

On Tundergarth Farm

by Geoffrey Calver

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There's an oak tree in Hanover, New Hampshire. Twenty years old, it is still a sapling. I imagine that one day the tree will have a commanding view of the Connecticut River and Norwich, Vermont, where my mom sat in bed, crying, watching everything unfold on the television. Underneath the tree is a bronze plaque with gold lettering in memory of my uncle, who died December 21, 1988 above Lockerbie, Scotland on Pan Am 103, The Clipper Maid of the Seas.

Two hundred seventy people. I try to imagine the final seconds of their lives. The bomb exploding with a roar. The terrifying jolt. The torrent of air as the plane's aluminum siding tore off. Falling, the ground screaming at them. How did they cope with the inevitable, the knowledge that there was nothing they could do to stop their dramatic descent. Did they give in to their impending death? Or did they rack their brains for some way in which they could escape?

September 11. People hurl themselves out of the World Trade Center, their bodies taking seconds to fall. I imagine falling from thirty-five times higher. Seconds stretched into minutes. Minutes to contemplate your death. I imagine that in a fall of a thousand feet there is nothing but the sound of wind rushing past your ears. There is no time to think before you hit the ground. I imagine this because it is hard not to. I imagine this because I don't know where else to place my uncle.

July 1997. My father and I are in Boston. I clutch two Red Sox tickets between my fingers. I chatter excitedly as we drive along the banks of the Charles. We swing onto Commonwealth, which is lined with maple trees and elms. Their branches canvass widely. The

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brownstones here are three and four stories high. We drive by one of them and my dad says, "Your uncle used to live there." I stare at the building longingly.

December 21. Winter is just beginning to settle into the Green Mountains, and this is my least favorite time of year. The trees are brown skeletons. The wind howls and the sky is more often than not, grey. It is cold, cold enough to snow. But there is not a flake on the ground.

December 21. We go to a restaurant as a family. Each year we celebrate my uncle's short life by being thankful we have each other.

Every year they mention it on the news. "Today is the anniversary of the bombing of Pan Am 103..." I try and comfort my mom but I don't really know what to say because I can't relate.

They found my uncle lying in a field outside of Lockerbie. "It was beautiful," my mom said. The field resided on a hill near the tiny hamlet of Tundergarth. Five kilometers from Lockerbie. The nose of the plane had crashed nearby, the iconic image from the disaster. My mom said that there were sheep grazing in the meadow. It was lined with stone walls and canted towards the valley where Tundergarth rested. The steeple of a chapel barely visible. My mom carried a box when she visited, it was filled with pine cones and maple leaves, chestnuts and dried flowers; pieces of New England. She scattered them where they found his body.

My grandparents were given my uncle's class ring from Deerfield, and a gold cuff link that had been found in the wreckage. For years, my grandfather was unable to sleep peacefully, terrified that his son had suffered.

It is Thanksgiving break, 2008, and I am browsing through photo albums. I stop at a photo of my uncle giving me a Teddy Ruxpin. Teddy Ruxpin was a huge, animated teddy bear. I loved Teddy Ruxpin, but when I entered Kindergarten, Teddy Ruxpin sat in the corner of my room, his eyes haunting me at night. One morning, several years after my uncle's death, I buried my head in my mom's arms and told her, "I don't want him anymore."

In the photo, there is a smile on my two-year old face and my uncle is laughing. His forehead is shining in the warm, June sun. It reflects off his glasses. I close the photo album and think about Teddy Ruxpin, and I wish that I had not gotten rid of him. I imagine that my mom was pained when I asked her to give it away. A piece of my uncle, gone. Forever.

