



The last days of Muhammad Atta

On 11 September 2001, he opened his eyes at 4am, in Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began.

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Observer

'No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence provides a convincing explanation of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al] Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11'

The 9/11 Commission Report

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What was the scene of this awakening? A room in a hotel, of the type designated as 'budget' in his guidebook - one up from 'basic'. It was a Repose Inn, part of a chain. But it wasn't like the other Repose Inns he had lodged at: brisk, hygienic establishments. This place was ponderous and labyrinthine, and as elderly as most of its clientele. And it was cheap. So. The padded nylon quilt as weighty as a lead vest; the big cuboid television on the dresser opposite; and the dented white fridge - where, as it happened, Muhammad Atta's reason for coming to Portland, Maine, lay cooling on its shelf... The particular frugality of these final weeks was part of a peer-group piety contest that he was laconically going along with. Like the others, he was attending to his prayers, disbursing his alms, washing often, eating little, sleeping little. (But he wasn't like the others.) Days earlier, their surplus operational funds - about \$26,000 - had been abstemiously wired back to the go-between in Dubai.

He slid from the bed and called Abdulaziz, who was already stirring, and perhaps already praying, next door. Then to the bathroom: the chore of ablution, the ordeal of excretion, the torment of depilation. He activated the shower nozzle and removed his undershorts. He stepped within, submitting to the cold and clammy caress of the plastic curtain on his calf and thigh. Then he spent an unbelievably long time trying to remove a hair from the bar of soap; the alien strand kept changing its shape - question-mark, infinity symbol - but stayed in place; and the bar of soap, no bigger than a bookmatch when he began, barely existed when he finished. Next, as sometimes happens in these old, massive and essentially well-intentioned and broad-handed hotels, the water gave a gulp and then turned in an instant from a tepid trickle to a molten blast; and as he struggled from the stall he trod on a leaking shampoo sachet and fell heavily and sharply on his coccyx. He had to kick himself out through the steam, and rasped his head on the shower's serrated metal sill. After a while he slowly climbed to his feet and stood there, hands on hips, eyes only lightly closed, head bowed, awaiting recovery. He dried himself with the thin white towel, catching a hangnail in its shine.

Now, emitting a sigh of unqualified grimness, he crouched on the bowl. He didn't even bother with his usual scowling and straining and shuddering, partly because his head felt dangerously engorged. More saliently, he had not moved his bowels since May. In general his upper body was impressively lean, from all the hours in the gym with the 'muscle' Saudis; but now there was a solemn mound where his abdominals used to be, as taut and proud as a first-trimester pregnancy. Nor was this the only sequela. He had a feverish and unvarying ache, not in his gut but in his lower back, his pelvic saddle, and his scrotum. Every few minutes he was required to wait out an interlude of nausea, while disused gastric juices bubbled up in the sump of his throat. His breath smelled like a blighted river.

The worst was yet to come: shaving. Shaving was the worst because it necessarily involved him in the

contemplation of his own face. He looked downwards while he lathered his cheeks, but then the chin came up and there it was, revealed in vertical strips: the face of Muhammad Atta. Two years ago he had said goodbye to his beard, after Afghanistan. Tangled and oblong and slightly off-centre, it had had the effect of softening the disgusted lineaments of the mouth, and it had wholly concealed the frank animus of the underbite. His insides were seized, but his face was somehow incontinent, or so Muhammad Atta felt. The detestation, the detestation of everything, was being sculpted on it, from within. He was amazed that he was still allowed to walk the streets, let alone enter a building or board a plane. Another day, one more day, and they wouldn't let him. Why didn't everybody point, why didn't they cringe, why didn't they run? And yet this face, by now almost comically malevolent, would soon be smiled at, and perfunctorily fussed over (his ticket was Business Class), by the doomed stewardess.

A hypothesis. If he stood down from the planes operation, and it went ahead without him (or if he somehow survived it), he would never be able to travel by air in the United States or anywhere else - not by air, not by train, not by boat, not by bus. The profiling wouldn't need to be racial; it would be facial, merely. No sane man or woman would ever agree to be confined in his vicinity. With that face, growing more gangrenous by the day. And that name, the name he journeyed under, itself like a promise of vengeance: Muhammad Atta. In the last decade, only one human being had taken obvious pleasure from setting eyes on him, and that was the Sheikh. It happened at their introductory meeting, in Kandahar - where, within a matter of minutes, the Sheikh appointed him operational leader. Muhammad Atta knew that the first thing he would be asked was whether he was prepared to die. But the Sheikh was smiling, almost with eyes of love, when he said it. 'The question isn't necessary,' he began. 'I see the answer in your face.'

Their Coglan Air commuter flight to Logan was scheduled to leave at six. So he had an hour. He put on his clothes (the dark blue shirt, the black slacks) and settled himself at the dresser, awkwardly, his legs out to one side. Two documents lay before him. He yawned, then sneezed. While shaving, Muhammad Atta, for the first time in his life, had cut himself on the lip (the lower); with surprising speed the gash had settled into a convincing imitation of a cold sore. Much less unusually, he had also nicked the fleshy volute of his right nostril, releasing an apparently endless supply of blood. He kept having to get up and fetch more tissues, leaving after him a paper trail of the staunched gouts. The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day.

Document number one was displayed on the screen of his laptop. It was his last will and testament, composed in April 1996, when the thoughts of the group had turned to Chechnya. Two Moroccan friends, Mounir and Abdelghani, both devout, had been his witnesses, so he had included a fair amount of formulaic sanctimony. Any old thing would do. 'During my funeral, I want everyone to be quiet because God mentioned that he likes being quiet on occasions when you read the Koran, during the funeral, and also when you are crawling.' Crawling? Had he mistyped? Another provision stared out at him, and further deepened his frown: 'The person who will wash my body near my genitals must wear gloves on his hands so he won't touch my genitals.' And this: 'I don't want pregnant women or a person who is not clean to come and say goodbye to me because I don't approve of it.' Well, these anxieties were now academic. No one would say goodbye to him. No one would wash him. No one would touch his genitals.

There was another document on the table, a four-page booklet in Arabic, put together by the Information Office in Kandahar (and bound by a grimy tassel). Each of them had been given one; the others would often produce their personal copy and nod and sway and mutter over it for hour after hour. But Muhammad Atta wasn't like the others (and he was paying a price for it). He had barely glanced at the thing until now. 'Pull your shoelaces tight and wear tight socks that grip the shoes and do not come out of them.' He supposed that this was sound advice. 'Let every one of you sharpen his knife and bring about comfort and relief of his slaughter.' A reference, presumably, to what would happen to the pilots, the first officers, the flight attendants. Some of the Saudis, they said, had butchered sheep and camels at Khaldan, the training-camp near Kabul. Muhammad Atta did not expect to relish that part of it: the exemplary use of the box-cutters. He pictured the women, in their uniforms, in their open-necked shirts. He did not expect to like it; he did not expect to like death in that form.

Now he sat back, and felt the approach of nausea: it gathered round him, then sifted through him. His mind, inasmuch as it was separable from his body, was close to the 'complete tranquillity' praised and recommended by Kandahar. A very different kind of 33-year-old might have felt the same tranced surety while contemplating an afternoon in a borrowed apartment with his true love (and sexual obsession). But Muhammad Atta's mind and his body were not separable: this was the difficulty; this was the mind-body problem - in his case fantastically acute.

Muhammad Atta wasn't like the others, because he was doing what he was doing for the core reason. The others were doing what they were doing for the core reason, too, but they had achieved sublimation, by means of jihadi ardour; and their bodies had been convinced by this arrangement and had gone along with it. They ate, drank, smoked, smiled, snored; they took the stairs two at a time. Muhammad Atta's body had not gone along with it. He was doing what he was doing for the core reason and for the core reason only.

'Purify your heart and cleanse it of stains. Forget and be oblivious to the thing which is called World.' Muhammad Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with the militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that. He played along with it, and did the things that impressed his peers; he collected citations, charities, pilgrimages, conspiracy theories, and so on, as other people collected autographs or beer mats. And it suited his character. If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character, and with an almost sinister precision.

For example, the attitude to women: the blend of extreme hostility and extreme wariness he found highly congenial. In addition, he liked the idea of the brotherhood, although, of course, he thoroughly despised the current contingent, particularly his fellow pilots: Hani (the Pentagon) he barely knew, but he was continuously enraged by Marwan (the other Twin Tower) and almost fascinated by the pitch of his loathing for Ziad (the Capitol)... Adultery punished by whipping, sodomy by burial alive: this seemed about right to Muhammad Atta. He also joined in the hatred of music. And the hatred of laughter. 'Why do you never laugh?' he was sometimes asked. Ziad would answer: 'How can you laugh when people are dying in Palestine?' Muhammad Atta never laughed, not because people were dying in Palestine, but because he found nothing funny. 'The thing which is called World.' That, too, spoke to him. World had always felt like an illusion - an unreal mockery.

'The time between you and your marriage in heaven is very short.' Ah yes, the virgins: six dozen of them - half a gross. He had read in a news magazine that virgins, in the holy book, was a mistranslation from the Aramaic. It should be raisins. He idly wondered whether the quibble might have something to do with sultana, which meant a) a small seedless raisin, and b) the wife or concubine of a sultan. Abdulaziz, Marwan, Ziad, and the others: they would not be best pleased, on their arrival in the Garden, to find a little black packet of Sunmaid Sultanas (average contents 72). Muhammad Atta, with his two degrees in architecture, his excellent English, his excellent German: Muhammad Atta did not believe in the virgins, did not believe in the Garden. (How could he believe in such an implausibly, and dauntingly, priapic paradise?) He was an apostate: that's what he was. He didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion. And, strange to say, he would find neither.

He packed. He paused and stooped over the dented refrigerator, then straightened up and headed for the door.

In its descent the elevator, with a succession of long-suffering sighs, stopped at the 12th, the 11th, the 10th, the ninth, the eighth, the seventh, the sixth, the fifth, the fourth, the third and the second floors. Old people, their faces flickering with distrust, inched in and out; while they did so, one of their number would press the open-doors button with a defiant, marfanic thumb. And at this hour, too: it was barely light. Muhammad Atta briefly horrified himself with the notion that they were all lovers, returning early to their beds. But no: it must be the sleeplessness, the insomnia of age - the dawn vigils of age. Their efforts to stay alive, in any case, struck him as essentially ignoble. He had felt the same way in the hospital the night before, when he went to see the imam... Consulting his watch every 10 or 15 seconds, he decided that this downward journey was dead time, as dead as time could get, like queuing, or an interminable red light, or staring stupidly at the baggage on an airport carousel. He stood there, hemmed in by pallor and decay, and martyred by compound revulsions.

Abdulaziz was waiting for him in the weak glow and piped music of the lobby. Wordless, breakfastless, they joined the line for checkout. More dead time passed. As they fell into step and proceeded through the last of the night to the car park, Muhammad Atta, in no very generous spirit, considered his colleague. This particular muscle Saudi seemed as limply calf-like as Ahmed al Nami - the prettyboy in Ziad's platoon. On the other hand, Abdulaziz, with his softly African face, his childish eyes, was almost insultingly easy to dominate. He had a wife and daughter in southern Saudi Arabia. But this was like saying that he had a flatbed truck in southern Saudi Arabia, so little did it appear to weigh on him. He had also, incredibly, performed certain devotional duties at his local mosque. And yet it was Abdulaziz who carried the knife, Abdulaziz who was ready to apply it to the flesh of the stewardess.

When they reached their car Abdulaziz said a few words in praise of God, adding, with some attempt at panache,

'So. Let us begin our "architectural studies".'

Muhammad Atta felt his body give an involuntary jolt. 'Who told you?' he said.

'Ziad.'

They loaded up and then bent themselves into the front seats.

Abdulaziz wasn't supposed to know about that - about the target code. 'Law' was the Capitol. 'Politics' was the White House. In the discussions with the Sheikh there had been firm concurrence about 'architecture' (the World Trade Center) and 'arts' (the Pentagon), but they had disagreed about an altogether different kind of target, namely 'electrical engineering'. This was the nuclear power plant that Muhammad Atta had seen on one of his training flights near New York. Puzzlingly, the Sheikh withheld his blessing - despite the presumably attractive possibility of turning large swathes of the eastern seaboard into a plutonium cemetery for the next 70 millennia (that is, until the year 72001). The Sheikh gave his reasons (restricted airspace, no 'symbolic' value). But Muhammad Atta sensed a moral qualm, a silent suggestion that such a move could be considered exorbitant. It was the first and only indication that, in their cosmic war against God's enemies, there was any kind of upper limit. Muhammad Atta often asked himself: was the Sheikh prepared to die? In the course of their conversations it had emerged that, while plainly reconciled to eventual martyrdom (he would have it no other way, and so on), the Sheikh felt little personal attraction to death; and he would soon be additionally famous, Muhammad Atta prophesied, for the strenuousness with which he eluded it.

These meetings and discussions - with the Sheikh and, later, with his Yemeni emissary, Ramzi Binalshibh - now lost weight and value in Muhammad Atta's mind, tarnished by Ziad's indiscipline, by Ziad's promiscuity (and if Abdulaziz knew, then all the Saudis knew). He thought back to his historic conversation with Ramzi, on the telephone, in the third week of August.

'Our friend is anxious to know when your course will begin.'

'It will be more interesting to study "law" when Congress has convened.'

'But we shouldn't delay. With so many of our students in the US...'

'All right. Two branches, an oblique stroke, and a lollipop.'

Ramzi called him back and said, 'To be clear. The 11th of the ninth?'

'Yes,' confirmed Muhammad Atta. And he was the first person on earth to say it - to say in that way: 'September the 11th.'

He had cherished the secret until 9 September. Now, of course, everyone knew: the day itself had come. He was impatient for his talk on the phone with Ziad, scheduled for 7am at Logan. Ziad was still claiming that he hadn't yet decided between 'law' and 'politics'. It looked like 'law'. As a target, the President's house had lost much of its appeal when they established, insofar as they could, that the President wouldn't be in it. At that moment the President was readying himself for an early-morning run in Sarasota, Florida, where Muhammad Atta had been taught how to fly, at Jones Aviation, in September 2000.

It was during the drive to Portland International Jetport that the headache began. In recent months he had become something of a connoisseur of headaches. And yet those earlier headaches, it now seemed, were barely worth the name: this was what a headache was. At first he attributed its virulence to his misadventure in the shower stall, but then the pain pushed forward over his crown and established itself, like an electric eel, from ear to ear, then from eye to eye - and then both. He had two headaches, not one; and they were apparently at war. The automobile, a Nissan Altima, was brand-new, factory-fresh, and this had seemed like a mild bonus on 10 September, but now its vacuum-packed breath tasted of seasickness and the smell of ships below the waterline. Suddenly his vision became pixelated with little swarms of blind spots. So it was then asked of him to pull over and tell an astonished Abdulaziz to take the wheel.

There seemed to be a completely unreasonable weight of traffic. Americans, already about their business... Tormenting his passenger with regular glances of concern, Abdulaziz otherwise drove with his usual superstitious

watchfulness, beset by small fears, on this day. Muhammad Atta tried not to writhe around in his seat; on his way to the car park, 10 minutes earlier, he had tried not to run; in the elevator, 10 minutes earlier still, he had tried not to groan or scream. He was always trying not to do something.

It was 5.35am. And at this point he began to belabour himself for the diversion to Portland: a puerile undertaking, as he now saw it. His group was competitive not only in piety but also in nihilistic elan, in nihilistic insouciance; and he had thought it would be conclusively stylish to stroll from one end of Logan to the other with less than an hour to go. Then, too, there was the promise, itchier to the heart than ever, of his conversation with Ziad. But his reason for coming to Portland had been fundamentally unserious. He wouldn't have done it if the internet, on 10 September, had not assured him so repeatedly that it was going to be a flawless morning on 11 September.

And he didn't solace himself with the thought that this was, after all, 11 September, and you could still get to airports without much time to spare.

'Did you pack these bags yourself?'

Muhammad Atta's hand crept towards his brow. 'Yes,' he said.

'Have they been with you at all times?'

'Yes.'

'Did anyone ask you to carry anything for them?'

'No. Is the flight on time?'

'You should make your connection.'

'And the bags will go straight through.'

'No, sir. You'll need to recheck them at Logan.'

'You mean I have to go through all this again?'

Whatever else terrorism had achieved in the past few decades, it had certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom. It didn't take very long to ask and answer those three questions - about 15 seconds. But those dead-time questions and answers were repeated, without any variation whatever, hundreds of thousands of times a day. If the planes operation went ahead as planned, Muhammad Atta would bequeath more, perhaps much more, dead time, planet-wide. It was appropriate, perhaps, and not paradoxical, that terror should also sharply promote its most obvious opposite. Boredom.

As it happened, Muhammad Atta was a selectee of the Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening System (Capps). All it meant was that his checked bag would not be stowed until he himself had boarded the aircraft. This was at Portland. At Logan, a 'Category X' airport like Newark Liberty and Washington Dulles, and supposedly more secure, three of his muscle Saudis would be selected by Capps, with the same irrelevant consequences.

Muhammad Atta and Abdulaziz submitted to the checkpoint screening. Their bags were not searched; they were not frisked, or blessed by the hand wand. Abdulaziz's childish rucksack, containing the boxcutters and the mace, passed through the tunnel of love. Just before boarding, another gust of nausea gathered about Muhammad Atta, like a host of tiny myrmidons. He waited for them to move on, but they did not do so, and, instead, coagulated in his craw. Muhammad Atta went to the men's room and released a fathom of bilious green. He was still wiping his foul mouth as he walked out on to the tarmac and climbed the trembling metal steps.

Coglan 5930 was not only late it was also an open-propeller 19-seater, and it was full. Excruciatingly, he had to wedge himself in next to a fat blonde with a scalp disease and, moreover, a baby, whose incredulous weeping (its ears) she attempted and failed to slake with repeated applications of the breast. Between heartbeats, when he was briefly capable of consecutive thought, he imagined that the blonde was the doomed stewardess.

The plane leapt eagerly into the air, with none of the technological toil that would characterise the ascent of

American 11.

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