

Joan Kingston
26472 Highway 62
L'Amable, ON
Canada
K0L2L0
Phone: 905-493-0134
E-mail: jmkingstn@sympatico.ca

Word Count; 2113

**THE DAY THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN PORTUGAL
A SHARED TRAGEDY**

By

Joan Kingston

“When Things Fall Apart”- Travel Writing Competition 2026

Sometimes when tragedy falls, it doesn't have to fall on us to affect us in a significant way. We can be the helpless bystander as tragedy falls, and still be changed forever. That's what happened to me the day the lights went out in Portugal and Spain.

I'm a Travel Agent in Ontario, Canada. I've been selling Travel for twenty years. I've been through 9/11, Iceland volcanoes, airport bomb threats and Covid. In all that time, I've never had a situation quite like this one.

On Monday April 28th 2025, I got a call from Margaret Hughes.

"Good Morning, Leisure Travel, How may I help you?"

"Joan? Joan? Is that you? It's me Margaret. Margaret Hughes. We're in Florence." She said, her voice strained and straight forward

"Margaret? You're in Florence? You're coming home tomorrow? Right?" I asked, my mind filtering through my files to find the right information.

"Well, no." She faltered. "That's why I'm calling. Our flights been cancelled." She stated.

Her flights been cancelled? This is news to me. There were no notices in my e-mails. Nothing from the airline telling me there was a problem. I'm confused, a thousand things running my mind. Why would the airline cancel the flight? Is there bad weather? Are they over booked? Are they going to offer another alternative flight? What's going on?

"Cancelled? Why? Did they say why?" I ask.

"Dennis and I arrived at the airport is morning to catch the flight to Lisbon, so we can stay over and be on the flight to Toronto tomorrow. When we got here, they told us the flight was cancelled." She explained

“Ok, I understand, did they tell you why, or give you an explanation?” I ask again, saying I understand when I don’t understand at all.

“Dennis is at the counter now; he’s talking to the Agent.” She pauses.

“OK, hang in with me until he gets back and we find out what’s going on.” I say. In the meantime, I’ve reached into my drawer, pulled out their file and I’m desperately reading their itinerary to bring myself up to date with where they are and what they are doing.

They started in Toronto a couple of weeks ago. Flew to Lisbon, took a week’s coach tour that ended in Barcelona, Spain where they boarded a Cruise ship and sailed the Mediterranean for eight nights ending in Venice. From Venice they took the train to Florence where they planned to fly back to Lisbon, spend the night and fly back to Toronto. They could have flown directly home from Venice, but they love Lisbon and chose the extra layover in one of their favourite cities.

When Dennis returns from the counter he explained to Margaret, who explained to me that the airline couldn’t check them in because their system was down. This made no sense to me.

“Margaret” I asked, “Can you give the phone to Dennis for a minute? Let me talk to Him?”

“Sure, sure” she said as she passed the phone.

“Hi Dennis, tell me again, what did they say”, I ask.

“Hi Joan” he said, in a slow drawl that expressed the smile on his face. I loved that I’m beginning to panic and these people, who are clearly stranded, are taking it all in stride. “The

Agent at the counter told me that their system is down because the airline's system in Portugal is down." He explained.

"Down?" I ask. I'm still very confused. "Did they say how long it would be down, or when it might be back up? Did they give you any indication when the flight might take off?" I ask. It's like pulling teeth to get information.

"No, they can't tell us anything they can't log-in, their system is not working. It's not just the airline, they said, it's the whole country. Nobody has power." He explains.

For a moment I'm stunned. The whole country has no power? Did I hear him correctly? That's not a thing, is it? I've never heard of that in all my life. I question him and he confirms that's what he's been told.

I have no idea what to do. I need time. Time to confirm the power outage. Time to research alternatives. Time to figure out how to help them. Time to come up with a miracle.

"OK Dennis, Hang tight. Give me ten to fifteen minutes to figure this out and I'll get back to you. If you hear anything else, call me." I say in my best calm, power voice while I'm feeling anything but calm.

"Thanks Joan, we're fine." It's Margaret back on the phone. "We'll stay right here, call us back." She repeats several times, looking for reassurance. Reassurance I give her but really don't feel.

Here's the thing, most people think that a Travel Agents main job is to rescue you when you're in trouble. The truth is there is very little we can do to help you when you're there and we're not. It used to be, decades ago, when the industry was small and reservation departments

had a handful of people, an agent could get to know the names of the airline reservation agents. You'd build a rapport and ask for a favour. Those days are long gone. Nowadays we are lucky to get a dedicated line for travel agents and still have to wait on hold for three hours to talk to representatives in the Philippines who have a standard set of written instructions and can't or won't help us.

Even on the odd occasion when you meet someone at a conference and get a business card. The minute you try and contact them for help you find out they changed jobs six months ago and no one knows who replaced them. There is no Rolodex of special contacts, no secret society, just me and my crystal ball doing the best we can. But I digress.

The first thing I do is panic. "Oh my god, Oh my god, Oh my god..... What do I do?" Notice I use the lower case "g" because I don't think praying the upper case "G" is going to help in this situation. While I Google, Power Outage in Portugal, my mind is reeling trying to figure out how to get Margaret and Dennis from Florence to Lisbon. The Google search tells me that the power outage covers all of Portugal and most of Spain and that it is expected to last into the next day.

Fact number one, do not send them to Portugal. There is nowhere for them to go in Portugal, and at some point, I will have to remember to cancel their hotel reservation in Lisbon for tonight. We'll be lucky to get that money back. Hopefully the hotel will take pity on them due to the circumstances, and offer a refund.

Back to the problem at hand, Margaret and Dennis are standing in an airport in Florence and they need to get home. Problem number two, Air Canada is expecting them to be on a flight

tomorrow from Lisbon to Toronto.....wait a minute..... if the power is out..... that flight is not going either. It will be cancelled. In a flash, I've got an idea.

I pick up the phone and dial Air Canada. "Please pick up, please pick up." I think while I wait. I'm on hold for only fifteen minutes, and I get through. I'm thankful for small miracles.

"Hi (whatever your name is) it's Joan from Leisure Travel, I have a couple who are flying tomorrow from Lisbon to Toronto, can I give you the flight locator and ask you to look it up for me?" I smile as I talk and sugar wouldn't melt in my mouth, I'm so sweet. You have to be nice on the phone, if they even sniff the slightest nasty on you, they hang up. I'm lucky, this Agent speaks English with a French accent and she's nice. I explain the situation and between us we determine that the flight out of Lisbon tomorrow, although not officially cancelled, will likely be cancelled soon. Then I ask her a question, which is the key to the second half of my brilliant plan.

"Can you look something up for me? Is there a flight from Rome to Toronto tomorrow and are there two seats?" I ask.

Have you figured it out yet? If I can change the flight to depart from Rome instead of Lisbon, then Margaret and Dennis can still fly home tomorrow. They may only have to pay a small change fee, and they won't have to buy a whole new ticket. But I have to hurry, the change has to be done before Air Canada cancels the flight to Lisbon or the whole plan falls apart and the Hughes are buying all new tickets.

The agent confirms the flight from Rome, flights times, flight number, available seats, and I'm off to the races. I won't change it yet. I must talk to Margaret & Dennis first, but I have a plan and it's coming together.

“Hi Margaret?” I ask. “It’s Joan. Are you alright? Is everything alright there?” I’m concerned about them. Waiting in an airport is a horrible experience.

“Hello Joan, we’re fine, what news do you have for us?” She asks clearly anxious to know what’s happening and what’s going to happen to them. I quickly tell her what I read on the news feed about the power outage and how widespread it is and how long it will last. Before she can get too worried, I jump right in and tell her the good news.

“Margaret, can you get to Rome? I know it’s late in the day there, but can you get a flight or a train from Florence to Rome today?” I ask, anxious for this part of the plan. If they can’t get to Rome then the whole plan falls apart.

“Yes.” She says somewhat hesitantly. “I think we can”

“Look, Margaret. If you can get to Rome tonight, I can get you on a plane tomorrow back to Toronto. We can change your ticket, so you fly home from Rome instead of Lisbon. I’ll get you a hotel at the Rome airport for tonight. One that has an airport shuttle, all you have to do is get a flight to Rome. Do you think you can do that?” I’m talking fast. I’m so excited I’m half out of my seat. I’m desperate to know if they can go along with my plan.

“That sounds great, hang on a minute, let me explain it to Dennis.” She says while I wait..... “Yep, I think we can do that. Give us a few minutes to check it out and we’ll call you back.” She says and hangs up.

I try to be patient while I wait for them to call back, when they do Margaret tells me they have bought tickets and are in line ready to board their flight to Rome. Yaaaaaaa..... The plan will work. Margaret gives me instructions to change their flight for the next day and to pay whatever fees and costs are necessary to get them on that plane. (I love customers who

understand the necessary cost of travelling). I tell them that by the time they land in Rome I will have their room booked at the hotel. They should check their e-mail for the reservation.

The rest of the plan works out very well. I change the ticket to Toronto, they make it to the hotel in Rome and call me to let me know they are all tucked in for the night and have received their new airline tickets from me. The crisis has been averted. Margaret and Dennis will be home tomorrow. I even convinced the reservation agent to waive the change fee, under the circumstances.

Although this tragedy didn't happen to me, I wasn't the one standing in the airport with the cancelled ticket in my hand. I wasn't the one who had to buy a last-minute flight and check into a hotel in the middle of the night. It was all real to me. My heart raced, my stomach lurched. My eyes tear up when it was over. I felt everything that happened so strongly, visualized so keenly, breathed so deeply, their tragedy was shared with me, and I'll never forget it.