

# The Collector of Names

STORIES

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## 57 Gatwick

A flash went off as he approached the podium, which made him squint and temporarily lose his courage. He read his prepared speech in front of the cameras and then asked the reporters if they had any questions. One of them wanted to know if he had heard the explosion.

"No," he said looking at the microphone. "It was too high up."

George McCourt was not alone. Most people in Duluth didn't hear a thing that night, not until debris had started crashing onto their city. A rainstorm of bolts, seats, burning luggage, and bodies fell from the sky. It took seven minutes for the explosion to be sucked into the ground, and when it was all over—when everything had finally fallen from the sky—police sirens filled the air. People came out of their houses to see what had happened. There was a full moon that night, and many homeowners wondered what had just fallen into their front yards.

Flight 57 was running late but managed to rumble away from Minneapolis into good weather. It climbed to 29,000 feet and everyone settled into their seats expecting to arrive in London Gatwick the next morning. Flight attendants knew

that chicken alfredo would be popular, so they began to unwrap extra trays. They would serve it somewhere over Newfoundland and, by the time they reached Greenland, most of the passengers would be asleep.

The flight was carrying a maximum load of luggage and freight. Hundreds of suitcases and backpacks were stacked in the dark. A Picasso was boxed up for an art show in Edinburgh. The corpse of an old man was being flown back to his boyhood home in Ireland. Several bikes were clamped together and a number of baby strollers had been neatly folded away. There wasn't an empty seat on the plane, and the wings were loaded with 46,000 gallons of fuel.

"How many bodies have you found so far?" a reporter asked.

George gripped the podium and hated that word, *found*. It made the search sound like a treasure hunt. "We've recovered 139 bodies."

"How long until you find the others?"

He took a deep breath. "It's been a tough search for us. Very tough."

Even though he was the County Coroner, it still surprised George how quickly cancer had colonized his wife's organs—it started in her ovaries and spread like evil fireworks. He found it hard to believe that she was gone and that he was still here, still healthy. George was a mountain of a man, weighing close to three hundred pounds. He played college football for the Gophers and turned his back on the NFL because he didn't want to leave home. So now, when he wasn't working with the dead, he went to church where he kneeled down on his battered knees and looked up at the cross. "God has Sunday morning," he often told his sixteen year old daughter, "but

the Minnesota Vikings get the afternoon." She rarely laughed at this. She was more interested in shopping and make-up and other things that George didn't understand. He worried that she was slipping away, but he didn't know how to stop her.

He was on his fourth beer when his cell phone went off. He had the television up high, the surround sound made his living room shake, so he didn't hear the sirens. When he answered the vibrating phone in his pocket he thought the voice on the other end was playing a sick joke on him. "An airplane? Oh, you're hilarious pal."

A police cruiser drove him to the debris field where the night air prickled his scalp and the red lights of emergency vehicles flashed through the trees—George looked around and felt adrenalin in his blood—at first he didn't see anything except for an odd-shaped rock. One of the firefighters moved towards it and called back, "This one didn't make it either." At such an early stage in the search everyone still hoped to find survivors. It was just impossible to believe that they were all gone, that so many lives had been snuffed out above their city.

Several houses were on fire and at least fourteen residents of Duluth had been killed by falling debris. What surprised him most, at least initially, was the inescapable smell of jet fuel. It was everywhere. It was as if an invisible fog had settled over the city. He cupped his mouth with his hand as firefighters and paramedics followed him down the street. Red lights continued to flash, sirens broke the starry night, and a line of frightened men moved forward, searching, searching, searching. No one spoke.

Luggage was everywhere. So were newspapers and magazines and smashed laptops and cameras and cell

phones. One of the landing gear assemblies had dropped into someone's backyard. An engine had fallen in front of the Lake Superior Railroad Museum. It looked like it was supposed to be there, like it was a new display for the kids, like some friendly giant had dropped it there as a surprise. One of the paramedics touched it gently with an outstretched hand and then let out a long, low, gasp.

When the sun finally rose over Duluth the next day, nearly one hundred bodies had been recovered. The images stuck with George, they flickered before him and competed for his attention. He saw a man belted into his seat holding a book. A baby was found in a tree. A woman's hand was found in the back of someone's pickup. An old man was found naked near the lakeshore—he was curled into a fetal position as if he had decided to exit life the same way that he had entered it. George had these human beings taken to the morgue, he felt like he was gathering his own loved ones, as if he had known them all along.

One story in particular refused to let go of him. A resident in Lester Park was watching television—a nature show on tigers she would later say—when she heard a deafening thud. The old lady went to investigate and when she opened her closet she found the body of a teenage girl. The woman screamed and kept on screaming until the police arrived. George couldn't stop thinking about that teenage girl, how she looked like his own daughter, how her delicate body had smashed a hole through the roof. He stood in the closet and glanced up at the stars. He imagined her falling 29,000 feet. He saw the lights of Duluth rising up to meet her.

"The devil is out tonight," one of the policemen said, crossing himself.

George nodded. He was used to car crashes and the

occasional suicide, but the scale of this engulfed him. Nothing prepared him for what he saw. He simply had no psychological training to deal with what lay scattered around him. Even the FBI agents, those toughened men and women who anticipate and train for such disasters, went over to the side of the road and retched. Many of them broke down.

George excused himself for the bathroom and allowed himself to weep for exactly five minutes. No longer. When he was done, he stepped outside and went back to work.

The jockeying for administrative control got worse the next day when more suits arrived from Minneapolis and Washington. Everyone thought they were more important than anyone else. So what, George thought, let the CIA, FBI, and all the damn local authorities play their little power games. I'll focus on the dead and those who loved them.

More than anything, George McCourt wanted to sanitize what fell from the sky that night. He wanted to restrain and muzzle the horror so that the families might be spared from just how awful the butchery really was. Let them imagine their loved ones, asleep, slipping through the clouds like wingless angels. Pieces of husbands and wives and children had not been sprinkled over his city. There were no dents in the road where bodies had bounced up after their fall. No, he would protect the living from such brutal knowledge. He promised God he would do this.

The press were headquartered at a nearby golf course. The mayor explained to them, and therefore to the nation, that the entire city was a crime scene. "We need your cooperation," she said to a packed room. "We're still locating bodies and ask that you respect this heartbreaking process."

Then the Governor, a handsome man who had his eye on

the White House, mentioned that these brave people had not perished in vain. "They're all heroes, and the terrorists who committed this cold-blooded act will . . . all . . . be . . . found." He tapped the podium to reinforce his words.

George shook his head and waited for his turn to speak. He pulled out his prepared speech and wondered vaguely what he would look like on national television. It bothered him that he felt the need to comb his hair.

Outside, reporters filmed clothes that were stuck in trees, they interviewed people who wanted to share their experiences, and a small group of them were escorted around the city. They stopped at the Railroad Museum and looked at the engine that had fallen near the entrance. They picked up their microphones and began to broadcast stories about the twenty-four students from Saint John's University who were going to study abroad in London for a semester. They talked about these lost students as a group and as far as George could tell the engine was always shown in the background, its mouth open like a gaping black pit.

Reporters were eager to know what George had seen but he was tight-lipped, almost rude. He walked through them and did not mention the girl in the closet or the naked old man or the cowboy boot with a foot still inside it. He got tired of stories about how these people had died. He began to wonder about the stories behind their living. Surely, he thought angrily, *that* was more important.

As more bodies were recovered, more space was needed to store them because George had to work with a variety of national agencies to determine where, exactly, the explosion had originated. This meant that the entire plane had to be mapped out and each of the bodies examined for severity of

burns and concussive forces. It was decided that a hanger at the Duluth regional airport should be used for this and, so, as bodies were wheeled in on new gurneys, George ticked off their names. He could have done this administrative chore on a clipboard but he wanted a massive seating chart of the plane. He wanted something large that could only be seen from a distance because he felt that it needed to capture the scale of what the explosion had done to so many people. The seating chart ended up being the length of four sofas, and George asked each family for a photo of their loved one. He taped wedding photos, birthday photos, Christmas and Eid and New Year's Eve and graduation photos to a cut-out of the plane. There, staring back at him, were 358 souls. They were all smiling.

As the weeks went by he photographed the dead and then offered up the remains to the families. He made a point to be there when grieving family members came to the makeshift morgue. Sometimes they shook his hand and sometimes they acted as if it were his fault that the plane had been turned into a comet. But as each body left him, George had a strange feeling that they were dying all over again.

He began to link seat numbers with names. 3F was where Shawnda Collins sat. 32A was Zachary Donrivery. 17C was Emma Wilcox, who sat next to her boyfriend, Jeff Khan, who sat next to Jamal Ceannt, who was a piano teacher returning home to Paris. There were other stories that kept George awake at night. Miguel Santos was on his way to London in order to surprise his wife. She was working on a two month project that wasn't going well so Miguel thought he would show up, take her out to a fancy dinner, and cheer her up. He looked forward to waking up next to her and playing that stupid game that would decide which one of them was going

to make the coffee.

Tim Munro wanted to see Italy before he died. It took three years of penny-pinching, but he and his wife were finally on their way to Rome. He had several tour books in his suitcase and two extra memory cards for the camera. As the plane waited to take off, he wondered about sunsets over Venice and wished that he hadn't stopped painting. *Maybe I should pick up a brush again?* George found these words in Tim's journal alongside several doodles of a medieval church. Apparently, after the explosion, Tim held onto his journal all the way down to the ground. He gripped it to his chest with both hands. And when George found him still strapped into his seat, it took a long time to wiggle the notebook free. When he did get it free, George opened the little book and stood there, reading it. Tim's handwriting was neat and gentle.

One of the Saint John's students, the attractive blonde who sat in 21D, played lacrosse and was double-majoring in music and literature. She especially loved Jane Austen and the Beatles. She had finally been kissed by Ben Crossan two weeks before her departure. He was shy and seemed totally impervious to the obvious hints that her friends had dropped to him at parties. They kissed one night beneath the moon, their lips touching gently at first, and she felt his jacket crinkle in the cold. He went to the airport with her and they held hands until, at last, she had to go through security. She blew him a kiss and promised that she would call. That night, when Ben heard that Kristen had vanished into the cold night sky, he collapsed on the ground. His mother had to gather him in her arms.

The girl that George found in the closet was Hannah Mitchell. He knew that she was fifteen but he just couldn't bring himself to find out anything more about her. When Mrs.

Mitchell came to collect her daughter's remains she didn't ask a single question, and George saw no reason to tell her about closets or broken roofs or how beautiful the stars looked that night.

He started smoking again. He got bags under his eyes and he grew more protective of his own daughter. He wanted her to stay home but didn't know what to say. Be safe, he would yell as she went off to school. Then he would fidget.

The crash of 57 Gatwick had unexpected effects on the city of Duluth. Pharmacists noticed a huge spike in sleeping pills and anti-depressants. To everyone's surprise, the whole town mourned the loss of the four police dogs that were used to find the bodies. The additives in the jet fuel filled them up with cancer and they died quickly, one after the other. The city tested its ground water while everyone secretly wondered if they, too, should worry about what was in the air that night.

The months juddered by and George learned that he couldn't drive around Duluth without seeing the dead. They were everywhere. That front yard over there was where Tim Munro (seat 8D) was found. A large piece of Linda Clarke (seat 37G) was found on that street corner. He looked at trees and saw dangling things he wanted to forget. If he closed his eyes and took a deep breath he could almost smell the jet fuel.

One night while George was watching the news he learned that a truck bomb had killed 84 people in Baghdad. He stood up and felt his heart pumping wildly. His tongue went dry and he couldn't control his breathing. There, on television, Iraqi ambulances raced through the streets and oily smoke twirled into the sky.

"That's a quarter of a plane!" he shouted at the reporter.

And then, to his deep surprise, he burst into tears.

. . .

It was assumed that the bombing of 57 Gatwick was committed by al-Qaeda even though they repeatedly denied any involvement. It turned out to be a single man, an American in his mid-thirties. Videos were found in his apartment of high school shootings, and he left a suicide note on his refrigerator stating that he wanted his exit to be grand and unforgettable. He worked at the Minneapolis airport. There were other details, but George tuned them out. He simply refused to waste any words on the man. He wouldn't even say the man's name.

It took several sessions with a therapist for George to acknowledge just how seriously he had been injured. They tried hypnosis and breathing techniques and other things that seemed downright weird to George. The man with glasses and a greasy ponytail told him that he should establish a memorial to the victims.

"It might help you heal," the doctor said over a piece of soothing background music. "I'm sure people would contribute their time and money. Think about it, George. It might do you some good."

So George launched himself into fundraising, and talked to various architects and city planners. The memorial would be placed on a hill surrounded by evergreens and it would be simple—just three slabs of marble with each name written in raised black lettering. That was important to him. He wanted families to be able to run their fingers over the stone and feel the name of their loved one beneath the ridges of their skin.

Many grieving family members had come to Duluth that summer because they needed to see the crash site. They wanted to know where their loved ones had fallen so they could touch the dirt and leave behind a clutch of roses. George

took the time to walk the city with them, he introduced them to firefighters and home-owners, and at the end of the day, he usually brought them to the shores of Lake Superior. There, the water was calming, the waves mumbled against the pebbles, and it seemed as though something deep and primal were tugging at the water inside their own bodies. Some of those who came that summer, like the wife of Miguel Santos, just closed their eyes and listened to the shoreline breathe.

George began to feel that the families were searching for him, as if they needed to be around him. He became a conduit, and connected the families together by sharing names and addresses. It started when the family of seat 18G wanted to know who had been sitting in 18F. They wanted to send a sympathy card, which turned into a three page letter, which turned into a phone call. Soon one mother in Colorado was talking once a week to another mother in Brighton, England. Other requests came in: Saint Paul talked to Canterbury, Berlin talked to Des Moines, Sioux Falls talked to Tehran. Two families in Minneapolis realized they lived only ten blocks from each other.

For the first time in his life George felt like an artist. Most of the time he was digging for the sickness or the blunt object that had snuffed out someone's existence, but by working on the memorial he was doing something life-affirming. He didn't realize it at the time but the first memorial he created for 57 Gatwick was a chart of smiling photographs. Back then he had transformed seat numbers into something else, something that had stories and dreams, and now he was doing it again. When the blueprint was finally finished, George stood back and crossed his arms. Yes, he smiled. Yes.

As the unveiling approached, and as Duluth braced for this unwanted anniversary, George allowed himself to think

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of his dead wife. He saw her bent over the garden to pluck a peapod for him to eat. In three weeks she would be gone, but on that cloudy afternoon she had split the juicy pod with her thumbnail and offered the green pearls to her husband. If he closed his eyes now, he could almost taste them, he could almost smell her perfume and feel her hand on his face.

On the morning of the unveiling, a limo was sent to George's house. He waited in the front hallway for his daughter and thought about the time that he still had left with her. They left the house, arm in arm. And when the dedication was over, when the bagpiper had squeezed out the last of his lament, the families came over to George McCourt. Some of them shook his hand, others embraced him, many said nothing. But they all touched him as if they needed to look into his clear eyes and believe that everything, in time, would be okay.