

## **For those left at home**

“Where are you?”

“In a lady’s house. Her name’s Veronica. She just spoke to you. Phone us back.”

“But where?”

“Not far from Heathrow.”

I called the number he’d given me.

“Heathrow’s bedlam. You can’t move. People are lying on the floor. All the hotels are booked out. We tried to get a flight back to Belfast tonight but there’s no seats. Here’s Mum.”

“Hello, are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m grand. I’ve just been worried about you two. I didn’t know where you were. You must be exhausted.”

“We’re tired – but luckily we met this lady in the airport and she brought us to her home.”

“Who is she?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

My nightmare day was getting worse. That afternoon I’d been transported to a new world.

My heart seemed to stop as I watched the pictures on the TV screen, of bright, blue autumn skies changed forever. Then reality hit – slowly, as I absorbed the horrific images in front of me. A memory stirred in my mind. I sat down. I felt the blood draining from my head, as I slowly, quietly said to my client,

“My parents are flying to Washington today. I have to go.”

It became a day of phonecalls.

“Your call is important to us. We are experiencing high volumes of calls. Please hold and an operator will be with you shortly.”

Eventually I got through to a human being. ““They were flying from Heathrow to Dulles airport and then on to Las Vegas with United Airlines,” I told her.

“Their plane has been diverted to Los Angeles and they’ve landed safely there,” said the operator.

“But that can’t be right. Think about it,” said my younger brother. “They couldn’t have got there so quickly.”

He made his own enquiries. First he was told their plane had never taken off and they were still in London. Then he was told their plane had been diverted to Canada before air space over north America was closed.

I couldn’t drag myself away from the TV. The horrific images were strangely hypnotic. But the day had been an emotional rollercoaster and I was exhausted. As I was getting ready for bed the phone rang.

“Is that Morna?” asked a woman with a brisk home counties voice.

“Yes. Who’s speaking?” I asked.

“My name’s Veronica. I’m calling about your parents.”

My heart had sunk.

Mum continued, “She’s given us a bed in her house for the night.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“The Salvation Army were in the airport. They put us in touch with her. She came down to the airport to offer a room to someone. She’s making a meal for us now.”

Part of me was cross for all the times I'd been lectured at when growing up about not going off with strangers. But I was overwhelmingly grateful that on the day the world changed forever, there was still at least one, good, kind person left on this earth who had reached out to two weary travellers in their hour of need.

"That's very kind of her," I said

"She won't take any money. She drove us to her home from the airport. We'll phone again tomorrow when we know what's happening."

"Ok. Get a good sleep. Bye."

"Yes. You too. Bye."

Sleep was difficult that night as I kept thinking of what might have been. So many others had been left behind that day never to see their loved ones return from their journeys. I kept thinking of all the families who hadn't been able to speak to their loved ones tonight – and never would again. When I met two weary travellers who returned on a flight to Belfast the following afternoon, more of their experience began to unfold.

Dad, ever observant, had noticed something unusual on their flight to Dulles. He recalls saying to the passenger beside him, an American engineer,

"The plane seems to have slowed down."

"Do you think there's something wrong?"

"We seem to have changed direction."

"Why do you say that?" asked his neighbouring passenger.

"Look outside."

"All you can see is blue sky."

"And the sun."

They called the stewardess. She looked carefully at the two men and said, "There'll be an announcement."

"The sun is now on the other side of the plane. We must be heading east rather than west," Dad said.

"Very observant," the stewardess replied.

A few years later I travelled to New York and at Ground Zero experienced chill on a hot August afternoon. Memories flooded back to me. I thought of the TV images. I recalled the frantic telephone calls. I remembered kind Veronica who still sends my parents a Christmas card. And I thought of all those left behind at home.