

1-1-2012

## Flight Risk

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### Recommended Citation

Espinoza, Ronnie (2012) "Flight Risk," *Digressions Literary Magazine*: Vol. 9, Article 4.

Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/digressions/vol9/iss1/4>

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## Flight Risk

*Ronnie Espinoza*

Samir Ali couldn't stop sweating. Even with his suit jacket off and long sleeves unbuttoned, he couldn't stop. He turned on the faucet and started splashing his face, desperately trying to replace the sweat with the running water. They told him that it would be like this, but he never really believed that his nerves would betray him this late in the game. He checked himself in the mirror, watching the beads of water stream down his face, lost in thought for who knows how long. Yes, he was afraid. Fearful, scared, terrified, all of the above. Yet he felt relieved at the fact that his clothes were dark enough to hide his perspiration. After drying himself off, his attention then went back to his lower torso where his hands were carefully applying the finishing touches to the bomb wrapped around his waist. Yes, it was a bomb. Yes, it was real.

It was the size of a portable CD player. And according to his comrades, it had enough C-4 to blow up at least half of the 747. It wasn't the first time Samir had been on a plane, but if everything went according to plan, it would be his last. Contrary to what Samir predicted, smuggling the components of the bomb had been the easy part. He went through the metal detectors earlier in the day dressed as a young businessman, complete with briefcase. Appearance-wise, he would often be mistaken for a Latin American rather than a citizen from his native Afghanistan. He was well spoken, his accent hardly noticeable. He was calm. He was comfortable. But now he stood inside the plane's lavatory, uncomfortably adjusting the detonator near his rib cage.

He checked his wristwatch and thought about his options. He preferred to set it off right then and there, but he knew the plane was still too high in altitude and miles away from any worthy landmark. He then thought about waiting it out inside the lavatory until the time came, at least until the pilot made his initial descent into New York.

*That way I don't have to see their faces, he thought. Yeah, why not?*

And just as his mind settled on the idea, a sudden knock on the lavatory door reminded him of reality.

"You need some help in there, son?" a rough, old voice asked. Samir responded instinctively. "I'll be right out."

Samir buttoned up his shirt and put on his suit jacket, obstructing the custom-made explosive entirely. He took one last look in the mirror and whispered the only motivation he had left. "Allahu Akbar."

It didn't take Samir long to return to aisle seat 3C, but he dreaded every step of the way just the same. All he saw were their faces now. Those same little, cute faces that had occupied the other two seats next to him ever since takeoff. As he approached, he saw nine-year-old Michael sound asleep at the window with a pair of headphones on while twelve-year-old Katie sat with her book in the middle. Samir sat back down hoping Katie wouldn't look up. Hoping she wouldn't ask him any more questions about his nationality or favorite food; hoping that Harry Potter could entertain her long enough until his next visit to the lavatory. But ...

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"Uh ... I didn't feel well." It was the first time Samir had to think before he answered.

"I got some Dramamine in my backpack." She reached for her backpack on the floor, but Samir quickly stopped her.

"No, I'm all right now, Katie. It's okay—Thank you."

"Okay. Let me know if you change your mind."

Samir couldn't help but crack a smile. Katie was very resourceful as well as friendly. Both kids were.

"I see Michael fell asleep," he commented.

"Yep, all thanks to you."

"Oh, I didn't do anything. He just doesn't like flying, same as me."

"You're afraid of flying?"

"I was. When I was a boy, just about his age."

"But the more we fly, the crankier he gets."

"That's perfectly normal. Just remember to give him that CD he's listening to and he'll be out like a light."

"What about you?"

"I have other copies at home. No worries."

Katie stared at Samir for a while. Naturally, he reacted.

"What?"

"You're a good guy, Samir."

"Not really."

"You are."

"You think so?"

"I know so. I'm a real good judge of character."

Samir started to laugh.

Moments later, the head flight attendant came by to check if the kids needed anything. At the same time, she informed them that it would

be another hour before they touched down in La Guardia. Katie had closed her book by then.

“Have you ever been to New York, Samir?” Katie asked.

“Once.”

“Did you like it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“Well, sometimes you have to look at things more than once to get a better understanding of it. How about you, do you like it?”

“I guess. I like it because we get to see our dad.”

“That makes sense. Family is important.”

“Do you have family there?”

“Um...I’m afraid not. They don’t travel much these days.”

This last stretch of conversation between Samir and Katie eventually reached the thirty-minute mark when the pilot’s voice came on over the intercom.

“Folks, we’re just about ready to make our first descent into the Big Apple. It should take us about another twenty minutes to reach the runway at...”

*Twenty minutes.* That was all Samir heard. Twenty minutes to go over his options once again. He couldn’t believe how fast the hour had gone by. Part of him wanted to blame Katie, but he knew he had the flight attendant to thank for all of this. What were the odds of him having to sit next to two good, innocent kids? *The flight attendant did this,* he thought. *She was the one who escorted them in. She was the one who couldn’t find me a different seat before we took off.*

Ten minutes to go. Michael had woken up. Samir already felt the sweat on his brow. He closed his eyes, and whether he knew it or not, tears started rolling down. Katie was the first one to notice.

“Samir, are you okay?”

Samir kept his eyes closed as if he were praying, but spoke in a soft tone to his two companions.

“I’m just trying to talk to my wife ... my daughter. You remind me so much of her, Katie. She was so smart, like you. I wish they were both with me now.”

“I’m sorry,” Katie said.

“It’s okay.” Samir opened his eyes and seemed to regain his composure. “Trust me; they’re in a better place now.”

As much as he liked talking to Katie and Michael, Samir hated

that he knew too much about them, and that they knew too much about him. He hated that he sat next to two unaccompanied minors, courtesy of their recently divorced parents and their joint-custody agreement. He also hated that they knew how his family passed away, all thanks to what the marines referred to as “friendly fire.”

“Don’t worry, Samir,” Michael said. “We’ll be landing soon.”

Samir smiled back at Michael and gave him a wink. It was then that Samir made his decision.

“Yes, we will, Michael. Yes, we will.”

With the plane’s landing in progress and with no one looking, Samir slowly reached inside his shirt and tore off the miniature detonator, deactivating the bomb permanently.

All the passengers stood up as soon as the seat belt sign went off. Katie and Michael started out first while Samir stayed behind.

“You’re not coming, Samir?” Katie asked.

“Not just yet. I have another flight to catch, so I have to go through a different gate.”

“Oh.”

“You enjoy the CD, young man,” said Samir, playfully shaking Michael’s hand.

“Thank you, Samir.”

“You’re quite welcome. Take care of your sister.”

“I will.”

Out of nowhere, Katie gave Samir a long-lasting hug, catching him by surprise.

“It was nice talking to you.”

Holding on to the embrace, Samir took his time to respond.

“The pleasure was all mine.”

Katie and Michael Higgins waved their final good-byes as they exited the plane. Samir sat back in his seat and watched as the other passengers followed. Sitting there alone in silence, he contemplated if he had an afterlife to look forward to. He thought about where he should fly off to next. He knew that he couldn’t return to his homeland in Takur again, especially once they found out that flight 201 from Ft. Lauderdale had landed safe and sound. Soon they would be looking for him. Soon he would know if he had done the right thing or not. And where did Samir go when he finally got off that plane? Only Allah knows. It was a risk he had to take.