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On Tundergarth Farm

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Author Bio

Geoff Calver is a senior Writing major with a minor in Political Science. He is an avid writer and literary enthusiast and hopes to be working within the publishing industry by June. He is a production editor of the Mercury and has been involved at an executive level on the magazine for three years.

On Tundergarth Farm

There's an oak tree in Hanover, New Hampshire. Eighteen 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 once sat in bed, crying, watching everything unfold on the television. Underneath the tree is a plaque. It is bronze, with gold lettering in memory of my uncle, who died December 21, 1988 in the skies above Lockerbie, Scotland on Pan Am 103, The Clipper Maid of the Seas.

I imagine that in a fall of a thousand feet there is nothing. Only the sound of wind rushing past your ears.

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

I recall September 11. Watching people hurl themselves out of the World Trade Center. Their bodies taking seconds to fall. I then 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. Only 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 am clutching two Red Sox tickets between my fingers. I am chattering excitedly as we drive along the banks of the Charles. We swing onto Beacon Street, which is lined with maple trees and elms. Their branches canvass widely, providing shade on a hot day. The 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. I wish I had the opportunity to visit him in Boston. I am sure he would have taken me to Red Sox games.

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. My mom dines out with my grandparents, my sister and I come along. Each year we celebrate my uncle's life by getting together as a family. To celebrate the tiny group that we have left.

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, she lost her brother.

My sister is nineteen. Two years younger than me. We are two very different people. She is conservative, I am liberal. She barely reads books, I love them. She is avid about economics; the only thing I am avid about when it comes to economics is whether I have enough money in my bank account to make it through the week. Despite our differences though, I love her and wouldn't know what to do if she died.

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 a terrible 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 which 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, 2006, and I am browsing through photo albums. I discover a photo of my uncle giving me a Teddy Ruxpin toy. Teddy Ruxpin was a huge, animated teddy bear. I loved Teddy Ruxpin and carried him everywhere. 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.