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CHRISTOPHER CASS 43, grew up on Long Island in Cold Spring Harbor, a Yankee fan from the day he was born. He lived in Manhattan for many years before moving to Los Angeles.

I had purchased a ticket weeks before to fly on September 13th from LA to New York on the red-eye. Well, the 11th happened. My sister, Nancy, was in the World Trade Center on the 4th floor. All air travel shut down for three or four days across America and my flight was cancelled.

I called the airlines and was unable to get through, but I live close enough to a hotel in Beverly Hills that had a satellite office for United Airlines. So I walked in, took a number and waited in line. It was a big crowd. Everybody was saying the same thing, "I was supposed to be on a flight - what's happening? When can I get outta here?" Finally, I met with the travel agent and she switched my flight to Monday night, the 17th.

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LAX is a messy airport - it's self-contained with all the terminals in this large horseshoe. Because of 9/11, authorities said, "Get here early for your flight. Two hours minimum for domestic, three hours for International." For the first time, they actually meant it. I had a ten o'clock flight, so I made sure to get there well before eight.

Unfortunately, no one was allowed to drive into LAX, even to drop off or pick up passengers. Authorities were telling everyone to park in, like, "Parking Lot Z" which was nowhere near LAX; it was, like, in Long Beach. So, my wife drove me out there and I joined this amazingly long line of people with luggage queuing up to get on shuttle busses that would take us to the terminals. I could tell then that I was in for a strange evening.

I get on the shuttle bus. I throw all my luggage on, we're packed in like sardines. The driver's on the microphone with that insanely pleasant voice saying, "Terminal One," and a few people get off. "Terminal Two," a few more people get off. "Terminal Three," one or two get off. And then: "Terminal Four," which is the international flight terminal. *Everybody* got off the shuttle! It was a mass exodus, except for me and one other guy. Everybody who got off at Terminal Four looked like foreigners and I got the distinct impression that they were all eager as hell to get out of America.

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Now fast forward a bit: I'm in the United terminal to check in. I go up to the counter, hand over my ticket and passport. I ask the woman if there's any way I can get a window seat.

She rapidly strikes her keyboard, glances at the screen, and says, "Everything's all booked up, but ask the attendant at the gate, there'll probably be cancellations. We might be able to fit you in."

That day, I was concerned with security - obviously. So while I'm at the counter, I ask the woman specifically, "Look, I've got this laptop I'm gonna carry on. Is that okay? Should I put it in my bags?" She says, "No, don't worry about it." And I think, "Fine, fine." I leave the United counter and head toward the security checkpoint.

I queue into the metal detector line which is long and slow. Everyone's going through one security checkpoint; there's only one conveyor belt for luggage, one metal detector. I'm fidgeting; I can sense that everyone's getting antsy. There's an Arab-looking man in line and it's impossible not to notice him under the circumstances. And this woman with a baby stroller turns to me and decides at that moment to say, for whatever reason, in a voice loud enough to carry four or five people in front, "I'm going to Baltimore and I hope *that* guys' not on my flight!"

She made no bones about it; she didn't even try to clean it up. Didn't whisper it under her breath, it was like, "To hell with being PC,¹² this is how I feel, so this is what I'm saying." I ignored her. Chose not to engage in conversation, pretended I was distracted with my own thoughts. Doing the half-polite, Gee-Id-rather-not-talk-to-you-right-now sort of airport body language. I didn't know how to deal with her and I didn't want to. What she said made me sad. Ugh! The Ugly American.

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Then I get to the security checkpoint. I throw my laptop, backpack and fanny pack up on the belt. I usually carry a little Swiss Army knife on my key chain, but I'd already taken that off because I'd heard that nothing even vaguely sharp would be allowed on board. Not wanting to get hassled over a two-inch pocket knife, I packed it in my luggage.

I noticed that every item going through the x-ray machine stopped, backed up, and then went on through again. Everybody's stuff: forwards, backwards, forwards again. More security people than I'd ever seen at an airport checkpoint, too. U.S. Marshals in blue windbreakers with yellow, bold lettering on the back. LAPD. LA Airport Transr Cops. National Guardsmen. The works. A police state.

¹²PC - "Politically Correct," a modern sociological phenomena whereby people phrase their responses to certain situations in a way that could not possibly offend any societal group.

My laptop went through and I was prepared to deal with some questions. The *st-could-you-sep-over-here, turn-your-computer-on-please* deal. What did I have in that case? The computer. Lots of phone cord for the modem. An extra battery for my cell phone. A tiny travel alarm clock. Couple of camera lenses, film canisters. What I supposed would look like the makings of a small bomb through an x-ray machine.

But the security guys slipped the computer case through the machine once. Twice. The attendant nodded to me, I grabbed the case and was on my way. I took about three steps past all these men wearing uniforms and guns, and I thought, "Are we really any safer than we were a week ago?"

I was struck with this insane urge to just call one of these armed guards and say, "Look, I just breezed on through here and nobody checked anything. What the hell is going on?"

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It's nine o'clock now and I walk up to the gate counter because I wanted to get that window seat. This woman, whom I'll call United Employee Number One, takes my boarding pass and types my name into the computer. I tell her how I'd prefer the window. She says, "We're gonna start boarding in about 25 minutes. Why don't you come back and I'll see what I can do for you then? I'll hold onto your boarding pass in the meantime."

25 minutes later, I'm back at my gate and United Employee Number One is nowhere to be seen. So I go up to the counter, now manned by United Employee Number Two, and I explain how Number One has my boarding pass, and I want a window seat and blah blah blah. Says Number Two, "We're not boarding just yet. She'll be back. I'll keep an eye out for you."

Off I go to find a chair and sit down amidst this crowd of people who are all . . . watching everyone else. Everyone sitting each other up. Who are you? Why are *you* flying on this flight? *My* flight? This sense of vigilance. We had been in shock all week. We were all a little paranoid.

I *did* notice at that point that there were two or three Arab-looking guys. And I *noticed* that I noticed them, you know? I thought, God, now I'm like that woman with the stroller. But I just couldn't help it. I noticed and I felt bad for it. But I noticed just the same.

Then, the announcement comes over the speakers. "Sorry, we're experiencing a slight delay. The pilot is having a staff meeting with the crew. There are five flight attendants on this flight. Three of them have checked in and two are still going through the security checkpoint

and they're on the way up. We apologize."

I thought, "That's the most information I've ever heard an airline disclose about a flight delay ever."

When the two flight attendants came rushing down the concourse, it was a validation. Ah! They were telling the truth. It's a nice feeling when the airlines tell the truth.

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Now the passengers are starting to line up at the gate. I go back up to the counter to meet with United Employee Number Three, an older woman with a nicer uniform and a bright red scarf. She appeared to be some sort of senior United official. And I strike up a conversation with her. "I gave my boarding pass to a woman who used to be here, she told me not to worry. I was trying to get a window seat."

Number Three finds my boarding pass and says, "Yes, there will be a window seat available. I'll change it for you." By now, we are over 40 minutes late. It's ten o'clock and we haven't even gotten on the plane. More PA announcements: "We're sorry, we're sorry."

Finally, they call my trunk of rows and I get on the plane with my laptop and my backpack.

Now prior to going to the airport, I had - for whatever reason - pulled a note card out of my drawer at home and scribbled a few lines to the crew of the flight I was going to be on. "Dear Crew, I know we've all had this horrendous week and I just wanted to share my sympathies with you, your company and your fellow workers. This is a tragedy of epic proportions, blah blah blah . . ." Just a sympathy note to let them know that some passengers care about them and what they do for a living.

I had never written a note like that before in my life. I just wanted them to know that they're appreciated. We don't know what happened to that one plane that crashed in Pennsylvania but it could very well have been that the crew and passengers worked together to stop any further disaster from happening.

I'm walking down through the gangway to get on and as soon as I hit the threshold of the airplane, here are these two flight attendants who are all smiles. "Welcome! Welcome! Hello!" And the first one I saw, I just reached in my pocket and showed the envelope into her hands. I barely even made eye contact with her, I just mumbled, "This is for you." And then I lugged my bag up on my shoulder and walked off down the aisle. Didn't want to make a big production out of it.

I go to my seat, look down the fuselage of the plane and there is, well, for lack of a better word, there's "Abdul" sitting in an aisle seat.

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I don't even know what the proper phrase is. *A Middle Eastern man? An Arab-looking guy?* He had olive skin, brown eyes, black hair, and a moustache. Fairly nondescript, but most definitely of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern origin.

I did the *airplane nod* the one that says, "Hi, I'm going to be living in that seat right there, you need to get out so that I can get in." He understood. He stood up right away, I threw my laptop in the overhead, scooted into the row, and put my bag under the seat. I pulled my newspaper out and I thanked him and he sat back down, started fidgeting with the seat belt, and there's elbows flying, and I'm folding the paper, but before I begin to even read the paper . . .

. . . And I never do this. I mean I *don't talk to anyone on airplanes*. But I thought about it for a long moment and said, "So. How was your week?"

* * *

This thought hit me a few days after the flight: I was doing something that people were frightened to do. Fly to New York. Go to Ground Zero.

I had to admit I'd been making calculations in my head, like, "okay, if I'm taking a red-eye flight and we're loaded with 60,000 pounds of jet fuel and were leaving Los Angeles, the terrorists are not going to crash us in New York because there's not going to be any fuel on the plane by the time we get there. No fuel means no explosion, so they're going to crash here in L.A. They obviously would want a flight they knew had less passengers so there wouldn't be any more Shanksville incidents. But hang on a minute. My flight is *fall* . . ."

This was the kind of shit floating through my head.

* * *

"So. How was your week?"

He looks at me and says, "Fine."

It was just one word. A cold delivery. It felt like after the word *fine* left his mouth a big white sheet of cardboard came up that read, THAT'S IT THAT'S DONE. Then I thought, "Cut the guy some slack, huh? If it wasn't this particular week, if anyone had asked me the same

question two weeks earlier, I would have said, 'fine' too." So I put my newspaper up in front of me and went about my business.

But then I had this thought right after that. How can you just say "fine?" How can anyone just say "fine" after the week that just happened? September 11th was . . . it was a Kennedy moment. Where were you when JFK was shot? Everyone knows where they were when John Lennon was killed. Everyone knows where they were when the Space Shuttle blew. It's a Kennedy moment, a Pearl Harbor moment.

I just didn't expect to get *fine* and then have him drop it so suddenly. So I *pretended* to read my paper. But now I can't help but preoccupy myself. "Why did he say 'fine?' What does he *really* want to say?" And now I'm looking out of the corner of my eye, thinking, "Wow, he *really* does look like an Arab."

I noticed that there weren't any airline magazines in the front pocket of my seat. I found our later there'd been a picture inside the magazine showing the World Trade Center so United had decided to pull them.

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Now it's 20 minutes after ten and we're still at the gate. The flight attendants have run down the aisles, taken the head count, and whacked down the doors to the overhead compartments. We're all ready to go, but now I'm having these crazy thoughts:

"If this guy is a terrorist, what do I do? I've just put my rinky-dink, little Swiss Army knife in my bag, it's packed up and stowed below. I've got this copy of the LA Times, I could roll it up and hit him with the Sports Section. I've got a blanket and a pillow. I could throw the blanket over his head."

And then I'm thinking, "Why am I having these thoughts? He's just a passenger on a plane. No different from me."

But for these 10 or 15 minutes that we're waiting, I got a little wigged out. Abdul crossed his leg and he had the right-foot-leg-up going. His right leg crossed over his left, just barely sticking out in the aisle. This was all registering.

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About another five or ten minutes went by. Then, I saw a flight attendant come down my aisle. She stops right in front of where Abdul and I are sitting. She hunkers down, looks at us and says, "I'm sorry to do this, gentlemen, but you fit a profile and the captain would

like to see you both."

My mouth is wide open. "Me?" I say, almost audibly choking on the idea.

And she's smiling. Still smiling the whole time. "Yes, if you could just follow me?"

Neither one of us did anything for a dramatic bear. Then, I unbuckled my seat belt and Abdul unbuckled his. He stood up. He wasn't in any hurry to go. I, on the other hand, can't wait to find out what's going on. *I fit a profile!*¹⁴ I've got my American passport out -

I thought, "What is it? My goatee?" But then I thought: "Aha! The card! Someone gave the flight attendant my card and they must have thought, 'He's out of his head! He's the good cop, Abdul's the bad cop! He's too nice. Why did you give us this card, sir? Let's question him!'"

Well, I got up. Abdul got up. He's walking in front of me, right up ahead of me, and every head on the plane is looking at us. I have my passport and I have my California driver's license, gathering it all out of my little fanny pack. I'm thinking, "Okay, I know I'm not in any kind of trouble. If nothing else, I will have a good story to tell when I get off the plane." But I was insanely curious. And it wasn't even an option to protest.

I thought we were going to the cockpit. We didn't. We deboarded the plane on the gangway. I'm thinking, "Oh, wow, I didn't expect to leave the actual airplane. Now aren't there some sort of merchant marine laws that go into affect when you get on and off a plane?" I had this little moment of "what-are-my-rights?" I step out and there's a small crowd of United employees standing around.

There's the captain and a U.S. Marshal. Other United security guys with their blue blazers and then there's the two flight attendants, hovering by the door, but still inside the plane. And the two other Arab guys are out there. Three Arab-looking gentlemen, and me.

* * *

The captain is engaged with the other two Arab guys. His posture is rigid. He's shaking his head back and forth and back and forth, holding passports in his hand. It's not a pleasant look on his face. It's like he's got bad gas. He's breathing a couple of deep breaths. I saw him

¹⁴At this point it's probably important to describe Christopher Cass as a Caucasian male with brown hair, blue eyes who was, at the time, wearing a goatee. On the day of the flight, he was dressed casually in a jacket, denim shirt, tie, and khaki pants.

hand the documents back to the two Arab guys. Then he turns to Abdul and says, "You've probably been getting this all week and I apologize, but I need to see some identification."

Abdul pulled out a driver's license-looking piece of ID. I started getting tunnel vision, I couldn't focus on anything but my pounding heart. I started getting sweaty. What am I nervous about? Why is my adrenaline running?

I remember hearing one of the blue coats say, "Do you have anything else? Where are you from? Where are you going?" The captain was now rolling his eyes, and shaking his head. I kept repeating this inner monologue of, "I don't want to be here. I don't want to have anything to do with this." Meantime, everyone else is just watching.

The pilot, looking like he's finished with Abdul, looks up at me. I look at him - then past his shoulder. And I see another person who's been standing there the whole time. It's the Senior United Woman with the red scarf, standing behind him five feet away. I make eye contact with her; her eyes bug wide open, her mouth drops, and she mouths, "What are you doing here?"

I shrugged my shoulders and mouted back, "I don't know." And the captain starts to walk toward me, but the Senior United Woman intercepts him. She grabbed him by the bicep, grabbed me by the bicep and huddled the three of us off to the side. Our heads were really close together and she said to the captain, "Steve, this is Mister Cass. He's fine. We talked a little while back. His sister was in the World Trade Center and he's going to New York to see her. I put him in that seat 20 minutes ago."

The captain looks at my passport, then at me, and says, "Well, aren't you traveling with this guy?"

"Noooooooo," I guffaw.

He looks back at Abdul and asks, "Are you traveling with him?" Abdul looks at me, then back at the Captain, and shakes his head, "no."

The captain says to me, "I'm really very sorry. I assumed you were traveling with him. These other two gentlemen are traveling together. I'm very, very sorry. Please accept my apologies. You can go back to your seat."

My pulse rate is peaking by now. The lovely United employee is holding onto me with both arms saying, "I'm sorry. So sorry. Please. Enjoy your flight."

I'm genuinely sincere when I look at both of them and say, "It's fine. Really." And I walked back into the plane.

* * *

The first person I saw was the flight attendant whom I'd handed the card to. I looked at her and said, "Is this because I gave you a card?"

She gasped, "Oh, *you're* Mister Cass. I'm so sorry. We loved your card! I've passed it around to the entire crew - we've all read it. So-and-so cried when she read it. They took *you* off the plane! Oh my God, please!" She grabbed her co-flight attendant and said, "This is the guy that wrote us the card." Suddenly everyone wanted to kiss me.

Well, I walked back down the long aisle and again, every head is watching me, everyone's eyes saying, "What happened?" I'm not in my seat for one beat when two heads, the people sitting in front of me, pop up over the chair. And the guy behind me sticks his head up over my seat. And it's like an F.F. Hurton commercial. The guy down the aisle is sticking his ear out trying to hear what I'm going to say. I abbreviate my experience to them by saying, "I'm not sure, but it's pretty serious."

About 10 or 15 more minutes go by. Two flight attendants come down and sit in Abdul's vacant seat and put their hands on my arm. "We're sorry, please accept our apologies, we're all under a lot of pressure."

Two other flight attendants walk quickly down both aisles. One stops at my seat, the other stops where the other two Arab guys were sitting toward the back of the plane. I see the overhead bin open up over me; I see the other two flight attendants on the other side open the compartment over the other guys' seats. They're rummaging through stuff, then *whooosh*, she takes the bags right off the plane.

We're past 11 o'clock now, over an hour late. The pilot gets on the PA and says, "We're taking off in a few minutes. We're just removing some luggage from down below."

And then? Applause. Not a standing ovation, but there was quite a reaction.

My emotions were mixed. I'm as angry as the next person about what happened on the 11th, but want to run around killing all Arabs, all Muslims, because that's not what it's about. But clearly what had just happened was a "let's-intern-the-Japanese" move. It was clear we were gonna pigeonhole these people, at least this week we were. The political and moral machinery inside my head was grinding and not grinding easily. It was confusing. It

was awkward.

* * *

We took off. And by the time we'd been in the air an hour, every single flight attendant on the plane had come by my seat to apologize.

There was a young black woman sitting one row behind me in the center section. She was clearly in view of what had happened, but not within earshot. At some point in the flight she got out of her seat and sat down next to me.

"Hey, what happened?" she asked.

There was an older black couple sitting nearby who looked to be in their seventies, at least. Very nicely dressed, middle class, knowledgeable. You didn't have to say what we were all feeling, you could feel it. After the 11th, there was this sort of unspoken communal pain among people. We were all in tune with some sort of human wavelength that allowed us all to communicate, practically telepathy. Everyone and everything was heightened.

The young black woman said, "Boy, I'm so relieved they took those guys off the plane." And she got up and walked away.

A split-second later I wondered: would she have been saying that 40 years ago if a black person had been escorted off? This woman who was barely in her thirties had missed the hardcore civil rights movement, but here she was, certainly benefiting from it.

I kept trying to look at the older black couple trying to read what they were thinking of all this. But they kept to themselves and never looked over. I just wanted to get a feeling, some sort of expression. But they didn't share it with me. I know this: a black man in his seventies has felt discrimination in this country. I was just hoping that there would be some wisdom in that man's face that I could learn from. But nothing came. §