

## *BOMB SCARE*

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It is true that, in this world of modern conveniences, some things have changed.

Fear, for instance.

Sitting in a Pan Am 747 over the Atlantic, at 35,000 feet, believing that a bomb might be on board—though the authorities have reassured you that they have searched for such a device; sitting there unable to move—because the plane is packed full of people, tourists mainly, exasperated and weary (the flight will be six hours overdue because of the bomb threat); sitting there trapped in a plane allows a new kind of fear to percolate through one's being. It's a fear unlike any other ages have known. It's a fear, which, like a general anaesthetic, renders the person comatose before the surgeon's blade begins its work.

It had begun in Rome.

A pellucidly clear, perfect Roman morning, late August. Nothing tainted that sky, the colour of the copper oxide Roman mosaicists used for their skies, except for a slight mantle of industrial haze draped along the horizon, where Mussolini had built his model city. Indeed the sky had been like that for almost the entire summer and my companion and I were roasted black from the unrelenting Mediterranean sun. No sunglasses, not

even the tinted plate glass windows of Rome's Fiumicino aerodrome, could dim that sky.

Our plane, a spangling new 747, was parked outside and was itself a reflection of that sky—silver and blue, Pan Am's signature colours. Its great bulbous nose seemed to nuzzle up against the windows of the terminus. Nadja, my companion, had remarked that its snout, big and slightly petable, resembled that of our much loved dog, an observation that had the effect of domesticating the plane for me.

But all wasn't as tranquil or as innocent as that sky—or the giant aeronautical beast waiting outside to ferry us to New York. Rome aerodrome, summer of 1974, was like a city preparing for war. Soldiers, dressed in the Italian army's version of camouflage, guarded every entrance and egress and were sauntering leisurely but not too leisurely through the vast, warehouse-like overseas lounge. Perhaps the inscrutable logic that governs so much that is Italian thought it best to keep the soldiers in full view. Conspicuous they certainly were and in an off-putting sort of way. Perhaps then Palestinian or other foreign terrorists who might try to wreak havoc among the international tourist set might think twice before showing up here.

In any case the airport was swarming with bored young men in mottled green and umber fatigues, caressing Russian made machine guns. That they all seemed to have their fingers on the triggers of these lethal weapons seemed an unnecessarily histrionic touch but typical, we mused to ourselves, of the Italian personality and its need always to play to an image, to evoke always the *bella figura*.

Outside, lined up alongside the terminus, were their vehicles, not so innocent looking armoured personnel carriers of all kinds, some with rather large and ominous cannons, powerful enough to down anything that might be foolish enough to land

or take off without their permission. And yet in that perverse sort of way typical also of things Italian the whole scene seemed disorganized and a bit amateurish. No adult figure stood out who might be in charge, only the young foot soldiers themselves, whose faces conveyed the callowness of youth, a fact that gave one little comfort should they be confronted with equally immature youths from life's terrorist ranks.

Since our flight was already delayed I had plenty of time to feed my curiosity and take in the scene. I did notice a different kind of figure, who didn't fit the usual tourist formula, in nondescript off colour rayon suits and open neck polyester shirts, lolling about, with no particular purpose in mind, trying to appear nonchalant. These were muscular types for the most part. Their pectoral and back muscles bulged through their jackets. Security types, I surmised, belonging to either the airlines themselves or possibly Interpol. Indeed, when one of them bent over to retie his shoelace I glimpsed the outline of a Beretta tucked into his trouser belt. (I was right in my suspicion because two of them, sans carry-on luggage, would board our plane later.)

Still, despite these precautions, it wasn't hard to imagine clever terrorists bursting upon the scene and doing what some Palestinian Liberation fighters along with a handful of Italian Red Brigades had done the previous December and at this very airport—firing indiscriminately into the throngs of travellers waiting for their flights. A Pan Am airliner had been torched with phosphorous bombs. Three dozen passengers had been killed and two dozen wounded. The terrorists had escaped on another plane to Kuwait, where they had been welcomed as heroes. Despite these visible and invisible precautions, a very clever terrorist might still be able to commandeer a plane, our beautiful plane.

The young Italian soldiers surely were instructed not to shoot indiscriminately into such a crowded space. All a pair of terrorists need do was corral a group of travellers and parade them through the exit doors onto our spangling 747, whose pilots had already positioned themselves in the cockpit. There would be little the inexperienced soldiers could do to stop them. If the terrorists had reconnoitred the waiting hall as I had done they would have spotted the plainclothes Interpol or security guards and easily taken them out.

They, too, no doubt, had been instructed to respond cautiously to any threat and would be rendered vulnerable. But the point is, are there any terrorists who aren't clever, or as clever as your average security guard, who has a nice family to return to each night and isn't on a suicide mission? The modern world had given way to a new species of fear, as I said, making us its unwitting victims. Thus I had, in my overactive imagination, worked out a whole series of colorful scenarios for hijacking an aircraft, even before we boarded our plane.

On board our plane, that beauteous craft, with its wide aisles, capacious seats, and ample leg room, everything looked normal and inviting enough. The "soft" *Muzak*, the warm comforting smells of the leather upholstery and plush carpets, diluted somewhat by the saccharine deodorant that used to be ejected into the ventilation systems of planes, were meant to put us at our ease. Soon we were latched into our seats, a contented, compact house, overseen by the ten or so stewardesses, who, like the music, were chosen to appeal to every kind of taste, and who, I noted with some satisfaction, represented every species of American beauty. Soon there was the deep throated cough of the four big Pratt and Whitney engines as the jet fuel ignited, so different from the oxygen starved sounds of aircraft engines in the fifties and sixties. These beauties purred like cats in sleep and once started seemed to have miles to go before they reached

maximum thrust. To free the plane from the loading dock took just a fraction of their power.

We heard those gentle clicking sounds, those gears falling smoothly into place sounds, and those melodious “pongs” that the manufacturer has built into plane mechanisms to reassure even the most fearful flyer. We knew the elaborate flight check was underway even though we were still fifteen minutes from takeoff.

Then our destiny changed, taking us all by complete surprise.

I was looking out the window at the time. I felt first the bumping sensation and then understood the reason why. We had left the asphalt runway and were manoeuvring over grass. Throughout the cabin, heads turned confusedly to other heads for an explanation, and the sound of murmuring could be heard above the low purr of the engines. Where was our captain taking us? Clearly our route was off to the side of the large aerodrome, away from any terminus or runway.

Finally we reached what appeared to be the edge of the aerodrome, really an open field. Then the captain came on the intercom again. He had spoken to us as we left the terminus and, in his soothing Southern accent, welcomed us aboard Pan Am’s flight 540 en route non stop to Kennedy. For security reasons, the voice now told us, we were to exit the plane. Special ramps would be made available for our disembarkation and assistance provided by the cabin crew. This was a precautionary measure merely, ordered by the Italian Security Services, and wasn’t meant to cause alarm. We shouldn’t be alarmed. All carry-on luggage should be left on board. He apologized on behalf of Pan Am for the inconvenience. Further information and instructions would follow.

Throughout the whole of the clearly improvised speech, the voice didn't falter or lose a beat. Only the mellifluous American accent (Georgia?) showed the slightest strain, becoming more pronounced as it delivered its curt message, but certainly conveying nothing as worrisome as fear.

*Inconvenience indeed!*

Almost on cue, the whole cabin erupted in an outcry, as at a church service the congregation will sometimes pause in its prayers and emit a collective cough. At that point one of the shadowy figures whom I had pegged at the terminus as an Interpol type rose from his seat a dozen rows ahead and darted to the rear of the plane, where the stewardesses had congregated for takeoff. It was then I realized that something serious was afoot.

Eventually the plane came to a stop and the giant engines exhaled their last breath. Silence, the stunned silence that emanates from hundreds of people packed in a small space, filled the cabin, but only momentarily. Almost immediately it was replaced by the cacophony of confusion and fear, but without a single overriding voice to ease the confusion or still the fear. Then a female voice came over the intercom, presumably the head stewardess, pleading for order and calm. But, unlike the captain's voice, hers failed to conceal its emotion. The result was near mayhem, with the whole cabin pouring into the aisle at once and trying to make for the exits.

It was then I looked out the window and saw a fearful sight. What looked like the entire Italian Army, in an incredible array of personnel carriers, was approaching the plane, the vehicles even more heavily armoured than those at the terminus. Young men stood behind giant Gatling like guns, which seemed ominously and insanely to be pointed at our plane. Then emergency ramps towed by army trucks and what appeared to

be a caravan of tour buses. For a moment my mind scrambled for an explanation and came up with the plausible notion that the Italian government had fallen in an army coup. After all Greece had fallen to a clutch of army colonels just seven years before and Libya, Spain, and much of the Middle East were currently ruled by military despots.

The portable ramps were secured to both the front and rear exits of the aircraft, the doors opened, and we collectively eased our way towards these exits, not so much by individual choice or willpower as by the packs' own momentum, much as sausage meat passes through the mincing machine.

Despite everything the evacuation went smoothly, at least until we were all disembarked from the plane and stood nervously congregated on the grass like a bunch of lost travellers in search of their tour guide. At this point the captain should have appeared and, with the authority given his tall, Clark Gable frame by his resplendent Prussian blue Pan Am uniform (designed by Christine Dior), taken control of the situation. Instead, nothing, no instructions, not even from the handful of Italian officers who had taken charge of the evacuation. We were ignored, in fact, and subjected to the same hauteur that we had been subjected to often that summer, which is an innate part of the Italian character, the love-hate relationship that Italians bear towards foreigners. Indeed, it was as if we didn't exist or were ourselves somehow responsible for this turn of events.

I spotted one of the stewardesses (a striking, long-legged blond, vaguely southern, a Zelda-type), one on whom I thought I could execute my male charm, and went to speak to her. A bomb threat had been called into Pan Am's Paris office just as our plane was making for the runway. "It's a serious threat. We take such threats seriously these days," and she offered me a forced not very convincing apology, combined with a forced not

very reassuring smile. That was all she could tell me but it was enough. I knew more than I did a minute ago. I thanked her and resumed my place beside my companion, quite delighted to share my news with the other passengers milling about, which they all took to heart sombrely.

And indeed such threats had to be taken seriously. Plane hijackings and other heinous terrorist acts were everywhere in the news the past few years. Only a month before a train we might well have been travelling on ourselves from Rome to Munich had been blown up south of Bologna by a group of Red Brigade fascist hoodlums. The bomb had been timed to explode in a tunnel south of Bologna but fortunately the train wasn't on time. Had the bomb gone off in the tunnel the blast would have reverberated through the entire train and probably killed everyone on board. As it was twelve people had been killed and fifty wounded.

Travelling north to Switzerland a week later we had seen the wreckage on a siding outside the Bologna station, the burned out carcass reminiscent of scenes from the last Great War, the war that should have put an end to such wilful carnage for all time. The world was a mad place, especially here at the midpoint of the Mediterranean. As I said, Fascist Greece lay next door, fascist Spain and Libya a hand's breath away. (Portugal had just got rid of its dictatorship but was still an oppressed state.) Fanatics flourished everywhere for whom human life was of little consequence in the execution of their insane agendas. How Italy, so close temperamentally to these other states, had retained a semblance of democracy was a mystery, a mystery for which, in my jaundiced view, the Italians themselves deserved little credit.

Still no voice of authority told us what to do. We were gathered about the plane as though for a social event. All we needed was a few catering trucks to arrive, filled with delicious



Italian delicacies, and we all would have lounged the afternoon away spread out on the grass. A few passengers were even taking pictures with their cameras, which we had been expressly instructed to leave on board with our other carry-on luggage.

And I must admit, against the panoply of azure sky, the big silent jet with its gleaming, perfectly riveted aluminium fuselage, stencilled with Pan Am's cobalt blue insignia (the plane was appropriately named "Clipper Defiance"), lent the scene a bizarre unreality. A gentle fuel laced breeze wafted across the airfield. If, that moment, a discrete little bomb had blown the tail off the aircraft, sending orange and blue flames high into the sky, I think we all would have applauded and felt we were part of some Fellini-orchestrated spectacle.

That image of a bomb exploding in the plane while we all stood about aimlessly seemed an apt image for the dissociation of sensibility that we all felt, myself included; the peculiar way our fear had been displaced, objectified, taken out of our hands, so that we could examine it from a distance. For myself, I know I could barely move. Nadja, too, was immobilized by this turn of events and, like me, desperately wanted someone to take charge, to tell us what to do. Her remark that it was probably unwise for us to be standing so near the plane jolted me from my stupor. It gave me the courage to convey this message to the other passengers lolling nearby. Whereupon one of the Italian officers came over and in a clearly threatening tone told me to keep my mouth shut. "*Zitto taci fa' silenzio,*" he spoke to me as if he were a guard at a concentration camp and I was his inmate.

Finally, with no specific orders from anyone, we lazily boarded the tour buses, which, presumably, were to take us someplace. Possibly, had we wanted, we could have remained on site, enjoyed a picnic on the grass, sun-bathed on a wing. I doubt anyone would have noticed or cared. I felt something more visceral, however, when I saw the entire Pan Am gang

board another of the buses, captain and co-pilots included, and head for God knows where, another airline or country perhaps.

Who, then, was going to mind the plane and all our valuable possessions? These eighteen year olds in the Italian army? That fear nudged closer to reality when I contemplated the thought of these inexperienced youths tearing the plane apart for an explosive device that may or may not have existed. The scene had more potential for disaster than anything that had happened thus far. Likely, we would still have to board this plane for our flight home. "God," I thought, "these terrorists are geniuses at psychological warfare."

Would anyone really know where to look? Surely Boeing should send someone or one of the crew should have stayed on board. But the Pan Am contingent, in their natty Dior uniforms, had seemed mostly embarrassed by the whole affair and had swiftly departed the scene ahead of everyone else. Suddenly the meaninglessness of the situation struck home.

How easy, I thought, for one of these callow youths to inadvertently damage the plane. The cockpit would have to be searched and all the elaborate hydraulic mechanisms and electrical and computer devices in the undercarriage inspected. What if some youth pulled the wrong switch, pried open the wrong panel, damaged or disabled something? What if he were too ashamed or stupid to admit the fact? What if no one noticed until we were over the Mediterranean or Atlantic?

For surely the army had the responsibility of going through the entire plane. Suspicion, for it to be effective, had to be total, impersonal. Every inch, every coign and corner, of the huge craft would need to be searched, lest a crew member himself or some ground personnel had planted a device. What if one of the Italian officers or soldiers was himself a member of the Red Brigade and knew how to sabotage the plane's navigational

system or landing gear? Maybe the bomb wasn't actually on board but would be shortly. The possibilities for disaster presented to the mind were infinite. Then there was the passengers' luggage itself, obvious places to conceal a bomb. How would they manage that? These army personnel would have to examine our luggage or at least submit it to some kind of test.

Our bus was filled and we were transported back to the terminus, the same large holding area that we had occupied before. For the next three hours I watched our beautiful plane, off in the distance, being disembowelled; watched it through a summer haze that turned the young soldiers, scurrying up and down the portable boarding ramps, into worker ants.

The terminus wasn't equipped to handle so many people. Many had to stand or sit on the grungy carpet. The two food concessions in the boarding area soon ran out of water and soda drinks. Sandwiches, too, had sold out. Infants cried. An Italian mother screamed at the man behind the espresso bar because he wouldn't give her milk for her baby. Then the toilets, for both sexes, were closed off. Here was a great opportunity for Pan Am to do something gallant and rush refreshments to its beleaguered passengers. But no, as before, nothing happened. We didn't exist.

By now the entire passenger list knew that a bomb threat on our plane had been called into Pan Am's Paris office. But since there were no Pan Am officials left in the boarding area, the clerks who had taken our tickets presumably having departed for the day or for an overly long lunch, no new information was made available to us. Everywhere, on the faces of our group, one saw that look of resolute fear, that new species of fear alluded to before, where one felt anaesthetized before being subjected to some stranger's knife. Hunger, thirst, the purgatory of a crowded airport lounge, were the least of our concerns.

Already it was after one and our flight delayed four hours. Since our whole group knew about the bomb threat there was no shortage of theories as to how the situation might devolve. Some happily conjectured that a new 747 would be shuttled in at any moment and would ferry us to our destination unharmed. Others talked of a twenty-four hour layover and the prospect of a deluxe five star hotel on the Via Veneto. A US State Department official (his status got passed around along with the other rumours) looked particularly frazzled and I wondered if he wasn't the reason for the bomb threat in the first place.

Throughout all this, my own fantasy life was working at full throttle. What had dawned on me suddenly was how vulnerable we all were. The army guards had all been summoned to the plane. Not even the plainclothes security types with their concealed Berettas were in evidence. Perhaps they, too, had departed for the day or were rummaging through our poor plane. Essentially the lounge was unguarded, a perfect moment for terrorists to strike and do incalculable damage, in effect a lounge filled with many hundreds of people, four hundred from our plane alone, most of whom were in a state of nervous exhaustion.

What if the bomb were not on board but in this very lounge, concealed in one of the many overflowing rubbish bins scattered about the terminus or in one of the toilet stalls? Or even in the espresso machine? That May a Red Brigade explosive device concealed in a rubbish bin on a Brescia palazzo had indiscriminately killed eight people and wounded over a hundred. What if a bomb was now in the hands of one of the passengers? Eventually we'd be shuffled on board this or another aircraft and probably without any additional personal scrutiny. The possibilities for imagination to run riot were endless and my exhausted state left little room for reason to do its thing.

After another hour we saw some activity at the plane. The army vehicles that had encircled the craft left. The bus with the crew and stewardesses returned. Miraculously, two Pan Am officials appeared in the boarding lounge looking quite refreshed. Without a word of explanation, they shuffled us onto our buses and directed us to our plane. Truculently, guiltily, our hearts heavy with misgivings, we did what we were told and reboarded the plane. What choice did any of us have by this time? Everything we had brought to Europe with us and purchased over the summer was on board, including my own valued research notes for a project that I was working on at the time.

Misgivings aside, we occupied our seats. Happily, his stagey southern accent restored to normal authority, our pilot came on the intercom and reassured us that everything was in order. That the evacuation had been a safety exercise and nothing more. He made no mention of a bomb scare, words none of us ever wanted to hear again. Within minutes we were aloft and soaring over the blue Mediterranean, heading, uneventfully, we must have all thought and hoped, for New York. But then thirty minutes out came a new announcement. It was issued in the same meant to please Georgia accent or perhaps that accent revved up a notch. (It was amazing how much we read or wanted to read into that voice.) We were to make an unscheduled stop in Paris to replace a navigational computer. A navigational computer? Planes of this calibre usually had backup navigational systems on board. Were we running on the auxiliary system? The stop over would take an hour, during which we would be allowed to disembark the plane and enjoy the “wonderful” duty free shops at the new Charles de Gaulle airport. Once again we were told to leave all carry-on luggage on board.

*Duty free shops?* Was he serious? I’m sure not a person on board believed a word. Heads again turned confusedly and

imploringly towards their seat companions. What was going on? Not a word the captain had said rang true. Hadn't the bomb threat been made to Pan Am's Paris office? Now, suddenly, we were landing there.

At the airport we seemed to occupy a special berth, removed from the rest of the other terminals, though with access to the "wonderful" shops. Not having used the toilet on board I decided to use the one in the arrival lounge. It was then I noticed that I was under surveillance. Washing my hands at one of the sinks I realized that the person a few sinks away was one of the two security types I had identified at the Rome terminus and on our plane later. I hadn't seen the fellow since. Suddenly, there he was, ten feet away, grooming his hair in the mirror but clearly keeping an eye on me. He must have followed me into the toilet. I instantly put an end to my ablutions and sought out Nadja, who had found us a pair of seats overlooking our lovely plane, which, that moment, I swear, seemed to look back at us through the plate glass with a woeful, guilty look.

As the lounge filled with passengers returning from the shops, I was sure I noticed a few faces that I hadn't seen before. All three were very fit looking men in their late thirties, early forties, who had a particular look to them, a suspicious look. It met your own look head on. Spend your life looking suspiciously at the world and you begin to assume that look. It's a feral look, always on the alert to danger.

Security types, replacements for the others who had by then worn out their credibility, I was sure of it, and clearly they had me in their sights. Like trained dogs they shunted down the aisles of seated passengers sniffing out fear. As they passed our seats I tried not to look at them but, of course, I did look. Their stares locked onto my stare and could only be dislodged by my breaking the link. It was not that I was trying to be mischievous or bring trouble upon myself. It is simply that I don't like to be

stared at. If stared at I tend to stare back and not give an inch, a trait that has got me into some difficulties in my past. I begin to look guilty because, like a trapped Dostoevskian character, I actually start to feel guilty.

Later, on board, once we were underway and at cruising altitude, they appeared again, taking turns slowly raking the aisles, presumably searching for anything suspicious. Clearly, from the way each looked my way—the intensity and length of his stare—the trio had traded notes on the Arab looking man in his early thirties, in aisle 43, middle seat B, whose skin was burnt black and whose hair was a little longer and wilder than it should have been. The fellow with the distinctively menacing look. *Myself*.

Indeed, that moment I had one of those terrible Kafkaesque epiphanies one has in life, in which one accuses oneself of terrible things. I recalled the feature that *Time* magazine had published on terrorism that summer and the profiles and pictures of some of the more notorious terrorists, especially those of Arab descent who had taken their cause to the European stage. These terrorists, too, were idealistic-looking men in their early thirties. They, too, were dark skinned, their skin roasted by the Mediterranean sun. They, too, had long, unkempt hair and an agitated look. My God, I thought, in the trained eyes of these security types I probably fitted the profile of the terrorist more than anyone else on board. I could easily be one of them. Even dear Nadja, with her Italian background and naturally olive complexion, with her modest demeanour and Moroccan silk shawl, even she fitted the image of the typical terrorist's wife or female consort.

More frightening, I realized that we stood out on the plane. It was late August. Most of the people on our flight were middle-aged or older. The young couples who had visited Europe earlier in the summer with their families had returned

home in time for school. There were only a few couples as young as ourselves and none that I could recall or could see now in the cabin were as burned from a summer's sun or as nomadic looking as we were. Then, too, we were travelling under different names (we weren't married) and different passports; Nadja's American, mine Canadian, the passport of choice of terrorists all over the world.

Suddenly I had an image of myself as the most desperate and wanted looking individual on this plane of very respectable looking people, a total outsider if not possible terrorist, and I broke out into a real sweat. I had a sudden intuition into my own fear, fear not of the plane blowing apart but of some grave miscalculation on my part, of having pitted my innocence against an infinitely more complex and sinister evil, of having exposed myself to real danger as a result.

But that wasn't all.

At Paris a very suspicious looking character had boarded the plane and had been seated by the head stewardess in what was then an empty aisle seat next to mine. A woman had occupied the seat since leaving Rome but had either disembarked in Paris or been transferred to a seat elsewhere on the giant plane. The fellow got on late, just as the plane was about to close its doors, and made all kinds of apologies to stewardesses and passengers alike before bumptiously taking his seat beside me.

Breathlessly he told a strange story and without any prompting on our part. He had been waiting at the Paris airport for his plane, another Pan Am flight to New York, and, since the flight was delayed, decided to rush back into Paris to visit his bank. But his taxi got stuck in traffic and he missed his flight. He got to the boarding desk just as his plane was taking off.



“How terrible,” he emitted a sinister little laugh, “the worst kind of nightmare . . . missing your plane. But luckily Pan Am was able to get me a seat on this one.”

He let out his sinister little laugh as though even he didn't believe a word he said. I certainly did not. Why he had felt the need to tell us all this I didn't know. We were both preparing to enjoy an afternoon nap. The trip so far had taken seven hours. The vast Atlantic still lay ahead of us, another eight hours. Already we were mortgaged into another day. We would miss our connecting flight to upstate New York. Friends, who wouldn't know about our misadventure, would be waiting for us at Binghamton airport. We were feeling wasted and didn't wish to engage in fantastical small talk with this stranger.

Then he began to tell me about himself. He was Cairo born, with the swarthy facial colouring of his race, a resident of Montmartre in Paris, on a business junket to the United States. He made frequent trips to the United States, indeed all over the world. He spoke four languages.

He was what under normal circumstances I would have deemed a funny little man—the image of Hercule Poirot crossed my mind—but with a serious almost contrived intensity about his person. He was, I calculated, in his late forties. He was dressed in a richly flecked light tweed jacket, a garment much too heavy for this time of year, with an meticulously tied bow tie. Yet there wasn't a drop of perspiration on his skin.

He wanted to know about us. We looked like a happy couple. He could tell things about people by looking into their souls. He looked into my soul.

“I can see you are not a troubled man. Are you a troubled man?” He let out that sinister little laugh, as though mocking me or possibly himself.

When he heard I was a university professor he wanted to know what I taught.

“Ah modern European history. I, too, am a student of Modern European history. But you are not old enough to have lived through much of that history. *I ... on the other hand,*” but he failed to finish his thought.

“And you?” I asked, wanting to shine the spotlight on him and perhaps shut him up. “What do you do?”

“I, too, am a student of history, as I said. But, in my daytime job, I sell my other expertise to large businesses.”

“And what is your expertise?”

“Ah! I’m a kind of psychologist, you might say. Companies hire me when they have . . . let’s say . . . a problem with their workers. These are usually psychological issues deep below the surface which few business executives can spot but which can grievously affect a company’s productivity. I come in, interview workers, provide an assessment. My work is much in demand. There are a lot of dysfunctional companies out there. Yes . . . my talents are much in demand as you, an educated person, can appreciate.”

But when I asked him where he had studied he became evasive. He refused to answer, except to say “Cairo, my home city, land of the Pharaohs.” But no mention of university or program of study.

“You must know the work of Freud and Jung?” I asked. But he gave no indication that he knew either man’s writings. “Adler then? What about Bergler or Klein or Horney, they had much to say on the subject of dysfunctional personalities and problems with work.”

But he declined to take the bait, whether through ignorance or design on his part I couldn't tell—this was as far as I could delve into the man's psyche.

Now I pride myself on being a kind of worldly psychologist myself. I have a sixth sense. I notice people. I stare at them until they reveal their souls. I psychoanalyse terrorist types and terrorist threats at major airports. My paranoia has its negative but also its positive side. People don't often fool me. Perhaps because my paranoia had been given an exceptionally good workout that day my suspicious sense was on high alert. I didn't believe a word he said. I had the distinct feeling I was being conned but for the life of me couldn't fathom why.

Then, possibly feeling pressured by my queries, he changed subjects.

“There's been a bomb threat, I gather,” he said, a little too knowingly. “They told me about it at the boarding desk. Someone called the Paris Pan Am offices with the threat. The bomb supposedly in a passenger's carry-on luggage.”

And then, more ominously: “The news was troubling but I had no choice. I simply have to be in New York by tomorrow. There was no other flight.”

This was strange news indeed, more specific in its details than anything we had been told thus far. I played along, my curiosity peaked by what I deemed to be the other's highly strange behaviour and diversionary tactics. I decided to play along and see where the conversation lead.

“Yes, we were all evacuated from the plane at Rome. But I gather they found nothing. They would have gone through all the carry-on luggage. We were told to leave it on board.  
*Otherwise . . .*”

I coyly left the rest of the sentence to his imagination.

“Yes, otherwise . . . I hear what you mean. You wouldn’t be sitting here. But, of course, they wouldn’t have told you if they found something. They never do. These threats happen all the time, real and imaginary. I’ve been subjected to a number of them myself. Most aren’t real. *Some, however . . .*” and he left me to finish his thought.

Now my fantasy life had its most subtle morsel to feed on. Could this fellow be one of the bombers—aligned with the bombers, one of their scouts? His swarthy image fitted the profile. His birthplace was Cairo, home to numerous terrorists and terrorist acts the past few years. Could these disclosures be a ruse? Suddenly a lot of things began to make sense or indeed not make sense. The vacant seat beside me for one. A woman had been sitting there when we took off from Rome, as I said, but now seemed mysteriously to have moved elsewhere on the plane. The arrangement must have been made when we were stopped in Paris. When our friend got on he had been directed to the seat beside us by the chief stewardess. Then his story, the story of his life, the whole thing seemed fantastical . . . fabricated . . . a subterfuge . . . but to what end? To throw us off the scent? But why?

As though to pour gasoline on the flames of my suspicions, he said: “I was afraid they’d think it was me. You never know what people are thinking, are capable of . . .”

His eyes pierced me to the core when he said this. Did he know what I was thinking?

By now I was in a kind of suspension of disbelief—a prelude, I felt, to real panic. The events of the last seven hours had exhausted me. I hadn’t slept the night before. I never do when I am about to undertake a long trip. I was, in some semi-conscious reaches of myself, convinced this person was contemplating some dire act. I had nothing, really, to base this

on, except what he had said or not said, his suspicious behaviour, his tangled, implausible tale, but perhaps also some collective anxiety building about me on the plane, building almost physically about me on the plane. I decided then to set a trap for this stranger whoever he was, to engage him psychologically, as it were, and possibly expose or at least disarm him. The alternative was to sit here and do nothing, to let my fear fester, and that was untenable.

But then, as though to fan the flames of my paranoia, he followed with: “You see, it would be the perfect plan. I had left the airport after checking in my luggage. My luggage was on the other plane but I was not. But what if . . . *if* . . . something had really been planted on the other plane? Some device. What if it went off. What if the plane and everyone on board perished? They would check the manifest and see that a certain Egyptian had missed his flight. Suspicion would fall on me. My countrymen, some of my countrymen, alas, have committed heinous acts. Life is cheap in my part of the world. And all for supposedly noble aims. I would have absolutely no way of exonerating myself.”

He had done it again, filled out graphically in words my deepest suspicions and effectively disarmed me. And indeed wasn't this how such people operated? They revealed their plans, in a kind of hallucinatory allegory, as a way of affirming their innocence, almost as a perverse show of their normalcy, as a way of rescuing themselves, their deed, from history's condemnation.

All the while those cold Pharaoh like eyes scrutinized me, eyes of porphyry. Before I could say a thing he said: “I've been told I could play the part . . . of terrorist, I mean. Saharan complexion, a certain youthful idealism about my person. What do you think? They all look the same these terrorists. The same idealism shines through their eyes. Did you know many of them

were professors in their home country? Yes, trained to be professors, mostly history and philosophy. Very cultured men and women, for the most part. Ah yes, born idealists.”

Those eyes, predatory eyes, the eyes of the lynx or fox, seemed to want to pin me to my seat and I had to hold on for dear life. He stopped to see that he had my full attention before continuing. Most assuredly, he had my attention.

“Take yourself. Canadian, you say. I wouldn’t have guessed Canadian.

*Francais* from North Africa, perhaps. Some intermix of cultures in your features, tone of the skin. Yes. Christian *and* Islamic. Basilica *and* Mosque. I have such mixed blood in my own family. Did your mother have North African ancestors by any chance? Your father, perhaps? I would say you have north African blood in your lineage . . . and I’m seldom wrong in my instincts. You could pass for a terrorist yourself. Did you know that?”

An alarm bell look must have registered on my face that instant because he followed with: “Does my frankness disturb you? It shouldn’t. You are just an ordinary professor, I can tell, no terrorist. Appearances aren’t everything. You have to see beneath the skin. Some have a talent for this. I have a talent for this.”

My God, by now my body had broken out into a real sweat. He, on the other hand, wasn’t perspiring at all, despite the tweed jacket and tight-buttoned collar. He registered no discomfort at all. I would have reached in my pocket for a handkerchief, except that I feared drawing attention to myself, my discomfort, under the interrogator’s penetrating glare.

Was this how he operated in his work? The confrontational approach. Anyone who had anything to hide would fall victim to

such a technique. I felt I was a victim myself although clearly I had nothing to hide. This brutal frankness on his part had the unfortunate effect of blinding me to my circumstances. Especially to my suspicion that this character, his sudden unlikely appearance on this plane and his blunt, brusque manner—the manner of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor—had something to do with the bomb threat. Here he was pressing me on my guilt when I should be pressing him on his. Wasn’t this the most rudimentary of psychological tricks, of diversionary tactics, meant to disarm and unnerve the other, and totally and utterly effective in my case? Throughout all this Nadja slept the sleep of the angels, unperturbed by everything that had happened and impervious to my suspicions.

He began to regale me with terrorist acts, specific incidents from the past decade, and the “fanatical” right and left wing factions who had masterminded these actions, including the killing of nine Israeli athletes by Black September terrorists at the Munich Olympics just two years before.

“Nowhere in Europe,” he said, as though he were an expert on the subject, “is safe from these terrorists at present. Italy and France are particularly vulnerable. Their airports should be avoided at all costs. . . . Soon . . . *yes, very, very soon* . . . we’ll see even more brazen acts . . . acts with far greater consequences . . . fatalities numbering in the hundreds, possibly thousands. You’ll see. The propaganda effects will be enormous.”

But then, as though he’d exhausted himself with his own dirge, he appeared to lose wind, else his tolerance for disaster had given out. His eyes waxed over. He fell asleep. He actually fell asleep. Nadja was still deeply asleep, sailing across a sea of dreams. For a long while I sat there quaking, feeling as helpless as I have ever felt in my life, this new species of fear that I described earlier having dissolved by now into a kind of general numbness. I had reached a point of exhaustion where I didn’t

care about bombs or fanatical acts. A whole day of intense suspicion had wiped my senses clear of anything like bodily fear. What I dreaded now was a loss of my mind.

Eventually I, too, slept, but an unsatisfying sleep only a layer or two deep, raked with nagging dreams. In one of those dreams I found myself desperately searching the Paris airport for a toilet, whereupon I awoke with a pressingly urgent bladder. I had to waken my sleeping companion to get past him to the aisle.

In the toilet, I had the feeling that I was being observed, likely through the darkened glass mirror. And why not? The 747 was designed so that the area under the seating compartments was accessible in flight. It would be a simple matter to build one-way viewers into the toilets and to access them during flight. In an age when plane hijackings were commonplace it would be a reasonable thing to do. For wouldn't a hijacker likely use a toilet to unpack his weapon or explosive device?

When I returned to my seat Nadja and my Egyptian terrorist were awake, the latter engaging my companion in congenial conversation.

“Well, did you find any bombs?” he asked, when I was settled into my seat, followed by his sinister little laugh.

I refused to respond even with a smile.

He and Nadja were eating chocolates, chocolate coated pistachios.

“From one of Paris' finest chocolatiers,” he said by way of explanation, setting the chocolate box in my lap.

“Your dear travelling companion, *Nadja*”—he pronounced her name more melodiously than I had ever heard it pronounced before—“and I were talking about poisons, how easy it would



be for terrorists to poison a whole plane. No one refuses food on a plane. It would be so easy. It could be done with no one seeing you. A few grams of powder mixed with the sauce on the *bifteck* or dissolved in the *acqua minerale* . . .”

Oh dear God, not again! I couldn't go another round with this insane individual. Enough, I screamed inside, wanting to strangle this person whose mind was obsessed with destructive deeds. I declined the chocolates, pleading an upset stomach. In fact my whole being was in a state of severe nausea.

The unfazed, makeup perfect, Pan Am stewardesses, looking quite lovely and completely refreshed in their Dior mini-skirted uniforms, started serving what they described as dinner. It was delicious fare that could very well have been prepared by world class French chefs that morning. Needless to say, I ate the *Tournedos Rossini*, a filet of beef dressed with *foie gras*, truffles, and Madeira sauce, with misgivings. A choice of fine French wines was served gratis, in acknowledgement of our forbearance.

Then our terrorist succumbed once more to sleep, a sonorous sleep this time, one obviously not raked with bad dreams. In time, Nadja and I embraced a welcome sleep ourselves.

We were awakened by our captain.

In his stagey Rhett Butler accent he informed us that we were nearing our destination but due to congestion problems at Kennedy we needed “to park ourselves” in a holding pattern over Nantucket for another forty minutes. Thankfully, he had kept silent the last part of our journey to allow us to sleep. In giant circles, probably as wide as Cape Cod itself, we circled Massachusetts' off shore islands, our captain easing the throttle of the big beauty's engines back and forth, letting them whine softly and dangerously close to the stalling point at times, no

doubt to conserve fuel. He accomplished this in cloud cover that was as thick in places as the *Vichyssoise* served at dinner. I marvelled at the man's forbearance and at man's ability, generally, to do the things that he does for a living, especially in this age of suicidal maniacs all too willing to sacrifice one's life for extremist causes. Was it a good living—I wondered? Whose warm body would the man lovingly embrace that night before his own well earned sleep?

Not one of us, I think, could have landed that plane, such was our collective exhaustion by that time. Perhaps, up front, face to face with all those intricate knobs and dials on this the largest commercial airliner in the world the man had long ago grappled with his own fears and his own exhaustion. Or perhaps the intercom system was designed to screen out such things. No matter. Despite all that had happened I came away with a deep respect for this plane and its crew.

Then, at last, the wheels having touched down, more waiting, more commiseration, this time the captain describing “a ground parking problem,” which would require a further delay before disembarkation. Even now, there wasn't in that soothing Southern voice the slightest hint of fatigue or exasperation. The voice retained its composure until the very end.

As at Paris, we were shunted into a separate terminus, away from the rest of the airport traffic and subjected to rigorous questioning by immigration and customs officials. Nadja and I, in fact, were redirected to a private screening room and our luggage thoroughly searched. My suspicion quotient, which was maxed out by then, sprang alive momentarily. But luckily I restrained myself. I answered dutifully all the questions put to me, kept eye contact to a minimum, and my mouth shut. Nadja's gentle nudging with her foot helped.

But then something occurred, which, if it didn't entirely make sense of everything that had happened, revealed a penultimate or even final piece of the puzzle (or perhaps a more apt image would be 'nail in the coffin'). We and our luggage had been cleared and we were shuffling down the hallway towards the exit when a door opened on a room marked with a big red *Absolutely No Entry* sign. A stewardess, one familiar to us from our flight, stepped into the hallway wheeling her overnight case. In those few seconds the door was open I got a glimpse inside the room. Gathered about a table four men were seated, their faces visible to me. Three of them were the Interpol agents who had boarded our plane in Paris. Their faces were all too familiar to me. The fourth, however, was the real surprise. It was Hercule Poirot, our mysterious seat companion. The fellow was engaged congenially in conversation with the other three, punctuating, I could tell, his speech with his heinous little laugh. I saw them but fortunately they were too engrossed in conversation to notice me. At least, I don't think they noticed me.

Suddenly the events of this whole agonizing day took on a kind of bizarre lucidity. The bomb threat had been undoubtedly real. My suspicions that I had been singled out as possibly part of that threat were also real. My fear that I had been under scrutiny for the entire trip was equally valid, not an illusion on my part. Possibly the whole mad event, the threat, the unexplained and unscheduled stopover in Paris, the stranger seated next to us, his fantastical interrogation, all this and more had been linked to me, my age, my sunburned appearance, my innocent but equally guilty look. In the eyes of these security personnel I had become the bomber, the putative bomber, or the bomber's cohort, the most suspicious and probably guilty looking person on board. For the entire fifteen hour flight, I had strained the collective talents of the world's foremost security agency, Interpol—before, that is, their agent Hercule Poirot had

interrogated me, ascertained the truth, and apparently exonerated me.

But what if he had not? What if I had failed the test, failed the psychological evaluation—as, given my visibly agitated look and state of mind, I might well have done? Would another box of chocolates have been produced laced with strychnine? Would I have been rendered unconscious on a visit to the toilet? Would I, had I failed this test of my innocence, have been subjected to an ignominious fate?

Settled in our taxi for the short run to our hotel (Pan Am had booked us into the airport Hilton for the night), I turned to Nadja, dear sweet Nadja, whose innocence had shielded her from the day's bizarre events, who really knew nothing at all about what had happened or nearly happened, and said, with a touch but only a touch of irony in my voice: "Nadja, do I have an interesting story to tell you."

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