

COMING IN TO LAND

by Robert Shearman

Ladies and gentlemen –

We hope that you have taken pleasure in this Air Intercontinental Flight from Los Angeles to Paris, France. That you have enjoyed the in-flight entertainment system, that you have enjoyed our specially prepared meals and snacks. We hope that you've taken the chance to sit back, and relax – and maybe sleep as we've crossed all those time zones.

We now need to inform you that we will soon be beginning our descent into Paris. And we ask you to pay attention to the following information and act upon it accordingly.

We are currently cruising at an altitude of thirty thousand feet at an air speed of four hundred miles per hour. The time at our destination is 13.25, so do remember to change your watches if you haven't already done so. The weather looks good and with the tailwind on our side we are expecting to land in Paris approximately fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. The weather in Paris is sunny but cloudy, with a high of seventeen degrees in the afternoon, you may need to wrap up warm, there's a chill to the evening. If the weather cooperates we might get a great view of the city as we descend.

We hope that may be possible. The captain says he'll do his best. That would make it easier for everybody. It all depends upon the clouds. We're fighting these damned clouds.

We will soon be locking all toilets prior to our arrival in Paris, so this would be a good time to use the facilities if you have not yet had the occasion to do so. Go now. It's all right. We'll wait.

I'm sorry, that's all the time we have. I'm sorry. If you could all return to your seats. Yes. I'm sorry, madam.

I'm sorry. Please return to your seats, and prepare for landing.

We ask that at this time you secure all baggage underneath your seat or in the overhead compartments. Please take care in storing baggage, and know that the contents of the compartments may have shifted during the flight. Please turn off all personal electronic devices, including laptops and cell phones. Smoking, of course, continues to be prohibited for the remainder of the flight, and will not be permitted until after you have cleared customs and left the terminal building. You are welcome to keep drinking alcohol. If you are the sort to find it calming, if you find it an aid rather than a hindrance to concentration.

Please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position. You may fasten your seatbelts or not. It's all the same to us. If you choose to fasten your seatbelt, insert the metal tab into the buckle by your side and pull on the strap until it is comfortable or secure. But many find that the seatbelts don't do any good. For some they are, if anything, a barrier. For some the seatbelts suggest their faith might be lacking.

And, ladies and gentlemen, be advised. It is all a matter of faith.

Air Intercontinental is proud of its safety measures, and our fleet has a survival rating that is one of the highest in the world. Last year an average of eighty-three per cent of all our passengers arrived securely and intact, at any one of our destinations all around the globe. Eighty-three per cent. That's not something to be sneezed at.

But we know too that faith is a personal thing. And that even with all the support and encouragement from our specially trained staff, not all our passengers are able to sustain that last effort of mental strength necessary to ensure their safe arrival. On every flight there will be those that fail. On any flight, those that will vanish from their seats. That'll disappear completely, and fade into thin air, the moment that the wheels hit the runway.

There are certain precautions that should be taken to give you the best chance this will not happen to you.

We are arriving soon in Paris, the capital city of France. You will not land safely unless you absolutely *believe* in

Paris. You are required to have faith in the city, in its culture, and in what it represents. In the very concept of Paris, on a philosophical level. If you have no faith that it's really there, then it won't be.

Playing upon your screens now are certain classic images of Paris to help you in your effort. The Eiffel Tower. The Mona Lisa. An old man on a bicycle waving a baguette. It is important that these be used as a focus for your concentration, and not as a replacement for actual faith itself. You need to believe in Paris, not merely the images put before you. The man on the bicycle will not be there to save you.

Some of you will be returning home to Paris. For you the ideal of Paris should be easier to hold. But be warned. Simply knowing something exists is not quite the same as having *faith* in it. We know tales of French couples, perhaps disillusioned with their lives, disillusioned with each other, who have lived in Montmartre for years, perhaps, who have more *evidence* than most of Paris' existence – and who, nonetheless, didn't make it through touchdown with all their body parts in place. Maybe they got complacent. Maybe, at the crucial moment, they took their minds off

Paris altogether. But even if you've lived in the destination city of your flight and feel you've no doubts at all, we ask you still to pay attention and focus. Focus upon what your home *means* to you, right deep down in your soul.

Do not fall asleep or doze during the landing. Heaven knows where you might end up.

For those of you who have never even visited Paris before, your task is necessarily harder. But do not be unduly alarmed. Concentrate on what Paris means to you, too, and why you booked the ticket there to begin with. Why you paid so much money. What it was that drove you to so risk your very existence, and give such anxiety to the loved ones you've left at home, just to visit the place. There must be a strong idea of what Paris is in your heads in order for you to have done that. It doesn't matter how idealised or inaccurate, not if you truly *believe* in them. Faith isn't a spelling test. Just hold on to that inner Frenchness you have, hold on to it tight, and you'll be just fine.

For those of you who have visited Paris, but have never lived or worked there, you may be in the greatest

danger. You may only half remember a city you once visited when you were small. You may be hanging on to happy holiday memories from when you were a kid – that time when your Mummy and Daddy smiled at you, when they took you to that park, when they let you feed all those pigeons and eat that ice cream – are you really *sure* that was Paris after all? That you're not getting your holidays mixed up? Think. As you ate your choc ice, can you remember whether it was really the Eiffel Tower that was looming above you? Wasn't it just a common or garden electricity pylon? Be sure.

It is estimated that false nostalgia is responsible for most of the deaths and vanishings on transatlantic travel. False nostalgia kills.

For me, when I need to have faith in Paris, I always think of my time there with Jacques. Jacques and I walked along the Seine hand in hand. We drank Beaujolais and we smoked Gitanes, and he was the perfect lover, we made love right there underneath the night sky of Paris. With the sound of Paris in my ears and the smell of Paris up my nose, and yes, all those people watching, and some of them were tourists, but most of the peeping toms were Parisians through and

through. And as he drove deep inside me, "Mon Dieu!" he cried, and I squealed loud and shrill, I squealed loud so the noise would bounce off the Notre Dame, ring right round the Arc de Triomphe, all Paris could hear our rutting, and Paris delighted in it, because that's what Paris is, Paris doesn't care, Paris is a whore, I squealed like a little pig, *une cochonette*, that's what Jacques called me, I didn't know what it meant at the time, afterwards I had to look it up, frankly I was a little disappointed, "Mon Dieu," cried Jacques, "cochonette, merci beaucoup!" So, as the plane descends, as we near the ground, I think of Jacques, it's the thought of Jacques I hold on to, and I think of how afterwards he held on to *me*, so tightly, and how his French peasant sweat tasted.

Some of you may prefer to think of the Louvre, or of croissants.

Please do your best to keep your children calm during the landing procedure. You will have seen how we distributed amongst our younger passengers at the beginning of the flight little picture books of Paris, along with simple but convincing explanations of the city's importance in commerce and the arts. Encourage

them now to review this literature, and make sure for their own safety that they have not graffitied flying dragons or similar non-Parisian monsters over the illustrations. We invite you too, if you feel any doubts or weakness, to study the safety card in the seat pockets in front of you. The French translation of what to do in the event of a crash can be very reassuring.

Should the cabin experience sudden pressure loss, stay calm and listen for instructions from the cabin crew. Oxygen masks will drop down from above your seat. Place the mask over your mouth and nose. Pull the strap to tighten it. Then breathe normally. If you are travelling with children, make sure that your mask is on first before trying to help them with theirs.

Should this happen, of course, it might distract your concentration. Alongside the oxygen mask will drop a headset. Place the headset over your ears. Wiggle the toggle to adjust volume. The headset will be playing a medley of typical French music, from *La Marseillaise* to Jacques Brel. If you are travelling with children, make sure that your headset is playing first before trying to help them with theirs.

If you are travelling with children, there is no point trying to hold on to them. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. Believe me. I'm sorry. Believe me.

We are now beginning our final descent. We hope that you have taken pleasure in this Air Intercontinental Flight. The cabin crew have certainly taken pleasure in serving you, and we hope to see you again on another flight very soon.

I didn't mind that Jacques lied to me about being married. He kept the ring on, after all, and every time he waved to the barman for another drink he flashed it in front of my face brazenly enough. Every time he reached out to stroke my cheek. No, I just wish he hadn't given me a false address. What did he think I was going to do, stalk him? I'm a girl from Louisiana. I knew what this fling was, just a fling, right? But when I tried to visit his home, my next stopover in Paris, I found that the street he'd given me didn't even exist. That's what hurt. I never pretended it was love, not even as we were having sex, but it wasn't just sex, was it, there was something more to it, wasn't there? I thought so. I believed so. Yes, that's what hurt.

I wonder if his name were Jacques at all.

Landing positions.

Good luck, everyone. See you on the other side.

Oh, Jacques.

Air Intercontinental thanks you for flying with us. We always remember you have a choice.

Oh, Jacques, hold on tight, baby. Hold on, mon brave.

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