

Black Box Recording

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Black Box Recording
by Jarret Keene

Flight 648 is at 25,000 feet and headed for the ground at 300 miles an hour.

Copilot: Oh, shit.

Captain: Oh, God.

Cabin: [*Stick shaker vibrates, warning of imminent stall.*]

Copilot: Oh, shit.

Captain: This is the end, Lord, isn't it? According to your plan, then.

Copilot: Help me. Help hold it.

Captain: I *am* holding it.

Copilot: Hey.

Captain: I'm not blaming you. I blame the machine, the guts of Lucifer.

Cabin: [*Public address recording: "Attention, emergency descent. No smoking."*]

Copilot: Total system failure and I can't even light up?

Captain: God help us.

Cabin: [*"Put the mask over your nose and mouth and adjust the head-band."*]

Copilot: Speed me to my death and then offer survival tips? That's sadism.

Captain: Lord, not the mask.

Copilot: I'm pulling like crazy but nothing happens. It just continues to vibrate. Fuck!

Captain: [. . . .]

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Copilot: I can't hear you. Switch on the mike.

Captain: [. . . .]

Copilot: Switch on the mike, Alan. On the mask.

Captain: . . . wants me conscious at the point of impact.

Copilot: There you go.

Captain: Pray for your wife and kids that they might carry on without you. And pray for your soul.

Copilot: I will. As soon I'm through telling God to eat me.

Captain: I had a wife once. But she was under the influence of satanic forces. She liked seedy bars and loose talk and big black guys. So I moved in with a karate instructor. She didn't work out either.

Copilot: I don't comprehend the Asian philosophies.

Captain: Women constantly strive to contaminate my relationship with Jesus Christ.

Copilot: All of us are just so much dead meat.

Captain: They're not spiritual creatures. It has something to do with menstruation, I think.

Copilot: I want to kiss everyone on board full on the mouth. If we weren't wearing masks, I'd do it. I'm not kidding, Alan. Hell, I'd kiss you, you Republican! But none of these things matter anymore. I pardon humanity.

Captain: They're bound to the earth and moon. Prisoners locked in the material realm. They can never grasp the concept of heaven.

Cabin: [*Public address recording: "This is an emergency descent." Muzak begins playing.*]

Copilot: I think I've forgiven my mother for throwing away my comic books. Do you know she trashed my favorite series? *Kamandi: The Last Boy On Earth*. It wasn't the most original idea, sure. In fact the series was highly derivative of *The Planet of the Apes* movies. But Kamandi went places Charlton Heston never dreamed. In one issue, I remember, Kamandi stumbles across a secret and powerful cult of talking gorillas who've taken over the post-apocalyptic ruins of Washington D.C. They worship what they call "The Spirits of Watergate." These spirits were

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nothing more than the Watergate tapes, which the gorillas used as a basis for building their society. When played loudly and at high speed, the tapes create a terrifying sound and can be used as a weapon. After thrashing the cult, Kamandi slows down the tapes and listens to Nixon saying things like, "I want to make this perfectly clear..."

Captain: They love to talk you into a state of lethal violence. *Talk talk talk talk talk.* Perhaps they're designed that way. To test a man.

Copilot: My mother claimed that comics were destroying my eyesight and turning me into a delinquent. Now here I am, a peaceful airline pilot with 20/40 going peacefully to his grave.

Captain: I was always comfortable with death and dismemberment. I tortured animals for many years. Then I grew up and auditioned for the CIA, and they made me read a manual called *How To Kill*, and if you asked me to compose a blurb for it, I'd write something like "thoroughly engaging." It's essentially a comic book that shows you how to club, knife, hack, hang, ignite, and shoot a person. It even shows you how to kill unarmed, like driving your thumb and forefinger into the throat of an unconscious subject and applying pressure. But the most disturbing chapter explains how to electrify the grid of a urinal basin. It freaked me out a little and eradicated my interest in joining the CIA. I mean, killing a guy as he's taking a leak? That's like blowing away a deer while it's giving birth. There's no honor in that. At my age, honor is all I have to go on.

Copilot: Have I ever been in a fistfight? No. I attended private school, where aggression consisted of ridiculing a student for possessing an off-brand tennis racket. I was abused by students from other, less privileged places of learning. I never fought back. I had a scholarship playing the vibraphone in the jazz ensemble, so I needed my mitts. Damaging them against some Cro-Magnon's brow would've left me at the brutal mercies of the public-school system of Oakland, California. The vibraphone is a warm, appealing instrument. It has a certain smoothness that attracts women of all shapes and sizes, hues and colors. The young girls of Oakland were dying for something like the vibraphone to emancipate them.

Captain: My most profound encounter with the Savior? I had this job as a teenager, you see, working for a gardening supply store. It involved the perpetual unloading of trucks out in the back of the store. The trucks would bring in huge loads of manure packed into plastic bags, each bag weighing forty or fifty pounds. But what I want to say is that there was a red brick wino hotel across the street from the back of the store. Once upon a time the hotel had been the YMCA where as a kid I learned to swim and shoot pool. The YMCA had moved uptown, and now the winos sat in their windows and yelled at us and threw empties while we

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unloaded all that manure. One morning I was loading a truck for a delivery, it was fall, the wind was blowing hard, and I was bringing out a bouquet of balloons when a string broke and a balloon with the words "GET WELL SOON" escaped from the bunch and went flying. It flew up over the razor wire and floated past the hotel. The winos and everybody in the yard stopped what they were doing and looked up. "GET WELL SOON." The balloon sailed into the clouds, growing smaller, its string tail waving like a hand. Then it was gone.

Cabin: [*Snack cart thuds. Passengers scream.*]

Copilot: I knew a young woman in college who later committed suicide. She was the 100th person to jump off the Dumbarton Bridge, and this made her somewhat famous. I never had any romantic interest in her, but for a few months I felt it was my job to put flowers on her grave every weekend. The graveyard was always empty, sort of peaceful. The rich were buried on the hill, the poor down below. The different religions didn't mix; the Catholics were buried among themselves, the Jews, and so on. The city of the dead was the same as the city of the living except that everyone was dead. When I was too busy to put fresh flowers on her grave, I'd feel guilty all week. Once, on my way back to my car, I saw a homeless guy stealing the flowers and selling them at an intersection. After witnessing this, I got drunk and never visited the cemetery again.

Captain: Smokestacks. I'd sit in the car during my half-hour lunch break and look at the smokestacks on the factory roof. Watching the smoke pour out like clouds, I sometimes lay on the hood of my car, soaking up the sun like a cat and listening to the birds in the banyan trees. Doze off, wake up to the factory whistle, and go back to work. Yes, that was good, honest work. Kind of work the unions in this country have done much to undermine.

Copilot: Not long ago I had a dream in which you appeared, Alan. You're standing naked at the foot of my bed. You turn, look out the window, gently parting the white curtains. I'm staring at you through a hole in the sheet. There's a photographer in the next room. What do you think this means?

Captain: Is this really the best time to hurt my feelings?

Copilot: It was wrong. I apologize.

Captain: Please don't mock my efforts at meditation. Along with the Bible, I've read and read and read again *The Silent Life*, by Thomas Merton. I was fascinated by these accounts of monastic life; the Carthusians, particularly, with their isolated hermitage, were brilliant men who found the right answer to the complexities of life, and as a young man I was saddened by the knowledge that I could never be one of them.

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These holy monks had a curious mixture of humility and vanity I could never hope to achieve. They believed that if they were humble enough they would see God when they died—and you can laugh and call this a naïve vanity—and they were so innocent and touching that the tears well from my eyes even now. But back then, in my twenties, I knew God would never look at a wretch like me.

Copilot: I love you, man. In spite of your brainlessness.

Captain: I believe in and accept your love. But what do all these things mean now—these ideas and memories, these things we wanted to be?

Copilot: It's perfectly simple.

Captain: Lord, we just lost engine four. 'Simple' you say?

Cabin: [*Glass object—perhaps a coffee pot—shatters against the cabin door.*]

Copilot: Yes, Alan.

Captain: Tell me.

Cabin: [*Low-altitude siren.*]

End of tape.

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