

## **The Passenger**

*By Justin Nichols*

The newspaper over his head did little to keep the nearly sideways bombardment of rain from ruining his twenty-four thousand dollar Brioni suit. Not to mention his patent leather loafers. His shoes seemed to absorb all of the standing water on the tarmac as he rushed, albeit slowly, to the Learjet awaiting him fifty yards from the doors of the dry hospitality of the terminal. He was hunched over, plowing through the torrent. One liver-spotted hand was over his silver haired but mostly bald head, and the other clutched a soaked leather satchel draped across his body, when he finally reached the jet's dropped stairs.

“Good morning, sir!” exclaimed the flight attendant and the pilot in unison as the passenger boarded the plane, handing the attendant the useless pulp of newspaper.

“Wipe that smug smile off of your face,” he replied to the pilot. “You’ll be getting a bill for this suit. A rather pricey one. You should have parked this damn plane closer, or at least had someone drive me here from the terminal!” The passenger was truly angered that his suit was ruined. His wife had bought it for him to wear today, and she told him she was looking forward to seeing him in it. Today was their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

With a cold glance between the pilot and the flight attendant, the passenger realized he succeeded in making his ultimate point that he was not to be trifled with. Not today.

“I...I’m sorry sir,” the pilot stammered. “I’ll get to our final pre-flight checklist and get clearance while you get settled. Enjoy your flight sir.” With an apologetic glance to the flight attendant, he turned and headed back to the cockpit.

“My enjoyment of this flight will depend on your unlikely skill in piloting this piece of junk, and Barbie here keeping my drink filled,” he called after the pilot while turning his glare to

the flight attendant. After a few silent seconds of deadlocked eyes, he yelled, “Bourbon! Rocks! Now, Barbie!”

The flight attendant, recoiling at the direct, glowering stare the passenger gave her more than the harshness of his words, backed away a step, turned on her heel, and went to get him his drink. “Great,” she thought to herself sarcastically. “This ought to be a fun eight hours. Just don’t kill the man, Jeannette.” When she was alone in the galley, she threw the sodden newspaper into the trash receptacle as hard as she could.

The drink in one hand and a warm towel in the other, she made her way back to where the passenger had settled himself into one of the plush leather seats, hugging a still-dripping satchel. “Here you are sir,” she said, smiling with her mouth but not her eyes. She handed him the towel, then reached for the satchel to remove it from his lap. His hand immediately swatted hers away.

“Don’t touch that!” the passenger seethed. “Don’t ever touch that.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but all luggage needs to be stowed away. For your own safety, of course.”

Still staring at her, the passenger removed the satchel from his lap and put it on the seat next to him. His dark, red-rimmed eyes narrowed, daring her to try to remove it as he thought to himself, “Go ahead. Make my day.” One corner of his thin lips curled up. One thing he adored about his wife was that she loved Clint Eastwood movies.

An exasperated sigh left the flight attendant’s lips as she silently offered him the drink. He took it, downed the liquid in one gulp, and handed the glass back to her. “Get me another one, Barbie,” he said, staring at the seat back in front of him.

“*Jeannette*, sir,” she said.

“What?” he asked looking up to meet her gaze.

“My name is *Jeannette*, sir,” she said with a deadpan tone, pointing to her name tag pinned to her left breast. “Not Barbie.”

Looking her dead in the eye, the passenger replied, “I don’t care.”

After she left, the passenger towed himself off as best as he could. The warmth of the towel felt good and he left it around his neck until the heat dissipated. He sat back, put a hand on the comforting satchel beside him, and waited for departure. And his next drink. With this momentary solitude, he had to try hard not to cry again.

Before the drink came, the pilot announced their clearance and asked his passenger and staff to remain seated and fasten their seatbelts. The engines amped up their whine as the plane taxied to the runway. Within another two minutes, the passenger was pushed back in his seat by the acceleration, and the plane was off the ground.

Once the jet pierced through the top layer of clouds, the morning light shone brightly in through the cabin’s unshaded windows. A moment later, the pilot announced a cruising altitude of 44,000 feet, and the passenger was free to unbuckle his seat belt. He did so, but he made no attempt to get up. Staring out the window beside him, he thought of little except his previous week. The last eight days had been consumed with well-wishers, soliloquies of God, overly apologetic hangers-on, and anger. So much anger. He knew his anger was misplaced, often lashing out at complete strangers, as he had done to the flight crew this morning. He was beginning to regret his outbursts, but they seemed uncontrollable. His fuse had shortened to a hair’s breadth.

It surprised him to find that he had so much anger in him in the first place. Only a month ago he had been all smiles as he cut the ribbon on the new hospital wing that was named after him. He had sponsored a shelter for abused mothers and given hundreds of thousands of dollars

to Humane Societies across the country. Hell, even his own dogs were rescues. He was a multi-millionaire with a vast network of friends. He had everything. Wanted for nothing. He lived a life of the Golden Rule and was happier for it. He came from nothing, but as an only child with the unwavering support of his two loving and doting blue-collar parents, made himself into a multinational financier. A month ago he had it all. Eight days ago he lost nearly everything that was important to him.

His reverie was interrupted by Jeannette bringing him his next drink. She set it down on the tray that was dropped in front of him and started to walk toward the rear without a word. “Thank you,” said the passenger solemnly, trying to make eye contact. She half-turned to look at him quizzically when the jet suddenly lurched downward.

All at once, the oxygen masks fell from the ceiling, the whine of the engines seemed ten octaves higher—much too high to be normal—and the jet continued its steep descent. Jeannette, unprepared for the sudden altitude change, was thrown off of her feet toward the cockpit, hitting her head on the seat back just behind the passenger, cutting her scalp on the upright tray.

The passenger’s natural instincts took over. Though now in his seventies, he spryly jumped out of his seat, fighting the inertia of the falling plane, to get to the flight attendant. He helped her in a seat and sat down next to her. After fixing the mask over her bloodied face, he buckled her seat belt, then buckled his own and put his mask on. It was all he could do for now.

Shock and surrealism had taken hold of the passenger’s mind. Was he dreaming? It felt like being in the doctor’s office just four short weeks ago when they got the news. He couldn’t wake up from that. Would this be any different?

The plane started to shake as it picked up speed on its downward descent. The captain's voice, sounding panicked and barely audible over the engine roar, said, "We need to make an emergency landing! Put your seatbelts on and tuck your heads between your knees!"

Outside the passenger's window, a brilliant flash exploded under the wing, shooting smoke and flames from the engine. The jolt of the explosion rocked the plane and it listed to the left. The passenger, immediately forgetting the pilot's urgent instructions, dug his nails into the armrest, and he turned his head to look out the window. The wing began to sag as the thrust from the other engine pushed the right side of the jet forward while the wind bit into the dead left engine, pulling it down. They were dropping through the cloud barrier as the storm still raged outside. Rain streaked like bullets across the window glass, and the view evaporated to a dark gray.

It was then that the passenger remembered his satchel in the seat ahead of him. With a renewed vigor, he unfastened his seatbelt and removed his mask. Jeannette, watching him, put her hand on his arm, pleading with her eyes for him to sit back down. Her face was a tumult of pain, terror, and concern. The passenger looked her in the eyes, smiled and squeezed her hand. His main objective now, his only objective, was to get to his satchel and the urn that it carried.

As the plane continued to fall, the passenger struggled to his feet and leaned over the seat in front of him. The strap of the bag had caught on the arm rest of the chair. Otherwise, it would have fallen to the floor and been swept away and out of reach when the plane made its drastic turn. He reached and secured the strap by two fingers, lifted it off of the arm rest and fell heavily back into his seat.

The passenger removed his treasure from its leather imprisonment and sat clutching it to his chest. The rain continued to batter the window next to him, and the dark gray outside

lightened slightly to allow a view of the much-too-close patchwork of fields below. The plane continued its list and downward descent, its speed ever increasing.

What surprised the passenger most about his situation now was that he didn't feel afraid. Looking back on his seventy-six years of life, he was mostly proud of what he had accomplished. His career, for him, was only a means to do what he *really* loved. He was a humanitarian and philanthropist at heart, and his wife, until eight days ago, shared his enthusiasm for helping others. His two children had grown into caring, responsible adults with beautiful families of their own, and he was so proud to be their father. He still loved and missed his parents, who had both died the same year, nearly three decades earlier. He hoped he would get to see them again. He mostly hoped he would see his wife Helen again. How he missed her.

As the jet neared the ground, the passenger reached for Jeannette's hand. She was sobbing silently, and seized his hand gratefully. Looking in her eyes, the passenger saw only Helen looking back at him. "Come to me, Myles," she said to him. "Come home to me." The passenger smiled broadly, nodded, and spilled tears of his own just before the plane hit the ground.