

Chapter 1

The Phone Call

Have you seen the news?"

"No, I haven't seen any television because..."

"A plane has gone down," Dan said. "We want to be sure it wasn't Monte's. What was his flight number?"

The answer to that question changed our world forever.

Janet and I had barely arrived at the home of Jack and Nadine Irvine in Maple Valley, Washington, when the phone rang. The phone call was from our son-in-law Dan Fiorello in San Jose, California.

"What are you talking about?" I felt as if a shot had gone through my body.

"A plane has gone down on its way from New York to either Zurich or Geneva. The time and point of departure matches Monte's itinerary. Darren saw it on the news and called us because he didn't know where you were. Was that Monte's plane?"

Unbelief and shock struggled inside me.

"Jack!" I yelled at our host. "Turn on CNN!" As he moved toward the TV set, I asked Janet, "What flight was Monte on?"

"It was Swissair en route from New York to Geneva, Switzerland." She remembered that the evening before she notified the college in Collonges-sous-Saleve, the school he planned to attend in France, that he would be arriving on one of Swissair's flights.

I turned back to the phone. "We haven't seen the news and we don't know his flight number," I said. "It may have been Monte's plane." The calmness of my voice surprised me, because the turmoil inside made me feel as if I wanted to explode. "Do you think it is?"

"I don't know, Dad. I just heard on the news that there was a Swissair flight number 111 that was taking off from New York at 8:18 p.m., New York time. It was on its way to Europe and went down in the ocean off Nova Scotia, somewhere near Halifax. Impact time with the water was 10:31 Nova Scotia time."

"Oh, no," I groaned. I breathed deeply and called to my wife, "Janet, what was Monte's flight number?"

She couldn't remember. Monte had three different flights from Southern California to Geneva. I waited for Janet to think about the flight number.

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“We faxed a form to the school last evening and gave his flight information,” she said. She closed her eyes, as if trying to see the number on the paper. “It had two ones in it. I remember that much.”

My heart sank. If there had been two, maybe there were three ones. “Could... could it have been Flight 111?”

Again the seconds ticked by. Finally, Janet nodded. “Yes, yes, I think so - 111 sounds like it.”

My wife obviously had been listening only to my side of the conversation, but she sensed that something was terribly wrong. Initially, she thought something bad had happened in San Jose, because she knew I was talking to Dan who lived there.

Just then a commercial ended on CNN and the announcer said, “There has been a crash of Swissair Flight 111 on its way to Zurich from New York. It went down off the coast of Nova Scotia at 10:31 p.m., Nova Scotia time.”

Our friends Randy and Loralyn Horning were also there to share this moment with us. All six of us stared at the screen.

My immediate reaction was that it could not be true. I was his father and very close to my son. Wouldn't God have warned me - enabled me to sense that something was wrong? No premonitions had come to Janet either.

In fact, at 6:30 Pacific Time, perhaps a minute before the crash, we had been in the air on our final approach to Seattle. I had looked at my watch and remarked casually, “Well, Monte's over the Atlantic Ocean now.”

If that was Monte's plane that went down, why hadn't I sensed something malevolent going on?

The CNN announcer continued to offer sketchy information, and, as we later learned, some of the initial reports were inaccurate. They said there had been survivors, but added no details. Hope churned inside us alongside the dread that had been clutching at me for the past ten minutes.

“I think we need to pray,” Janet said.

First, we hugged each other. Tears flowed down all our cheeks and no one tried to act brave. We were all operating on raw emotions.

Jack and Nadine Irvine and Randy and Loralyn Horning knelt next to Janet and me to pray. Silently I kept crying out, God, let this be a mistake. Let this be a mistake. Each of us prayed silently and then, one by one, we voiced our pain and confusion.

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When we got up, I didn't feel any better; Janet had a calmness about her that I didn't share.

We turned back to the TV set and watched. CNN flashed an 800 number on the screen, which they called a Family Assistance number, for immediate families to call for information.

I called the number, and after an interminable wait, someone came on the line. "Yes, Swissair Flight 111 has gone down," was the first answer.

"Were there survivors? Our son - our son Monte Wilkins - was on that flight and..."

"I am sorry, sir, but we cannot confirm anything else at this time. If you will leave your name and telephone number, we will get back to you."

"But our son was..."

"I am sorry, but I do not have that information." The person acted professionally, as she was supposed to do, but right then I needed the answer to one question: Was Monte alive?

I called our son Darren and his wife Yvette, who lived in Loma Linda, California, and told them that Family Assistance was unable to confirm anything about survivors. Next I had to notify our younger daughter, Marci. It seemed important to me that Marci not hear the news when she was alone. Before I could call her and be sure she wasn't alone, Dan's mother called the house and told Marci they were praying for us. She immediately realized Marci didn't know what had happened. She awkwardly made small talk and hung up without talking about the crash. Shortly afterward I phoned Marci, carefully asking if others were with her. She was alone. I didn't want to tell her, but her suspicions were already heightened, and she would accept no delay in knowing what was going on. The agonizing distance between us was unbearable.

"Monte's plane crashed." I remember saying those words, but the rest of what I said is blurred. Marci cried out as if someone had beaten her badly. I felt utterly helpless as her father with so many miles between us.

As I learned a little later, within minutes after my call, a number of the members of our church came to the house. They embraced Marci and tried to comfort her. Several of them had already decided to stay until Janet and I were back in California.

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Now our children knew as much as we did - and that was only one fact: Flight 111 had crashed in the ocean off the shore of Nova Scotia. The nightmare had begun.

We sat in front of the TV set, waiting for any new information. Quite early the announcer said that the flight had been bound from New York to Zurich.

"Zurich?" I said, grabbing on to that single word. "Then it wasn't Monte's plane." I wanted to believe that. In that instant the word Zurich meant the difference between total disaster touching our family and one that didn't touch us.

Minutes later the announcer corrected that information. "We have confirmed that Swissair Flight 111 was bound for Geneva and not Zurich as originally reported."

Another few minutes elapsed before they showed a videotape of the amassing of emergency vehicles and the readying of local medical facilities to receive survivors. Several times they used that one word - survivors - that brought hope surging through us.

"Survivors," one of us repeated.

As our gaze fastened on each other, we held tightly to that single word. It was the only encouraging word we had. At that moment, we had no thoughts about other families. Our hearts were focused only on our son. He might be one of the survivors. He had to be one of them.

I called Family Assistance again. Although a different person answered my call, the information - or lack of it - was the same. They would call us when they knew anything more.

"Maybe he missed the flight," I said.

In our minds we dared entertain the thought that he may have missed the flight, but in our hearts we knew it couldn't be true. Janet and I both knew it wasn't likely that a capable, responsible young man on a mission of adventure would have missed the flight. If he had, surely he would have called his sister Marci, who was staying at our house in southern California.

"I want a flight to Halifax. I'm going to go there. I'm going to find Monte!" I said. I started calling the airlines, demanding to get an immediate flight for Halifax. Even though part of me knew I was being unreasonable, I felt I had to take action - any kind of action. I had to do something, to take charge, to do whatever I could. I would drag my son out of the North Atlantic myself if I had to, but I needed to be there - to be with our nineteen-year-old son. He might die of hypothermia if I didn't save him.

As I tried to make plane connections, I had mental visions of our youngest child floating around on pieces of debris, freezing, and crying out for help. And I was four thousand miles away. I needed to get to him.

Before I could arrange to fly to Halifax, more information trickled in. Each snippet brought greater heartache. As we watched the minute-to-minute coverage, within the next thirty to forty minutes it became apparent that all the early reports had been inaccurate.

There had been no survivors.

I stifled a gasp when a Nova Scotian reporter explained that they had amassed enormous efforts to search for survivors. The man also said the impact with the water had been so horrific the plane had been “fragmented beyond belief.”

Finally, we heard the worst: no survivors. Even after hearing that, we still held out hope. We waited. Surely there would be a few, someone who had escaped the watery grave. I kept waiting for someone to speak and say, “We have located survivors.”

We never heard those words.

The government agencies, as well as volunteer agencies that had set out on a search-and-rescue mission, soon changed it to search-and-salvage. Finally, reality set in. No one had survived.

I’m a physician, and at one time I ran the Department of Ophthalmology and residency-training program at Loma Linda University. I was used to making decisions that affect people’s lives, solving problems, managing people, and taking care of terrible situations. Without realizing it, I immediately stepped into the role of Dr. Efficiency. Looking back, it was my way to cope and to insulate myself from the reality of our loss.

By then, our conversation consisted mostly of one-or two-word responses. All of us were absorbing the facts differently. Janet is a person I call emotionally intuitive. She has the capacity in any situation to shift quickly into its spiritual context. The more agitated and irrational I acted, the quieter she became.

I have no idea how many times I called the Family Assistance number. It may have been foolish, but I had to know. I kept telling myself that if I had the answers - if I knew for certain that Monte was on that plane and that he had not survived - I could handle the reality. It’s the not knowing that drives me, I thought.

Even then, I was rationalizing. In truth, I was struggling to absorb a reality that I didn’t want to acknowledge. Whenever a flood of internal

pain increased again, I picked up the phone and called Family Assistance. Each time their response was the same. I'd hang up and call Swissair. I couldn't sit passively by and do nothing.

While I kept dialing those numbers, Dan called the U.S. National Travel Safety Board. All of us were enormously frustrated over our desire to know and yet we were unable to learn anything.

"We're not going to get any more information tonight," I finally said. By then I had become more rational. We had learned that, including the crew, 229 people had been on the flight. They would not make announcements about any individuals until they verified that every one of those people had been on board. We realized that they were trying their best.

We just had to wait.

Waiting seemed impossible; we waited anyway. We decided to return immediately to our home at Yucaipa, California. After I had made reservations with Alaska Airlines for the flight, I asked the Family Assistance people to relay any information to Darren while we were in route. They assured me they would.

Finally, about three o'clock in the morning, Janet and I went to bed. Exhausted, frustrated, and weary with grief, we tried to sleep. But grief and a thousand random thoughts pushed away sleep.

Only a few months before the accident, Janet had read a book about families in grief situations. She had learned that when parents lose a child, there is an extremely high incidence of divorce afterward.

"Please, God, don't let this happen to us," Janet prayed as she took my hand.

Right then, I could focus only on Monte and my sense of loss. The word why kept intruding. Why had we let him get on that flight? Why hadn't God shown Monte that he shouldn't be on that flight? If he was a child of God, why would God let this happen? Why didn't God protect him? I also asked if we had done something wrong to bring on such a terrible tragedy. Was this punishment for some kind of sin - Monte's or ours?

I drifted off to sleep, but it lasted less than an hour before the alarm awakened us.

By seven o'clock in the morning on September 3, 1998, we were on a plane flying back home. While we were airborne, Darren received confirmation from Swissair that Monte had been on the plane, but he had no way to notify us.

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As we boarded the plane, I kept thinking, I don't know how I can manage this. How can I get beyond this grief?

In retrospect, I've always been grateful that when we received the word about the crash, we were with loving friends - people we had known since our high school days. They surrounded us with love and compassion. Just being with them strengthened me. Because of their presence and obvious love for us, I truly believe God enabled me to make it through the first night.

For me, their presence was a miracle. Some would call it the providence of God. I didn't see the pattern then, and only later would I realize how many caring people would contribute to our emotional survival.