

Forces at Work

By Vanessa Ahern
September 11, 2002
10048
Neighborhood: [World Trade Center](#)

I am a skeptic when it comes to psychics like John Edward, the hunky television charlatan, who claims he is able to communicate with “The Other Side.” When I have a premonition I tend to deny it.

I denied one in late August of last year when I was seven months pregnant. While organizing my wallet, I paused on two WTC visitor passes that I had used during my temp assignment at Aon Corporation that week. I had worked in their plush offices on the 101st floor at 2 World Trade Center for two consecutive weeks. They only needed me sporadically. The visitor passes at the Word Trade Center were only good for the day of the visit.

As a temp I had to present a driver's license and get my photo taken by a high-tech gizmo every time I worked there in order to get the visitor pass. There was no sense in keeping them, especially since I looked puffy and pregnant in the photo. Yet, I had an unexplainable urge to keep these two WTC passes. I imagined myself placing them in a scrapbook along side a sonogram photo.

I had, of course, no reason to be feeling this sentimental about a temp job and blamed the moment on my pregnancy hormones and packrat tendencies and threw the cards out along with useless grocery receipts.

I had loved working while I was pregnant. My agent Susan told me that Labor Day week was usually a busy week for temps, but my phone did not ring. As my due date of October 11th approached my temp assignments dwindled. My husband Tom rubbed my stomach in the mornings, reminding me to relax. I wanted to keep temping to stay busy and save money for the long haul of stay-at-home motherhood.

“People don’t want to hire pregnant temps. They probably feel guilty making you work, you know. Besides the economy sucks right now,” Tom said.

With a bionic sense of smell, sore boobs, an achy back, violent mood swings, and no work to keep me occupied, I got increasingly angry at my temp agency and the world for not calling me up with work.

On September 11th I woke up hoping for the phone to ring with a temp assignment. The phone still hadn’t rung at 8:55 am so I assumed it was going to be another day of pregnant delirium. I heard Tom futz around. I expected him to start brewing the coffee soon, even though the smell of it would make me queasy.

He turned on the television to see how the market was doing. “Can you believe this shit?” he yelled, waking me fully up.

Black smoke was spewing from one of the towers. The newscasters were still struggling. A small jet. No a commercial jet. Could it be some kind of air traffic control equipment failure? Then minutes later, the second plane hit.

“What floor were you working on?”

“Oh, my God. The 101st. I don’t know which tower,” I said. I prayed. I tried to recall names of the people whose phones I answered. My mind went blank. I had always dismissed temporary employers because I felt in a grandiose-I’m-over-qualified-for-this-job-kind-of-way that most people who deal with temps assume that they are mentally vacant. When I temp I rarely make friends or remember the faces of people who employ me for the day.

I could only recall snips of conversation. At Aon a frail young woman named Donna sat in the cubicle next to mine. I overheard her talking on the phone to her significant other. Her doctor’s office had called her to tell her that she would need hand surgery. “This is the worst thing that can happen to me in my life, right now,” she said. I heard her sniffling. If I had known her for more than a couple of days, I might have popped my head into her cubicle space and offered her a tissue or a pat on the back. But, instead I stared at the computer monitor and continued on with the merge printing project assigned to me.

Another day, a young female employee stopped me as I waddled to the bathroom.

“You poor thing! I saw you earlier and was thinking about how uncomfortable you have to be in this heat. How are you feeling? When is the baby due?” she asked.

What followed was one of those warm distracting conversations that make the sluggish hours of temping go by fast, and feel more rewarding: “This job may not be advancing my publishing career, but at least I’ve made one human connection today.”

Did that caring stranger make it out of there in time? I’ll always wonder.

Our phone started ringing. Instead of my employment agent, it was my father calling me to make sure I wasn’t temping that day. Hearing the relief in his voice made me want to go to church and thank someone. It also made me want to kill someone. Who, I didn’t know.

Two weeks past my due date, a nine-pound baby girl greeted me via caesarean section after twenty hours of labor. When my daughter turned four weeks old, I got a sudden burst of energy. My moxie was back. My incision wasn’t hurting anymore. My first foray with a stroller into Central Park made me think of my first driving lesson. I was certain I would get into an accident. Things that used to be benign to me were suddenly offensive: careless smokers, mentally unstable vagrants, unleashed German shepherds.

I peered down at her through the canopy window of the stroller. She looked back at me, content, binky firmly in place, relishing the crisp air. My daughter was oblivious to my angst. I had always wanted to walk my baby in Central Park, but now I felt uneasy. I looked out at the famous high rises that circle the park and winced. I envisioned flying bombs raining on us. Was this what the shrinks call post-traumatic stress disorder? Was it postpartum fatalism? I didn’t know and I didn’t have time to get a good therapist referral.

A year later, I don’t have apocalyptic visions when I take my daughter to the playground, but terrorist nightmares have infiltrated my sleep. If I hear a loud boom, real or imagined, during the night, I will check on the baby, and turn the television on just to make sure it is safe to go back to sleep. If I had held on to the visitor passes, I would have proof of my premonition. I wished I had paid more attention while I was temping.

I don’t remember the faces, just the feeling I had while working at Aon Corp. People there took great pride in their work. One day I will tell my daughter that I temped in the South Tower while she was in my belly, and that fate and perhaps anti-pregnancy bias kept us from being one of the 175 Aon workers who died that day.

Tagged: [9/11 and its aftershocks](#)



Rate Story  (No Ratings Yet)

§ Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

Submit Comment

☐ Notify me of followup comments via e-mail

Latest Stories

Missing Krystal Kelly

By Michael A. Gonzales
August 30, 2026
In the fall of 1984, three months after turning 21, I started working at the midtown coffee shop, Miss Brooks, that was located on the corner of 56th Street and 6th Avenue. As with most [...]

Greenpoint’s Alternate-Side-of-the-Street Breakfast

By Joe "Kirsch" Curcio
August 15, 2026
Image and photos by Joe "Kirsch" Curcio I'm convinced that one of the reasons New York is considered "the city that never sleeps" is alternate side-of-the-street parking. The truth is, at 8 a.m. in Greenpoint, [...]

Categories	Archives
Across the River	Village
All Over	Ground Zero
Internet	Harlem
Subway	Hell's Kitchen
Bronx	Herald Square
Castle Hill	Inwood
Co-op City	Little Italy
Rikers Island	Lower East Side
Riverdale	Lower
Tremont	Manhattan
West Bronx	Meatpacking
Yankee Stadium	District
Brooklyn	Midtown
Bay Ridge	Morningside
Bedford-	Heights
Stuyvesant	Murray Hill
Bensonhurst	NoHo
Boro Park	Nolita
Brighton Beach	On the
Brooklyn Heights	Waterfront
Bushwick	Outer Boroughs
Carroll Gardens	Park Avenue
Carroll Gardens	South
Clinton Hill	Restaurant Row
Cobble Hill	Rockefeller
Coney Island	Center
Crown Heights	SoHo
Cypress Hills	South Ferry
Downtown	Stuyvesant Town
Brooklyn	The Bram Stoker
DUMBO	Awards
Dyker Heights	Times Square
East New York	Tribeca
Flatbush	Tudor City
Flatlands	Turtle Bay
Fort Greene	Union Square
Gowanus	Upper East Side
Gravesend	Upper West Side
Greenpoint	Washington
Kensington	Heights
Long Island	West Village
Long Island City	Williamsburg
Midwood	World Trade
Park Slope	Center
Prospect Heights	Yorkville
Prospect Park	Zuccotti Park
Red Hook	Midtown
Rockaway	Midtown East
Shea Stadium	Midtown West
Sheepshead Bay	Port Authority
South Brooklyn	Multiple
Sunset Park	New Jersey
The East River	Hoboken
Williamsburg	Robbinsville
Windsor Terrace	News
Central Park	Other
Central Park	Astoria
Co-op City	Berkshires
Connecticut	Connecticut
Stamford	Greater New
East Bronx	York
East Hampton	Long Island
Hamptons	Los Angeles
East Village	New Jersey
Ellis Island	New Orleans
England	Paris
Featured	Philadelphia
Flushing	Philadelphia
Pomonok	Poughkeepsie
From The Archives	Utah
Harlem	Washington DC
Hamilton	Papua New Guinea
Heights	Port Authority
Sugar Hill	Queens
Jamaica	Aqueduct
Kips Bay	Astoria
Letter From Abroad	Beechhurst
Long Island	Citifield
Farmingdale	Corona
Long Island	Elmhurst
Babylon	Flushing
Fire Island	Forest Hills
Massapequa	Howard's Beach
Syosset	Jackson Heights
Lower Manhattan	Jacob Riis Beach
Theatre District	Jamaica
Manhattan	JFK
3 Bleecker Street	JFK/LGA
Astor Place	Kew Gardens
Battery Park City	Hills
Bowery	Middle Village
Central Park	Ozone Park
Chelsea	Ridgewood
Chinatown	Rockaway Beach
Clinton	Shea Stadium
Columbus Circle	South Ozone
Dumbo	Park
East Harlem	Sunnyside
East Village	Whitestone
Financial District	Woodside
Flatiron District	Randall's Island
Gramercy Park	Staten Island
Grand Central	Clifton
Station	The Catskills
Greenwich	Uncategorized
	Prall's Island
	Westchester

Other Stories You May Like

Unbearable Lightness

By Paul W. Morris
It's a trick of the light. Depending on where you stand, the "Tribute in Light" memorial looks more like a pillar of fire descending from heaven than a recreation of the World Trade Center. You'd [...]

The Numbers

By Bryan Charles
Mr. Beller's Neighborhood was started in the year 2000, and we have published many stories about what happened in New York on 9/11/2001 and the months that followed. Today is the 25th anniversary of that [...]

America is the Bomb

By Kevin Cooney
"America. Boom. America. Boom. Boeki Centaa. Boom." During my time in Japan, I had grown quite used to not understanding what the hell people were trying to tell me. But this was a new one. [...]

Back Then

By Gretchen Griffin
Some South Jersey friends and I have a Christmas evening tradition of ditching our families and meeting for drinks in a dive near Atlantic City. There was a time when most of us lived in [...]

The College at Ground Zero

By Kate Walter
My class started the fall semester in the beautiful rooms of newly renovated Fiterman Hall, the south annex of Borough of Manhattan Community College, and finished in a trailer on West Street across from the [...]

Nearby [World Trade Center](#) Stories

The Archaeology of Disaster

By Dorothy Spears
There is the sense that we are doing something wrong, Diana Wall and I, as we walk south from Franklin Street toward what is arguably Manhattan's most compelling dig site, the hill of rubble that [...]

Maybe a Girl Who Loved the Ocean

By Amy Brill
Remembering the Names of the D [...]

The Day the Music Retched

By Andy Gensler
It was supposed to start with a mandated early-morning appointment with an "employment specialist" from the New York Department of Labor and end with me shaking my ass to minimal techno at Centro-Fly. Between these, [...]

Photographic Memories

By Christie Grotheim
The thing that intrigues me about photographs is not the spontaneity in which they're taken, nor the way they freeze time, but the fact that in the split second when the shutter snaps, one doesn't [...]

The College at Ground Zero

By Kate Walter
My class started the fall semester in the beautiful rooms of newly renovated Fiterman Hall, the south annex of Borough of Manhattan Community College, and finished in a trailer on West Street across from the [...]