



## 'It's Always With You'

**For almost 30 years, the loss of 75 people in a plane crash has loomed over this West Virginia town like a mountain. But slowly, Huntington is finding its way into the sun.**

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**By JULIA KELLER**

I was born with the sound of a railroad whistle in my ears, the mountains at my back and the river at my feet.

Everyone in Huntington, W. Va., was born that way because the city was captive to those elements. The coal was spooned out of the West Virginia mountains, heaped into railroad cars, then loaded onto barges and pushed down the Ohio River. Huntington, named for railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington, was the spot where the railroad met the river.

If you lived along the Ohio River, as I did, you could stand on the bank and marvel at the great, flat coal barges sliding past like dirty black wafers. At night, their searchlights would sweep the riverbank on each side; there was something thrilling about being frisked by light as you stood on the bank, hoping your mother didn't call you inside too soon.

Things are different in Huntington these days. Because the coalfields are no longer thriving, rail traffic has steadily diminished. In the past three decades, Huntington's population has inched back from about 74,000 to some 55,000.

The river is still there, of course. The river and a memory.

At 7:37 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 14, 1970, as a cold rain pecked at the ground and a nasty fog rolled in, a chartered jet smashed into a scrabby field about two miles west of Huntington's Tri-State Airport, some 30 seconds before it would have landed. Everyone aboard was killed instantly.

The crash site was a horrific mess of broken bodies, twisted plane parts and burned earth, upon which the chilly rain continued to fall, almost as if nature were trying to propagate the spot anew.

Seventy-five people died on that plane, including most members of the Marshall University football team and coaching staff, along with a contingent of prominent Huntington residents who attended all the games, home and away. The plane was returning from Greenville, N. C., where the Marshall Thundering Herd had lost a squeaker to East Carolina University.

To this day, the crash retains the dubious distinction of being the biggest sports-related disaster in U. S. history. The victims included 37 players, 12 coaches and university staff members, 5 flight crew members and 21 townspeople. Those deaths left 70 minor children; 18 of those children lost both parents.

Six of the dead young men could not be positively identified; their remains, assigned to particular players by process of elimination, are buried in Huntington's Spring Hill Cemetery.

To have been born and raised in Huntington, as I was, is to remember the crash, and how the city simply crumpled beneath the collective weight of its sorrow, as any city would. "For the people of Huntington," said Deborah Novak, a Huntington native who is making a documentary about the event, "it's like the Kennedy assassination. Everybody knows where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news."

I was watching television that night with my sisters: Cathy, 14, and Lisa, 8. I had turned 13 two weeks earlier. The three of us were sprawled belly-down on the floor, chins cupped snugly in palms, faces angled at the glowing rectangle like planets toward a sun.

In the middle of the show there was, unscrolling across the bottom of the screen, an announcement: Plane down at airport. Details to come.

The National Transportation Safety Board later would determine that the plane had come in too low for its landing, skimmed some trees whose branches extended into the approach path, and exploded when it hit the ground.

Two days after the crash, John Reed, then NTSB chairman, said, "If it hadn't been for those trees, he (the pilot) would probably have made it. It was that close."

My father, James Keller, taught mathematics at Marshall. With so many funerals happening simultaneously, Marshall's stunned athletic department was having a difficult time finding enough university representatives to attend them all. My father volunteered to give the eulogy at the funeral of Scottie Lee Reese, a 19-year-old linebacker from Waco, Texas.

So my parents loaded Cathy, Lisa and me into our family's blue and white Volkswagen bus and took off for Waco, an approximately 1,000-mile drive from southwestern West Virginia. Scottie's funeral was held a week after the crash at the Tolliver Chapel Missionary Baptist Church.

I would like to say that I recall the words my father spoke there, that whatever wisdom and eloquence he summoned for the occasion enabled my 13-year-old soul to swell and grasp the enormity of the Reese family's loss.

But all I really can remember is looking around the church at those stricken people and their friends and wondering what they would do next. I meant it literally: What would they do when they went home after the funeral, and the day after that, and the day after that? How would they go on?

Almost 30 years after that plane disintegrated in a bleak West Virginia field, I found that I was still wondering.

How did those with loved ones on the plane -- the children, parents, siblings and friends of victims -- ever resume their lives? "Sometimes it seems like 30 years ago," said Keith Morehouse, who was 9 when his father died in the crash, "and sometimes it seems like it happened yesterday."

Then and now, I wanted to know how people lived with such a loss, with the sudden, permanent demolition of the way they thought their world would be. Where does grief go?

Chester Reese is 71 now. He and his wife, Jimi, 72, raised six children in their Waco home: Ronald, Chester Jr., Scottie, William, Dwight and Cheryl.

Four of their children went to Prairie View University, just outside Houston, Chester said. Scottie, though, received a football scholarship to a place they'd never heard of: Marshall University.

They heard news of the crash from a radio broadcast.

"Scottie was a lovable boy. Very intelligent," Chester said. "I'm not saying it because he was my son, but he was good."

After nearly 30 years, the pain still is fresh each morning, Chester said, almost as if it renews itself overnight, culling from the darkness new power to hurt. "You don't forget it. You don't. It's something that happened and you can't do anything about it. I have to accept it.

"I have my bad moments. I do." He paused. "I get in my car and I ride. I ride out to the cemetery and visit his grave. I have a cry." He paused again, longer this time. "Sometimes I can't talk about it."

Jimi, who helps her husband run Chat 'N' Chew, a Waco restaurant they own, said Scottie's favorite hobby was singing with a Huntington gospel group called the Soul Searchers. Asked if he was a good singer, she laughed softly and said, "Well, he thought he was."

She described her son as "real friendly. Nobody was a stranger to him." He loved football, loved West Virginia, loved telling the folks back home about his adventures in a faraway place where the terrain was as craggy as Texas was flat, that seemed, in fact, like the exact geographical opposite of the land he knew so well.

"I think about him all the time," Jimi said. "Sometimes it seems like he's still around somewhere, like he can't be gone. When it gets round close to that day again, I start to think about it harder. Along about that time of (that) month, it gets pretty heavy.

"It ran through my mind the other day, how old he'd be, where he'd be."

Indeed, Scottie -- and all of the young men on the Marshall plane -- have now been dead longer than they were alive.

Her faith, Jimi indicated, remains a railing she can grasp when she feels as if she might be falling. "I was brought up not to say, 'Why him?' My mother said, 'He was only loaned to you. The Lord wanted him back.' Never question what the Lord does."

Cheryl Reese's 's memories of her brother are clear, as clear as the air on a perfect football afternoon in the late fall. She still has the last letter he wrote to her from Huntington.

"I remember how he laughed," she said. "And he sure did eat a lot. His favorite was my mom's potato salad."

The news of Scottie's death abruptly ended her childhood, Cheryl said. She was 10 years old. "It's just like yesterday to me. It was my wake-up call to life. When I came in the house that night, my mother was crying. I remember getting mad and thinking, 'Who made my mom cry like that? Who's making my mom cry?' "

Then they told her what had happened.

Cheryl, 39, has always lived close to her parents in Waco. She works for the U. S. Postal Service. Fourteen years ago, she gave birth to twins. The girl, she finally decided, would be named Shayla.

The boy's name came easy. She called him Scottie.

The first few weeks after the crash, Mary Beth Repasy recalled, she would go to mass every day, come home and lock herself in her bedroom.

Then she would scream.

Repasy, 76, doesn't scream anymore. The red wound of loss has been cauterized by time. But she remembers her son, Jack Repasy, who died at 20 aboard the Marshall plane, with a clarity that cuts through the fog of the intervening years.

He was a big, handsome young man, who looked a bit like former Denver Bronco quarterback John Elway. But it was in receiving, not passing, that Repasy distinguished himself.

He was best friends with two other Marshall players, backup quarterback Bobby Harris and offensive guard Mark Andrews, who had grown up in the same neighborhood and graduated, as Repasy did, from Cincinnati Moeller High School, a football powerhouse in Cincinnati. They, too, were large and good-looking, possessing the natural athlete's confident swagger, that casual grace born of physical prowess and an absolute certainty that the world wished them well.

They borrowed one another's clothes, wrestled on mattresses thrown on the floor, went fishing, gossiped about girlfriends. They did everything together.

On Nov. 14, 1970, they died together.

"There was one blessing. They went in a hurry," Mary Beth Repasy said.

She has stayed in close touch over the years with Bob and Betty Harris, 75 and 73, and Ruth Andrews, 77, Mark's widowed mother. The families have a mass said each year on Nov. 14 for their lost sons.

Bob Harris Sr. and Mary Beth's late husband, John Repasy Sr., did their screaming in another way: They sought answers from the NTSB about the cause of the crash, never satisfied with the answers they were given from bureaucrats who seemed, to a grieving father's way of thinking, to have something to hide. "We were both very angry," Bob said bitterly.

The Harris family had driven to North Carolina to watch their son play. They asked him to ride back with them, but he said he needed to be with the team. They heard the news about the crash at a service station on their way home.

Right after her son's funeral, Betty went back to work. "I wanted to be busy," she said. "I had to be." She called her boss at the Internal Revenue Service in Cincinnati, though, and told him to ask co-workers not to mention her son, not even to express sympathy.

It is only in the last few years, she said, that she has been able to talk at length about Bobby with anyone other than family members. She has six other children. What used to hurt -- remembering Bobby's smile, his laugh, the way he'd effortlessly pick her straight up off the ground, for he was a strong boy -- now brings her a quiet peace.

A funeral for the three boys was held at Cincinnati Moeller, site of so many of their athletic triumphs. As was the case for all the crash victims, the caskets were closed. Betty regrets that, even though she knows the reason: The catastrophic nature of the accident had left the bodies scorched and torn.

"It makes you never quite believe it," she said. "You think he'll come walking along."

Ruth, who has two daughters, agreed. "We never saw Mark. It took so long to imagine him dead. You need to see him dead to accept the fact that he's not coming back."

The grief, all agreed with a chorus of nods, never goes away. It advances and retreats, it intensifies to an almost unbearable point and then backs off, but it never leaves.

"No," Bob said, shaking his head. "It's always with you." He added, "I didn't cry. I never have. I'm not able to. I wish I could."

He was the golden boy. Teddy Shoebridge was handsome and charming, with a big, sly, easy grin. He was a crackerjack athlete, too, a young man who would have had to choose between football and baseball. He was pro material in either sport.

Teddy was Marshall's quarterback. He came from Lyndhurst, N. J., a city just outside New York, where they still remember. The scoreboard at the Lyndhurst High School football stadium is named in his honor.

"He was a great kid. Just a great kid," said Ernie Salvatore, longtime sports columnist for the Huntington Herald-Dispatch. "He was a star, no doubt about it."

Salvatore, 77, knew them all. All the players on the 1970 team, their parents, the statistics, the personalities. It was his job to know: He had covered Marshall sports for 50 years when he retired in 1986. Earlier this year, finding himself with time on his hands -- his wife, Joanne, had died recently -- Salvatore rejoined the newspaper. It was the place he felt most comfortable, his second home.

When he thinks about the crash, Salvatore said, among the first pictures that cross his mind are the faces of Teddy's parents, Ted and Yolanda Shoebridge. Of all the parents, they seemed the most devastated, the most shattered, the most inconsolable. Years later, Salvatore recalled, Yolanda still would call him at the office late at night, sobbing into the phone.

"What could I say?" Salvatore said quietly. "What could I tell her?"

Terry Shoebridge, 40, Teddy's brother, described the family's sorrow this way: "My parents' heart was ripped out on that day and it was never put back."

To his brothers Terry and Tommy, 45, who still live in the Lyndhurst area, Teddy was a hero, an idol, practically a god. How could it have been otherwise?

In the dining room of the comfortable home that Terry, an accountant, shares with his wife and two young children, the Shoebridges gathered around the table to talk about their lost prince.

"I was 17 years old," said Tommy, a big, powerful-looking man who coaches the Lyndhurst High School football team. He was talking about Nov. 14, 1970, the day that changed everything. "I came home and my mother was hysterically crying. My dad was pacing in the yard. I couldn't get a straight answer out of anybody."

Yolanda, 73, so frail from cancer that she had to rest between sentences, recalled that her parish priest was the one who arrived to break the news to her and her late husband, Ted Shoebridge Sr. "In 29 years, it seems like yesterday and they're going to tell me all over again.

"He was No. 14. He loved 14 and 44, whichever number they would let him have. I see a license plate with 14 or 44 and I think, 'See? He's there. He's telling me he's there.' "

Yolanda and her two surviving sons have been interviewed many times about Teddy. When national magazines such as Time and Sports Illustrated or networks such as ESPN present stories about the crash -- usually near the anniversary date, typically pegged to Marshall's surprising new reputation as a football powerhouse -- naturally they head for the quarterback's family. Quarterbacks are always good copy. Quarterbacks are stars.

Even in death, it seems, Teddy Shoebridge is the go-to guy.

"I don't mind talking about him," Yolanda said, "because I want my son to live on and on. I'm not saying this because I'm his mother, but he was the greatest kid you'd ever want to know."

She has never let go. She never will. "My mother lives with this every day of her life," Terry said solemnly, almost in awe. You can talk about closure, you can talk about putting things behind you and getting on with life, but for the Shoebridges, time stopped on Nov. 14, 1970. Almost literally: In the family's garage, where Ted Sr. ran his car repair business, hangs a 1970 calendar. The last date marked off is Nov. 13. The calendar was never changed, never replaced; it hangs there, waiting.

Yolanda and Ted Sr., who died of a heart attack two years ago, raised their remaining sons with love and care. But they never got over Teddy's death. Anyone will tell you that, anyone who knows them, including their sons. Yolanda will tell you that herself: Never, never, never, never, never. The word -- an echo in a dark cave -- keeps coming up in her conversations: Never.

"I feel bad that I always told him, 'Good things come to good people,' " she said, shaking her head. "That's what I always said."

In 1990, she and her husband returned to Huntington for the 20th anniversary of the crash. "I was so glad we went. It was the greatest trip," she said. "It eased the pain some."

Grief, said Tommy, does funny things to time.

"Teddy was always older than me, always so much wiser. I'm twice his age now. He only lived 20 years. But he'll always be my older brother."

Athletes, the good ones, leave vapor trails of memory when they fly by. "Let me tell you about the night when. . . ." "Were you in the bleachers on the day of. . . ." Oddly, or maybe not so oddly, sporting events often are enjoyed more in retrospect than when they're actually happening in front of your eyes. The stories are what matter, the tales, the legends, the passionate retellings.

Everybody in Lynchburg, it seems, has a Teddy Shoebridge story.

"They don't forget him," Yolanda said, with a satisfaction that seemed momentarily to lift her up out of her pained hunch. "It's a circle that doesn't end."

"I have so many letters that he wrote to me over the years. I keep them in my Bible. I read them when I'm down."

The day after Teddy's death, Yolanda went to church. The priest thanked her, she recalled. "He said, 'You showed people you don't hate God.' I don't. If you look and search, you see God is not a mean person."

The team that died Nov. 14, 1970, was having a tough year. That made the crash all the more poignant; not only had Marshall lost that day's game with East Carolina, 17-14, but, with the loss, the Thundering Herd had guaranteed itself another losing season.

In the previous 17 years, Marshall had enjoyed just three winning seasons. The record in that stretch: 51-113.

"Marshall was a poor school with no facilities," said Salvatore, who had complained bitterly in his columns, year after year, about the lousy conditions in which Marshall athletes were forced to play. Fairfield Stadium in Huntington's west end "had been falling apart as far back as 1940, the first time I saw it," Salvatore declared. And nobody had taken a hammer or a paintbrush to the rusting hulk in the ensuing years.

West Virginia University, he argued, always had the state legislature's ear; it was the priority. Marshall was the poor cousin, the afterthought. Marshall was the second-place state school in a second-rate state, a state that people made fun of. Still do, in fact.

As Salvatore pointed out, however, Marshall's troubles only seemed to strengthen the bond between the city and the university. Townspeople rallied 'round the downtrodden team. "It was a siege mentality."

Sick of second-rate status, tired of being ignored, Marshall's coaches started taking shortcuts. In 1969, the Mid-American Conference, in which the university competed, suspended the team indefinitely for more than 100 recruiting violations. The NCAA put Marshall on one-year probation.

And then came the crash.

In the nearly 30-year span since that black November night, however, a remarkable thing happened: Marshall football has become phenomenally successful. Since 1990, the Herd has been the nation's winningest college football team, with a record of 101-25. It plays in a shiny new stadium. The 1999 team, which opened the season Saturday against Clemson University, was picked in several pre-season polls to win the MAC, which recently readmitted Marshall.

That renaissance is the subject of an upcoming documentary film for public television, "Ashes to Glory," by Deborah Novak and her husband, John Witek.

"In my heart, I feel this is the greatest sports story ever," declared Novak. "But I don't think this documentary could have been made before now. Only now, 30 years later, are people willing to talk about this.

"Everybody has a spin on this story. But it's a story of courage."

It is also, of course, a story of change.

Dave Wellman, 46, Herald-Dispatch reporter, said, "Used to be, I'd go somewhere in the 1970s, and if I had a Marshall shirt on, people would say, 'Oh, the plane crash.' Now, they say, 'Oh, Randy Moss.'" Moss is the former Marshall receiver, infamous in Huntington for his comment to Sports Illustrated in 1997 that the crash "really wasn't nothing big," now a star with the Minnesota Vikings.

Marshall's football success has brought about, perhaps inevitably, less emphasis on the crash. That was then. This is now. And now means, increasingly, sweet victory.

Wellman rested an elbow on his desk in a quiet corner of the Herald-Dispatch newsroom. "It was just so long ago," he said.

He was a Marshall student when the plane went down. The first few days, he said, were "absolutely gut-wrenching." The city, like the campus, was devastated. Store windows were draped in black. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

Then time went by.

"Every year, it gets a little less emotional," Wellman said.

Keith Morehouse, 38, was one of the six children of Gene Morehouse, the broadcast voice of Marshall athletics, who died in the crash. Keith, sports anchor for WSAZ, a Huntington television station, is the play-by-play man for Marshall football.

He was 9 when the plane went down. Over the years, he has been a frequent target for interviewers because his story is so wonderfully symmetrical -- son picks up father's fallen microphone -- but Keith never tires of such intrusions.

"Hundreds, both locally and nationally," he said, estimating the number of times he has been asked where he was on the night of the crash. "But I don't mind. For anyone who asks the question, it's the first time they've asked it. They don't know the answer."

He and his siblings were watching "The Newlywed Game" that Saturday night, Keith recalled. The phone rang. His mother answered it, shrieked -- and everything changed forever.

"I remember my father as being very gentle, really nice. We'd listen to him on the radio, wrapping up the games," Keith said. On the bookshelf behind his chair is a black-and-white portrait of his father: a thin-faced, bespectacled man with a shy, earnest smile.

"In some ways, I feel kind of fortunate, as funny as that sounds. We will always remember him in his prime. We never had to see him grow old."

His mother, who died in 1989, never really recovered, Keith said. She moved away from Huntington after her youngest child left home, but her memories followed her wherever she went, always ready to tap her on the shoulder. "She worshiped my father. She once told me that if she was in downtown Huntington and she saw him across the street, she'd still get chill bumps."

On a beach vacation after graduation from Huntington High School, Keith met a young woman who had just graduated from crosstown rival Huntington East. Her name was Debbie Hagley, a name that instantly resonated for Keith: She was one of six children of Ray and Shirley Hagley, the team physician and his wife who died in the crash.

Keith and Debbie, 38, were married a few years later, after both graduated from Marshall. They are the parents of two children.

"I don't think about the crash itself," Debbie said, "but once a day, for about a split second, it pops into my mind that I really wish my parents could have seen my kids." She and her siblings were raised by their grandparents.

Her grief, Debbie said, has had a discernible trajectory. "It took several years to get to a certain point. But then, it came to a standstill. For the past 10 or 15 years, I've felt the same way. I'm OK with it. I say, 'My parents were killed in the Marshall plane crash,' and I can say it without crying."

She paused. "They were 33 when they died. I'm older than that now. Sometimes I think, 'Were they ever really here?' "

Several of her friends recently have suffered through the deaths of their parents, Debbie said. "I find myself thinking, 'Well, for me, that's over and done with. I've already been through that.' "

Many of the children orphaned by the crash either stayed in Huntington or, after leaving the city, returned.

"When you're young," said Kevin Heath, 40, whose parents, Emmett and Elaine Heath, died in the crash, "you think, 'How can I get away from home?' When you're older, you think, 'How can I get back?'" "

Kevin and his wife moved back to Huntington in 1986 after several years away. At first they were saddened by the memorial service sponsored by Marshall each Nov. 14.

A decade ago, however, their daughter Molly was born on Nov. 14. "Now it's a happy day for us, not a sad one," Kevin said.

When the phone rang Nov. 14, 1970, Kevin was at home by himself. His sister had just dropped him off, knowing their parents would be there shortly. Kevin answered the phone. The housekeeper for H. D. and Josephine Proctor, his parents' best friends and Kevin's godparents, was hysterical; she apparently forgot to whom she was talking and blurted out that the plane had crashed. Your parents and the Proctors, she told Kevin, are all dead.

"I just went and hid in the closet," he said. "They had to come and find me. I'm sure I was in shock."

Still, he holds no grudges, bears no one any ill will. "I think I got over it pretty quickly because I was so young," Kevin said, with a shrug in his voice. "My older brother and sisters took care of me. You find out how important family really is."

Chuck Landon, 47, says his grief for the crash victims "stays vivid. It was such a staggering experience."

In 1970, he was a 19-year-old Marshall junior. He lived in the same dorm as most of the football players. The



players were his buddies. He can still see them in his mind's eye, Landon said. He turns a corner these days and thinks, "It's Dennis Blevins! Hey, Dennis!" before he realizes, with a sickening swoop of emotion, that Dennis Blevins is dead, that he died in 1970.

"You look in the mirror and you see how you've changed. In your mind, though, they haven't changed at all," said Landon. "Instead of the boys of summer, they're like the eternal boys of fall."

Before the crash, he had harbored no journalistic ambitions, but afterward Landon became sports editor of the Parthenon, the student paper. Editor Jeff Nathan had died in the crash.

Landon lives in Charleston, W. Va., and writes a sports column for the Charleston Daily Mail. He has been to the crash site twice, seeking some kind of resolution, some elusive closure, for the emotions that assail him.

"I keep thinking," he wrote in a 1998 column, "the emptiness and the melancholy will forget to make their annual visit. But each Nov. 14, they arrive again."

My father never talked about the crash.

On our way home from Waco, my mother rode in the back of the van, and my sisters and I took turns up front, sitting beside my father as he drove those lonesome miles from Texas to West Virginia.

When it was my turn, I kept hoping he would discuss the crash with me, because I would have felt so grown-up to talk about such a momentous topic. But he didn't. It was a long and quiet ride.

My father died in 1984, at 52, after a brief struggle with lung cancer. Never, in all of the conversations I had with him during the last solemn weeks of his life, did we talk about the crash or, for that matter, about his decision as a young man to remain in Huntington, spurning job offers from other universities throughout the years.

Somehow, the two ideas seemed linked in my mind: It was as if my father, like Huntington, could never quite shake the notion that he deserved whatever happened to him, that he was powerless to resist. Indeed, there was a kind of lyrical fatalism in my father, just as there was in West Virginia. He was a brilliant man, a gifted teacher and a troubled soul; he lived too long in the shadow of those mountains, I think, and allowed himself to forget that shadows move according to the position of the sun. They are not permanent.

When I return to Huntington to visit his grave, I am struck by how the city has transformed itself since the crash and all the sadness. Yes, the population has fallen; but thanks to a new medical school and overflow from the consolidation of other state schools, Marshall's enrollment has almost doubled, from about 8,500 in 1970 to more than 16,000 today. And there is, of course, that marvelous football team, the one in the bright green and white uniforms, the one that wins far more often than it loses.

Three decades is a long time, except when it isn't.

The question that had pushed me back to the crash -- whither grief? -- ended up pushing me forward. "Look at the night sky," Leon Wieseltier advises in "Kaddish," his 1998 chronicle of the Jewish prayer recited in mourning a loved one. "You are not seeing only the light of the stars. You are also seeing the journey of the light of the stars toward you." I asked about the progress of grief, but I learned about the purpose of memory.

I recall quite clearly my thoughts on that Sunday morning after the crash. I tried to imagine the scene inside the plane just before it hit. Who was sitting where? Who was talking to whom? Who was thinking what?

A plane burrowing through the night sky had always seemed to me -- a kid whose first flight lay some 10 years in the future -- like a wonderfully snug place, a capsule that would enfold you like the warm palm of a cupped hand. I had a picture in my mind of the passengers sitting in pairs on each side of the long, low-ceilinged row, and I could almost hear the wisecracks and the big, booming laughs, could feel the elbow in my own ribs when somebody asked his seatmate if he'd heard what that guy three rows up there had just said, wasn't that a hoot, can you believe he

really said that?

I could see the pilot and co-pilot, calmly efficient in their seats, facing a control panel decked out with lights and dials and switches, peering through the rain and fog for a glimpse of -- yes, there they are -- the lights of Tri-State Airport.

That was where my imagination always faltered. I did not, could not, envision the crash. I was not interested in the crash itself, only in the moment just before. Who was laughing, who sleeping, who thinking about his girlfriend or combing his hair? Who was coughing? Who was looking out at the river?

Because it has been almost 30 years since that night, the serrated edge of grief has been, for most of those who had loved ones on the plane, rubbed by time into a smooth object. It doesn't draw blood anymore. They can carry it around with them now. They can touch it at odd moments.

They can touch it in much the same way that, perhaps 40 years ago, some might have brushed a young son's sleeping face with their fingertips, wondering what kind of man he would grow up to be, how many children he might have, what special destiny awaited him just down the road.

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