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SPORK PRESS

Notes from the Jumpseat by David Ewald

Pan Am Flight 759

Rain. A swamp. No: a bayou. Born on the bayou. Tom Cruise's face, The Homeless Pilgrims. But that's not right either. I'm still learning about this one. Thunderheads forming. The pilot complaining on the CVR of having to wait for the catering to be brought on board, otherwise they could take off before the storm really hit. Killed by the need for convenience, that routine, the protocol of air travel that would not last. Microbursts and windshear, the unknown. It had happened before and would happen again before. I'm on a need to know basis here. Three years old, almost four, living in Nevada at the time. An overweight cop on screen in the charred aftermath drawling out what they knew, what would later be confirmed. A Friday. Years later I would watch a similar-looking Louisiana state trooper in two back-to-back James Bond movies, *Live and Let Die* and *The Man with the Golden Gun*, the former more successful than the latter, but the latter containing a scene in which the bumbling yokel cop helps Bond perform an impressive 360-degree flip in his vehicle. Vietnam, Saigon, the helicopter that didn't crash. Bond was more my father than he. It couldn't have been Joe Cocker with "Up Where We Belong" but did it happen in time to hear Jeffrey Osborne's "On the Wings of Love"? All 145 on board, 8 on the ground. Four and five equal nine, the final number of Flight 759. Take the one away from eight, a lucky

number, I believe, in some Asian cultures, and you have seven, the alpha number. I watched alone. My father was not home often. He was in the air a lot, leaving traces of himself for others to see.

Pan Am Flight 103

Not Nevada but close, one state over to the west. Ten years old and the video game king. Played a lot of Rad Racer but wouldn't go near a flight simulator. Parents gone by this time. They'd taken another flight, a charter plane that crashed near Sedona a few months before Pan Am Flight 103 and a week after my tenth birthday. For my father, for a change, it wasn't business. I went to the funeral along with my new parents, my mother's sister and her husband, the tin-pusher. I'd seen both *Live and Let Die* and *The Man with the Golden Gun* by then. I remember thinking my parents' plane should have gotten more attention, a higher gross. Why did the big planes get the highest grosses? I remember feeling angry when Pan Am Flight 103 happened. Bomb in the cassette-corder, Libya, a Delillo novel on board, a hit song on the minds of those college kids returning home. Christmastime was there, floating all around in the air circulated through vents, magic stardust and memories. Smooth sailing through the cold gentle night. A Wednesday. The last movie my father and I saw together was a bad one, one my mother didn't want me to see: *7*. I remember nothing but the violence. Steven Seagal wouldn't die in a plane crash. Presents and purchases, gifts from bonny olde England in the cargo hold along with the tape that contained no song. And two decades later an essay published in my college alumni magazine, a piece by a classmate of one of several of the student-victims, those New Yorkers who didn't live to see *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Nineteen years later a movie would be released set at this time, the end of 1988, in New York, destination of Clipper Maid of the Seas, and in this movie two brothers lose a father to the Russian mafia. The movie made me sadder than the news of Pan Am Flight 103, all 259 on board, 11 on ground. Replace the 2 with a 7 and you have the number of the earlier Pan Am flight. One and one is two, five and nine equal fourteen, double the seven. News claims lives. For years I refused to acknowledge it. I've since seen the manifest and been inundated with the manifesto. News claims lives.

Swissair Flight 111

That's three. In San Francisco, nearing thirty, nearly a decade after the Swissair disaster, I taught English language to a class of mostly Swiss students. I played for them a number of Buddy Holly hits, including "That'll Be the Day", followed by Don McLean's "American Pie". I explained what "the day the music died" meant. They looked at me with alarm. I assured them that aviation safety had greatly improved since 1959. And 1998, the year of Denise Richards in *Wild Things* and the year I, age twenty, finally got some. How could a heart float on the ocean unless it was the heart of Jesus Christ himself? I thought of saying to my second mother, just to see her reaction. The day after the tragedy my second father told me he'd lost someone on that flight. "Who?" I asked. "Everyone," he said. My second mother bade me

kneel before the cross on the wall and demanded I say a prayer for the passengers and crew. I couldn't. Two hundred twenty-nine on board, no one in the ocean unless you count the fish and maybe a whale. I was so close to losing it, the unchecked voids of my father's life, what might never be known in the space outside his world. Instead of praying I went to the computer. I tried to find out everything I could about the passengers and crew. Another Wednesday night, calm and clear. When, in my third hour of searching, my second father asked what I was doing, I told him and he warned me not to go any further. It's not healthy, he said. I remember my father giving a similar warning, before all the names, those lives were there for the taking.

PSA Flight 182

Didn't fully look into this one until after I'd moved from San Diego. Don't think I ever passed through the intersection of Dwight and Nile, site of the crash's initial impact in North Park. One month six days old at the time. My high school crush, future graduate of San Diego State, was born eleven days after the tragedy. I would look at her from afar. And then it happened between us, but later, after I'd left my second parents' home and was safely ensconced in college life, away from airports and their demands. I'd like to think he would have been proud, my father, the disco king, with the way it turned out. I'd like to think all the sons and daughters of the passengers on that flight were eventually proud. Even those of the pilots. The fathers. One hundred forty-four on board, seven on ground. Manic Monday. Captain James Edward McFeron died three days before what would have been his forty-third birthday. I'd like to think he would have celebrated with his wife and four children. I'd like to think First Officer Robert E. Fox and Flight Engineer Martin J. Wahne had someone to go home to. I hope they all had someone to go home to. Styrofoam boxes replaced with paper wrappers. A bright shiny McDonald's morning over San Diego, a Mayor McCheese kind of morning. All aboard. Add the 8 and 2 and you have 10, but take away the 1 and you have 9, the omega number of Pan Am '82. When has 8 ever been lucky? My second father has worked at San Diego International for close to thirty years now. Growing up I would hear him say "Close call again today" at the dinner table. Then I would think of my parents' plane, which had no other plane in sight.

PSA Flight 1771

I think about this one because of my father, and how my father fired people for a living. He hired people too, but he enjoyed firing them more. I think about him on that flight, the cursed airline, victim of a disgruntled employee and the problem of history without preemptive measures taken. A palindrome number, either way equaling 8 if added. Eighty-eight Keys. Subtract and you have 66, the devil's year according to my second mother, the route of American evil. A Wednesday, again. Happy cows graze in California. Deportees. I think about the song he would have been listening to before boarding the flight.

December of 1987, what hit was that, I was nine years old and already zoned out. I think about the sun through the windows slanting across the laps as the plane tilts into its final dive. Climactic scene of 1983's *Octopussy* in which the main Bond villain crashes his small plane into a mountain. All time high all right. I remember the smell of cologne on his neck, the small plane they boarded, but in my confusion I get the flights mixed up, was he on that one and not this one, he took so many, and where was she, why did she have to fly with him that day and no other, and why did she not fight back? James, just James. Stirred far more than shaken, I'm happy to say. James E. McFeron outlived his father by twenty years. It's sometimes difficult to think that the disgruntled David Burke had a father, but not so difficult to think of Raymond F. Thomson as mine. He was strong for the company, strong for himself, and when the gun was brandished I'd like to think he knew what he was doing, even then.

Oh, 43. And maybe a cow or two.

Air Florida Flight 90

My greatest joy is landing—and leaving the airport. To think the last place on earth they witnessed was a non-place. Seventy-eight people died in this crash, but how many of them were men? How many were fathers? How many had fathers still alive? “You’re never going to get me at the controls of a commercial airliner,” my second father said to me in the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, just after the explosion of TWA Flight 800. “To have all those people behind you, counting on you...” “Coward,” I said. “You sit back and play it safe. Stare at blips. It’s like a game to you.” “It’s no game,” he said. “If you were near any of this, you’d understand.” I knew what he’d meant, but he thought I took it the wrong way and I let him believe that. In my room I watched the cross on the wall as if it would crawl away. I wanted to be there for that. I wanted to be there to watch him go. To think that the control tower maybe isn’t so safe, *Top Gun*, buzz buzz by, and that the screen could explode the way it did in Chicago, killing a video game freaky kid I’d heard about when I was young. Think about the passengers of Air Florida Flight 90 seated in the non-place, eating McDonald’s from Styrofoam containers. They see the snow falling heavily outside, across the wide windows. Some survivors of this one. Are you kidding me? Another Wednesday? Seventy-four plus four equals ’78, the year of my birth. And to think: I still haven’t been to Florida.

Colgan Air Flight 3407

An even 50, 49 on board and one in a house, asleep. Add the first two numbers and we have 7, same as the omega number, and it’s a 707, baby. Stalled. We’re down. [screams]. In Buffalo, in Buffalo....Were any of them aware of Czolgosz and his act, over a hundred years earlier? Czolgosz didn’t live to see the airplane. What would he have thought if he had? My work, for this. Flags at half-mast, sunny outside but snow on the ground, again. A Thursday this time, and a female first officer. Passing through, years

before this one, I stopped at the border after having just visited Niagara Falls, and in that post-9/11 environment I shouted a bit too loud something to a friend I was traveling with, and it could have been over, the assault rifles raised and the fingers jumpy on the triggers. Upon graduating high school my mother worked as a flight attendant for a regional carrier that had a perfect track record. She lasted less than a year. The week after she quit, the airline's record was blemished by an accident that claimed the lives of most but not all the passengers and crew on board. I remember my father telling me this when I was just shy of nine. My mother might not be here today. I might not be here today. The day before, my mother had taken me behind a closed door and explained sex to me. "Why are you telling me this?" I said to her. I did not say the same thing to my father.

United Airlines Flight 585

Unfortunate: this one happened the same day as the Rodney King beating. To think that millions upon millions of people, if they remember March 3, 1991 at all, remember it for the beating and not for this crash, which occurred only hours after King was pulled over. But then, to think twenty-five people looked out their seat windows in horror at the swiftly approaching Colorado Springs landscape not having witnessed the beating, taped or otherwise, causes me great concern. All 25 on board, nothing but crater. Holy Sunday, focus on the forensics. Another palindrome. I was twelve years old and still in San Diego. Even after the crash my second mother talked of visiting Colorado Springs. "I want to see the Air Force Academy," she would say. "I want to go around The Garden of the Gods." What about the Ermenonville Forest in France? I would think to ask years later. There's a monument there. March 3, 1974. Another flight, a far greater death toll. Another Sunday. A Monty Python skit involving negligent pilots on many of those soon-to-be-extinguished minds. I was prepared to take her on my own if that's how it would have to happen, but it never happened. The pain that had confined her to a wheelchair since she was twenty-nine prevented her from traveling too far. What she felt was like being in labor constantly. Later, in college, I would read that my second mother's condition could be cured if she were to give birth. Why she never had a child of her own with my second father remained a mystery for about as long as the mystery of why United Airlines Flight 585 plummeted.

Wings West Airlines Flight 628

My greatest fear with this flight is that it will be forgotten because of where it happened. Before I heard of the crash, I'd never thought anything bad could happen in San Luis Obispo. It was where I'd met my wife, a Cal Poly Mustang through and through. When I asked her, on our second date, if she knew of the mid-air collision, she dodged the question and picked at her food. She was five when it happened. She took other flights before and after 1984. The crash of Wings West Airlines Flight 628 occurred one month six days before the McDonald's massacre in San Ysidro, California. San Ysidro is 323 miles

south of San Luis Obispo and sixteen miles south of downtown San Diego. I didn't think much of anyone else when I was dating my wife-to-be. Not my parents, not my second father watching his blips on the screen or my second mother in her wheelchair watching the cross on the wall. I was over all that, I thought. Add the 6 and the 2 and you have 8, the omega number, a lucky number in certain cultures. All 17 on both aircraft, no one on the ground. Another McDonald's morning, Filet o' Fish Friday, 11:17 am and 38 seconds to be exact. Had my wife been on Wings West Flight 628 bound for San Francisco as a child we never would have met. Then again, if I had never mentioned the SLO crash to her she would not have found me so charmingly odd (her words, not mine). Had my second father never cheated on my second mother she would not have refused to have children with him.

Comair Flight 5191

The honeymooners had planned to go to Disneyland. They'd just been married and the bride looked beautiful stepping into her carriage. I've been to Disneyland too many times. No ride prepares you for the real thing. It's been said it's like a rollercoaster, in the end, but nothing can replicate that final experience, nor should anything. No overhead voice can assure you that when you wake up you will have landed, the artificial lights will turn back on, the bar across your lap will rise and you'll step out of the vehicle and continue on your merry way in an orderly fashion, single-file, as if you're entering a plane's cabin. I've often thought of locales for the final scene of the final James Bond movie of all time. The one where Bond actually does die—and doesn't come back. In one scenario Bond finds himself in the Mall of America in a shootout with jewelry thief meth addicts. In another he finds himself fighting for his life against an Oddjobesque thug on the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride at Disneyland. Bond takes out this new Oddjob only to strike his head on a stalactite. Blunt force trauma. Forty-nine on board and one survivor. Too early in the morning to see where they were headed. The five dropped for publicity purposes, the 191 an unlucky number in aviation. Needed. In the final-final scene, quite moving, all the Bond girls from all the movies from Ursula Andress up through someone not yet born visit Bond as he lies in a coma. They lay flowers all around his bed, pile the lilies so high that eventually even Bond's face is blotted out in white. Roll credits. A Sunday.

Galaxy Airlines Flight 203

Six years old and living close to the airport where the plane took off. My father worked for the airport. He had nothing to do with the crash, as far as I could tell. The crew forgot to secure an air access door. It was night and I'd like to think not snowing when they decided to turn back, abort, come in for a landing. Why had they taken off at one a.m. on a Monday anyway? In my memory of that January the night is always solid black and clear. One person survived. They found him sitting upright in his seat, still conscious. The Livestock Events Center was turned into a makeshift morgue, the 1800s all over again.

That night my father entered my bedroom. I turned from the wall and watched him kneel beside my bed. He wore his spectacles and his business suit. He'd been traveling again and had just returned. He told me he'd been on the flight that had landed just as the Galaxy flight had taken off. The red-eyes. He knew some of those people. This is what he told me. Headlights passed over the wall above my bed briefly, a car turning in the cul-de-sac outside. My father bade me sit up but not turn on any lights. He took my hand and turned it so that my palm was up. He then placed the action figure, in its factory-sealed package, in my hand. He waited for me to thank him, as I had done every time he returned home from a business trip. When I did, he left. It took me longer to thank him this time. Instead of "Thank you" I almost said, "Air access door." I wondered if those were the final words.

Valujet Flight 592

I think of a big football player barreling down the aisle, bellowing as smoke pummels his lungs. I think of passengers getting out of their seats and shouting, panicked, as if it's 1947 and they're on an earlier flight. I think of that same massive man, graduate of my alma mater, a San Diego Chargers running back, wrestling a gator, his face inches away from the beast's slowly squeezing jaws, seconds away from the mud and water and bilge washing over him and all the rest. One hundred and ten on board, the pilot a San Diego native. And a Saturday afternoon. I was in high school then and not on the football team. The day it happened I was watching *Goodfellas* on my own, at home. I had graduated from James Bond by then. My crush was dating a player on the junior varsity team who I suspected did not treat her right. We could never talk about it. Even after we started dating, in college, we could not talk about how she'd been treated. I was good then. I managed to not bring up any crashes, even the crash of EgyptAir 990. I kept my darkest thoughts to myself, as did she. Instead I said, one night after a particularly amazing inversion, "There's something sexy about airplanes. The confinement. The altitude. The shared air. The shared danger."

"What are you talking about?" she said.

We'd gone to see *Mission Impossible 2* earlier that day. I recalled then the opening scene where the plane crashes. Of how if she had been seated next to me on that plane, unconscious, and I had avoided the trap and not put on my mask, I would have saved her. Tom Cruise would have done it. Bond would have, too. I would have found a way to save us.

EgyptAir Flight 990

I put my faith in God. That infallibility. Night over the Atlantic Ocean. Nearly two years after the massacre at Deir el-Bahri but a precursor to a much bigger event. Another heart on the ocean? All 217 on board. A Sunday, of course. Not a Monday and five years earlier over Indiana, they really did have

cause to worry about the weather that afternoon. Didn't live to see "The Gymnast" and, even more tragic, "The Couch" episode of Seinfeld. Look at it that way and the EgyptAir passengers were lucky: they got to finish out the series. Halloween and plane crashes. Take away the 9 from the 9 and we have 0, the omega number. I had 99 problems but a girlfriend wasn't one at the time. Or so I thought. It was hard to have fun at the party that night. Dressed up as a commercial airline captain and my high school crush the flight attendant, short-short skirt and all. I saw the way my supposed friends eyed her, what they had in mind. But in my mind, I could only see a little old lady on board, seated in the center aisle, her purse in her lap, hands folded over, carry-on tucked neatly beneath the cushion that wouldn't save her. Could've been my grandmother. She'd boarded in Los Angeles. Maybe she'd avoided boarding in Los Angeles on the morning of September 25, 1978. Turn over the card and you rarely find an ace. My second parents put their faith in God and look where it got them. My wife and I are expecting our first child any day now. Any day. And when she flies to Egypt now it will be from New York, and I won't know anything of her life, nor will I wish for the plane to crash.

American Airlines Flight 587

The number of people who almost took the ill-fated flights. Almost booked that \$18 ticket on Florida Commuter Airlines Flight 65. Almost decided to leave a day earlier or a day later. Almost. Hollis Frampton considered taking United Airlines Flight 826 but changed his mind. A would-be passenger of PSA Flight 182 had also dodged the Tenerife disaster the year before. The number of people who survived the collapse of the World Trade Towers by being late to work, or by being on a low-enough level. A friend of a friend slept in a little later than usual that morning and was just getting off the train underneath a tower when the first plane hit. He lived. So too did the woman who escaped by fleeing the ground floor restaurant where she worked. Two months later, she was bound for the Dominican Republic, onboard American Airlines Flight 587. Add the 5 and the 8 and we have 13, an unlucky number all around, canceled out by the omega, a lucky number in certain cultures. All 260 on board, five on ground. That was a Monday. Far Rockaway, Kramer hitting golf balls into the ocean. And the whale. The sea was angry that day, my friends. Blow hole. *Drown* and the DR. What went through her mind, in the end? I survived the collapse of the World Trade Center—and now this?

China Airlines Flight 611

The helicopter that did crash. "If man were meant to fly, Mr. Wint..." "He would have been born with wings, Mr. Kidd." 1971. Take away the alpha from the 9, add 7 to the omega and we have 8 either way, a lucky number in certain cultures. Bitten by the bug. *Diamonds Are Forever*. The number of planes that have crashed in Africa since the beginning of time. Time I go international. James, just James. Our future looks fine. Six and one and one is eight, not that it helped. A song I associate with California

summer was released two months before this crash. All 225 on board, a Saturday, I presume sunny. Over the Pacific, Oceanic Airlines Flight 815, if only survivors could have been written into the script two years earlier. They're all dead at the end anyway. A catastrophic failure of parts. What I come up with is inadequate, incomplete. Lost. I'd like to think some of the passengers were listening to that song on little earbuds, their eyes closed, heads in time to the music, as the plane reached cruising altitude. The song may have reached overseas by that time, but the crash itself can never be recreated, any of it, in any medium. What I'm left with is myself: steel and plastic, a press of faces, the sea a mosaic of airplane parts, a dragon curling along the waterway then sinking, a rainbow imprint left behind.

The next flight I take will be the one. As if. Bellerophon was so empowered by Pegasus that he spurred the winged stallion toward the heights of Mount Olympus. But as he neared the top Zeus unleashed a wasp that stung Pegasus on the rump and threw Bellerophon to blindness and misery. An even harsher ending for Icarus, who did not heed his father's warning. Nor will I heed my own father's warning. I will keep going out there. I will keep searching. He is distant from me now, a mere star, and I will not stop until I see all of him, and only him. I will not stop until I reach his world.

David Ewald's work has appeared in *BULL: Men's Fiction*, *Metazen*, *Eclectica*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Denver Syntax*, *Spectrum*, and elsewhere. His full-length play, *Mormania*, was part of Paragon Theatre's *The Trench*, and his novella (co-authored with Stuart Ross), *Markson's Pier*, was published in Volume XI of *Essays & Fictions*. He currently serves as Nonfiction Editor for *Eclectica Magazine* and lives in California.