



---

Excerpt from BLUNT TRAUMA  
Prologue

---

September 3, 1998. 7 am, Dublin, Ireland. Groggily, I reached out and switched on the radio, which was tuned to BBC Radio 4. The first thing I heard was a headline: a transatlantic airliner had crashed into the sea off the coast of Newfoundland. Something like a wave of horrified relief washed over my sleeping conscience. I had a ticket to travel to New York City on September 18 to see my mother and sister, who both had apartments in Manhattan. Since the age of eleven, I had been terrified of flying, and had often woken up icy with fear during the weeks preceding a flight. Now, in a ghastly kind of way, I could rest easy. Statistically speaking, if a transatlantic jet had just been lost, well, then, wasn't mine likely to get there safely?

I'm alright Jack, I thought vaguely.

The rest of the headlines passed me by, as I drifted back towards sleep. The main bulletin led with the plane crash. The carrier was identified

as Swissair. The flight had departed from JFK, New York, bound for Geneva.

All at once, I was wide-awake, my self-centered fantasy shot to hell. The flight was my sister's flight. She took it regularly, maybe five times a month. Chilled to the bone, I staggered out of bed, tumbled down the hall and hammered on the bathroom door.

Inside, my husband was shaving. He too was listening to Radio 4.

'The crash,' I blurted out. 'The Swissair crash. It's the flight Patty takes.'

Frank looked at me. 'Phone her.'

'What? Get her out of bed at two o'clock in the morning?' I couldn't bear the idea of disturbing my hard-working sister. Not if she was asleep in her own bed. Besides, phone calls in the small hours are unsettling. The last time our own had roused us had been eighteen months earlier, with news of my father's death.

Soon, I was dressed and downstairs.

'What's got you up?' my older son asked.

I told him.

'What are the chances that she was on it?' he asked.

'One in five. Maybe one in six.'

Richard nodded. At eighteen years of age, he was calm and sensible. Quite reasonably, he suggested that the odds were in his aunt's favor. She was probably OK. Soon he was out the door, headed for his summer job as a computer games tester. A few minutes later, Frank left for work too.

Our younger child, Andrew, who was nine, sensed that something was wrong. 'What's the matter? What are you worried about?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I hope it's nothing.'

‘But what *is* it?’ he asked sweetly.

‘Only something that *might* have happened. I’ll tell you when I find out.’ Andrew was happy with that, so I left him eating his breakfast.

Up in my study, I took out the telephone directory. I scribbled down the Dublin numbers for Delta (the airline that employed Patty) and Swissair (the airline that she flew for on a code-share agreement). My plan was to telephone both, as soon as I’d left Andrew to school.

By 8 am, we were doing his violin practise together, as we did every morning. A recent week at a Suzuki violin camp had fired Andrew’s enthusiasm, so much so, that he was learning four pieces simultaneously: three lively works by Seitz and the first movement of Vivaldi’s A Minor Concerto. The bright, joyous music filled the living room, but I was in turmoil. Ten years earlier, I had worried when a Pan Am plane had exploded over Scotland at Lockerbie, killing all on board and some on the ground. Then, I knew that my sister only occasionally worked on that particular flight. This time, it was different. The Geneva flight was the only flight that Patty took. She had been flying the route exclusively for a couple of years. She loved both it and Swissair. The Swiss penchant for order, discipline and predictability pleased her. And the Geneva flight was filled with clever, successful people – bankers and diplomats and businessmen – people whom Patty admired, regular passengers she had come to know.

Andrew worked his way busily through his practise. Outside the window, I heard the neighbours’ children leave for school. We played a few more bars, then I told Andrew to put away his violin. In the ensuing quiet, I heard the answering machine, upstairs in my husband’s study. It was the signal you get at the end of a message, after someone has just hung up.

I had been so caught up by the music and my malaise that I hadn't heard the telephone. Before I got to the top of the stairs, it was ringing again. This time, it was Frank. Having just arrived at his office, he had logged on to the Swissair website. There was a press release about the crash, but no information about passengers or crew. There was, however, a Geneva phone number, which I jotted down. I hung up, then pressed the playback button on the flashing answering machine. My mother's voice, distant but calm, began to fill my head. 'In case you haven't heard already,' the voice said, 'your sister was on Flight 111. We have lost her.' Then the message was over.

'Oh Jesus, Jesus,' I heard somebody cry, an appalling wail. For a moment I listened, wondering who was making that terrible noise. Then I realised that it was me.

Downstairs, Andrew, waiting for school, had begun to play the piano. He was playing from the score of *Titanic*, a movie that fascinated him. He had chosen the lament, the slow sad music that unravels near the end, as a lifeboat rows through countless frozen corpses, bobbing in the sea.

With shaking hands, I rang my husband back. 'It was my mother on the answering machine. Patty was on the airplane.'

Find out more at <http://www.ivybannister.com/>