

Still, by the sea

By DAWN RAE DOWNTON
In West Dover, N.S.

Ian Shaw last saw his daughter Stephanie when he drove her to the Geneva airport. She was off to New York to look in on her boyfriend, and "she was luminous," Mr. Shaw remembers. At 23, she was studying economics. She'd produced an outstanding thesis and had just been recruited by the World Economic Forum. She also worked as a ground stewardess for Swissair, and before she took her new job she decided one last time to exercise her access to free flights.



That day in Geneva was buttery with sun, Mr. Shaw recalls—much like the one he and I shared this week at Shaw's Landing, his celebrated waterside café in the craggy little Nova Scotian fishing village of West Dover. Today is the eighth anniversary of the Swissair 111 crash in which Stephanie Shaw died, just down the road from West Dover, off the coast of the tourist hamlet of Peggy's Cove.

Stephanie wasn't supposed to be on flight 111. At the last minute she opted for a direct flight back home, and boarded it.

"That was one of the small hardships in terms of destiny," her father agrees. Geraniums bloom in his café windows above a sun-drenched deck filled with tables and umbrellas. Scotland-born, Calvin-bred, wearing a chef's jacket white as his hair, he dusts the leaves as we talk. He was always industrious, and still is. But he no longer lives in Geneva. He isn't the director of Jean Lasalle Swiss watches any longer either; he no longer wears fine suits, drives a Rolls, or collects art.

On a visit to Nova Scotia a month after Swissair 111 went down (invariably he calls the event an "accident" even though the Transportation Safety Board of Canada ruled that negligence—an improperly installed prototype entertainment system—likely caused it), he saw a take-out diner for sale. The following year he bought it. Shaw's Landing was born, and the transformation of Ian Shaw was begun.

Until then he'd been only "an interested Sunday family cook," but over what he calls the very terrible winter of 1998/99, he conceived how the little diner could become a memorial to Stephanie more dynamic than the

commemorative events he was being asked to contribute to; and how it could employ some locals and serve visitors too.

Service has since become Mr. Shaw's mantra. "There is no greater goodness in life than small kindness," he says. He himself found much kindness in his new home, where Nova Scotians remembering the crash are still reduced to tears. South shore fishermen had turned in early as usual on the night of September 2nd, 1998. They still talk today about how a crack split the night sky, how in minutes they were out of bed and into their boats for a rescue unknown. But everything was gone. Months later, to commemorate Stephanie, Ian Shaw and his wife, Gudula, tossed an empty urn into the waters.

Switzerland faced a national catastrophe. The land of precision watches and trains that run on time lost its jet and then its airline when Swissair filed for bankruptcy. Mr. Shaw himself landed "right next door to suicide." He drank heavily, dared not walk along the River Rhone near his home lest he throw himself in. Nor could he go to the train station. "Every time a train came in, there was an answer."



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He'd always believed that reward came of effort, and his life—his wardrobe, his expense accounts—had till then proved it; but with Stephanie's death he lost his bearings, and he found no shelter in denial or hope. From the moment he saw the TV news in Geneva, he says he knew Stephanie was gone, though reports first said a westbound flight had crashed, with survivors. Gudula pointed out that Stephanie was survivor material and a champion swimmer. But "I couldn't breathe," he recalls. "I didn't want to."

Mr Shaw has a long, drawn face, and an elegant, deft way of putting things that's completely unaffected. "I'm not here to be close to Stephanie," he tells me. "I don't believe in proximity over the bier of death. When people ask me then why *did* you come, I always answer 'why did Swissair 111 not come back to Geneva?' If you can tell me that, I can tell you why I came here."

Neither is it painful for him to be here. "We have this terrific insistence on the dimension we call life," he says, tending another geranium. "It fits into the space given. Stephanie's space was torn apart. The manner in which she died is appalling to me, but here"—he waves a hand at the ocean all around us—"is a very fine reminder that thousands of generations have been born, have lived, have died. They've all moved on, and the only constant you have is the ocean."

He walks along that ocean less often now. At 68, he plans the café menu, does the shopping, oversees the cooking, greets everyone in his chef's coat and often waits the tables, and after all that it's hard for him just to get up the stairs to bed every night. Though he's impressed with them, he doesn't visit the nearby Swissair memorials any longer either, or mark the anniversaries: it's a way, he says, of picking the scab. Why remember one very black night, rather than 23 years of happy family life?

The family now consists of a son, Olivier, who works for the Red Cross, and Gudula, who remained in Geneva. The Shaws have recently bought a home in Spain, and they hope to reunite and retire there soon. After eight years, Shaw's Landing is for sale.

Mr. Shaw is outraged that Swissair executives donned "platinum parachutes" under bankruptcy laws, and availed themselves of the Death on the High Seas Act which left families of the Swiss casualties (but not the American families) unprotected. While he's pro-Canadian and now a landed immigrant, he has also been outspoken about some aspects of the crash investigation, particularly about insurers' attempts at salvage.

You'd never know any of it by the way he lays down your plate of golden fillets and asks genially after your own "little ones." Early days in his new café, serving diner food he didn't like, he thought he should have had a "James Bond 007 license to kill" by food poisoning. If he didn't know himself anymore, he explains, he did at least know good food. He'd travelled widely once: he'd eaten well and met great chefs. Gradually he refined the Shaw's Landing menu to the unpretentious bliss it is today, headlined by fresh haddock brought down the coast from Arichat, lightly washed in batter, and only "set," never overcooked, in the saute pan.

The café's guest register is thick as a phonebook, full of testaments to Mr. Shaw—and to his cooking. Many visitors don't know his past. Those who do never gawk.

Despite his tragedy, Ian Shaw has been happier in Nova Scotia than he might have been elsewhere. If the plane had gone down in Switzerland, or anywhere else, he thinks there would have been "all sorts of bickering. Here, everyone became joined in an effort of compassion." When he sells and leaves, he'll miss CBC Two, he says, and he'll miss Value Village, the charity clothing store in Halifax where he finds not fine suits but what he needs now. He'll miss Nova Scotians, too—just as they'll miss him.