

The Paper Cup

Clive F Sorrell

It all began and ended with a small paper cup flying through the air. It was the only thing that left the ground that morning for the aircraft had unexpectedly stopped on the taxiway to the main runway.

After a hectic scramble to board MA4513, stow bags of needless duty free items, shift painful buckles out of the way and squeeze into seats that were designed for children, 30G and 30H sighed and began to relax. Ferrying across the Bay of Naples in temperatures that rose to 39° and then coaching to the airport before walking half a mile through the terminal maze to reach their flight had exhausted the elderly couple. The woman leant her head against 30G's bony shoulder and closed her eyes.

The general hubbub of people looking for their seats and the unsettling sounds of hand luggage being forcibly rammed into overhead lockers began to fade into quiet conversational murmurings as everyone settled down to wait for MA4513's scheduled take off and the welcome stream of cool air from the vents above them.

The holidaymakers, many glowing painfully from over-exposure to a sun they were unlikely to experience for another year, began emitting a low buzz of anticipation as Tracy, Karen and Cedric moved through the cabin ensuring tray tables were folded, seats in the mandatory upright position and belts securely buckled.

A few people seemed incapable of finding the ends of their seatbelts and Tracy and Karen were obliged to fumble beneath large, middle-aged bottoms to locate the offending items. A safety film was showing on the back of every seat with children acting the parts of grown-ups. It would seem that highly paid market researchers

had determined that adults were incapable of following simple instructions unless given by infants.

It was when the little girl showed how to use the seatbelt that MA4513 came to a shuddering halt and the whining engines wound down to an ominous silence. The low conversational buzz changed to a confused muttering that ceased when – *Bing-bong* – a calm, treacle-like voice flowed from the intercom speakers.

‘Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to flight MA4513 flying to London Gatwick.’ The cabin fell silent. ‘My name is Roger Clapstick and I am your Captain. I’m sorry to inform you that we have a small technical problem that needs a little attention. This shouldn’t delay us more than ten minutes.’ *Bing-bong*.

30G and 30H sighed in unison. ‘I hope we leave soon,’ 30H whispered as the safety film finished and she selected *Games* on the tiny screen. ‘Marion said she’d be waiting at the pick-up point.’

‘They’re pretty strict on how long you can park there,’ 30G murmured as his nail-bitten digit pressed *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. The couple was soon engrossed in the quiz show they often missed at home. Their daughter, with whom they were financially forced to live, hated the show. With heads touching they began selecting from the alternative answers to each question and after twenty minutes they had ‘won’ £62,000 when – *Bing-bong*.

‘This is your Captain again. I apologize for this lengthy delay but it seems there is a further glitch that prevents us from closing one of the cargo doors. I have sent for the engineer but I cannot say how long he will be as it is now lunchtime and he is a true Italian. Ha-ha.’ *Bing-bong*.

A ripple of resentment flowed like a hot Mexican wave down the long cabin that without air-conditioning was rapidly over-heating. Tracy and Karen’s smiles had become fixed for they were now the focus of frustrated, perspiring faces that peered over the backs of seats. The promised meals had not turned up and the captain’s humorous apology, referring once more to Italian lunchtimes, didn’t lighten the mood; only one person tittered when he said ‘at the moment things are a bit up in the air.’

To comply with regulations the doors had been opened and the internal temperature and humidity was now exceeding that of the Neapolitan Riviera outside and across the aisle the turf accountant in 30F was mopping his red face with a

fistful of tissues. He dropped the sodden wad of paper onto the floor just as Cedric arrived with a tray of water.

‘When will they fix that bloody door?’ 30F asked testily.

‘As soon as the engineer arrives, sir,’ Cedric said in his best soothing voice that had no effect on the man as he handed him a paper cup of water. ‘Just let me know if you need some more.’

‘I don’t need water, I need a plane that flies.’

‘Please be calm, sir – ’

‘Calm? Keep calm?’ Snapped 30E, the turf accountant’s wife, who grabbed the second paper cup being offered and shook it in Cedric’s face, spilling a considerable amount of the contents on her husband. This increased his temperature and perspiration output considerably.

‘Yes, madam – ’

‘Don’t call my wife a madam you pimply-faced faggot!’ 30F shouted as he tossed the paper cup at Cedric who nimbly dodged allowing the missile to continue flying, unlike MA4513, until it struck 33G on the back of his head. The cup crumpled on the sunburnt pate, spraying water over 33H, 33G’s thin-lipped girlfriend, as well as 34G and 34H, two interior decorators. All three men released their seat belts and stood up. Cedric innocently spread his hands but nevertheless the trio assumed he had been the culprit.

Although thoroughly engrossed in their game, 30G paused their winning streak at £125,000 so both could search for an earring 30H had dropped. That was when the first retaliatory missiles were launched. A panini filled with chopped tomato and mozzarella, a half-peeled orange and an open packet of cantuccini soared towards Cedric but having been a dancer with a ballet company before being discharged for behaviour unbecoming a principal boy he dodged them all with a sinuous pirouette he had often used in *The Nutcracker*.

The panini sailed on to strike the turf accountant’s wife, slithering a mixture of mozzarella and tomatoes down her chest. The brick-hard cantuccini biscuits spread out, not unlike a multi-warheaded rocket, to strike a number of targets whilst the orange ricocheted off 30G’s headrest and flew across the cabin to smash 27B’s designer sunglasses.

Tracy and Karen hurried down the cabin, reassuring the rumbling passengers who, ignoring the young women, began quarrelling aggressively about who threw what at who – or is it whom – and that started further arguments.

Ding-dong. ‘This is your Captain with some good news.’ The treacle flowed on cheerfully. ‘The engineer has arrived and he assures me the fault will be rectified in a matter of minutes.’ *Ding-dong.*

The rumbling from three hundred and eighty seats subsided and the combatants who were still standing sat down and fumbled for their seatbelt buckles.

‘About bloody time,’ 30F mumbled to 30E as he grabbed his wife’s buckle by mistake. She gave him a dirty look and stopped fumbling in her ample cleavage to snatch it back with mozzarella-covered fingers.

Ding-dong. ‘Ladies and gentlemen this is your Captain again. It seems we’ve now lost our slot for takeoff, and we’ll have to wait for a new time to be allocated.’ A collective intake of breath punctuated this sentence. ‘This may delay us for another forty minutes.’ *Ding-dong.*

The muttering that had been fading became a roar and Tracy, Karen and Cedric retreated to the galley to load the trolley with hot coffee jugs and cold snacks in an attempt to avert a full-scale riot. 30H managed to find the elusive earring in her husband’s turn-up and they went back to their game. *Who scored the winning goals in the 1924 FA Cup Final* caught the couple out and they pushed the *Play Again* button again and again and again as ambiguous questions on football kept coming.

‘Throw anything else at me and you’ll get more than a paper cup,’ the hot and extremely bothered 33G shouted at the turf accountant over his headrest.

‘Wanna put some money on that?’ 30F shouted back, true to character, as he unbuckled his seat belt and started to rise. ‘

‘Would you like tea or coffee, sir,’ Cedric said in his best mollifying tone of voice as he moved forward to row 30 holding a thermos jug. Karen was right behind him with a nearly foodless trolley and the compulsory company smile that was now more of a nervous grimace.

‘I told you before mate, I want to be on my way to Gatwick,’ 30F snarled at the flight attendant as he sat down.

‘I don’t care what you want, George, I want a coffee,’ 30E declared as she flicked the last of the mozzarella from her fingers and reached across to take the

steaming cup from the flight attendant. Just then a second orange, unpeeled this time, was launched on a perfect trajectory that ended on top of the full cup being taken by 30E no more than ten inches above her husband's lap.

The scream as scalding fluid soaked through thin cotton could be heard beyond the terrorist-proof door to the cockpit. 30F liked to go commando when he was on holiday and he leapt to his feet clutching at his privates. This upset the tray Cedric was holding and a rain of paper cups showered 31F as though the monsoon season had begun in MA4513.

'Who' and 'whom' fights and indiscriminate missile launchings were now escalating throughout the length and breadth of the cabin as men and women reached boiling point. Fists, bottles of water, umbrellas, handbags and an assortment of smaller objects were being used as 30G and 30H achieved £500,000 by answering 'yes' to the question – *Do female kangaroos have three vaginas?*

Ding-dong. 'This is First Officer Sopwith. As a reward for patiently waiting three and a half hours Captain Clapstick would like to personally address you with some very good news.' *Ding-dong.*

The cockpit door opened and the captain emerged with a veneered smile that warranted sunglasses. 'I would like to report that the cargo door has been successfully sealed and we have a new takeoff slot.' Anarchy ruled and had reached a sound level that drowned the captain's last words. 'We anticipate leaving in five minutes,' he shouted before being violently invited to join a fist-flying scrum of enraged rugby club forwards.

Cedric, Karen and Tracy had once more withdrawn to the galley using their trolley as a shield against some of the more dangerous items flying their way. Cedric attempted to use the internal phone to call the flight deck but on standing up a cricket ball thrown by 12A, a junior member of the Basingstoke cricket club, struck him on the temple, killing him instantly. Karen screamed and Tracy waved a tissue at the small window in an effort to attract the attention of the ground staff.

A man walking away paused, turned and saw the frantic flutter of white at the tiny window. He started to wave back but being an Italian engineer whose lunch had been ruined he changed his wave to a middle-finger gesture. He was unaware that three hundred and eighty heat-crazed people had lost all reason and were beating

each other to death. He was also unaware that his assistant had left the stubs of used welding rods glowing on the cargo floor of flight MA4513.

As the rioting grew more intense 30G and 30H were holding their breath and gripping each other's hands for the final question that would give them the chance of 'winning' one million pounds.

Heavier ammunition such as bottles of duty-free whisky, virgin olive oil and gaudy ceramic plates with amateurish portraits of the Pope was now being taken from the overhead lockers and used to club, smash and slash from one end of the cabin to the other.

At precisely twelve o'clock five things happened in rapid succession.

One.

Bing-bong. First Officer Sopwith announced they had lost their takeoff slot again and there would be a further delay of sixty minutes. This announcement ended with a scream as the cockpit door was forced open by 18C who entered wielding a broken bottle in each hand.

Two.

Stourbridge bus drivers from 47B and 47C sexually assaulted Karen and Tracy in the galley but nobody heard their screams.

Three.

30G and 30H guessed correctly that *Casu marzu* is a Sardinian cheese containing live maggots.

Four.

The neglected welding rods started a small fire in the floor cavity insulation and this spread down to where the major fuel lines were situated.

Five.

MA4513 exploded in a ball of intense heat and the sunny Neapolitan sky rained pieces of plane and the ashes of two 'millionaires'. One rather odd item also drifted down to litter the seared tarmac; a single and barely scorched paper cup.

The dry wind blew it towards the runway where it took off again.

--ooOoo--

*This fantasy was inspired by my flight home from Ischia where I had been reading
Sombrero Fallout by Richard Brautigan.*

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