roberts for The New York Times
People reflect on loved ones at a Greenwich Village restaurant.