**Lie a Little**

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*The most important failure was one of imagination.*

-Final Report of the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004

But it’s not imagination that fails. The body conjures what the mind requires of lies. The dull slap of pavement, the warm air against a twelve-year-old’s arms, the rancid-cotton taste of smoke. This was the last time spring would stain the pads of my feet as I ran barefoot to find my friend, whose house was on fire. I watched it burst open; the fire gave the roof to the sky. My friend was from Haiti, but this was Ohio, where spring blooms only once.

The passengers left nothing to imagination. They told us everything. Brian Sweeney. Robert Fangman. Peter Hanson. Peter called his father in Connecticut: *I think they intend to go to Chicago or some place and fly into a building*. Peter’s father, incredulous:*They don’t do that.* Someone screamed, and the call cut out. Twenty years later, I don’t want to imagine, I want you to tell me the truth; I want you to lie, but just a little. Listen. I thought nothing of it, the previous autumn, when my friend and I crouched beside my parents’ house and popped the seed pods of impatiens. We believed that doing so would hasten the coming of next year’s spring. But next year’s spring brought the fire, and with it a daytime of lingering lilacs and burnt air. You could see everything: cherry blossom petals scattered in the yard. Darkened grass, stunned by sacrifice. The house’s ribcage a burnt dove, asking us to imagine what happened inside. I have read you a hundred times, Commission; I have read your report on Sunday afternoons. You ask us to imagine a plane, and then to forget a spring that conjured a war that turned people to rubble, rubble to sand.

All we do is imagine; after Peter called out for us, there were still seconds to be had, time to be spent. Too much time. How it descended, how the cabin pressure changed, and the oxygen masks emerged. How those passengers, seat belted, pressed down, and grasped knees. How those on the left side of the plane saw the building, how it waited. How those on the left side saw and understood and understood. But watch the replay. Watch it again. Generous, terrible magic, those last moments, when the plane banked sharply to the left because al-Shehhi didn’t want to miss, and he opened the plane to the sun. For us, the plane glinted. For them, light sliced. Watch it again. This replay lets you imagine them blind.

In Connecticut, Peter’s mother turned on the TV and watched plane swallow smoke curtain. Peter’s father said*they don’t do that,*but his mother understood and understood. Watch it again. Again. Know we trade certainty for story, language for sound. Better not to know that none of us is lucky. No one flies blind.