

Jet: Chronicle of a Crack-Up

by Joe Minion

Minter Krotzer, a 32-year-old African American flight attendant with North American Airlines, is smoking again, but she feels too ashamed to buy her cigarettes at the corner store where she had bought them while she was smoking regularly. Weeks ago, Minter had announced to the store's Korean vendor that she was quitting – and since then, whenever she would go in to buy her groceries, the vendor, a square-faced young man who called her “boss”, would remark on how great it was that she was coming in for so long without asking to buy cigarettes. Now, she can't bear to hear the vendor note the return of her addiction – his voice, she imagines, ringing out in the store: *Oh no, you started smoking again! What happened? I was really rooting for you, boss!* She definitely wants to avoid that. So this morning she walks one block farther up Ninth Avenue and she buys a pack of Parliaments at a magazine vendor's kiosk. It isn't hard to be weak.

After a smoke, she eats breakfast quickly at a nearby coffee shop, leaving in time to make an 11:00 appointment in the Village after a quick stop at Blockbuster to return a video – Dario Argento's cult horror flick *Suspiria* – then it's onto the subway for the long train ride to the airport. But right after dropping off the video, Minter lingers a bit in the store. Something is making her stay here, calling to her to roam the aisles. She is

thinking about that damned flick, *Suspiria*, which got under her skin. She is also thinking about that document NAA had her sign assuring them that she was okay – that she could work, that she was psychologically stable. Her Blockbuster Video card has her signature on it, too. In fact she's been assured that her Blockbuster card that is good at any store in the USA – the card is “nationally recognized”. It is blue and yellow and white. It is laminated and her signature – *Minter Krotzer* – is on the back. No clerk has ever – not once – asked to check her membership card against some other signature-verifying document. When she first signed it, though, she made a special effort to write her name in a way that she'd have no trouble duplicating were she ever asked to should things get “serious” or “legal”. You don't fool around with signatures.

She rents *Airport '75*, a movie in which a jumbo jet has a mid-air collision with a private plane, killing the jet's pilot, co-pilot and fatally wounding the navigator, played by Gary Collins. Karen Black, a stewardess, takes over the controls and lands the plane safely, saving the lives of hundreds of passengers. At the checkout counter, Minter is, as always, ready to produce another form of signature ID to prove she is the true and original Minter Krotzer, but the clerk just asks for the money.

On the cover of the videotape box for *Airport '75* there is a shrunken, VHS-size version of the original movie poster. It is a picture of the tiny private plane and the front of the jumbo jet in the moment immediately after they have collided. The eye is drawn to the area in the picture where the pilot of the private plane is looking right into the eyes of the pilot of the jumbo jet, and visa-versa. The damage is such that, during this rendered split-second of abject horror there is nothing but open air between the two planes' cockpits. The nose of the small plane has been completely lopped off and the jagged-

edged hole in the jet fuselage is big enough to drive a Ford Pinto through. There are what look like razor sharp sections of bent steel rimming the horrible gash, and through it the pilots are kind of looking at each other, realizing they are certainly doomed. But if you look closely you can see, strangely, a glimmer of quiet joy in the eyes of both pilots. Yes, they are scared shitless, but there is, curiously, the vaguest sense of relief in their faces. It's over for them – they are off the merry-go-round! Perhaps they even like the idea of going out with such a bang.

Later, Minter has her weekly visit with a shrink, assigned to her by NAA after they'd noticed that she seemed a tad shaky after the World Trade Center thing a month back.

Her psychologist shares a suite of offices with another psychologist. Both psychologists have a habit of always running late, which means that today, as usual, Minter sits in the waiting room with the other psychologist's client, a different one every visit. This time it's a white woman about her age, one who is not killing the time by reading one of the old magazines piled on one of the small tables.

"You see Dr. Holland?" the woman asks Minter from one of the creaky wicker chairs. She has intense, startled eyes, as though the rest of her skinny body was at this moment being ground up by an enormous wood chipper, her neck and head just inches away from its pulverizing steel maws.

"Yes," says Minter. She decides not to pick up a magazine, either, an invitation to the other client to go beyond small talk if she so chooses. She glances around, taking in the room, pretending like she's there for the first time.

“So is he any good?” the woman asks.

“She,” says Minter.

“She. Is *she* any good?”

Minter thinks. *Is she any good?* It’s just a yes-or-no question, but Minter is curious to converse with this whacked-out looking woman – maybe get some free post-behavioral therapy tips in the process – and she wonders what to say. If she says yes, she might appear to be well-provided-for in the nervous breakdown department which she knows she definitely isn’t, no matter how much she believes talking to her psychologist may have at times, in fact, helped her from becoming even worse. If she says no she might look stupid, as in *then what the hell are you doing here?* stupid. Seconds pass.

“Well, I guess *not*,” says the other client.

“No...well...it’s taking me so long to answer because, the truth is I don’t really know,” says Minter. “I mean, how do you really *know*?”

“You’re screwed up, right?”

“Well...”

“You *are* screwed up, right? Incredibly so?”

“Well, yes.”

“I’m Dolores.”

“Minter.”

“I’m screwed up too, Minter!”

“Great!”

“Wanna see how? Just sit back for a while and let me talk for a few minutes. My screwed-up-edness will reveal itself right away! I have no doubt! You wanna see?”

“Why not!”

The other woman starts talking and, indeed, as she promised, her screwed-up-edness reveals itself right away. The problem, though, as Minter herself admitted, is that she – Minter – is screwed up, too, and one of the symptoms of being screwed up is that one is so locked into one’s screwed-up-edness that it gives one the attention span of a ferret on two cups of espresso and it’s hard to listen for very long to the details of someone else’s screwed-up-edness. So Minter doesn’t listen very carefully – she just picks out little dribs and drabs that are semi-coherent, anyway. Something about the incredibly precise nature of this woman’s job beginning to make her see demons. Something about how she’s a Head Positioner – that’s her actual job title, a Head Positioner in an optician’s office, as in *positioning human heads* – and how she has started seeing messages sent to her through the shapes of her positionees’ nostrils and the directions in which their nostril hairs are pointing when she bends down and looks up at their tilted-back heads. Something about the similarity between the various shapes of people’s nostrils and rune stones, smoothed rocks utilized in an ancient practice for predicting the future and buttressing oneself against predatory characters who can suck one into their own twisted and distorted realities if one leaves oneself too vulnerable, and blind, of course, to the invaluable messages of the rune stones. Throughout it all, Minter keeps thinking *this chick really needs to see a shrink*.

It’s a DC-10 to Miami. There are eleven seats across every row. There are two aisles. Her flight attendant uniform is navy blue, a tight-fitting double-breasted vest over a knee-length skirt with a zipper on the side and a white blouse underneath the vest. Her

name, “Minter”, is embossed in bold black letters on a rectangular plastic, bronze-colored nametag pinned over her left breast. The tag also has the corporate logo of North American Airlines directly over her name. The logo is “NAA”, with a large *N* and the two *As* nestled into, respectively, the upward-pointing acute angle and the downward-pointing acute angle formed by the large *N*. There were many committee meetings and large expenditures involved in choosing this corporate logo. This particular one was settled on when it was suggested by sub-contracted and heftily compensated psychologists that the two nestled *As* would convey a feeling of protection and reassurance. With a logo like that, the consensus was, there’s no way you can imagine a North American Airline jet suddenly going out of control and plummeting in a headlong spiral before impacting with the hard earth – or any other hard object – at a terrifying velocity, killing hundreds of passengers in a gruesome, fiery inferno. No way – those *As* are nestled in there but good.

They’re up to 35,000 feet now and climbing still.

“What’s the matter, Minter? You look funny.”

“Can you do beverages, Celia?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m exhausted from a feeling like...like an oncoming nervous breakdown. No, I mean a nightmare I had. Utterly exhausted. Did you ever have a nightmare like that? One that just wipes you out for the rest of the day?”

“That is the lamest—...Get off your ass and *push that fucking cart.*”

There's a guy in 27D, a famous comedian. He's practicing his shtick right here on the plane. He's spitballing, improvising gags, audibly, to the nicely cleavaged blonde in the seat next to him. But that's not enough. He wants everyone on the plane to hear him. Minter definitely hears him.

Exactly when did stewardesses in this country get so fucking cranky?

Coke, Diet Coke, 7-Up, ginger ale, orange juice, apple juice, the repetitive clink of ice cubes, never more than two, in the clear plastic glasses that look like oversize Nyquil caps.

I know it's a tough job, there's got to be a thousand different ways to tie that neckerchief, but why piss on me?

A napkin. A bag of pretzels, having to answer the occasional question about why not peanuts anymore, something about how there are people who are allergic to peanuts, even just the smell of the dry roasted little buggers, so that if a bag is opened in row 14 someone who's allergic back in row 32 could get a reaction from it but it can't happen with pretzels which don't have that oil, saying all this with a big smile even though the image conjured is of some environmentally sensitive poor slob's tongue swelling up like a French bread in the middle of a flight to Honolulu, someone choking on their own tongue and then threatening to sue the airline because this is America and that's just naturally what you do.

You know, the worst thing about it is they don't even come clean with you and tell you how much they hate you. They treat you with that highly contrived air of mock civility, that tight purse-lipped grin where they nod mild agreement at everything you say but you know right behind that faceplate they barely tolerate your very existence.

The slow, endlessly interrupted forward movement along the narrow aisle, the cart even narrower, leaving enough room for passengers who want to squeeze past it with a deep insuck of the tummy. Men with midriff bulges, married men in Lacoste shirts who are attracted to Minter and who pretend that they needn't pull in their gut that much, hiding the effort, a certain energy they give off, Minter knows it well by now, that telegraphs that they want to grab her, want to get her phone number and give her theirs, hope for a rendezvous, hope she'll be staying in whatever city they're flying to, maybe she's a real swinging stewardess, the image of them from the 60's still amazingly alive in the minds of lascivious gents.

I'd rather they just come out in the open and say, "Hey, listen, FUCKHEAD! When I was eighteen years old I made a horrible vocational choice, all right? I traded my entire adult life in for cheap airfare to Barbados, now I've got hair the tensile strength of Elsa Lancaster in "The Bride of Frankenstein", I haven't met Mr. Right, I'm a waitress in a bad restaurant at 37,000 feet, jam your Diet Slice up your ass!"

Soon it will be time to begin the entertainment. On this flight, Minter will be starting the movie, which basically involves shoving the tape into the machine and pressing the "play" button. The videotape that she'd brought onto the plane, the exciting and compelling *Airport '75*, her own personal choice for this particular flight, waits for Minter, tucked safely into her carry-on purse, under her seat. *I love everybody*, thinks Minter.

Ten minutes later she is inserting the videotape. The audience is agog. *Universal Pictures presents...*

NAA corporate headquarters, the 19th floor hearing room at the company's offices at 845 Third Avenue in New York. Minter and the other flight attendants (they are "attending" in the truest sense now, as in the Old French "attendre", *to wait*, as in the Latin "attendere", *to heed*) are sitting on elementary school-type chairs, metal foldouts with round-edged Formica writing surfaces attached with bolts. Here they are reduced to children and are being referred to as "fly girls" by the suits from upstairs who are gathering in the hallway outside this box-shaped windowless room. The light inside the room is artificial, fluorescent ceiling lamps behind sliver-thin grids of metallic rectangles, the whiter-than-white light that gives out a nervous pulse and that despite its intended utilitarianism showers the room with a clinical anxiety. It is the kind of room in which Big Tests are taken and passed or failed and in which futures are determined. The writing surfaces are, coincidentally, in the abstractedly oversimplified shapes of the continental U.S., the dead giveaway being the drooping Florida peninsula serving as an armrest for the right arm; there are only right-handed desks in this room. The honchos outside are letting the girls wait, a tactic they learned from watching television cop shows.

The girls – the flight attendants from flight 221 to Miami, including Minter Krotzer and five other ladies who also live in the Big Apple – are okay about the reason for this compulsory meeting. They're okay about this solidarity concept, although truth be told, they really don't know why. They simply *feel* like it should be okay with them, so they're going with that feeling. They would like to think the feeling is rooted in ethics, or a rebellion against ethics, or just about anything deeper than what it *is* based on, which is some quasi-feminist (there were no male flight attendants on flight 221 to

Miami) rhetoric about their need to stay united – but it isn't. Somebody switched the movie on the flight, from *Notting Hill*, a sweet romantic comedy with Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, to the very traumatizing *Airport '75* and one of the passengers reported the effrontery to the brass at NAA, and now somebody's got to answer for it. The girls will not let Minter go down because they convince themselves that on a bad day it could just as well have been one of them, and they make a pact to stay united on this.

The hearing will drag on for eleven months. There are many documents handed down. There are lawyers. There are handsome bribes to the press to keep the whole affair out of the news, parsed out in the form of free air travel. There is arbitrage. It is determined that NAA will not be allowed to fire Minter Krotzer during that entire time. She is asked to resign but she does not – not until she is exonerated by every pilot and flight attendant with whom she has ever flown. And then, when the day comes that she is told she may stay on at NAA with no decrease in either pay or benefits of any kind, Minter resigns, faxing in a one-line memo. It says "Fooled you, I'm crazy after all. I quit." Signed, Minter Krotzer. You don't fool around with signatures.

Postscript: September 9, 2002, a few days after Minter has resigned. She is walking up Sixth Avenue amidst the throng of busy New Yorkers rushing past, their faces joyless but determined, men and women with definite plans. *I am waiting for someone to take me to where I really belong. This is just temporary, where I am now, I know it. Everyone else is on his or her way to where they belong, but I'm not sure what I should do, where I should go. Somebody please just stop me on the street and tell me,*

lead me, I'll go wherever you say; I'll do whatever you say. Somewhere out there, somebody has got to know.

When she arrives in her neighborhood, Minter stops in front of the window of her local pharmacy, her attention galvanized by a new display case – specifically, a group of small cardboard boxes all grouped together on one of the display case shelves. Looking beyond her own ghostlike reflection in the glass, she stares with reluctant fascination at the boxes, reading their labels from left to right, the big block lettering the same on every box: “Lumbar Sacral Support” (underneath a picture of a woman’s midriff, one hand pulling closed the Velcro fastener of a wide, hospital-white bodice that is wrapped around her waist like a mummy’s bandage); “Shoulder Brace” (a woman turned around with a thick, oversized baby’s bib-shaped shield fastened across her back with straps criss-crossing at mid-spine); “Cervical Collar”; “Elastic Abdominal Binder”; “Post-Op Shoe”; “Wrist Support”; “Arm Sling” and “8 Inch Ankle Splint”, all with corresponding pictures, all of them laid out in the window like a grotesque Nativity scene, comforting in the thoughtful anatomical spectrum of their responsiveness but at the same time ominously suggestive of just several of the myriad ways a frail human body can, in a contingent universe, without warning, be in dire need of these undignified accessories.

And where, she wonders, am I reflected here? Minter reaches into her purse, groping, anxiously anticipating the feel of the cellophane covered box of Parliaments.

She tears herself away from the pharmacy window, walking tentatively along the avenue – like all of us, sensitive to energies benevolent and hostile, real and imaginary, free falling into the cracks that will pull her asunder for the rest of her life.
