

“9-11; The Call”

By MARK GILCHRIST
Special to The Planet Earth

The day that we saved the United States from a tragic disaster all began with a dead man’s face in a plate of blueberry pancakes.

Okay, it actually started about an hour before that, but I do like the image. So, right, it was 4 o’clock in the morning on September 11, 2001, and I was in an all-night diner on the coast of Maine, hoovering a plate of hash browns, eggs and sausages, and listening to Stephen King talk about car wrecks.

Yeah, no, I do mean “The” Stephen King, Right – and he wasn’t on the radio or TV or anything. He was sitting right across from me, in my booth, sipping a coffee and fawning over the brute power of the MATJACK.

“These things are incredible!” he said. “You want to pry a vehicle away from a massive tree? You slip one of these bags between them, power it up, and, bam!” He was talking about... oh forget it – Google it if you want; I have a lot to cover here.

Anyway, it was pretty much, just another day in Portland Maine, pretty close to one of the places where Stephen calls home, and pretty quiet. We were just a couple of insomniacs burning a few hours near the airport, and, yeah, if you think it’s far-fetched that I just couldn’t sleep and so I just happened to go for a drive at just the same time that the Grand Master of mystery writing did, and that we ended up as the only diners in a lonely diner on a potentially perilous morning, I would have agreed with you. But then, after all we did that day, I kinda believe that just maybe, it was all just meant to be.

I say “that day,” but really, our job was done before 8 am, and when you think about it, we really didn’t do much; just saved our country is all.

So, yeah, right. Just an ordinary morning, chatting up my “bud,” the King of Horror, talking about mangled cars and trees, and all. But this surreal encounter took a sharp turn for the unreal when a man walked in and just sat down with us.

The restaurant was empty, so why did this joker take a seat at our booth? I was offput, but I guess Stephen is used to complete strangers sitting next to him, (because, yeah, that’s what I had done about an hour ago...)



A lobster shack decorated with buoys for the tourist season on Bailey’s Island, Maine.

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“Hi there, buddy,” Stephen said to the man’s blank face. “Uh, hi there, buddy...” No response. The guy was in his twenties, with tan skin, a thin layer of curly, black hair, and a real “not-from-Maine” look about him. He just sat there, staring right through the both of us. Stephen pretty much took it in stride – even waved the waitress down and bought him breakfast – but I was a bit creeped out, especially with the chanting.

The waitress set a cup of coffee and a stack of pancakes in front of our new friend about a minute after the guy had begun chanting, which explains, I guess, why he didn’t touch it. He was very quiet, actually, almost muttering under his breath, but it sure got our attention. Stephen turned to me, awkwardly, as if he wanted to leave.

“Well, it’s been nice talking with you, uh...”

“Mark,” I said.

“Yes... Mark, right. Well, I...”

“They will all die,” the visitor said. Aloud.

“What?” Stephen and I both said.

“Who’s going to die?” But the man just stared. Stephen sipped his coffee while I fin-

ished off my eggs. We looked at each other for a second. I was feeling a strong urge to run away, but that was wrestled down by the urge to hear the guy out.

“Thousands,” the guy said. “All dead...”

“Who are you?” I said. And that seemed to get his attention, briefly. He glanced at me, and then back to the wall behind us. Then the chanting, again.

Stephen and I just looked at each other, and pretended to do nothing. I was sur-

unfolded it and removed what looked like a Tylenol.

“Box cutters,” he said. “White House, Manhattan, Pentagon. No bombs. Box cutters. Two leave here on 6 am to Boston.” He held the capsule in both hands above his steaming coffee and pulled it apart, pouring a dark powder into the black liquid.

“Atta will be called at 6:50,” the man continued. “You must interrupt that call. Stop them and you save everyone.” He picked up the cup, brought it to his mouth and drank it down whole. Then the chanting again.

“Who?” Stephen said. “Who are these men?” We got no more answers. The guy just stared past us, emitting a low, guttural chant that turned into a hoarse moan as blood started oozing from his mouth, and then a whisper as his eyes rolled up and his lids closed, and then his head fell into the pancakes.

Okay, right, now, you might be thinking that Stephen and I would try CPR or something, but if you had been there, you’d know the guy was dead than anything we could undead, and besides, it was 5:20, and all of a sudden, we seemed to have a six-o’clock plane to catch.

“Hey-ho, let’s go!” Stephen said, and we leapt out of the booth.

“Call an ambulance!” I shouted to anyone on our way to the door.

** Every, single word of this story is absolutely true, except for the part about meeting Stephen King.*

prised to suddenly feel an odd kinship with Stephen, like we just got caught in something mysterious and special.

“They will die,” our visitor said, and I gathered that English was not his first language.

“Okay,” Stephen said. “Who? Where?” No response

“Mister,” I said in such a way as to signal the end of my rope. “We could call the police for you...”

“No,” he said, still not making eye-contact with either of us, but somehow talking to both of us. “You can help. I can’t.” His right hand went under the table, which didn’t seem to bother Stephen, but it scared the crap out of me. He leaned back as if he was reaching into his pocket, and I thought; “No one keeps a gun in their pocket – at least, not a big gun...” and then he placed a crumpled-up napkin or something on the table. Stephen took a small notebook out of his shirt pocket and started taking notes.

“How can we help them?” Stephen said, as if he was just researching his next novel.

“We? Why we?” I asked, researching a way the heck out of this, and then the guy just started babbling.

“Four planes. Two Boston, one Newark, D.C... take over... Cockpit kill pilots.”

Stephen and I took hard looks at each other, jaws slack as our strange friend continued. He picked the napkin off the table,



White birches on the southern shore of China Lake, near Augusta.

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“Carrie...” Stephen said to the waitress. “Tell the police I’ll talk to them when I get back. We have to go to the airport.”

“Carrie?” I said to Stephen as we ran out the front door. “Really?” He ignored me. “I’ll drive,” he said, pulling keys from his pocket. I followed him over to a beautiful, classic, old car. Red. Two-doors. Plenty of chrome. We got in.

“Falcon?...” I said, puzzled. “Fury,” he said as he started the engine. “1958.” He put it in gear and floored it out of the parking lot onto Maine Mall Road.

“What the heck was that guy talking about?” I said.

“Best I can figure, he just bailed out of a terrorist cell that is going to hijack four planes and crash them into buildings.”

“That... yeah, I guess,” I said. “But crap, that’s crazy! Fly airplanes into buildings? Stupid! Why? And why here in Portland?”

“Security may be easier? I don’t know,” he said as we raced past the Comfort Inn.

“They’re going to use box cutters to take over the airplanes,” Stephen said, “and pretend they have bombs – did you hear him say; ‘No bombs?’”

Portland’s airport is in the city, and it took us only a few minutes to get there. Stephen parked in the Departures Lane and we just left the car right there.

5:28 am

“Yeah, so we have two people leaving here on a 6 am flight, right?” I said as we walked into the ticketing area. Our flight was the only one working, and we walked toward the ticket counter.

“Wait,” Stephen said, grabbing my arm as he stopped.

“What?”

“We need to figure this out,” he said. “We can’t just...”

“Yeah, what do we do? Nobody will believe we just heard what we just heard.”

“Not at all.”

“Well, I mean, they might believe you,” I said. “I mean, you’re Stephen King...”

“Mark,” he said. “I tell horror stories for a living. Just let that sink in.”

“Gotcha.”

“So, who are we looking for?”

“Atta.” Did you hear him say that? Who is Atta? I said, looking around at everyone. “He or she must be here, somewhere.”

“I bet it’s a guy,” Stephen said.

“Why? Could have been ‘Etta,’” I said. “Like James?”

“Wow, yeah, you’re right. But no, I just... okay, this flight is just a small commuter – I’ve taken it many times – I’m going to Boston. You with me?”

“Umm. Well, ah...”

“I’ll pay. C’mon.”

“Okay, sure. You get the tickets and I’ll watch the security line. Here, they may want my drivers license.” I stood in a place where I could see both the people going through security and Stephen at the ticket counter.

I watched people empty their pockets onto trays on a conveyor belt and then walk through a metal detector. It seemed the thing went off every time someone walked through it but the guard just waved a detector-wand over the person and then waved him or her through.

Stephen hunched over the ticket counter, in a pose I imagine he had held thousands of times in his nearly three decades of book tours, and I watched as he pulled his wallet and took out a credit card, which somehow reminded me that we didn’t pay our bill at the restaurant... and then I was startled again by the metal-detector alarm.

The guy who just walked through it – he had really short hair and a dark complexion, and just a really rough-looking face – raised his arms in the typical, “okay, search me,” posture, and as the guard raised his wand, he reached into his jacket, slowly pulled out a box cutter and held it up in front of him.



Portland harbor as seen after takeoff on way to Boston.

The guard took the plastic knife, slid the metal blade out and back in, shrugged, and handed it back to the man.

Holy crap. Up until that moment, I had thought maybe we were on a wild chase, but this connected a lot of pieces! Stephen walked up to me and handed me a ticket, boarding pass and my license.

“I got him,” I said, pointing my head toward the man.

“You sure?”

“No, but he has a box cutter – he showed it to the guard.”

“Wow, did they take it from him?”

“No,” I said. “The blade was short, so maybe...”

“He’s going to L.A.”

“How do you know?”

“He was in front of me in line. I overheard...”

“Well, that must be the flight,” I said. “I mean, the one. Do you think it flies over New York or Washington? Well, I guess if they...”

“I’ll be right back,” Stephen said, walking away. He went back to the ticket counter and talked with the agent. I kept a corner of my eye on our prime suspect and waited.

5:45 am.

Agents started announcing boarding for the flight as Stephen walked back to me.

“The next flight from Boston to L.A. is at 7:45, an hour after ours arrives in Boston,” he said. “He’s on that flight.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked the agent,” he said.

“What? No way she’d tell you that!”

“She wouldn’t tell you, for sure,” he said. “But I’m a regular here.”

“What, did you tell her you’re writing a book?”

“Ha, I’m always writing a book,” Stephen said. “His name isn’t ‘Atta’ though.”

“What?”

“Yeah, something like ‘Abdul Omaha.’”

“So, right. Our pancake friend said that ‘two leave from here,’ so we need that other guy,” I said. “If we could just get the passenger manifest...”

“Yeah.”

“What if we just ask the guard?” I said. “Tell him everything...”

“We’d get kicked off the flight and I’ll make all the news channels.”

“Stephen King tells crazy story at airport,” I said. “Yeah, right. Bad idea.”

“Look, they won’t do anything on this flight – let’s just look for the other man – Atta – and work up some kind of strategy.”

Right next to the gate was a newsstand and bookstore, and an entire section of

bookshelves displayed some of Stephen King’s works: “*End of Watch*,” “*Sleeping Beauties*” and “*Mr. Mercedes*.” His non-fiction; “*Dans Macabre*,” and even some oldies; “*Christine*,” “*Salem’s Lot*” and “*Cujo*.”

6:03 am

We waited for the final boarding call, and left the terminal, walking toward the Beechcraft 1900, a 19-passenger plane that was all wound up and ready to go. Bracing ourselves against the propeller’s backwash, we climbed the steps, and Stephen greeted the flight attendant like they were old friends, which is how he seemed to treat many people in these parts.

“Hi, Larry,” Stephen said.

“Good morning, Mr. King.”

We sat in our seats, in the second-to-last row of the half-filled airplane.

“We have to delay this flight,” Stephen said, looking at his notes.

“Really? How?”

“I don’t know, but if our men are on this plane, then they’ll have an hour to connect in Boston.”

With only two rows of seats on this plane, we had to talk across the aisle, but no one could hear us over the roar of the propellers.

6:03 am

Stephen got up and walked to the front of the plane, returning a few minutes later, just as the pre-flight safety lecture began.

“Atta’s on this flight,” he said.

“What? How do you know?”

“I got a look at the manifest. Only 12 names, and one of them has ‘Atta’ in it.”

“Yikes.”

“Any ideas on how to stop this show?”

“I can say I smell smoke,” I said.

“Yeah... no, that won’t work – everyone on this plane has a nose...”

“I could shout; ‘Bomb!’”

“Sshh! You’ll get us thrown off the plane,” he said. “And then what can we do?”

Larry had folded up the stairs and closed the door, and we were leaving the boarding area, rolling across the tarmac toward a taxiway.

“I’m think I’m going to have a heart attack,” Stephen said.

“Whoa, easy there, old man,” I said.

“No, I mean, I’m going to fake it.”

“What?”

“Yeah, they’ll have to taxi back, wait for an ambulance...”

“That’ll make the news,” I said. “For sure.”

“Any other ideas?”

“Only a very bad one that has you wrestling with the pilots.”

“Look, all we have to do is make these guys miss that connecting flight to L.A.”

“So we delay for an hour?”

“Right. And the phone call, remember? 6:50. That’s, like, 40 minutes from now, and if we’re still in the air, he may not get it.”

“May... not...”

“Right, right,” Stephen said. “Are you always this negative?”

“Only on airplanes.”

“If the call does connect during the flight, at least we’ll be able to see him answer it...”

“Then we’ll just tackle him and grab the phone, right?” I said.

“Crude, but an option.” Stephen was then quiet for a while as we taxied out to a spot near the runway and sat in position, waiting for another plane to land. He looked at his notes, and put the book back in his shirt pocket. Then he unbuckled his seat belt, slumped over and fell into the aisle.

“He’s having a heart attack!” I said, loudly enough, I hoped, as I got out of my seat and knelt beside him. “Help! Stephen King is having a heart attack! Help! Help! Stop the airplane! Call an ambulance!” I felt Stephen’s hand around my throat, then he gripped my shirt and pulled my head down to the floor so our faces were nearly touching. I could see his eyes bulging as he faked convulsions.

“Cool it,” he said. “You’re a lousy actor.”

But it worked, and we got everyone’s attention, including the pilots, who opened the curtains between us and the cockpit.

“Oh my God! help!” I tried to sound a little less frantic, I guess, but I had no idea what I was doing. People shouted to the flight attendant, Larry, who had come up to us and was talking over us, to the pilots. We had an hour to kill, and I had no idea how.

What we did have on our side was credibility; no one would fake a heart attack on an airplane, um, right? I guess the flight crew has a procedure they go through, because everyone calmed down quickly, the plane turned around and we were soon back at the terminal.

Stephen apparently decided to just go “unconscious” on us, hoping to avoid questions, I guess. I acted as his lookout, to warn him if someone was about to do anything crazy, like poke needles in him or defibrillate his heart or something. At least, I thought I would – gee, I really wish we had planned this out a little better.

Well, it took 30 minutes for us to taxi back to the terminal, for the EMTs to arrive, check Stephen out and try to take him to the hospital, and for him – us – to convince them not to.

“I’m okay, really,” Stephen said. “Just, I don’t know, I... I’ll see my heart doctor in Boston, okay?”

“He has to speak in front of five thousand people today!” I said, picking a number. Larry looked really nervous, like he didn’t want to have anything to do with Stephen King dying on his airplane. Stephen got up and walked to the cockpit, knowing, I guess, that the final decision was the captain’s.

He poked his head through the curtains and while he was there, and during the whole charade, I had looked around, (casually, really, I mean, real cool, like...) to see who looked exceptionally upset about the delay,



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and I found our second guy.

6:45 am

Wasn't hard, I mean, it's a small plane. The "Atta" guy, I thought, was three rows ahead of us, across the aisle from me. Stephen came back and sat down, and we were soon taxiing again.

"You find him?" Stephen said, pretending to read a magazine.

"Yeah..."

"White shirt?"

"Yes, how'd you know?"

"Small plane," Stephen said. "Phone call's in four minutes."

"What do we do?" I said. Stephen didn't respond for the longest time, he just stared at the magazine as we rolled to the edge of the runway, turned and waited. He put down the magazine and leaned far into the aisle. I did, too, and we were close enough to talk privately.

"If he answers a phone at 7:50, um, that's it, right?" he said.

"Yeah, we'll know it's him, for sure."

"We can't let him talk on that phone," Stephen said. "Can you see him?"

"Yes. So, what do you think this phone call is about?"

"I don't know, but Pancake Man said..." Stephen looked at his notes. "You must interrupt that call. Stop them and you save everyone."

"Must be some kind of last-minute confirmation-type-call before everyone does their, um, hijacking stuff. Right?"

"Right," Stephen said, "and it looks like your crude option is our only option."

6:49 am

The sound of the propellers changed from a low hum to a high roar as the pilot turned the plane onto the runway and got ready to take off. Things started to get dicey, and I realized that what I might do next might involve felonies, and maybe even harm some innocent people, namely, myself.

"It's 6:50," Stephen said.

"By your watch," I said as the plane sped up, rolling down the runway past the terminal. "I have 6:53, actually. Give him a couple of minutes." Up to speed, our front wheel left the runway and then we took off, and between the angle of ascent and acceleration, I wondered how easy it would be to climb up the aisle three rows and then attack a grown man. I unbuckled my seat belt. The plane shook with the aggression of takeoff, and the props roared on both sides of us, and what happened next, just happened all-of-a-sudden, all-at-once.

"That's it," I said to Stephen when I saw the cell phone. I stood up, fighting the extra G-forces and pulling myself forward and up by the seats in front of me.

"Sit down sir!" Larry said. Then again as I ignored him. "SIR, please sit down!" I took three steps forward, reached out and grabbed the phone from Atta's hand. It was a hell of a lot easier than I had thought actually, as I had taken him by complete surprise.

"Cancel operation!" I said into the phone as the guy got up out of his seat. "Danger ahead - abort mission!" I tossed the phone to Stephen just as Atta grabbed my shirt. We struggled for far too long, and other passengers were shouting, and then Larry got out of his seat and he and some passengers separated us.

"You can't use electronic devices during takeoff!" I told him, loud enough for even the pilots to hear. "You trying to kill us all?"

"Get back in your seat, sir!" Larry said, and so did some passengers, and so I did.



Coffin Pond in Brunswick, where I grew up, or tried to.

"Where is my phone?" Atta said, standing over me.

"Sir, get back in your seat!" Larry said.

"I want my cell phone," Atta said. "This man stole it!"

"Get back in your seat, sir," Larry said, "or I will have you arrested in Boston!" This worked - man, it worked - and Atta sat down as the plane continued to ascend.

Stephen and I had no idea, really, what we had just done, whether we had stopped any hijackings or heck, even if there were really any hijackings to stop, but we believed we weren't out of the woods yet. We figured we would land in Boston at about 7:30, so Atta and his buddy would have 15 minutes to catch Flight 11. We conjured up several ways to delay the men, but none that really made any sense.

Little did we know that we would not have to create another delay, as our actions up to that point had set in motion a delay that none of us could avoid.

So, anyway, other than the "heart attack," and the brawl during takeoff, the 40-minute flight was uneventful. Stephen had given the cell phone to Larry, and once we reached cruising altitude, Larry gave it to Atta without explanation. We landed in Boston at 7:30 as Larry read off a list of connecting flight times over the PA. Flight 11 to Los Angeles was delayed by 14 minutes. **Crap.**

7:32 am

Atta and his buddy were in a big hurry to get off the plane, and they shoved their way to the back and got off first. We tried to follow them, but Larry elbowed his way in front of us. We walked down the steps to the tarmac where we were greeted by Logan Air-

port security and Boston police officers.

"That man in the white shirt," Larry told the officers, pointing to Atta, "and this man, here." A Boston cop and a security guy ran toward the terminal to catch Atta, and I nearly peed my pants.

Yeah, I panicked, folks. I was about to be arrested, and my guess was that I had just committed federal crimes, and I knew that my fragile constitution could not handle federal prison, not even a Martha Stewart-type joint. I froze, and Stephen told me later, that I cried like a baby. I think he's telling a story.

So, what happened? The cops took care of everything. I mean, they delayed Atta for six hours, so he didn't get on any flight that day, and no planes were hijacked and no buildings were crashed into, and no one died, (except for Pancake Man.)

I'm guessing the second guy called the other hijackers and stopped everything - or maybe my yelling on Atta's cell phone spooked them. We didn't know what happened, in fact, until more than a year later.

Yes, the cops detained Atta because, even though I had started the fight by stealing his phone, I guess you're just not supposed to get in a fistfight on an airplane, (they should explain that in the preflight safety lecture.)

They detained me, but I had a "lawyer."

Yeah, Stephen wouldn't leave me. He insisted they let him stay with me the whole time, and he corroborated everything I said, and I said everything. I told them all about Pancake Guy, about Carrie, about, well, everything you've read here, and they just listened like I was telling them a story.

But, every hour, it seemed, more people would come into the room, and they would

actually introduce themselves. One guy was from the FAA, a woman from the airport authority, then, two guys from the FBI, a man and two women from the CIA, someone from U.S. Immigration, a FEMA guy stopped in for about an hour, and another FBI person, but I couldn't really tell whether that one was a he or a she...

Nobody believed my story - our story - and it seems they had been completely in the dark about this, but they all took notes and nodded politely. I was hoping someone would say; "Yeah, we've been following these guys..." but that didn't happen. Apparently, all this was completely new to all these people.

The FAA guy asked Stephen if he faked the heart attack, and Stephen said his attorney would have to answer that. The guy joked that maybe his doctor should answer the question, and everyone laughed.

Yes, the story was incredulous, but what we ultimately had in our favor - which we didn't really know at the time, but would learn over the next year - was the truth. Apparently, Pancake Guy really had been in a terrorist cell here, and everything he had told us was spot-on.

We have no idea if their crazy idea would have worked, I mean, they thought they could steal airplanes and then just fly them right into buildings, killing thousands of people - what an audacious, ludicrous plan! With nothing but box cutters? Seriously?

I mean, certainly, the passengers would fight back, right? And, you can't just jump into a pilot's seat on one of these things and steer it into a building, right? How could they even get near the White House or the Senate Building with D.C. airspace so guarded?

As Stephen and I flew back to Maine later that day, we were giddy with the whole preposterous thing, and I told him that even he couldn't make up such a horror story.

And so, throughout the United States, September 11, 2001 was just another day, just like any other day in America.

But, three months later, the FBI made a slew of arrests. Seems these people would not give up, and boy, were they serious. After these two amateurs, (we,) foiled their attack, they just rescheduled the whole thing for Christmas Eve.

But, since they were now on our radar, so to speak, we caught them in time. Agents scoured flying schools around the country, and nosed around places where they hadn't nosed before. And we just had a stronger attitude, bolstered with the knowledge that, yes, people would actually consider stealing



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