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**Maeve:** Journalist Samira Shackle was half asleep as the plane started to descend. It was mid-December 2018, just a few days before Christmas, and Samira had been out in Pakistan doing research for her book, *Karachi Vice*.

**Samira:** So I had been interviewing people for like, all day every day for 13 or 14 days, and I just wanted to go home and sleep.

**Maeve:** She was on a flight home looking forward to arriving into Gatwick, an airport south of London, and just getting home as soon as she could.

**Samira:** I was exhausted and on a night flight, obviously crossing time zones and so on. I had fallen asleep on the second leg of the flight.

**Maeve:** So when the pilot came on the inflight speaker to tell the passengers that drones had been spotted near Gatwick, and they couldn't land, Samira struggled to take it in.

**Samira:** I was sort of half asleep and a bit bamboozled about what that meant and was kind of desperately trying to get onto the flight Wi-Fi to see if I'd actually heard what I thought I'd heard. And I couldn't get my phone onto the WiFi I remember, it's always so patchy on planes, but on the back of the seat you can get the headlines, and it basically just said that two drones were sighted above Gatwick, and I didn't really know what it meant.

**Maeve:** Drones sighted? What was going on? All at once, Samira found herself at the centre of an escalating drama.

I'm Maeve McClenaghan. This is *The Tip Off*.

**Maeve:** Eventually, Samira's flight was rerouted to Heathrow. On the ground, more chaos awaited her and her fellow passengers.

**Samira:** So I got off the plane, and then started looking at Twitter and looking at my phone and saw that this was a really massive story and that the airport had been shut down.

**Maeve:** Samira dragged her bags back home and fell into bed. But the next morning, she awoke to...

**Samira:** ...a kind of media circus.

TV news presenter: At Gatwick, many passengers sat waiting in planes on the runway (before finally being offloaded...)

TV news interviewee: We had quite a long journey and got here, and it was chaos.

TV news presenter 2: (All flights in and out of Gatwick,) Britain's second busiest airport have been suspended (after two drones were seen flying near the runway.)

TV news presenter 5: (But there have been several near misses,) with drones coming within a few feet of commercial aircraft. So the industry doesn't take any chances.

TV news presenter 3: (The problem of) drones near airports is a worldwide concern. In the UK, the authorities say the number of near misses has trebled in the last two years.

**Maeve:** Something looking like two drones had been spotted a little after 9pm by an airport security officer. The sighting was called in. This was serious stuff. The possibility of a drone colliding with an aircraft could have untold damage; in the worst case scenario, it could cause a crash. Plus, after several reported near misses, airport employees were on high alert.

Police and security staff descended onto the area. Runways were closed. Within an hour, a further six sightings had been logged. A few hours later, when it seemed like it was all clear, the airport officials moved to open up some runways again. Planes had been in holding patterns, circling, while their fuel ran dangerously low. Others, like

Samira's, had been diverted to other airports. The passengers inside the terminal were getting irate. But, just as the runways were about to open...

**Samira:** ...every time they reopened the runway, a drone would sort of dart into view again, and they'd have to keep closing it, and so it seemed that whoever was operating these drones was sort of taunting the airport staff.

**Maeve:** The police sent up helicopters and drones of their own – all to try and find who was behind this attack. But, nothing. Then, military trucks hauled in an anti-drone system to monitor the skies. Again, nothing. For 33 hours the airport remained closed. More than 1,000 flights had been cancelled. For days, the story had the UK gripped

TV news presenter 5: A nightmare situation for pilots and passengers, a drone striking a plane...

**Maeve:** ...Viewers glued to their screens waiting for the perpetrators to be found. But days, then weeks, passed, and no one was caught.

**Samira:** As the British media often does, it just sort of disappeared, having been this really big news event, and I was just really fascinated with it from then. This idea of, this really dramatic thing can happen, and then it just sort of drops out of public view.

**Maeve:** And it wasn't just the intense pace of the news cycle. UK authorities also seemed to stop talking about the drone sightings.

**Samira:** And there didn't seem to be any follow-up to this massive thing that had shut the airport down for 30 hours and cost millions of pounds and thousands of disrupted flights, and so on and so on.

**Maeve:** Now, these are the stories that Samira is made for. Stories that seemed seismic at the time, but then disappeared from view without anyone ever really getting to the bottom of them.

**Samira:** The kind of work I tend to do is taking a slightly more long view. So looking back at something that's happened already and sort of trying to cast a new light on it. I enjoy that way of working.

**Maeve:** So, after the Gatwick drone incident, and the weeks and months that passed, long after everyone else had become distracted and moved on, Samira was still thinking about it.

**Samira:** I kind of assumed that someone would do a big piece about it. No one really did.

**Maeve:** Once the manuscript for her book, *Karachi Vice*, was complete. She spoke to her editor at the *Guardian*, David Wolf. David edits the *Guardian's* Long Read section, where Samira regularly contributes.

**Samira:** It turned out he was also really fascinated by the story and had been. We just sort of thought if we've both been mildly obsessed by this for the last year, maybe other people have, too.

**Maeve:** As a next step, David encouraged Samira to scope out the potential story to see if she could find a new angle on it.

**Samira:** I think the words he actually said to me were: "If you're going to do it, then we have to solve it or try to solve it," which is quite a big ask.

**Maeve:** Samira started with some deep research, laying out everything that had happened in the aftermath of the sightings.

**Samira:** So I was looking around to see what I could find that might be new. I don't know if other journalists have other methods of doing this. For me, it's always a lot of time Googling and searching on Twitter and so on. It's that sort of first stage where we're like, *Am I a reporter? Or am I just someone who searches for things a lot?*

**Maeve:** Samira pulled together the statements from the police in the wake of the incident. There had been 170 drone sightings reported, 115 of which had been deemed credible by the police.

But despite all the police and military surveillance, and countless news photographers and camera people with their lenses trained on the skies above the airport, no one had managed to catch any drone sightings on camera.

The police, under pressure to solve the crime, did make an arrest. A couple who lived near to the airport were arrested. 12 armed officers stormed their house, and they were taken into custody and held for 36 hours. The reason seemed to be that the man was known for liking model aircrafts and that they lived near to the airport. News of the arrest soon leaked out.

**Samira:** The *Daily Mail* ran this front page with their photograph and the headline "Are these the morons who ruined Christmas?"

**Maeve:** They weren't. The couple were released without charge.

**Samira:** They were totally exonerated. It turned out they didn't even have a drone.

Man from the *Daily Mail* article: "As you can probably imagine, we're feeling completely violated. Our home has been searched, and our privacy and identity completely exposed. Our names, photos and other personal information have been broadcast throughout the world. We are deeply distressed, as are our family and friends. And we are currently receiving medical care."

**Maeve:** Samira tried checking whether the couple wanted to talk.

**Samira:** I think I messaged them on Facebook and didn't get a reply which you don't always, because sometimes your messages disappear into the Facebook "other" inbox if you're not friends on Facebook. And I wasn't sure if they'd want to talk or not, because obviously they had their names plastered across the media against their will. But in the end, I made contact with their lawyer who said that they just wanted to put the whole thing behind them. So it's a quite decisive no, that they just didn't want any more media scrutiny on them. So I had to park that, which was a shame.

**Maeve:** A bit dejected, she decided not to give up. In the course of her trawling through news reports and social media sites, she'd found one Twitter user who looked really interesting.

**Samira:** And I did an advanced Twitter search with the date parameters over the period that it actually happened. And that led me to a news photographer, Eddie Mitchell, who is based in Sussex and had been taking pictures that night and saw that he'd been tweeting pictures and live updates from the airport.

**Maeve:** This could be useful. Samira fired off a direct message to Eddie.

**Samira:** And explained, I'm a journalist, working with the *Guardian*. I'm thinking about doing something on the Gatwick drone, could we have a chat.

**Maeve:** Samira gave him a call. What he had to say was fascinating.

**Samira:** He told me about his experiences that night. So he was covering it. He described to me the moment where he thought he'd got the "money shot" kind of photo of the drone. And then when he loaded it up on his laptop and zoomed in on it, he saw that it actually wasn't a drone. It was a helicopter, and the placement of the lights had erroneously convinced him that it was a drone. And he said that was the moment where he thought maybe there wasn't a drone at all, because he's someone who knows about drones, flies drones several times a week and made this error. He also made the quite obvious point that there was no footage or photographs of the drone or drones.

**Maeve:** ...despite the fact that there were a bunch of photographers and news crews, and a whole airport full of passengers and staff.

**Samira:** This is one of the most monitored patches of land in the UK.

**Maeve:** Samira put the phone down, excited. Could it be that the answer to the great mystery of who was flying the Gatwick drones was...no one? What if all those people looking into the sky, primed to see a drone, were merely seeing lights from other aircrafts?

**Samira:** So that, I think, was a really interesting starting point. Whereas most of the coverage that I'd seen was started from the premise of the line that the police had very

steadfastly stuck to, which was that there were at least two drones flying and it was a coordinated and malicious attack. And the idea that there may not have been a drone or that there was a lot of error had kind of been limited to people on social media or maybe specialist sites, and had the whiff of conspiracy theory about it. So I thought maybe we should take that seriously.

**Maeve:** In fact, Samira found out that, a few days after the drone had been spotted, one Sussex police officer talking to the press had raised some doubts. "We are working with human beings saying they've seen something," he said. "There was always a possibility that there may not have been any genuine drone activity in the first place." But almost immediately this was contradicted. In the following days, Sussex police spokespeople repeatedly said that, yes, there had been drones, and they were working hard to find out who was behind it. So, which was it? Samira wanted to know more from Sussex police about just what it was they really knew.

**Samira:** So I thought then, maybe I should try doing a Freedom of Information request to see if there are any more documents or information that I could get. I mean, I've never personally had a huge amount of success with them. I know there's a real knack to it, but I thought it was worth doing. So then what I did was look on [whatdotheyknow.com](http://whatdotheyknow.com), which is a website that compiles Freedom of Information requests. So I had a search of the Gatwick drone, and I saw one name popping up again and again, which was I. Hudson.

**Maeve:** Who was this 'I. Hudson'? They seem to be on the same track as Samira. Could they have the answer she was looking for?

**Samira:** And so then I had to look for who this I. Hudson was and found that it was someone called Ian Hudson, who had occasionally contributed to some specialist drone news sites and also ran a Twitter account that lots of people who are into drones followed. So I DM'ed him on Twitter.

**Maeve:** Samira explained that she was in the early stages of research on a story about the Gatwick drones.

**Samira:** I mean, his first DMs already just really kind of sparked my interest. He replied straightaway saying, "Happy to talk to you on this issue. The timeline doesn't add up. I put in at least one FOI. The police aren't answering even basic questions." And so

yeah, I could tell that this was someone I definitely wanted to talk to. So he rang me up. We had a chat, and it was almost, you know when there's so much information, it's almost hard to take in. He's extremely expert about drones.

**Maeve:** Ian knew all about the technicalities of how drones worked. And, he explained to Samira, a lot of what had been suggested about the Gatwick drones just didn't add up. Take, for example, the amount of time they were supposed to be flying around. They were spotted over the course of a 30-hour period.

**Samira:** Most commercially available drones don't have a battery life that's that long. So of course, you could be changing battery packs. But you'd have to have quite a lot of battery packs, and it raises the question of where you would be, given that police really extensively had searched the whole airport complex on the whole perimeter.

**Maeve:** Then, there was the fact that drones have in-built software...

**Samira:** ...which prevents them from flying over airports.

**Maeve:** Ian explained that, yes, you could hack the software to override this. But if you went to all that trouble, if you really wanted to cause serious problems, why would you leave the drones' lights on?

Like Samira, Ian was interested in what the police had. He wanted to know the exact time the last credible sighting had been logged, and who would have been calling these sightings in.

**Samira:** A military anti-drones system had been brought into the airport, and that system is capable of picking up if there's any drone activity, and it hadn't picked anything up. And so Ian sort of established from the Sussex police Twitter account of the night that sightings had been deemed credible after the point in which this military system had been installed and didn't pick anything up.

**Maeve:** But Ian's FOIs, which Samira had found online, had gone completely unanswered. Still, just knowing Ian was out there asking questions was interesting. And he wasn't the only one.



**Samira:** There was this small community of people who had been acting as amateur sleuths and trying to find out what had gone on.

**Maeve:** Ian was able to put her in touch with more people. Each person helped her understand more about just how remarkable a feat the drone operators would have had to have pulled off. And she was also hearing just how in the dark the police investigation seemed to have been. The police officers looking into the case had seemingly been struggling to understand the actual capabilities of most drones.

**Maeve:** And other than the catastrophically wrong arrest of the couple who live near the airport...

**Samira:** ...there weren't any leads to be fair to them. There was no real sightings of anyone looking suspicious around the area. So they really were starting from nowhere, just from sightings of drones in the sky.

It just sort of increasingly built up this picture of just how little evidence there was, despite a lot of resources going into the investigation. And this is an investigation that pulled in, at different points, five police forces – cost a lot of money. And to have zero leads I think is quite fascinating in and of itself. When they closed the investigation formally in September 2019, they said they'd knocked on 1,200 doors, they'd taken 222 witness statements and identified 96 persons of interest, and then closed the investigation anyway, because there was no new information and no further realistic lines of inquiry.

**Maeve:** Now, that kind of exhaustive search might put some journalists off, but not Samira. If anything, it egged her on, and it added more and more weight to her developing hypothesis that perhaps at least some of those scores of sightings weren't actually sightings at all. She kept on, talking to more and more people. It had been well over a year now since the incident. But invariably, her inquiries were met with enthusiasm.

**Samira:** Everyone who had some sort of involvement in the drones world was really pleased that I was looking into it and really up for talking and really helpful about connecting me with other people and sending whatever documents they had. There's a sense that the technology is sort of unfairly maligned, and that the Gatwick drone incident was a big part of it. I mean, I spoke to a bunch of hobbyists who felt that it was

getting much harder for them to fly drones or that people were a bit hostile if they were sort of out in an area of natural beauty taking pictures. People might ask them suspicious questions about it.

**Maeve:** Samira wanted to get closer to the action. But that was easier said than done.

**Samira:** One feature of reporting this piece was that I was doing it during the first pandemic year, and so a lot of the reporting had been done on the phone, which is fine, and you can get lots of good material on the phone, but it's obviously no substitute for meeting people in person and so on.

**Maeve:** So when restrictions finally lifted, Samira found herself visiting friends in Bradford in the north of England, and then realised that not far away was Ian Hudson.

**Samira:** And I thought maybe I could just go out and see how these drones work, because the other thing was, you know, as I said, I started off without any real technical knowledge or understanding of drones. So I thought let me check in with Ian and he was very, very game. He said that a bunch of them who know each other through a sort of local drone Facebook group met regularly on Saturdays and he was quite happy to assemble some people, and I could talk to them about their views about the Gatwick drone, and they'd show me how it works.

**Maeve:** So when Saturday came around, Samira set off, out to meet Ian, but as she trudged through the fields to their meeting spot, she realised that fate might not have been on her side.

**Samira:** Unfortunately, the weather was absolutely terrible. So to fly drones, they're quite flimsy, actually – commercially available drones, even the high quality ones. So you do need good weather conditions. And the weather wasn't good. It was really really windy and a bit drizzly. But they were very game for coming out anyway and attempted to fly the drones. There were lots of jokes about the drones potentially flying away in the high winds and never seeing them again. But yeah, we did eventually manage to get one up.

And you can get these goggles, which attach to the drones, you can see what the drone's seeing as it were, so I put those on and, and had this amazing view over the

fields and beyond - that was great. Also just the noise they make and how they're operated and how they're put together.

**Maeve:** The drones' flimsiness in the wind made Samira wonder once more about the sheer improbability of what allegedly unfolded that night at the airport. The more understanding she gained about how drones actually worked, how they moved through the skies, the more sceptical she grew.

**Samira:** I think I heard several iterations of the phrase "There's more evidence for the Loch Ness Monster," which was something that lots of people said while I was reporting on the story.

**Maeve:** Samira returned from the field, damp and cold. But with a new understanding of just how tricky it was to fly a drone, how incredible it would have been to evade scrutiny for so long at Gatwick. More and more, it felt like Samira was chasing an improbable Loch Ness Monster of her own. By this point, she had gathered together a wealth of information: times, dates, facts. Now she needed to make some order out of all the clues.

**Samira:** So as you said at the beginning, I have a real soft spot for stories and things that have been a big media event and then disappeared. And something I do whenever I'm working on a story like this, I always make a big sort of spreadsheet of a timeline. Listing in detail everything that's happened and the sort of dates and times as specifically as I can and what the sources said.

Then I get into colour coding for things that are in the public domain and things that I've got from interviews or material I found myself, and sort of put it all together. And I find that's a really useful way to keep track of when things have happened, and if there are inconsistencies and what the inconsistencies are and, sort of, where to drill down on them.

**Maeve:** But looking through her list, there are still some blank spots. Her FOIs to the police hadn't been responded to. So she needed to hear from a police insider about where the investigation had got to. But that can be hard. Samira was accustomed to getting stonewalled by police press offices. For many investigative journalists, it's often

a frustrating part of the reporting process. But she pressed on and got lucky with the help of a friend who put her in touch with a contact.

**Samira:** I managed to just have a brief conversation with a police officer who had knowledge of the case, who wasn't actually on that police force but did have knowledge of it.

**Maeve:** That police officer told her, "We work on evidence, and I haven't seen any. That's all there really is to say." Samira wanted to talk to more people who'd been working at Gatwick too, to hear the story from their side...

**Samira:** ...which was really difficult. It was actually much more difficult than I thought it was going to be.

**Maeve:** The press office just kept finding ways to avoid putting anyone up for interview, referring her to previous public statements. So she thought she'd try contacting individuals.

**Samira:** So I spent quite a lot of time on LinkedIn, just sort of trawling for people who worked or had worked at Gatwick.

**Maeve:** Because some areas of reporting unfolded during the first year of the pandemic, many people working in aviation had been laid off from their jobs at Gatwick. Maybe, she thought, people would be willing to talk to her more openly about their experiences. Not quite.

**Samira:** Lots of people were especially nervous about sticking their necks out.

**Maeve:** She tried reaching out to fellow journalists from aviation specialist publications, too, to see if they could help put her in touch with anyone.

**Samira:** And again, some senior people had also left. Some of the more senior people had actually signed nondisclosure agreements, which I think is quite standard practice for big corporate entities. And so they didn't want to speak on that basis. And eventually it was through a contact - through one of those people who did in the end talk to me anonymously about the sort of feeling inside the airport that night.

**Maeve:** In the end, Samira pieced together the brief interview she had managed to get: the one with a police officer, the other with the Gatwick employee, alongside what she could find in the public domain. Finally, she had all she needed - or, all she was ever going to get.

**Samira:** That's when we decided to try and write it up.

**Maeve:** Her editor suggested she read up about what else could have been behind so many sightings. So Samira got to work. She found academic studies suggesting it was incredibly difficult for the human eye to accurately assess fast-moving distant objects. She also found reports from the USA, where the Federal Aviation Authority logs more than 100 reports every month, from citizens who believe they've seen a drone near a plane or an airport.

But when the Academy of Model Aeronautics analysed these sightings, they found just 3.5% actually involved a near-miss between an aircraft and a drone. But perhaps most interestingly, she found cases of mass hysteria, where members of the public - prompted by some initial incident - would suddenly all report the same thing. A professor of psychiatry told Samira: "In a state of anxiety, we often focus attention on innocuous stimuli. There's a lot of anxiety about terrorism. There's a lot of anxiety about drones."

**Samira:** Some of those sightings that were corroborated were a light on a crane in the distance actually, and you do think, it sort of makes sense. You have this drone sighting reported, you have the airport shut down, you suddenly have thousands of people in the area, looking at the sky and looking for lights, so it sort of figures that you would think *drone*, where you might not have thought it beforehand.

**Maeve:** After months of research, Samira was finally ready to publish. The story went up on the *Guardian*, two years after the drones were spotted. The response was immediate.

**Samira:** It went completely bonkers. You never know how a story is going to be received. But yeah, people just really seemed to enjoy the caper element of it, as well. And I think the work that people like Ian had been doing to sort of investigate it in an amateur sleuthing capacity - I think people were really drawn in by that, as I had been, as well. And yeah, it was a really crazy reaction. I think it was one of the most read

pieces on the *Guardian* site that day, and people were reading it not just in the UK - in the US and all around the world. I started getting lots of emails from people. Got quite a few emails from people who were angry that I hadn't looked into the possibility that it was a UFO, which was quite funny. More than a handful of those.

So I always think that's a sign that something's been widely read, once you start getting, like, really niche, criticisms. Yeah, it was quite an amazing reaction, really.

**Maeve:** In the end, Samira was not able to make good on her editor's 'big ask' to fully solve the Gatwick Airport drones mystery. But she did try, intensely and devotedly, to get to the bottom of it.

**Samira:** And I think the thing is that the theory that lots of people were putting forward, which is that there was no drone at all, or that, even if the initial sighting was accurate, that there was a healthy dose of human error, at least in the later stages of it, it becomes really, really difficult to prove a negative, so I think that all you can really prove is that is that no one's found anything. And so I think once you've sort of engaged seriously with that, as a theory, it becomes quite difficult to get definitive proof.

**Maeve:** In investigative journalism, there should always be a place for stories whose endings aren't neat and tidy. Samira's work raised important questions that made people think again about the assumed knowledge of what happened that day.

This is certainly not the last time we'll hear about drones zipping through the sky, and the potentially damaging consequences of their flight. Nor is it the last story that will set off its own wave of public hysteria, with numerous conflicting voices competing for the leading narrative. And when a new iteration of the story someday circles back to the news cycle, we'll have Samira's solid work to build upon.

I'll put a link to Samira's story in the show notes.

That's all for this episode of *The Tip Off*.

Please do review, subscribe and pass on word to your friends, and visit our new website – [thetipoffpodcast.com](http://thetipoffpodcast.com) – to explore show notes, past seasons, transcripts and more.

This show is a co-production of Studiotobe. Our co-executive producers are Joaquin Alvarado and Ken Ikeda.

Maeve McClenaghan – that's me – created this podcast.

Olivia Aylmer produces the show. Chloe Behrens handles audio editing. Claudia Meza does our audio mixing, sound design and original music. Thanks to her for editorial consultation, too. Thanks also to Soobin Kim and Rushana Miller for transcription support. Dice Muse composed our theme music.

As always, stay tuned for more stories behind the headlines.