PASSENGER 39-C

Wednesday, March 18, 2015 was a date I’ll never, ever forget. I was on my way to a publishers trade show in Frankfort, Germany from my home in Sacramento, CA. After connecting in Chicago, I hurriedly caught my flight in Toronto for my non-stop, seven and a half hour flight overseas on United Airlines.

Our plane was a huge, 4-engined Boeing 747-400, which could hold 374 passengers, 13 flight attendants, and 2 pilots. The flight appeared full, and I only noted one empty aisle seat on my way back to Economy Class and my aisle seat 40-D. UA flight #8592 was scheduled to depart at 5:00 p.m.

After I stowed my carry-on bag in the overhead compartment and settled into my seat, I overheard two nearby flight attendants saying that passenger 39-C was on his way, and that once he was on board, they could secure the cabin doors, inform the pilots, and we could take-off.

A few minutes later, man casually walked down the aisle. He was dressed in a brown, double-breasted suit -- the color and style probably last seen in the 1930’s – wearing a plain white shirt with a simple burgundy tie. He carried a dark wool overcoat on his arm. He was of average height and looked to be in his mid-40’s, still slim and fit. When he removed his matching brown fedora, I noted that his brown hair was modestly oiled and carefully slicked back. He wore no rings or wristwatch, but I saw a flash of matching plain silver cufflinks on his French cuffs. His most striking feature was his brown eyes, because they were set behind a vintage pair of round, Windsor-style eyeglasses (no nose pads, Zylo plastic black frames)--- the kind that author James Joyce used to sport. Finally, the Caucasian man was clean shaven and had a healthy complexion.

The passenger was not carrying any luggage other than what looked to be an ordinary 9x12 spiral artist’s sketchbook. He neatly folded his dark wool overcoat and placed it, with his fedora on top, in the overhead compartment before taking his seat and buckling in. He had an aisle seat, 39-C, a very short distance from where I was sitting on the nearby aisle, one row behind him.

About five minutes later, the captain announced that we were taxiing to our runway and that we were fourth in line for take-off. At 5:21 p.m., we were airborne.

The flight was routine. People put on headphones or inserted earbuds to watch movies or listen to music. Others began reading books or reading on their electronic tablets. Some people chatted or drifted off to sleep. Still others played games on their laptops. Parents entertained their children. A few businessmen shuffled documents. We would enjoy another hour or so of daylight out our windows as we flew east across the Atlantic.

Dinner and drinks were served about 90 minutes after take-off. I had the chicken with mushroom gravy, sliced carrots, and wild rice, with a small salad and chocolate cake. I noticed that the man in 39-C declined dinner, but requested – in a low voice, in some unfamiliar (at least to me) foreign accent -- some Earl Grey tea.

After the meal, the passengers returned to their prior activities, or prepared to get some sleep before we landed in Frankfort, scheduled for 6:03 a.m. Thursday morning. I returned to my thick paperback novel, but not before I noticed Mr. 39-C flipping through his sketch pad. All of his renderings were done in pen & ink -- faces, landscapes, and buildings mostly. He then took out of his suit breast pocket a classic thick fountain pen and began to draw. Ever curious, when I got up to use the forward lavatory, I got to walk past the man’s seat and gave a cursory glance to my left at his work. The other two passengers in his row were asleep.

I was completely shocked when I discovered that the man was sketching an airliner crashing in the ocean! I was even more horrified when the man abruptly looked up from his drawing, caught my eye, smiled a subtle smile, and boldly winked at me.

In an instant, the flight made a sharp groaning noise, shuttered, and started to descend, the engines whining and struggling. The seat belt light went on as the pilot announced for all flight crew and passengers to buckle in immediately. I went back to my seat. The plane lurched to the left, then to the right. Those passengers who were asleep woke up in surprise. Uncleared food trays slid off their tray tables to the floor. A few babies cried. Adults asked aloud what was happening, or merely cursed. The “ding” sound of altitude descent went on every few seconds for each thousand foot drop down from our 35,000 foot cruising altitude. A woman screamed a few rows behind me, and I distinctly remember a male voice praying an Our Father. Outside the windows, the sky was jet black. It looked like were going down into the dark ocean. My only thought was how this was not a good way to die. I was not ready to leave my wife and daughter this way! I, too, began to pray in earnest, and closed my eyes, and felt my heart pounding. Nothing the pilots seemed to try would halt our catastrophic dropping out of the sky. Ding…ding…ding…

Among the passengers and crew, it was more a sense of helpless resignation rather than raw panic and mayhem. I opened my eyes when I heard the co-pilot say over the intercom: “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a serious equipment problem of unknown origin involving partial loss of engine power. We have alerted St. John’s emergency operations center and have radioed our request for immediate assistance. Our current position is being automatically tracked on global air traffic control radar. We are in contact with both United Airlines and Boeing experts on the ground as we try to pinpoint the problem and correct it. It is imperative that you stay firmly buckled in your seats. Please try to remain calm. If – and only if -- we need to put down in the ocean, it is crucial that you follow all water-landing instructions from the flight attendants. That is all for now.”

It was then that I noticed the artist in 39-C leisurely admiring his completed work of an airliner crashing into the ocean, before doing something totally unexpected. He methodically tore it up into neat little squares, then stuffed the pieces into his coat pocket! In mere moments, the airliner’s engines suddenly seemed to stabilize and resume their normal humming. The plane stopped its out-of-control descent! Passengers looked at each other back in forth in amazement, puzzlement, relief, or disbelief. Couples hugged. Crying stopped. Hope resumed. Strangers squeezed hands. Would we survive now and live? Please, God, help us…

The pilot’s voice then came on calmly and clearly: “Ladies and gentlemen, we appear to have stabilized our unexpected engine problems. We are presently one hour and fifty-seven minutes from Shannon Airport, our closest point to land. United is arranging for another aircraft to meet us. You will de-plane this aircraft and transfer to it and then continue on to your final destination of Frankfort. We estimate that you will arrive there about 9:30 a.m., which is about three and a half hours late. I would personally like to thank each and every one of you for your cooperation and patience during this difficult and unexpected situation. Also be assured that suitable compensation for future flights will be offered to you by United Airlines. All cockpit indicators at this time point to a uneventful flying segment into Shannon. We are going to level off at 20,000 feet and stay there for the duration, rather than climb back up to our usual 35,000 feet, just as a precaution. No air turbulence has been reported at this new altitude. I’ll advise you and our excellently trained crew further just before we prepare to land. You will see emergency vehicles and equipment, and probably media crews too, on the ground. Nothing to be alarmed about, just routine. Again, I and my co-pilot Steve thank you, and…thanks for flying the Friendly Skies.”

The last remark got a laugh from most of the passengers, and acted as a big tension reliever. The crew busily began the clean-up of spilled trays, food, and drinks, and generally attempted to put people at their ease, smiling, offering warm beverages, blankets, and pillows. The seatbelt sign was turned off, and queues quickly formed for the various lavatories as people arose from their seats.

The passenger in 39-C, meanwhile, seemed unperturbed with the whole experience. He sat quietly and relaxed, and seemed oddly oblivious – even contented.

Should I tell someone in authority after we landed about the artist and his unusual drawing and its coincidental aftermath? And what about his tearing up the finished product and its subsequent dramatic aftermath? Could his actions somehow – incredibly -- have caused all of this?

The rest of the flight into Shannon was uneventful. Sure enough, the tarmac -- once we had landed (with loud applause for our expert pilots) and had taxied to a remote section of the runway -- was filled with emergency trucks, Irish police vehicles, and various media vans with satellite dishes.

Everyone gathered up their carry-on items and we lined up to exit the plane. Several people paused to shake hands with the pilots in gratitude, and a few even hugged their section’s flight attendants. I was five people behind the artist in the aisle. When he stepped off the plane, he waited a moment until I caught up with him at the end of the jetway. He then stared me straight in the eye, standing perhaps two feet away. Next, he unexpectedly winked and smiled the same odd subtle smile I had seen before and handed me a folded up piece of sketch paper before dissolving past the crowd of reporters and television filming crews.

I headed directly to the nearest men’s lavatory and shut myself in a toilet stall and locked the clasp. There, I slowly unfolded the mysterious paper. On it was a single, simple drawing of a “smiley face.” And below that were these groupings of letters:

KYVT

NXLO

DUZB

PWRJ

I was completely baffled. I went directly to the nearby United Customer Service desk in the terminal. I told the two agents my complete theory, showed them the bizarre note, and gave them a detailed description of the mysterious stranger-artist. They quickly called the police, and together we filled them in with the whole story.

I never saw the passenger in 39-C again. He was not found in the terminal, nor did he board the continuing flight to Frankfort. He was not seen on any video surveillance camera footage when it was played back. He seemed to have simply vanished into thin air.

I finally arrived in Frankfort on the substitute aircraft about four hours late. After attending the publishers international trade show the following two days, I went to the German authorities with a photocopy I had made of the artist’s cryptic note in Shannon. I had to try to figure out the mystery, for my own long-term sanity, if for no other reason.

The German detectives called in three language professors from the local university who were experts in foreign tongues. The authorities also called in a team of specialized computer code breakers. But after several days, neither group was able to figure out the meaning of the baffling message. The letters represented no known language or code.

Next, United Airlines tried to trace the mystery passenger’s ticket backwards, but he had paid cash so there was no credit card ‘trail’. Furthermore, according to the U.S. government, the name he gave on his passport – “Syrz Vexa” --had been somehow inexplicably erased (along with his photograph and number) in the State Department databases. His Earl Grey tea cup – had it been saved – might have revealed a fingerprint, but it obviously had been discarded as trash long ago. The other two persons sitting in Row 39 on UA flight #8592 were found in Toronto and interviewed, but neither could recall the artist saying anything for the entire flight, even during the emergency descent and its recovery.

Who was he? Where was he from? Where did he go? What was the explanation? And why did he wink at me -- on two separate occasions -- and then give me that enigmatic note??

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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