

Michael Paterniti

by Norman Sims

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[Note: *Before reading, it might be a good idea to read Paterniti’s “The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy” in the Historical Examples of Literary Journalism” folder.*]

My first reaction to Michael Paterniti’s article “The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy” was awe. My second reaction was that it might be fictionalized.

I first saw it as reprinted in this volume without the pictures that appeared in *Esquire*, a special issue in July 2000 devoted to “True Stories of Men & Disaster.” Although people spoke, their words were not in quotation marks. The main characters had no names, and even the place, Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia, gained only one mention. Somehow the author knew what was said on the plane, which passengers were drinking soda and wine, and that someone was writing a postcard on an airplane where all 229 passengers were killed seventy-four minutes into their flight from New York to Geneva.

I once asked a graduate English class to read Paterniti’s article alongside Michael Finkel’s cover story, “Is Youssouf Malé a Slave?” from the *New York Times Magazine* of November 18, 2001. Finkel told a story without quotation marks about a child from Mali in West Africa who was deceived into a period of agricultural servitude in hopes of acquiring a pair of shoes. It was a well-written article, but the Times fired Finkel as a contributing editor when they learned it was an

unacknowledged composite. He combined the stories of several young boys into the tale.

The students in the English class guessed, incorrectly, that Paterniti's *Esquire* article was fictionalized. Finkel, needing to conceal his secret, had to make sure the reader never asked if anything was made up. Paterniti turned "Long Fall" into an archetypal narrative of grief, and he consciously used the techniques associated with fiction to give the reader a closer connection with the grieving characters.

I went to Portland, Maine, to ask Paterniti about it. He's trim and energetic, with close-cropped hair and a smiling, open manner of conversation. In his early forties, he has worked for *Outside*, *Esquire*, and *GQ* magazines, all fine places for good writers. It may have been his earlier experience at *Story* magazine—which publishes fictional short stories—that gave him the most preparation for "Long Fall."

"With the characters," he told me, "if you're a father you're going to be with the father in this story. If you don't get too deeply into who the medical examiner is—his name and all that stuff—you're going to be able to see him as an archetypal character rather than a particular character. His journey you will take on as your own because he hasn't been named. You're participating vicariously anyway when you're reading. It depends how thick that wall is, or how thick that wall has been built by the writer, between the story and you. You either get closer or you get farther. I wanted it to be right there. I wanted it to be very graphic."

He felt the techniques of standard journalism—*attribution, quotation, identification*—would drive the reader out of the piece. "You have to cite the source, their title, by the time you get to the end of the sentence you're exhausted having read who that person was who said this, rather than just

having what they said.” Paterniti wrote the factual piece with a rhythmic literary style, the green light over the sea, revolving, the waves hitting the rocks, the clothes on the line that looked like bodies. While graphic in its descriptions—can “degloved” ever leave your mind?—it became a story of grief more than of death.

But was it real?

Paterniti showed up in Peggy’s Cove eighteen months after the crash. The coroner was finishing his work. Crews were still reassembling millions of airplane parts in a hangar. Most of what remained was grief and a peculiar feeling. He talked to everyone—the coroner, the father of the woman with Persian eyes, the boxer, the Boston lawyer for the family of four that were killed. The lawyer showed him photos of the family and after a while asked if he’d like to see what was left of them. Paterniti did not want to see but he said yes. The lawyer slid over a manila envelope. Inside was a single photograph of an ankle. He said, “That’s the family. That’s what’s left.”

“Sometimes this work feels like method acting,” Paterniti said. “You attempt to live so completely inside of your characters and their stories that it becomes part of you. I’ve often dreamt a story many times over the course of weeks, in different variations, before committing to a set of sentences, to the first notes. But the dreaming, like dreaming in a foreign language, is part of the process: it means you’re approaching fluency.”

All the details were accurate in “Long Fall.” “It’s all my job,” Paterniti said. “It went through a fact check. This is all reported. In the case of Flight One-Eleven, it was exhaustive—the work it took to get some of the details. Some of it existed, like what was going on in the cockpit. The black box had that. Actually all of the dialogue in here was recorded. The theory that they caught fire was one that investigators had put forth. They really

thought the pilot and copilot had caught fire.” He continued:

The drink orders raised an interesting challenge. Peter Griffin [his editor] and I went back and forth about that. I knew it was a full flight—and knew, too, where the investigators thought everyone had been sitting. And I had interviewed the families. I knew what they did on that flight traditionally. I knew the procedures on that flight, when the drinks would have been served, what exactly would have been happening as the plane flew north of Boston, headed Downeast, and then to Nova Scotia. I took what I knew to be the schedule on the best airline in the world at that time, one that ran like clockwork, and assumed that on this flight, with no sign of anything wrong, that the drinks were served and the entertainment system had been cued. I named two seat numbers, and there was some controversy about that. It’s possible that no one was sitting in one of those seats, but again, I went with what the investigators said—and then also the coroner. He had a schematic of the plane on the wall in the hangar where they had the bodies, and they put up blue dots with names on each seat for each person they found. I went with that, but I also wrote it broadly enough so that I wasn’t speaking for any one person’s actions on that plane before it crashed. This was probably the only detail in the story where I might have used the evidence more conjecturally, but in the end, we felt pretty solid about it.

The postcard was found on the surface of the water. It had been written on the plane and ended

up floating in the ocean. “There’s a little detail about all the currencies floating on the water, and the purses,” Paterniti said. “They’d fish the purse out and go to look for a wallet or lipstick or something, and it would be empty. There were hundreds of shoes on the surface of the water. In the end, I used the postcard, found on the water, but I put it on the plane.” He hid all his deep reporting behind the narrative so it would not intrude.

Paterniti said the evolution of narrative nonfiction requires a commitment to the “metaphysical details”—to the mystery of what it means—and sometimes it requires narrative forms that can change from story to story. He explained how this principle worked for him in “Long Fall”:

When I went to Peggy’s Cove, I arrived as a reporter, having already done months of research, toting file folders and phone numbers, with the usual docket of interviews. But then, as always, I tried not to forget that I was there as a human being, too. That I was feeling something—lost, haunted, starkly alive in the face of so much death—and searching for something. I went looking for the finest details of grief, and how one survives that kind of grief. And I went looking for those irrevocable moments of change: the coroner, in a state of blithe frustration at his long day, eating a TV dinner just as the phone first rang with news of the crash; the father staring at the river with an idea of suicide just before saving himself by leaving Switzerland and opening a restaurant on the shore near the crash site, in order to be near his dead daughter. From those moments came the molecules of thought and feeling that, for me, provided some sort of

edification. What's truest about the story, though, is that the edification never rose to an epiphany, rather was defined by that electrical current of loss that ran all the way to the end.

Paterniti's personal connection to the event originally grew from the unrelated death of his wife's mother, Peggy, in a scuba-diving accident. His connection deepened and became personal in Peggy's Cove. He said:

I walked into this, into a landscape where I hadn't been before. My grief was projected from all the people I met. I put it on this place, but I had a certain freedom to use fictive and poetic devices or to employ some sort of lyricism. Although I think that's a dangerous word. When overdone or in the wrong hands I don't like it. I don't like it when someone's really forcing it in. But I think if it rises out of the piece it can be a powerful thing.

To my mind, going to Nova Scotia to write about grief wasn't all that different from John McPhee going to write about the Mississippi River or Ted Conover trucking Africa. Human thought and feeling reflected brightly in those stories. The more radical notion, I think, is if a journalist chooses to write in the name of an emotion first, then uses one's reporting and language to find that seam in the tonnage of facts, the one that suddenly accesses a secret world that moves us in strange ways.

Fiction might be easier, but Paterniti said he could not do it. Having made the decision to write nonfiction, it had to be done right. "I didn't have any last words that anyone said," he told me:

The guy who had the postcard of Peggy's Cove on his refrigerator. How ironic that

he would look at Peggy's Cove every day of his living life, and then die there on a plane to Switzerland. Unbelievable. I wish I had him, all alone, his last words. That would have been powerful. But I didn't. So I thought I'd let the voice carry that. Do you remember the last time your lips touched the head of your child? Do you remember the last thing she said when she left with her ticket in hand? These are common, everyday moments when suddenly you think, "Whoa, what's happening here?" You're implicated. You can't really get out of it. I'm saying that's the goal of what I'm writing.

Paterniti described a sacred undoing of the body. How do you write that? Facts help. But language is more powerful than facts, if we can control it. He said the rhythm came first in the piece, almost like music, when he was driving out of town and saw the clothes billowing on the line like bodies. Then the language of the piece suggested itself to him. He found the words to report the event and the feelings and the lives that were involved.

This is tough. It takes a literary sensibility. And at the same time, it takes a commitment to the facts. Paterniti could not cut corners and make things up. Because this was real life. He simply had to find a way to convey its true story.