



# A Place of Grief and Comfort

## In an Irish village near the crash site of Air India Flight 182, victims' families gather to remember

BY LYNNE SCHUYLER

*More than 20 years ago, on June 23, 1985, a suitcase being transferred from a Vancouver flight to Air India Flight 301 exploded at Tokyo's Narita airport, killing two baggage handlers. Less than an hour later, another bomb detonated aboard Air India Flight 182 bound from*

*Toronto and Montreal to New Delhi and Mumbai. All 329 passengers, mostly Canadian nationals, perished a couple of hundred kilometres off the southern Irish coast. The bombing was the worst act of terrorism and mass murder in Canadian history.*



**T**HE SOUND of Royal Air Force and Irish helicopters shattered the peace of Sheep's Head peninsula, waking Mareth and Frank Vernon.

Mareth switched on the radio and heard that an Air India plane had vanished from the radar off the nearby coast.

A hundred kilometres north, residents of Cork were also passing a quiet Sunday when the horror of Flight 182's fate began to unfold. The city—the largest near the crash site—was designated first as a search-and-rescue operational base, then as a recovery centre as naval ships and military aircraft descended on the crash site. At the airport's wind-whipped tarmac, helicopters began to bring in bodies.

Away visiting family, Dermot Dwyer, then a detective sergeant, hurried back to Cork as the magnitude of the tragedy unfolded. Teams of Gardai (Irish police) had already started photographing and identifying the first of the 132 recovered victims. Pathologists worked at an exhausting pace.

At Cork Regional Hospital, Dwyer and his colleagues made their way around the rush of nurses and staff coping with the crisis. In the wing where a couple of large rooms had been turned into an emergency mortuary, he abruptly stopped. Row after row of bodies were laid out before

him—mostly women and children, all young, beautiful and innocent. A wave of revulsion and outrage coursed through him. *Why?* he wondered. *What kind of lunatic caused this?*

WITHIN days, perhaps 600 relatives of the dead arrived in Cork—exhausted, in tears, lost. They came from far-flung places, with different languages, cultures and religions. Some still clung to the hope that family members had survived. All were desperate to find their loved ones.

Among them were Toronto residents Narayana and Padmini Turlapati. Three days earlier, Narayana had collapsed, devastated, when he learned the fate of their two sons, Sanjay, 14, and Deepak, 11. The boys, the heart and soul of the family, had been on their way for a monthlong stay with relatives in New Delhi. Narayana, a chartered accountant, had planned to join them a few weeks later for a holiday, while Padmini was to return to St. John's, N.L., where she was completing her residency in pediatrics.

Deepak, impish, bubbly, with a sweet smile and sparkling eyes, loved NHL hockey, pop stars and his stuffed toys. Sanjay, tall, handsome, on the cusp of manhood, was a straight-A student who immersed himself in music, books and writing poetry. The Turla-

patis had moved their family to Canada in 1982, seeking to build a better life for their sons.

Now those sons were gone.

Families were asked to view police photos of the victims, an experience so traumatic that some fainted from the shock. Studying the grim photos, the Turlapatis thought they recognized Sanjay from his eyes and clothes. Devastated, dazed, they realized they would have to go into the morgue to identify him. They were fearful of what they would find, yet torn and distraught at the thought of not being able to claim their son's body. Hesitating, Narayana turned to his wife. "You go in. You're a doctor."

"No," she said, her voice breaking. "I'm a mother, not a doctor. I need you to be with me."

Entire families—about 20 in total—travelling on the flight were wiped out; six families lost all of their children. Two dozen people lost both their spouse and children. Among them were honour students, gifted musicians, engineers and budding pharmacists; lives full of promise, ruthlessly snuffed out.

Only the compassion that seemed to flow from every corner of Cork made their ordeal more bearable. Struck by the families' dignity and quiet courage, the Irish opened their hearts wide.

Arriving families were met by teams of trained counsellors and Gardai who listened patiently and consoled them. Masses of flowers arrived at the hospital and hundreds of phone calls from ordinary citizens poured in, offering



Rattan Kalsi lost his daughter, Indira, in the 1985 Air India bombing. The Canadian government responded to the event as though the passengers were Indian, not Canadian, he says.

rooms, food and clothing. Taxi drivers refused to charge fares; local cooks learned to prepare vegetarian meals in keeping with Hindu and other religious customs. At the hospital, staff treated the families with dignity and respect. Following Indian mourning rituals, the soft smell of incense drifted down the hospital's hallways and flowers were strewn along the floor, making the families feel at home.

For six weeks, Dwyer, along with teams of investigators, worked non-stop to identify the recovered bodies. Dwyer listened to the families' stories, saddened by the photos of loved ones. At night, he was haunted by all he'd seen.

Arrangements had been made to take the families by coach to the

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Sheep's Head peninsula, alongside Dunmanus Bay. The buses stopped near the tiny village of Ahakista, the closest spot of land accessible to the crash site.

Out on the ruggedly beautiful, windswept shore, Padmini Turlapati was surrounded by grief-stricken families who waded into the chilly Atlantic to scatter flowers and pray for their loved ones. She scanned the blue-grey waters, hoping for a miracle. Deepak hadn't been found. Padmini was a doctor, trained in science, but somehow she hoped he would spring from the water and greet her.

She wanted to walk into the ocean and never come back.

The TurlapatIs buried Sanjay near their ancestral home in India, then, like so many other families, returned to shattered lives in Canada. Padmini went back to St. John's, while Narayana remained in Toronto. Both retreated into their work, trying to bury their sorrow. Although most of the victims were Canadian, the bombing was perceived as a foreign problem, and the families' loss and suffering was rarely acknowledged. Few in Canada—politicians and public alike—seemed to understand that this was a national tragedy.

**F**ROM THE outset, the Gardai suspected a mid-air explosion from a bomb. Two suspects were arrested that fall, but one was released for lack of evidence, the other fined \$2,000 on charges relating to explosives, adding to the families' pain of not seeing

any perpetrators brought to justice.

The TurlapatIs, along with many of the Air India families, considered themselves "brothers and sisters in tragedy." Uniting to fight for justice, they drew solace and support from one another.

They met people like Rattan (Ron) Kalsi, a London, Ont., tool-and-die manufacturer, and his wife, Harbhajan (Jean), who had lost their youngest daughter, Indira, 21, a beautiful, doe-eyed university student. Murthy Subramaniam had once been a stranger, standing next to the TurlapatIs at Pearson International Airport, hugging his wife, Lakshmi, and daughter, Veena, eight, goodbye. Now the KalsIs and Subramaniam, along with the TurlapatIs, were among those who faithfully returned to Ahakista year after year to grieve and to remember.

For many of the families, the shingle beach near Ahakista had become a sacred place. In 1986 the Canadian, Indian and Irish governments erected a memorial there—a graceful, hand-carved limestone sundial, notched so that every June 23 the sun casts its shadow at 8:13, the exact moment of the tragedy. The sundial and a curving stone wall, embedded with 14 bronze plaques bearing the names of the dead, faces the Atlantic where they perished.

The people who lived in the remote villages near the memorial site were deeply touched by the tragedy. As the years passed, an extraordinary bond grew between the local communities and the many families who visited the memorial.



In Ahakista, Ireland, relatives pray at the memorial commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Air India disaster.

Mareth Vernon was driving home one day when she saw the people gathered along the tidal inlet, preparing for the first-anniversary memorial service. Stopping her car to offer help, she noticed an elegant, sari-clad woman sitting alone on the rocks, gazing out to sea. Vernon sat next to her, at a loss for words in the face of such profound grief.

Padmini Turlapati spoke first. "I have lost my only two sons. One I have identified in Cork, but the other is still in the sea."

Vernon invited the TurlapatIs to her home that day in 1986, and it was the start of a 19-year friendship between the two families. They shared meals and long visits and brought family and friends to meet each other.

The senselessness and brutality of the bombing had robbed Padmini of her faith and trust in others, but the

support and affection of the people she met in Ireland gave her the strength to live. Ahakista became the one place where Padmini allowed herself to feel, to be a mother again. Slowly, it became a place where happy memories were created from the tragedy.

Many of the returning families stayed in Agnes Hegarty's 250-year-old stone farmhouse. The bed and breakfast overlooked the memorial site from a nearby hilltop.

"How's your hip this year?" Hegarty would cheerily ask Ron Kalsi while setting tea and freshly baked scones before Kalsi and his wife, Jean. Nodding, catching up on the Kalsi family's latest news, she always took the time to look over the photos of Indira the KalsIs brought with them every year.

One Christmas day, Murthy Subramaniam phoned Hegarty from Toronto



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and asked her to light a candle at the site, in memory of his wife and daughter. He was surprised and moved to learn that she had been doing so for years.

The search for justice and the lack of arrests tormented all of the families. Only one man, Inderjit Singh Reyat, fined \$2,000 in 1985, was convicted in 1991 on charges relating to the Narita bombing. For 15 years, the Air India families avidly followed the investigation and its many missteps, including the destruction of key evidence by CSIS and the frustrating failure to obtain enough evidence to prosecute the killers. The families

### In November 2005,

the Liberal government announced that it had accepted the recommendation of former Ontario premier Bob Rae, to conduct a “focused, policy-based inquiry to deal with questions from this mass murder that remain unsolved.” The inquiry will investigate how Canada assessed the threat of Sikh terrorism, how its intelligence and police forces managed the investigation and how its airport safety regulations did or did not work. The news has been greeted with cautious optimism by some of the families. Others are not convinced there will ever be justice.

were convinced that their government was indifferent to their suffering.

In 2000 two men, Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, were finally charged. Generally the families greeted the news calmly, hoping there would finally be justice. Following a long, complex trial—the most expensive criminal case in Canadian history—the accused were acquitted in March, 2005.\* Reeling, many families felt as if they were reliving the death of their loved ones all over again. Padmini Turlapati wept at the outcome.

**Ahakista, June 23, 2005.** A fine, misty Irish rain mingles with the tears of those gathered for the Air India memorial service. It is the largest gathering of victims’ families since 1985.

As always, the Irish stand in quiet solidarity with the grieving families. There are those, like Dermot Dwyer, who haven’t missed a service in 20 years. In the crowd are friends such as Michael Murphy, who galvanized the authorities into setting up the memorial, locals, politicians, religious leaders, search-and-rescue workers and Cork Hospital staff who helped

\* Reyat, imprisoned in 1991 for his part in the Narita bombing, later admitted to manslaughter in the Air India explosion by aiding and abetting the construction of a bomb. He was sentenced to an additional five years.

the families throughout their ordeal. Schoolchildren not yet born when the plane went down have come from nearby schools to sing hymns.

The families surround the sundial inscribed with ageless words: “Time flies, suns rise and shadows fall, let it pass by, love reigns forever over all.” They quietly say prayers, mourning a generation lost.

Still waiting for justice, family members stand to speak. Their words are poignant and heart-wrenching. “Do not trivialize the magnitude of this tragedy by saying nothing can be done,” Padmini reminds those gathered. “History will never forgive the impotence of our inaction.”

All the families speak about the Irish kindness and generosity they will never forget. “Your love,” Padmini says, “gave us the will to live on.”

On the day after the memorial service, waves quietly lap the rocky shores of Dunmanus Bay as daylight fades. The night air is still as relatives and friends of the Air India victims gather at this spot below the sundial, waiting for the outgoing tide.

At last the moment is at hand. Narayana and his family light some of

the tiny votive candles in 331 betel-leaf lanterns—one for each person who died. One by one, the lanterns are set on the waves, to be carried out past the peninsula towards Flight 182’s final resting place. Gently bobbing, languidly flowing with the currents, they flicker and wink, their golden glow casting an ethereal light over the dark Atlantic waters.

On shore, Narayana watches with his family, friends and local residents. Their faces are etched in awe and wonder at the sheer beauty of hundreds of tiny lights drifting out to sea. The light, they hope, will take away the darkness and bring peace to the souls of those still resting beneath the waves.

They stand for a long time, unwilling to break this powerful connection to those they love. In this place, Narayana and Padmini feel their children are safe. Here, they have found beauty and serenity in the Irish countryside. It is here that strangers have embraced them, comforted them and become lasting friends.

And it is here, at last, that the TurlapatIs and others families of Flight 182 have finally found a small measure of peace.

### TOPSY TURVY



Last fall the handle broke off my husband’s golf umbrella. This spring, we got caught in a shower our first time out. He pulled out the umbrella and was surprised to see the handle broken as he swore he’d fixed it. I looked more carefully and, sure enough, he had. The handle was back on—the wrong end.

CYNTHIA LUDKIN, Grande Prairie, Alta.