

The Langoliers

ONE PAST MIDNIGHT:

A note on 'The Langoliers'

Stories come at different times and places for me - in the car, in the shower, while walking, even while standing

around at parties. On a couple of occasions, stories have come to me in dreams. But it's very rare for me to write

one as soon as the idea comes, and I don't keep an 'idea notebook.' Not writing ideas down is an exercise in self-preservation. I get a lot of them, but only a small percentage are any good, so I tuck them all into a kind of mental

file. The bad ones eventually self-destruct in there, like the tape from Control at the beginning of every Mission:

Impossible episode. The good ones don't do that. Every now and then, when I open the file drawer to peek at

what's left inside, this small handful of ideas looks up at me, each with its own bright central image.

With 'The Langoliers,' that image was of a woman pressing her hand over a crack in the wall of a commercial

jetliner.

It did no good to tell myself I knew very little about commercial aircraft; I did exactly that, but the image was

there every time I opened the file cabinet to dump in another idea, nevertheless. It got so I could even smell that

woman's perfume (it was L'Envoi), see her green eyes, and hear her rapid, frightened breathing.

One night, while I was lying in bed, on the edge of sleep, I realized this woman was a ghost.

I remember sitting up, swinging my feet out onto the floor, and turning on the light. I sat that way for a little

while, not thinking about much of anything ... at least on top. Underneath, however, the guy who really runs this

job for me was busy clearing his work-space and getting ready to start up all his machines again. The next day, I -

or he - began writing this story. It took about a month, and it came the most easily of all the stories in this book,

layering itself sweetly and naturally as it went along. Once in awhile both stories and babies arrive in the world

almost without labor pains, and this story was like that. Because it had an apocalyptic feel similar to an earlier

novella of mine called 'The Mist,' I headed each chapter in the same old-fashioned, rococo way. I came out of this

one feeling almost as good about it as I did going in ... a rare occurrence.

I'm a lazy researcher, but I tried very hard to do my homework this time.
Three pilots - Michael Russo, Frank

Soares, and Douglas Damon - helped me to get my facts straight and keep
them straight. They were real sports,

once I promised not to break anything.

Have I gotten everything right? I doubt it. Not even the great Daniel Defoe
did that; in Robinson Crusoe, our hero

strips naked, swims out to the ship he has recently escaped ... and then fills
up his pockets with items he will need

to stay alive on his desert island. And then there is the novel (title and
author will be mercifully omitted here)

about the New York subway system where the writer apparently mistook
the motormen's cubicles for public

toilets.

My standard caveat goes like this: for what I got right, thank Messrs Russo,
Soares, and Damon. For what I got

wrong, blame me. Nor is the statement one of hollow politeness. Factual
mistakes usually result from a failure to

ask the right question and not from erroneous information. I have taken a
liberty or two with the airplane you will

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shortly be entering; these liberties are small, and seemed necessary to the course of the tale.

Well, that's enough out of me; step aboard.

Let's fly the unfriendly skies.

CHAPTER 1

Bad News for Captain Engle. The Little Blind

Girl. The Lady's Scent. The Dalton Gang

Arrives in Tombstone. The Strange

Plight of Flight 29.

1

Brian Engle rolled the American Pride LIOII to a stop at Gate 22 and flicked off the FASTEN SEATBELT light

at exactly 10:14 P.M. He let a long sigh hiss through his teeth and unfastened his shoulder harness.

He could not remember the last time he had been so relieved - and so tired - at the end of a flight. He had a nasty,

pounding headache, and his plans for the evening were firmly set. No drink in the pilots' lounge, no dinner, not

even a bath when he got back to Westwood. He intended to fall into bed and sleep for fourteen hours.

American Pride's Flight 7 - Flagship Service from Tokyo to Los Angeles - had been delayed first by strong

headwinds and then by typical congestion at LAX ... which was, Engle thought, arguably America's worst

airport, if you left out Logan in Boston. To make matters worse, a pressurization problem had developed during

the latter part of the flight. Minor at first, it had gradually worsened until it was scary. It had almost gotten to the

point where a blowout and explosive decompression could have occurred ... and had mercifully grown no worse.

Sometimes such problems suddenly and mysteriously stabilized themselves, and that was what had happened this

time. The passengers now disembarking just behind the control cabin had not the slightest idea how close they

had come to being people pated on tonight's flight from Tokyo, but Brian knew ... and it had given him a

whammer of a headache.

'This bitch goes right into diagnostic from here,' he told his co-pilot. 'They know it's coming and what the

problem is, right?'

The co-pilot nodded. 'They don't like it, but they know.'

'I don't give a shit what they like and what they don't like, Danny. We came close tonight.'

Danny Keene nodded. He knew they had.

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Brian sighed and rubbed a hand up and down the back of his neck. His head ached like a bad tooth. 'Maybe I'm getting too old for this business.'

That was, of course, the sort of thing anyone said about his job from time to time, particularly at the end of a bad shift, and Brian knew damned well he wasn't too old for the job - at forty-three, he was just entering prime time for airline pilots. Nevertheless, tonight he almost believed it. God, he was tired.

There was a knock at the compartment door; Steve Searles, the navigator, turned in his seat and opened it without

standing up. A man in a green American Pride blazer was standing there. He looked like a gate agent, but Brian

knew he wasn't. It was John (or maybe it was James) Deegan, Deputy Chief of Operations for American Pride at

LAX.

'Captain Engle?'

‘Yes?’ An internal set of defenses went up, and his headache flared. His first thought, born not of logic but of

strain and weariness, was that they were going to try and pin responsibility for the leaky aircraft on him.

Paranoid, of course, but he was in a paranoid frame of mind.

‘I’m afraid I have some bad news for you, Captain.’

‘Is this about the leak?’ Brian’s voice was too sharp, and a few of the disembarking passengers glanced around,

but it was too late to do anything about that now.

Deegan was shaking his head. ‘It’s your wife, Captain Engle.’

For a moment Brian didn’t have the foggiest notion what the man was talking about and could only stand there,

gaping at him and feeling exquisitely stupid. Then the penny dropped. He meant Anne, of course.

‘She’s my ex-wife. We were divorced eighteen months ago. What about her?’

‘There’s been an accident,’ Deegan said. ‘Perhaps you’d better come up to the office.’

Brian looked at him curiously. After the last three long, tense hours, all of this seemed strangely unreal. He

resisted an urge to tell Deegan that if this was some sort of Candid Camera bullshit, he could go fuck himself.

But of course it wasn’t. Airline brass weren’t into pranks and games, especially at the expense of pilots who had

just come very close to having nasty midair mishaps.

‘What about Anne?’ Brian heard himself asking again, this time in a softer voice. He was aware that his co-pilot

was looking at him with cautious sympathy. ‘Is she all right?’

Deegan looked down at his shiny shoes and Brian knew that the news was very bad indeed, that Anne was a lot

more than not all right. Knew, but found it impossible to believe. Anne was only thirty-four, healthy, and careful

in her habits. He had also thought on more than one occasion that she was the only completely sane driver in the

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