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A sad and lonely Turkey Day for Sept. 11 widow

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STAR ORTIZ was deep in thought on the living-room couch when she looked up. And she panicked.

Her baby, Rebecca, 10 months old, was playing there a second ago. Where had she gone?

Star yelled for the child and for her parents. She ran to the kitchen. And Rebecca was just standing there, smiling.

Standing there.

"I couldn't believe it!" Star told me yesterday. "She'd walked there all by herself. For the first time! It was so beautiful."

Then, the ecstatic mother grew sad. Happy thoughts tend to end this way.

"I wish Paul was there to see it," she said. "He would be so thrilled."

The last time Star, 21, saw her husband, Paul, was early in the morning on Sept. 11. Paul, also 21, kissed her gently before leaving their Brooklyn home, and leaving for work at Windows on the World, where he was to set up computers for Bloomberg.

Rebecca had just started pulling herself up on her feet the day Paul left. "He couldn't wait to see her walk," Star said.

Rebecca has gotten pretty good at the walking thing since taking those first steps last month. But she still likes to say just one word.

"Dada," she says, over and over.

Star, too, gets stuck on a single thought.

"It is still my hope that the phone will ring and someone will tell me, 'I think I saw him,'" said Star. "I still have hope."

A gaping hole was blown into Star's heart on Sept. 11. But the days keep on passing. The baby grows. The bills pile up. And Paul is still gone.

Tomorrow, Star's mother will cook Thanksgiving dinner. Where once the table overflowed with family, the event will be far smaller this year.

On Dec. 7, Rebecca will celebrate her first birthday. And while Paul, a Jehovah's Witness, did not observe birthdays, Star will keep a seat open for him.

Yet it is hard for Star to think of celebrating, when everyday life has become so overwhelming.

Paul was his family's breadwinner. Since he went missing, his employer, Bloomberg, has helped pay the rent. But Star said she was turned away from two charities set up to help families of trade center victims because her husband was not a cop or a firefighter.

Star has had to rely on her parents for financial help. Lately, she's turned to a friend, a lawyer, to help navigate the maze of paperwork required to cut loose any benefits to which she might be entitled.

Next month, Star plans to leave the home she shared with Paul, and take baby Rebecca to live with her parents in Williamsburg.

"I couldn't deal with that apartment alone," she said. "It was just too much."

Soon, it will be Christmas. Star hasn't even thought about that.

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