

Esquire July 2000

The Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy

September 2, 1998, Swiss Air Flight 111, en route from New York to Geneva with 229 souls on board. No one would ever put it back together again.

by MICHAEL PATERNITI

IT WAS SUMMER; IT WAS WINTER. The village disappeared behind skeins of fog. Fishermen came and went in boats named Reverence, Granite Prince, Souwester. The ocean, which was green and wild, carried the boats out past Jackrock Bank toward Pearl Island and the open sea. In the village, on the last shelf of rock, stood a lighthouse, whitewashed and octagonal with a red turret. Its green light beamed over the green sea, and sometimes, in the thickest fog or heaviest storm, that was all the fishermen had of land, this green eye dimly flashing in the night, all they had of home and how to get there—that was the question. There were nights when that was the only question.

This northerly village, this place here of sixty people, the houses and fences and clotheslines, was set among solid rocks breaching from the earth. It was as if a pod of whales had surfaced just as the ocean turned to land and then a village was built on their granite backs. By the weathered fishing shacks were anchors rusted like claws and broken traps and hills of coiled line. Come spring, wildflowers appeared by the clapboard church. The priest said mass. A woman drew back a curtain. A man hanged himself by the bridge. Travelers passing through agreed it was the prettiest earthly spot, snapping pictures as if gripped by palsy, nearly slipping off the rocks into the frigid waves.

Late summer, a man and woman were making love in the eaves of a garishly painted house that looked out on the lighthouse—green light revolving, revolving—when a feeling suddenly passed into them, a feeling unrelated to their lovemaking, in direct physical opposition to it: an electrical charge so strong they could taste it, feel it, the hair standing on their arms, just as it does before lightning strikes. And the fishermen felt it, too, as they went to sea and returned, long ago resigned to the fact that you can do nothing to stop the ocean or the sky from what it will do. Now they too felt the shove and lock of some invisible metallic bit in their mouths. The feeling of being surrounded by towering waves.

Yes, something terrible was moving this way. There was a low ceiling of clouds, an intense, creeping darkness, that electrical taste. By the lighthouse, if you had been standing beneath the revolving green light on that early-September night, in that plague of clouds, you would have heard the horrible grinding sound of some wounded winged creature, listened to it trail out to sea as it came screeching down from the heavens, down through molecule and current, until everything went silent.

That is, the waves still crashed up against the granite rock, the green light creaked in its revolutions, a cat yowled somewhere near the church, but beyond, out at sea, there was silence. Seconds passed, disintegrating time... and then, suddenly, an explosion of seismic strength rocked the houses of Peggy's Cove. One fisherman thought it was a bomb; another was certain the End had arrived. The lovers clasped tightly—their bodies turning as frigid as the ocean.

That's how it began.

IT BEGAN BEFORE THAT, TOO, in other cities of the world, with plans hatched at dinner tables or during long-distance calls, plans for time together and saving the world, for corralling AIDS and feeding the famine-stricken and family reunions. What these people held in common at first—these diplomats and scientists and students, these lovers and parents and children—was an elemental feeling, that buzz of excitement derived from holding a ticket to some foreign place. And what distinguished that ticket from billions of other tickets was the simple designation of a number: SR111. New York to Geneva, following the Atlantic coast up along Nova Scotia, then out over Greenland and Iceland and England, and then down finally into Switzerland, on the best airline in the world. Seven hours if the tailwinds were brisk. There in time for breakfast on the lake.

In one row would be a family with two grown kids, a computer-genius son and an attorney daughter, setting out on their hiking holiday to the Bernese Oberland. In another would be a woman whose boyfriend was planning to propose to her when she arrived in Geneva. Sitting here would be a world-famous scientist, with his world-famous scientist wife. And there would be the boxer's son, a man who had grown to look like his legendary father, the same thick brow and hard chin, the same mournful eyes, on a business trip to promote his father's tomato sauce.

Like lovers who haven't yet met or one-day neighbors living now in different countries, tracing their route to one another, each of them moved toward the others without knowing it, in these cities and towns, grasping airline tickets. Some, like the Swiss tennis pro, would miss the flight, and

others, without tickets, would be bumped from other flights onto this one at the last minute, feeling lucky to have made it, feeling chosen.

In the hours before the flight, a young blond woman with blue, almost Persian eyes said goodbye to her boyfriend in the streets of Manhattan and slipped into a cab. A fifty-six-year-old man had just paid a surprise visit to see his brother's boat, a refurbished sloop, on the Sound, just as his two brothers and his elderly mother came in from a glorious day on the water, all that glitter and wind, and now he was headed back to Africa, to the parched veldts and skeletal victims, to the disease and hunger, back to all this worrying for the world.

Somewhere else, a man packed—his passport, his socks—then went to the refrigerator to pour himself a glass of milk. His three kids roughhoused in the other room. His wife complained that she didn't want him to fly, didn't want him to leave on this business trip. On the refrigerator was a postcard, sent randomly by friends, of a faraway fishing village—the houses and fences and clotheslines, the ocean and the lighthouse and the green light revolving, revolving. He had looked at that postcard every day since it had been taped there. A beautiful spot. Something about it. Could a place like that really exist?

All of these people, it was as if they were all turning to gold, all marked with an invisible X on their foreheads, as of course we are, too, the place and time yet to be determined. Yes, we are burning down; time is disintegrating. There were 229 people who owned cars and houses, slept in beds, had bought clothes and gifts for this trip, some with price tags still on them—and then they were gone.

Do you remember the last time you felt the wind? Or touched your lips to the head of your child? Can you remember the words she said as she last went, a ticket in hand?

EVERY TWO MINUTES AN AIRLINER moves up the Atlantic coast, tracing ribboned contrails, moving through kingdoms in the air, demarcated by boundaries, what are called corridors and highways by the people who control the sky. In these corridors travel all the planes of the world, jetliners pushing the speed of sound at the highest altitudes, prop planes pattering at the lowest, and a phylum in between of Cessnas and commuters and corporate jets—all of them passing over the crooked-armed peninsulas and jagged coastlines and, somewhere, too, this northern village as it appears and disappears behind skeins of fog.

The pilot—a thin-faced, handsome Swiss man with penetrating brown eyes and a thick mustache—was known among his colleagues as a

consummate pilot. He'd recently completed a promotional video for his airline. In it, he—the energetic man named Urs—kisses his perfectly beautiful wife goodbye at their home before driving off, then he is standing on the tarmac, smiling, gazing up at his plane, and then in the cockpit, in full command, flipping toggles, running checks, in command, toggles, lights, check, command.

So now here they were, in their corridor, talking, Urs and his copilot, Stephan. About their kids; both had three. About the evening's onboard dinner. It was an hour into the flight, the plane soaring on autopilot, the engine a quiet drone beneath the noise in the main cabin, the last lights of New England shimmering out the west side of the aircraft, and suddenly there was a tickling smell, rising from somewhere into the cockpit, an ominous wreathing of—really, how could it be?—smoke. Toggles, lights, check, but the smoke kept coming. The pilot ran through his emergency checklists, switching various electrical systems on and off to isolate the problem. But the smoke kept coming. He was breathing rapidly, and the copilot, who wasn't, said, We have a problem.

Back in the cabin, the passengers in 30B and 16D were sipping wine and soda, penning postcards at thirty-three thousand feet. In first class, some donned airline slippers and supped on hors d'oeuvres while gambling on the computer screens in front of them. Slots, blackjack, keno. Others reclined and felt the air move beneath them—a Saudi prince, the world-famous scientist, the UN field director, the boxer's son, the woman with Persian eyes—an awesome feeling of power, here among the stars, plowing for Europe, halfway between the polar cap and the moon, gambling and guzzling and gourmanding. No one knew that even now, the pilot was on the radio, using the secret language of the sky to declare an emergency:

Pan, pan, pan, said Urs. We have smoke in the cockpit, request deviate, immediate return to a convenient place. I guess Boston. (Toggles, lights, check, breathe.)

Would you prefer to go into Halifax? said air-traffic control, a calm voice from a northern place called Moncton, a man watching a green hexagon crawl across a large, round screen, this very flight moving across the screen, a single clean green light.

Affirmative for one-eleven heavy, said the pilot. We have the oxygen mask on. Go ahead with the weather—

Could I have the number of souls on board... for emergency services? chimed in Halifax control.

Roger, said the pilot, but then he never answered the question, working frantically down his checklist, circling back over the ocean to release tons of diesel to lighten the craft for an emergency landing, the plane dropping to nineteen thousand feet, then twelve thousand, and ten thousand. An alarm sounded, the autopilot shut down. Lights fritzed on and off in both the cockpit and the cabin, flight attendants rushed through the aisles, one of the three engines quit in what was now becoming a huge electrical meltdown.

Urs radioed something in German, *emergency checklist air conditioning smoke*. Then in English, Sorry... Maintaining at ten thousand feet, his voice urgent, the words blurring. The smoke was thick, the heat increasing, the checklists, the bloody checklists...leading nowhere, leading—We are declaring emergency now at, ah, time, ah, zero-one-two-four.... We have to land immediate—

The instrument panel—bright digital displays—went black. Both pilot and copilot were now breathing frantically.

Then nothing.

Radio contact ceased. Temperatures in the cockpit were rising precipitously; aluminum fixtures began to melt. It's possible that one of the pilots, or both, simply caught fire. At air-traffic control in Moncton, the green hexagon flickered off the screen. There was silence. They knew what was coming: the huge fuck, the something terrible. God save them. One controller began trembling, another wept. It was falling.

Six minutes later, SR111 plunged into the dark sea.

THE MEDICAL EXAMINER WOKE to a ringing phone, the worst way to wake. Ten-something on the clock, or was it eleven? The phone ringing, in the house where he lived alone, or rather with his two retrievers, but alone, too, without wife or woman. He lived near the village with the lighthouse, had moved here less than three years ago from out west, had spent much of his life rolling around, weird things following him, demons and disasters. Had a train wreck once, in Great Britain, early in his career, a Sunday night, university students coming back to London after a weekend at home. Train left the tracks at speed. He'd never seen anything like that in his life—sixty dead, decapitations, severed arms and legs. These kids, hours before whole and happy, now disassembled. Time disintegrating in the small fires of the wreckage. After the second night, while everyone kept their stiff upper lips, he sobbed uncontrollably. He scared himself—not so much because he was sobbing, but because he couldn't stop.

There'd been a tornado in Edmonton—it couldn't possibly have been, but, yes, a tornado, twenty-three dead. And then another train wreck in western Canada, in the hinterlands fifty miles east of Jasper. Twenty-five dead in a ravine. He'd nearly been drummed out of the job for his handling of that one. The media swarmed to photograph mangled bodies, and the medical examiner, heady from all the attention and a bit offended by it, knowing he shouldn't, stuffed some towels and linens on a litter, draped them with a sheet, and rolled the whole thing out for the flashing cameras. Your dead body, gentlemen.

Later, when they found out—oh, they hated him for that. Called for his head.

This had been a frustrating day, though, driving up to New Glasgow, waiting to take the stand to testify in the case of a teenage killer, waiting, waiting, four, five, six hours, time passing, revolving, nothing to do in that town except pitter here and there, waiting. Got off the stand around six, home by nine, deeply annoyed, too late to cook, got into the frozen food, then to bed, reading the paper, drifting, reading, drifting. And now the phone was ringing, a woman from the office: a jet was down. Without thinking, he said, It's a mistake. Call me back if anything comes of it. Set the phone in its cradle, and a minute later it rang again.

There's a problem here, she said.

I'll get on my way, he said, and hung up. He automatically put a suitcase on the bed, an overnight bag, and then it dawned on him: There'd been no talk about numbers yet, the possible dead. There could be hundreds, he knew that, yes, he did know that now, didn't he? He walked back and forth between his cupboard and his bed, flustered, disbelieving, *hundreds*, and then the adrenaline started to move, with hypodermic efficiency. Hundreds of bodies—and each one of them would touch his hands. And he would have to touch them, identify them, confer what remained of them to some resting place. He would have to bear witness to the horrible thing up close, what it did up close, examine it, notate, dissect, and, all the while, feel what it did, feel it in each jagged bone.

Flustered, disbelieving, it took him forty minutes to pack his bag with a couple pairs of khakis, some underwear, shirts, a pair of comfortable shoes, some shaving gear, should have taken five minutes.

He was a sensitive, empathetic man—at least he thought so (did his ex-wife? did his two faraway daughters?)—with a sharp if morbid sense of humor, a kind of loner in this northern place, Nova Scotia, where clans had carved out their lives over centuries and generations, where someone's great-great-grandfather had once fished someone else's great-great-

grandfather from a storm at sea. He was an outsider, had always been, which qualified him for what was now coming, lurching toward him at the speed it would take him to drive in that thick night, in the warm rain that now fell like pieces of sky, from his home to his office.

No, he didn't know then, as he left his retrievers, Dan and Deputy, behind, as he closed the door on his house, everything freezing in time as he did, magazines fanned on a table, milk in the refrigerator, didn't know that summer would pass and fall would arrive, that the leaves would vanish from the trees before he returned.

But now all he did was drive, doing the math: There were twelve in the office and six in the morgue. The local hospitals might be able to cough up thirty more, but that didn't even begin to cover it. Where the hell were they going to find enough body bags?

MORE PHONES RANG, MORE PEOPLE woke. The coast guard, the Mounties, ministers, presidents. The navy, the airline, the media, everyone scrambling to figure out what was going on; without realizing it, everyone was now caught in the spreading fire. In the village, boats left for sea. The fishermen rolled from their beds, threw on rain gear, buddied up, and started out, unquestioning, reflexively. (You couldn't keep the sea and sky from what it would do.) Many of the fishermen thought they were going in search of survivors, were convinced of it, owing to the legacy of shipwrecks in these parts, which often meant someone was out there somewhere in all that inky black, in a yellow raft, waiting for help, cold, shivering, alive, waiting, waiting, waiting for *them*.

The television reporter stood on the shore, with a growing cabal of other reporters, fellow parasites. He stood apart, shifting from foot to foot, antsy, squinting out at the ocean. Shit, where? Others worked their cell phones, frantically scrounging for the story, but still nobody knew anything. Someone living in a trailer home nearby claimed to have seen a huge flash on the horizon; another said the plane had come so close to the village that you could see inside, cabin lights flickering on and off, people lit, then black, see those last moments playing out from the ground.

These waters were his, that's what the reporter thought. He'd sailed these coves and inlets all summer long, sailed past the lighthouse so many times it seemed a natural outcropping of the landscape. He was a solid, good-looking man who spoke quickly, moved at a clip, all of forty-two, with just-thinning hair. He'd worked twenty years on the nautical beat, covering the navy and ship sinkings and whatever else came along. He never forgot to register a name, and then never forgot it, kept a card catalog in his head that connected everyone to everyone else. One of his great strengths. And when he saw what looked like falling stars in the distance, parachute

flares, he knew that was where the plane was. He turned to the cameraman.

We need to be under those, he said, pointing to the falling stars.

Before he left the office, he'd stashed extra cell-phone batteries in his pocket. You never knew, or maybe you already did. And now, in this night, in the seamless dark (there was no marking land but for the lighthouse, green light revolving), he was on his way in a hired boat with a cameraman. The wind blew, heavy swells, ten-foot waves, on his way, to see what? And why? He was as bad as the others, wasn't he? A fucking parasite. There were a lot of people on that plane, he knew that. At the UN, they called it the diplomatic shuttle: dinner meeting in Manhattan, breakfast meeting in Geneva. And now here they were, lost off the coast of this forgotten place.

It took an hour in those seas. The parachute flares and spotlights were blinding at first, the smell of diesel overwhelming. Sea King helicopters whirred overhead, flashing white beams; boats drifted through the wreckage, aimlessly, the water a bottomless black. They couldn't see anything, just heard it on the VHF radio, fishermen talking to one another: I got something over here. I think she's alive. Then thirty seconds passed. I need a body bag. And then other voices, this morbid call and response:

We got another one.

Over here, too.

Need a body bag, now!

Jesus, we got a foot in the water.

We have an arm.

We need a body bag! Who's got body bags?

Then the reporter saw a half-inflated life raft. Alive—someone was alive! But when they came upon it, it was empty, had inflated on impact. There were shoes fanning everywhere around them, hundreds and hundreds of shoes, in procession, riding the water's windrows—some with the laces still tied up. And underwear and ripped shirts, Bibles and stuffed animals. Money floating on the surface of the ocean now. Dollars and marks, rupees and francs and drachmas. You'd haul up a purse and expect to find a wallet, a driver's license, lipstick, anything, and it would be empty.

The plane had hit the water at more than four hundred miles per hour, nose first, two engines still firing, very unusual, extremely rare; the jet was two hundred feet long, and the tail rammed straight into the nose, everything exploding into more than one million pieces. Later, someone would be in charge of counting pieces at the military base, in a hangar where bits of the plane would fill thousands of crates and cardboard boxes. At impact, the bodies on board had been what the medical examiner would call

degloved, simply shorn from the bones. You couldn't pick them up in your hands. You had to scoop them in nets.

No one has survived this crash, the television reporter told the world. From what we are seeing, there are no survivors.

But, said an anchorperson, the coast guard is calling this a search and rescue.

There are no survivors.

Until dawn, he was the only reporter under the parachute flares, a bizarre, surreal time, no believer in God, but you could feel something, 229 of them in this place. There were body parts and shoes—he'd dream about them for a long time. He was beamed into television sets around the world. No survivors. He told the pilot's wife that her husband was dead. He told the famous boxer that his son was dead. He told the father of the woman with Persian eyes that his daughter was dead.

When he finally came to shore the next day, when he stood near the lighthouse, green light revolving, doing more live feeds, carefully choosing his words for the world, running on adrenaline, he noticed a large man glaring at him. The man was a very big man, with a pockmarked face and greased-back hair, scary looking, glaring. And the reporter thought, He's going to kick my ass for being a parasite, for feeding off all these bodies.

When the reporter finished, the oversized man started for him and the reporter could do nothing but ready himself for the blow. But it never came. Something else did.

I want to thank you, he said. You told me my fiancée was dead. I got a phone call last night, in New York, and I was told there might be survivors and I thought, Well, if anybody survived this it was her, because we're gonna get married—and everyone was saying there are survivors, and you told me she was dead. You told me the truth. I needed to hear that.

Needed to hear that? This man needed to hear that? Yesterday the reporter had been covering some minor promotion ceremony at the military base; today he had told the world they could say goodbye to these 229 human beings, the ones with X's on their foreheads, the ones turning to gold, once wearing shoes, ghosts now, goodbye. And then the big man was gone, too, before the reporter could offer thanks back, or rather condolences, before he could think to ask the living man's name.

IT WAS EARLY MORNING IN GENEVA, and the father of the woman with the blue Persian eyes—a slight, erudite man with fine hair turning from orange to gray, turning at that very moment even—sat before a television, watching the reporter, in disbelief. He woke his wife and asked, Did she phone last night? And his wife said, She'll be phoning soon to have you fetch her in Zurich. And he said, She won't; the plane has crashed.

His wife roused herself, still half tangled in sleep, and stared at the reporter, listening, trying to grasp words that made no sense. It's all right, she said. There's nothing to worry about. We'll wait for her call.

The phone rang. It was her boyfriend in New York. What plane did she take? he asked. And the father said, But you tell me? No, he said, because we parted company at four in the afternoon, and she didn't know which plane she was on. And can you please tell me that she was on the Zurich flight?

No, the father said. And then he called the airline and insisted they tell him whether his daughter had been on the Zurich flight. We cannot, a voice said. But you must. You must.... There was silence, then a rustling of papers. We have to tell you, the voice said, she is not on the list.

Thank you, said the father.

Then he told his wife, and she said, Until they phone us with the news, we have to believe. And the man said, But darling, they're not going to phone with news like that. They'd come to the door—

And before he'd finished his sentence, the doorbell rang.

Grief is schizophrenic. You find yourself of two minds, the one that governs your days up until the moment of grief—the one that opens easily to memories of the girl at six, twelve, eighteen—and the one that seeks to destroy everything afterward. The man was fifty-eight and he'd given his daughter every advantage he could afford; the circumstances of his life—his work for a luxury-car company and then a fine-watch company—had given her the riding lessons and top-notch education and summer home in France. But then she'd given so much of herself, too. She'd been a championship swimmer and show jumper. She had a great knack for simplifying things, for having fun, for enjoying the moment so fully that those around her wanted to live inside those moments with her. She was contagious and beautiful and twenty-four, with those amazing eyes. She was about to come home and take a job.

After she was gone, the husband and wife made a promise to each other: They would stop their imaginations at that place where their daughter had boarded the plane, their minds would not wander past that particular rope. As usual, he broke the promise, unable to divert his mind from picturing his daughter at the end—it's possible she, like all of them, was unconscious at impact from the crushing g-forces inside the aircraft. Or that she suffered horribly, screaming, the flash of an entire life playing before her eyes. Whom did she sit next to in those moments? What was said?

The man couldn't help but imagine the pilots, too, their fate connected to a recurring dream he'd had for many years of himself as a pilot, trying to land a jet on a motor launch and not knowing what the hell he was doing. Though his wife stopped her mind on the gangplank as her daughter stepped into the jet, he followed his girl into the sea.

Nothing made sense, time was disintegrating, everything was a confusion, chaos. Walking through town, he'd see the river and have to keep himself from slipping into it. He'd go to the station and hold back from throwing himself before a train: how good it would feel, a matter of time now, not whether but *when*—today? Tomorrow? What would it feel like?

Since he couldn't sleep, he drank a bottle of Scotch daily, then couldn't remember anything. He followed the news accounts, halfheartedly reading words like *investigation*, *black box*, *recovery effort*, *debris field*. There had been a Picasso on board the plane and millions in rubies and diamonds. One day a postcard arrived from his daughter, detailing her stay in New York. Authorities called, wanting to send some of her effects (others now slept with ripped shirts and favorite sweaters, passports and stuffed animals), but the thought horrified him. What was worse, what the man could never have foreseen after thirty years of marriage, after having done so much to put a life together, was how quickly it became undone. He'd spent his life stitching up a beautiful life—the watch on his wrist a mysterious blue, cost the same as a small house. Now he didn't want to be with anybody, just alone, and his wife, his best friend—his wife had stopped at the gangplank. How could she? How could she not follow their beloved daughter into the ocean? Silly words comforted her while they enraged him; having family nearby was a source of strength for her, torment for him. This response or that response of hers seemed so... wrong. And in his mind he was asking: What's the point of this life? And she said, We must forget.

There was one thing that made him feel better. He flew alone to the northern village a few days after the crash, thinking he'd have to identify his daughter, drove down along the coast road to the lighthouse. (The media was now encamped here, among the houses and rocks and

clotheslines, long-range lenses trained on anybody shedding a tear, beaming the image to the world.) He came to this village, and he felt something, some part of him rising, too. He knew he was going mad—and yet he could feel these waves churning inside him, his daughter there, too. When he returned to Geneva, he simply went back to devising ways to kill himself.

THE FULL SEVERITY OF THE CRASH dawned on the medical examiner only the morning after, when he rode a Sea King out to the debris field. The fishermen and others in Zodiacs kept shuttling body parts to a huge command ship, the captain on the radio to these men talking in calm tones. (Many would later say it was that voice, that reassuring voice, that pulled them through that night.) The media had already begun a body count, based on the body bags coming ashore, and yet there were no bodies out here whatsoever, not one intact body in those bags, which were running out fast. But for one, they couldn't identify a single soul visually.

Back at the military base, the medical examiner set up in Hangar B, refrigerated trucks called reefers parked outside to hold the remains. There were huge fans and scented candles to mask the smell, the whole place lit and flickering like a church. Like the strangest church. On one wall hung a huge diagram of the plane, a seating chart, and as the remains of a passenger were identified by dental records or DNA, by a distinctive tattoo or a wedding ring, a blue dot was placed on the passenger's seat. The medical examiner would eventually be in charge of four hundred people here—a cadre of pathologists and DNA experts, morticians, media liaisons, and staff. But when he came back to the hangar after having been at sea that first time, he thought, What if I go now, bugger off right now? But where? Back to his dogs? No, what he realized as the parts began to fill the hangar and the reefers, as the stench became overpowering, was that he was too afraid to leave. With each passing day inside the hangar, there was nowhere to vanish but inside these people, these bodies.

One day he was waiting to go on the stand in dead-end New Glasgow, killing time, and the next this complete Armageddon. There were three hundred family members gathered now at a hotel, and the medical examiner was asked to address them. Others spoke first—officials, the president of the airline, offering their deepest sorrow to these people—and then he stood up nervously, cleared his throat, perhaps recalling that day years before when he'd made a body out of rolled-up towels for the media, how simple and, well, hilarious that had been. But how do you tell grieving family members the average body is now in one hundred pieces, one hundred little stars? (A fisherman saw a human heart on the surface of the water.) You will never see your loved ones again, he said. Those were the first words out of his mouth, and the crowd let out a massive

exhalation, as if hit in the stomach. One man began sobbing uncontrollably and was led from the room. Not only are they dead, *you will never see them again.*

He'd said it. However painful, he knew this much: If you look away, if you self-justify or obfuscate, then you're stuck with the lie. You may make it through the moment, but in a day, a week, a year, it will bring you down, like cheetahs on a gazelle. Yes, he told them. If anything, they could see their own fear in his eyes, feel their quaver in his voice, their tears welling in his eyes. No stiff upper lip here. Fuck the macho and whatever it was that made you a man. (There was a heart on the surface of the water.) He vowed he would not betray these people, there'd be no fake body under a sheet. He'd try to talk to each of them, answer their concerns and desires, treat each body as if he himself were the next of kin: the father, the son, the lover, the brother.

Inside the hangar, days and nights of horrific work, checking dental records, X rays, fingerprints. And on several occasions the medical examiner took fingers from which they could not get accurate prints, decomposed fingers, made an incision, and stuck his own finger inside, went inside these bodies, *became* them, so that he could lay an accurate mark of them on paper, return them to their rightful place. He knew each passenger by name and blood type. He found himself intensely identifying with some, one in particular, a newspaper executive, a man named John Mortimer—couldn't shake him and his wife from his mind. He put himself in that seat next to John Mortimer's wife, tried to imagine the dreadful plummet, the smash of atoms. He tried to do the math: A loving couple falls through the sky at four hundred miles per hour, with maybe six minutes until impact: What did they say? What could be done?

Day after day, more blue dots came to fill the seats of the imaginary plane. He was not a believer in God, but a priest had come to the hangar, and the medical examiner said, Do you feel it? And the priest said, The souls are hovering. And the medical examiner looked up and said, Yes. Yes they are.

Then that November day came when they were done. There would be more dredging, hundreds of pounds of remains to come, jagged bones in piles (the plane hitting so hard some were embedded with quarters and nickels), clean as a whistle from the currents of the sea, but they were basically done. There were only a few technicians left in the hangar and they were going to shut it down, and the medical examiner came in early, when no one was there.

He knew it was perverse, but he didn't want it to end. He was convinced that his entire life, one full of mistakes and masterstrokes, had been

leading to this moment. He was exhausted, flirting with a breakdown. He knew that, could feel it, but he knew, too, that if he'd run, the cheetahs would have caught him, somewhere out there on the veldt they would have dragged him down. It was fall, the leaves off the trees. A season had passed. How many seasons had passed? Nothing made sense. He was going back to his life (his dogs, the daughter who thought he was grandstanding now, saw his public empathy as something he'd never once offered her), his best self traded back for his flawed self, and he stood for a long while in silence, time disintegrating. When he turned to walk away—even later when he retired and packed up and moved back west—most of him stayed right here.

THE PASSENGERS WERE blue dots now, and yet they were still alive. After that first night, even as time passed and the story fell from the news, the television reporter had been driven deeper into it; he learned the names, who connected to whom. He tracked the possible causes of the crash: a spark thrown from the wiring of the elaborate entertainment system, the flammability of the Mylar insulation. He was haunted by the prospect that if the pilot had landed immediately, hadn't gone by the book, dallying with checklists, just put the jet down, everyone might be alive.

But then he met the pilot's wife. He went to Zurich, flew in the cockpit of the same kind of jet that had crashed, with one of the dead pilot's best friends, an awesome feeling of power up in that kingdom of sky, plowing for Europe. He met the pilot's wife at her expensive home in a ritzy neighborhood with a lap pool and lots of sunlight inside. The woman was startlingly attractive, especially when she smiled, which wasn't often these days. In her former life, when she wanted to go to Manhattan or Hong Kong or Tokyo, she didn't go first-class, she went in the cockpit. And when her husband spoke, a dozen people jumped. They'd met when she was a flight attendant, and now here she was describing how she and her three children were trying to carry on without their father, her husband, Urs. She told a story about going to the crash site, on board a boat that took the families there, about how hard it had been for everyone, how the kids were down, very down, and coming back, over the side, in the water, there were suddenly dolphins running in the ocean, an amazing vision, like electrical currents, these dolphins up from the deep and slipping alongside them. Not too long after, she decided that she was going back to work as a flight attendant, for the same airline. Her first flight was the New York–Geneva route, on the same type of aircraft as the one her husband had ridden into the sea.

There were others, too, people so moved by the graciousness of those in this northern place that they returned or even bought property to be closer. One man sailed his sloop here, in honor of the brother who'd taught him to

sail in the first place, the brother trying to save the world. The boxer, now an old man of seventy-eight but once a world champion, came despite himself and said he felt lighter when he left, after looking out from the lighthouse at the spot where his son's life ended. It somehow made him feel lighter. Others came and saw the hangar where the remains had been, the hangar where the million pieces of plane were still boxed and numbered, seats over here, armrests over there. The three jet engines were there, too, big, hulking things with mangled rotors.

How did these people do it? How did they go on? How could they? One woman whom the reporter had interviewed in New York had a box of stuff that had once been her daughter's: a French-English dictionary, a cup, a pair of binoculars, some glasses, a locket that she, the mother, had given her. She spent hours touching these things. And then another woman, who lost her husband, heard that they had found parts of his hand, had tested its DNA, and she asked that the remains be sent directly to her, though usually the remains were sent to funeral homes or hospitals. The reporter knew a counselor who spent four hours on the phone with the wife who had her husband's hand, and she finally sent the police because the woman was trying to put it back together. I can get the thumb, she said, but I can't get the next part.

The reporter didn't have the luxury of a breakdown, what with three kids. He still had the nightmares—shoes and body parts. He saw a therapist a few times, and she told the reporter to put the dream in a box, take the image of that black, bottomless sea and the debris field with its body parts and shoes, the smell of diesel drenching everything, and place it all in a box, take the box and put it high on a shelf. He did that, and he got past it. Yes, in an imaginary closet somewhere in his head, in an imaginary box, was everything that had actually, really, horrifically happened, and now sometimes, on a very good day, after some beers, maybe watching hockey or roughhousing with the kids, he could imagine for a moment that it hadn't.

ONE DAY, THE MAN from Geneva boarded a plane and came back to the village, left his wife behind, riffled through his closet of finely tailored suits and ridiculous leather dress shoes and packed some jerseys and books and left, for good, the only remnant of his former life that wristwatch with the stunning blue face, the same color as the sea here on certain windswept days, the color of his daughter's eyes.

The man left his wife, yes, but to save her from him. It sounded odd, but it was true. They'd made a promise and he'd broken it. He kept following his daughter into the ocean.

The last time he came to the village in this northern place, he saw a roadside restaurant and convenience store for sale nearby, and now, knowing nothing about restaurants or convenience stores, he bought it. It was a barnlike building with living quarters on the second floor, in some disrepair, but if grief was schizophrenic, then maybe here he could find a balancing point for his life before he lost his daughter and his life after. He had never conceived of the possibility that anything he did could be undone, let alone that he himself would become undone. But he'd become undone.

So he set to work, seven days a week, up at five-thirty, readying the coffee, cleaning the grill, playing opera on the stereo, checking the weather in the cove that let onto the ocean, a stunning place, and his daughter in this place. He'd open the doors at seven, and at seven-thirty a man named Leroy came to clean. They said he'd been half a man, a backward boy, before he'd been given this job, mopping floors and cleaning toilets at the restaurant. Now he was coming into his own. When the man asked him to do something, he smiled and saluted and said, Okay, copy ya!

The man redid the walls, opened up the dining space, began to build a large deck. He'd once traveled to the Middle East to sell hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of watches at a time, and now he cooked Surf 'n' Turf burgers (\$5.52) and Bacon & Egg Double Deckers (\$2.99) just to hear someone, anyone, say, I think I've been sufficiently sufficed. Thank you kindly. He joked and laughed with the fishermen and the construction crews and the older men, too, who came just to sit and drink coffee. He stood in the middle of his restaurant in a rugby jersey, wearing a white apron, near a photograph of his daughter, and told a story about her.

She was sent to convent school when she was six years old, her hair cut incredibly short, not like it was at the end, long and streaked blond. There was an open school day, a parents' day, and they organized games for the kids. In one of the games you could fish for goldfish with a net, and his daughter came to him and said, Oh, can you imagine! All my life, my whole life, I've wanted a goldfish! I can't remember when I haven't wanted a goldfish! And the man looked at his daughter, who was beaming at him, her eyes lit all the blues of the world, and he laughed, her whole life and she was just six years old, sweet and precocious and it really was too funny. Well, a quarter of her life was over by then, doesn't seem—but it was, it was funny.

No, he hadn't left his wife. He talked to her every day, his best friend. But Geneva was her home and this was his now, this village. His beard had gone more gray over the winter here. Who could ever imagine where life would carry you, humbled and hopeful, lost and found and lost again as a

storm blew in from sea? There would be a day when he and his wife would be together again. They would reach an understanding, and they would perhaps travel down to Morocco, to Marrakech, a place they'd loved for its colors and light, for its people, together again, released, absolved, together.

It would be a strange, wonderful resolution, thought the man, imagining it. They would make themselves clean. But now, there were hungry men at a table, and so this man with the spectacular wristwatch tied on his apron, went to the grill. This man, though he was hungry, too, he fed the others first.

IT WAS SUMMER; IT WAS WINTER. The village disappeared behind skeins of fog. Fishermen came and went in their boats, boats that had been at the crash site all those seasons ago, under that dark ceiling of night clouds, in those swells of black, bottomless water. One of the men fished a baby from the sea, kneeling on deck, lit by the parachute tracers, holding fast to what was left of the child, time disintegrating. Those who braved the night said that something happened out there, something horrible, and then—and this is the odd part—something beautiful. In the strange, eerie silence, everything drenched in diesel, you could feel it, almost taste it, something rising up from this spot, up through the ocean, through the men who stood out there in boats, among the shoes, something rose through them, like electricity.

At the edge of the rocks stood the lighthouse, green light revolving, revolving. Sometimes, in the heaviest storm, that was all the fishermen had of land, this green eye dimly flashing in the night, all they had of home, and how to get there, that was the question. And there were other questions that lingered, too, when they dared to consider them. Even at noon on the brightest days of the year, especially on the brightest days of the year, when the wind whipped the laundry on the line, the questions lingered. Yes, what had happened here? And why did the clothes on the line look as if they were filled by bodies, though there were no bodies in sight anymore?

Copyright © 1997-2003 by the Hearst Corporation.