

Passenger 74

Hannah Cruickshank

(2021)

That whole plane trip was a weird one. Even before we knew about the mystery ‘passenger 74’ there was an ominous feeling aboard flight BA4926 from Houston, Texas to London, England on New Year’s Eve 1982. Later, the whole story would fascinate people worldwide, bringing both wild speculation and scepticism that passenger 74 ever existed.

We took off over the Pacific in an old, rickety plane at around 11pm, after being delayed for hours due to some technical problem not even the flight attendants understood. While the rest of the world was bringing in the new year, I was 30,000 feet in the air making small talk with the professional looking lady in the bottle-green cloak sitting next to me. Green-cloak lady had a rather unusual habit of staring into space, then scribbling in a blue leather notebook; pages watermarked with a strange looking flower.

‘So,’ I asked her, ‘what brings you to London?’

‘Work, I’ve taken on a rather high-profile client, and she doesn’t like travel.’ She spoke briskly, with a prominent southern twang.

‘Are you a lawyer?’

‘Something like that.’ Green cloak lady spoke with note of finality in her voice, making it clear that the conversation was over.

I fell asleep sometime later, and only awoke when the pilot announced we would be landing shortly. A brief time afterwards, there was a crackly voice over the intercom. ‘Unfortunately, we’re experiencing some turbulence and will need to circle for some time before landing.’

There was a collective groan from the passengers, now all awake in preparation for the expected landing, although no noise from the woman next to me. She now appeared as though in a trance, with her eyes half closed and lips moving soundlessly.

It didn’t strike me as odd at the time, but there were a lot of things going on during that flight that seem alien looking back. The cabin lights flashed brightly, and occasionally turned off all together. Even the view out the window seemed eerie, a great expanse of blank, starless sky. The flight crew seemed tense with anticipation, like a deer that has smelt the wolf coming. None of the passengers seemed to be awake, apart from myself and the mysterious lady in the green cloak, still in her trance like state.

When I woke many hours later, green cloak lady was gone, and in her place was a man dressed in dark velvet, who looked rather too much like a male version of her than I would've considered to be normal. I wondered if perhaps he had been dressed as a woman after losing a bet. It didn't seem likely, the lady in the green cloak had appeared far more feminine than this man. I was about to introduce myself to him when the whole plane went dark. A voice coming from the loudspeaker declared: 'Would Audrey Driscoll of seat 347 please report to the cockpit?' That was the seat next to me, where the woman in green had been sitting. I thought briefly about talking to one of the flight attendants about her disappearance; surely, they'd want to know about something like that. I reasoned that she could've simply switched seats with this man, after all, she did have a middle seat. Perhaps he was her brother; that would explain the similarities in appearance.

I suddenly saw green-cloak lady making her way up the aisle, and I decided, when she waved to the man next to me, that I must've been correct, and they were siblings. It was only later that I remembered the blood red splodge on her cloak.

Then, finally, the plane began its descent. Green-cloak lady still had not returned, and I didn't see her making her way back down the aisle even when the seatbelt light came on. I shook myself, shocked at my prying thoughts; it was none of my business what she might be doing in the cockpit. Our descent seemed to take hours, but finally, we landed at Heathrow Airport in London. The landing was nothing but a blip in the drama of the days that followed, and I have only one clear memory: The flight attendants, deadened eyes, telling us that we were missing a passenger and we would all have to stay in the airport hotel until they could find Passenger 74. I supposed I couldn't complain, I would have stayed in the hotel anyway and the airport would surely be covering the price. When they came around at nearly quarter to three in the morning however, I wasn't feeling so accommodating

'Why on earth are you waking us at this hour? Surely this is against our rights?' remarked the large American woman from the room next to me in shrill voice. I didn't complain; I felt rather bad for the flight attendants, who looked as they hadn't slept in days.

When they began to question us, I soon realised it was green-cloak lady who had disappeared. Her brother seemed quite frantic, understandably; his sister was missing after all. Many of the other passengers were flippant with their answers, seeming strangely unconcerned. As well as blankly staring when they weren't spoken too, just the same as green-cloak lady's trance on the plane. The American with the shrill voice was one of the worst victims of this; she was sitting quietly, eyes wide open in as though she was petrified, almost completely opposite to how she had been ten minutes earlier.

I, being green-cloak lady's seatmate, was first to be interviewed by the general manager the next morning. 'So, I understand you were sitting next to Audrey Driscoll?' Josh, the general manager asked.

'Yes', I replied, 'but only for the first half of the flight; she swapped seats with her brother a few hours in.'

Josh wrote something in his notebook, nodded, then asked: 'Did you have any contact with Ms. Driscoll before this flight?'

I could tell Josh would've rather had even the most junior of interns conduct this interview; he was constantly on edge as though he were going to be fired any second. 'No, I'd had no idea who she was before the flight.'

'And did you notice anything strange about Ms. Driscoll's behaviour throughout the flight?' I debated for a moment before making up my mind. 'No. She was quite normal.'

That night, Audrey Driscoll appeared in my dreams.

'My name is Audrey Driscoll, and I am Passenger 74. The missing passenger. The vanishing girl. The one they never found. I left that plane, and they'll never know how I did it.' Audrey Driscoll, green-cloak lady, laughed mockingly.

'What happened to you?' I asked, 'Where did you go?'

'Ah, my dear, I'm long gone now. You'll never find me, I've disappeared.'

The ground fell out from under me, and when I awoke in an ice cold sweat, there was no Audrey Driscoll to be found anywhere.

Almost a week later, and they still hadn't discovered where green cloak lady; Audrey, had disappeared to. Her brother had stopped swanning around with empty threats of million-dollar lawsuits and become almost deathly quiet when it became clear she wasn't going to turn up anytime soon. It was a few days after the lawsuit threats finally trickled to a stop that they found a body inside the baggage carousel. It was automatically assumed to be Audrey Driscoll, but the body still had to be formally identified. That body didn't belong to Audrey Driscoll, it was that of the large American lady with the shrill voice.

I was the last person, to our knowledge, that Audrey Driscoll ever spoke too. My only memories of the American lady, Mya Mills, are of her shrill voice, and her lying, waxen faced, in a coffin of dark marble. Those simple facts have haunted me all these years.

Audrey Driscoll was never found. The media dubbed her Passenger 74, and she became almost a martyr, the source of mystery and wild conspiracies. She was accepted dead after a few short months: funerals were held, tears shed, eulogies spoken through choked-up voices, flowers laid on empty coffins. But there was something else. A small piece of paper, wedged

between seats 347 and 348, watermarked with a strange looking flower. It read: Goodbye, flight BA4926. None of you will last.

I'm the only one left alive out of the 97 passengers who were aboard that flight.