

Crop Duster

John Boston

He said his name was Cyrus. The way he acted and carried himself, I assumed he was a foreigner. Maybe Iranian or Persian. He had only been doing crop dusting for a few years. He said he was a big shot in the Iranian Air Force before fleeing to America. Why on Earth he decided to get into crop dusting with his experience, I have no idea. He seemed to be working far below his experience and ability. I still call us crop dusters, even though the younger kids call themselves ag pilots. We spray dusty chemicals over crops, that's our job.

Anyway, Cyrus and I would be working together this week to spray an alfalfa field in southeastern Kansas. Pretty straight forward. Cyrus shook my hand and didn't say much. I was the senior ag pilot with the most experience, so that meant I was in charge, at least according to our company's rules. We have to pay close attention to wind speed and application rates. We put on too much fertilizer, we destroy the crop. Too little fertilizer and the farmer just wasted his money. I thought that our best plan of attack was to hit it head on at daybreak around six or seven. There wasn't supposed to be much if any wind. I made certain Cyrus was familiar with all the controls in the air tractor, as well as the safety equipment. He checked out my plane and I checked out his, as per company protocol. We carefully loaded the fertilizer into the spray tubes and locked them in place. Once everything was ready, we headed out.

Cyrus was a very skilled pilot, I could tell simply by how he turned and maneuvered the air tractor into position. His first pass wasn't perfect, but the next three were spot on. I made certain he was in good shape before starting my own. It took us just over four hours to spray a 2000 acre field between the two of us. We would both be paid three thousand dollars for our services. Not too bad for a day's work. Once we were back in the hangar, I thought it a good idea to get to know him a little bit better. I assumed we would be working with one another again in the future and wanted to have a good working relationship with him.

He didn't really say much. It's not that he was being rude or unfriendly, he just didn't seem to want to engage in small talk. He hadn't been with the company for too long, I asked him what his plans were.

"My only plans are to keep flying for as long as possible. I've been doing it for so long, it's all I know. I think when you start to fall out of a routine, things can go very wrong for you."

"I think there's a lot of truth to that. Our bodies don't seem to like change very much." I said.

"Tell me, Jack.....have you ever taken LSD?" he asked.

"No, I can't say I have." I said, being somewhat surprised by his question.

"I never even thought about it up until last year. I was with this woman and she got me into it. I can't tell you what the experience is like. For the first time in my life, I felt this clear, concise clarity I have

never known before. Things became so very clear to me. I only wish everyone could have the same experience. For a brief moment in my life, it felt as if I were walking hand in hand with God.”

“Cyrus, you do know you can’t keep a commercial pilot’s license and take LSD?” I said, trying hard not to sound too much like a boss.

“Oh, I fully understand. I don’t do it all the time, just when I need clarity and the need to communicate with my higher self.” said Cyrus.

Cyrus was a strange individual. He carefully stole the conversation away from me and managed to drop a bombshell on me at the same time. He was waiting for the right moment to strike. I’m not sure why he felt it necessary to tell me about his LSD use. He barely knew me. I hated to be the boss, but I am the boss. That’s just who I am. Some days, I don’t even want to be the boss. I’m not *the boss*, just a small boss. That said, I had no choice. I had to tell the owner of our company what Cyrus had told me. I know you have sudden flashbacks after taking LSD and we certainly couldn’t afford to risk it when he was in the air. I don’t know what Cyrus was thinking, but I know what I was thinking, and I just wanted to be done with a loose cannon like him. I just wasn’t sure my boss, Calvin was going to see it quite the same way. I went into his office and told him verbatim what Cyrus had told me. He didn’t seem too impressed.

“Jack, even if we did drug test him, none of them screen for LSD. Did he say he does it all the time, or what?”

“No, not all the time, just once in a while. Look, LSD is very dangerous stuff. My sister took some at a college party. It messed her up for a week.”

“I guess we’ll just have to keep an eye on him. Unless he tells you he’s regularly taking the stuff, I don’t think there’s much we can do about it.”

“He admitted to taking LSD.....and you’re telling me not to worry?”

“Jack, the guy who had my job before me, had two DUIs. We have an ex felon working for us. People make mistakes, they aren’t perfect, you’re just going to have to accept that.”

There it was. That’s how it all started. I have to work with a guy who takes LSD and flies airplanes. No one really seemed to care. The company was starved for experienced pilots, I understand that, but Cyrus had no business being here. He was a liability not just to himself, but the whole company and anyone else around him. I just hoped to avoid him in the future. I wouldn’t be so lucky.

Three months later, I had to work with Cyrus again for a commercial ag job, spraying insecticide and herbicide over a farm in Nebraska. Cyrus saw me and waved to me. I waved back. I was not the boss on the job, so I just sat and listened like everyone else. It took two days and five planes. I went through three hazmat suits and a respirator. I was actually walking back to my car, when Cyrus approached me.

“Jack, good to see you again. How have you been?” he asked

“Fine. You’re certainly getting good at dusting. You were running circles around the other two out there.”

“Yes, Jack, I was wondering if you had any time to reflect on what I had told you a few months ago?”
“Reflect on what?”

“Have you thought about taking some LSD with me?” he said. He was completely serious.

“Uh, no Cyrus, I won’t be taking any LSD with you.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that. It will change your life. I assure you.”

I didn’t say anything else to him. I got in my car and drove away, just leaving him there. I called the boss again and told him what Cyrus had told me.

“Look, you either test him for LSD, or I’m calling the FAA hotline. Feds are the last thing you want to deal with. So, what’s it going to be?” I asked, getting a little hot under the collar.

The boss called the owner of the company, who said to go ahead and test him for LSD. Everyone who was employed by my company had to report to the main hangar for a drug screen. We all took turns peeing into the cup and blowing into the breathalyzer machine. I was hoping this would be the last time I would have to deal with Cyrus and his LSD nonsense.

The owner of the company, Mr. Faraday, walked into my office and threw down a stack of papers. I could tell he was not amused.

“There is only one company that makes a drug test for LSD. It costs 9000 dollars.....that’s per pee cup. We got the results of his test back and they’re negative. He had no detectable LSD in his body. Are you happy now?” he said and walked out.

I was more relieved than happy. They might not have detected it this time, but I’m sure he was still using it. I shot my shot and came up empty handed. It was just time to move on.

It was a few months later, when I discovered that Cyrus had been given a promotion and was now going to be training new pilots. I’ve been dusting for much longer than he has been and I was never even offered the job. I was hurt. I was more angry than hurt. I also knew there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it. I just had to sit here and watch him get promoted, while I’ve been at the same position for the last ten years.

The company was growing and purchasing new planes. Cyrus and I would be going to the annual agricultural aviation expo and trade show this year in Las Vegas. I can tell you, I certainly was not looking forward to it. Cyrus was quickly working his way up the company and leaving people like me in his dust. Success comes so easy for some and never comes at all for others like me. As luck would have it, the two of them were forced to share a room together. Separate beds of course.

I just couldn’t believe it. A water pipe had burst running directly over our rooms. Forty people had to be moved and there weren’t forty rooms available. I didn’t want to make a fuss, I knew everyone was upset. I figured I would try and make the best of it. We both had to attend meetings in the morning, but were free for the rest of the day. I kind of assumed Cyrus would just come in at night, we’d exchange greetings, then ignore one another on our phones and go to bed. I couldn’t possibly have been more wrong. I had made the mistake of telling Cyrus I had studied philosophy as an undergraduate. I guess he took that to mean, I was the type to try and find some kind of hidden meaning behind everything. It

was either philosophy or liberal arts. He came in right after dinner and sat down on his bed. I tried to ignore him, but that just wasn't going to be possible.

"Jack, as a man who has studied philosophy, I would like to know your thoughts on the current situation in the Ukraine." he said sitting up on his bed.

"It's a shit show. You don't need any formal training to be able to see it for what it is. A perfectly pointless waste of human lives."

"My father was in the Iran-Iraq war. He was never the same man once he returned. He was one of the lucky ones."

"I'm sorry to hear that. My father had much the same experience in Vietnam. He came home a shell of a man."

"What type of people can our leaders be to create such unimaginable carnage and destruction and never be held accountable for it? I ask myself how God can permit such things to happen."

"Well, maybe one day our leaders will have a war and no one is going to show up for it. As long as people are willing to sacrifice their lives, there is going to be war." I said.

"My own government in Iran did much the same thing to our people. The Iranian people are very kind. I think the American people are very kind, but we are both very naive to have allowed such an evil force to control us."

"That's the story of humanity. One horror show right after the other. Maybe someday we can break free. It probably won't happen until the end of the world." I say

"That's entirely my point. It's not just change that matters, it's *who is doing the changing that matters*. Every event in human history that was done by our leaders has ended in horror, but every meaningful event done by a regular person like you and I has a profoundly positive impact on our planet. We have to be the change we want to see happen. We can't rely on others to do it for us."

"You're probably right. Hell, every useful invention we have today pretty much came by some guy like us who just decided to run with his kooky idea. The guy who invented the cathode ray tube was a potato farmer named Philo Fransworth. He just thought of the CRT one day while picking potatoes in his field in Idaho. Clara Barton was sixty years old when she started the Red Cross during the civil war. These are the people that created meaningful change."

"So, you see, it is up to us to bring the change we want to see. We are doing God's work. He is living through us."

"Change is for young people with ideals. I'm far too old and jaded to be an idealist." I said.

"That's where you're wrong, Jack. It's people like us with the knowledge and experience to make that change happen. Young people have strong hearts, but lack the wisdom to see it through. Too many start off strong, but quickly fade away. People our age know what it takes to succeed, like the saying goes: *you got to lose to know how to win*.

Cyrus spoke for the next half hour about doing God's work here on Earth and how a few very special, very lucky people get to feel God working through them. I was kind of surprised he never brought up his LSD use.

"LSD is the magical glue that brings all of this together. Mr. Leary was quite correct. LSD is like having a perfectly clear, perfectly functioning mind as God intended it to be. I was quite serious when I suggested you try it."

"I'm going to have to pass. That stuff is super dangerous. I hope you know what you're doing." I said. "Jack, for the first time in my entire life, I know exactly what I am doing." he said as he turned off the light to go to bed.

Cyrus and I did get to know one another better over the next few months. I decided to go take a job in sales and the only office was right next to his. We'd chat during lunch and in the hallway. Cyrus was a profoundly weird, yet profoundly fascinating individual. Faraday absolutely adored him.

"We're lucky to have him here, Jack. He's done some amazing things here for the company. He's the guy you should be looking up to."

I just smiled and walked away. Sure, a little part of me was jealous at his success in such a short amount of time. Success just comes naturally to a guy like him. He and his family arrived in Los Angeles thirty years ago with just the clothes on their backs. They had to stay at a Catholic shelter for three months before they got their own apartment. He said the Iranian border guards were shooting at their car, trying to prevent them from crossing into Afghanistan. Cyrus has certainly earned everything he has.

I guess in some ways, I felt a little foolish for not giving him a fair chance. I strongly disapprove of his LSD use, if he is in fact using it, but you certainly had to respect his life story. His son is doing his graduate studies at UCLA. His daughter works as an ER nurse. The family is living the American dream.

There was a dinner in his honor one evening. He had his entire family with him. His daughter could have passed for a runway model. His son was going to work for NASA. It was his speech that evening that I think I found the most interesting. It was more rewarding than the tri-tip dinner.

"Change, ladies and gentlemen.....embrace it, don't fear it. Yes, far too often, things do not change for the better, but I can assure you as an employee of this company, that any change you see from this point forward will be done by those who have the most to gain but it, not the most to lose by it. Ten years from now, we will be the largest agricultural aviation company in the world, not just here in the United States. When you walk hand in hand with God, anything is possible."

The audience gave him a standing ovation. It wouldn't be too much longer before he was our next CEO. I knew it was coming, it was only a matter of time.

The king had now been anointed.

I didn't really do much for the next few weeks. I did manage to secure a couple of large contracts. I caught Cyrus one day in our main hangar, he seemed to be doing some type of inspection.

He seemed more than a little upset. I asked him if everything was okay.

“It just strikes me as odd.....maybe even dangerous.” he said waving his clipboard.

“What’s that?”

“Take a look at this old Cessna Ag Wagon here. What do you see in front of you?”

“I don’t know? What am I supposed to be seeing? She’s an old warhorse.”

“To most people, even ag pilots, it’s a plane, more like a tool to complete the job. To me, it looks like a weapon. Any lunatic could fill it up with God knows what and just take off and unleash whatever they wanted on our town. Do we even do background checks on our pilots?”

“Cyrus, after 9-11, the FAA came down hard on us and every other commercial-freelancer, pilot out there. They were thinking the exact same thing. I do remember they pulled some Egyptian guy’s pilot’s license for no real reason, other than the fact that he was from Egypt. He threatened to sue and they had to relent. It wasn’t pretty.”

“I don’t know, I just know how many kooks and lunatics there are out there. Guys our age know it all too well. Maybe I’m just rambling without a point, but crazy people scare the hell out of me for the simple reason: *you just never know how crazy they really are!*”

“I don’t know, Cyrus. Everyone nowadays has to pass some pretty rigid background checks before they are allowed to fly, even an old jalopy like this one. If it’s that important to you, bring it up to the FAA? They have a manned hot line open 24 hours a day.”

“No, I need to talk to a real person, not a politician.” he said and stormed off.

I really didn’t think much of it and just looked for the spare parts my air tractor needed. We had a staff of very skilled aircraft mechanics who were worth their weight in gold. There was zero margin for error in the aviation industry, I kind of fell out of touch with Cyrus for the next several months. We were expanding into Mexico and Central America and Cyrus spoke Spanish, among his other noteworthy skills. He had been gone from the office for months at a time. I didn’t even really think much of it when it happened. Faraday called me and asked if he knew why Cyrus ordered these special spray nozzles for the airbus. They didn’t really have a commercial application.

“They cost over twenty thousand dollars! I’m sure he had a good reason, but that’s a lot of money. I just wish he would have run it by me first.” he said

“If he had run it by you, you probably would have told him no.” I said.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I can’t even get a hold of him down there. I hope he didn’t decide to run away with some little senorita.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. He seems devoted to his family.” I said.

“I want him to be devoted *to this family.*”

I sat straight up in bed that evening. I had the most vivid dream I have ever had in my life. It was almost as if *I* had taken LSD or something. It was all so real, so vivid.....*as if it were actually happening right in front of me and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.*

All I had were my suspicions. All I had was some very circumstantial evidence. In short, I didn't have shit. None of it was going to hold up in court and I would destroy this man's life in the process. I'm not even sure if it's physically possible to do what I think he is going to do. A lot of it is dependent upon wind speed, etc. It may not even be possible.

That doesn't mean Cyrus won't try to do it.

In my nightmare, the reason Cyrus is working down in Mexico is to get his hand on the chemicals used in the manufacture of LSD. Much easier south of the border. The cartel has some very skilled chemists on their payroll.

He's been telling me all along what he plans to do, I just didn't listen to him.

His love of LSD, his need for a people's revolution, his ordering those special microatomizers for the planes. Cyrus is going to dust someplace with LSD. He's going to do this and there isn't a damn thing I can do to stop him. He's actually going to get away with it. I can call the feds, they'll investigate and turn up nothing. I have no real evidence at all, just a hunch. I'll be vilified. Maybe it's worth it. I think I'm the only one onto him. There were really only two choices facing me. I could do nothing and maybe he would do nothing. I could do nothing and he could destroy a major city. *I could just kill him and make sure he never gets to put his plan in motion. I could very well be killing an innocent man. Then again, these were some very high stakes if I'm wrong.*

I knew I had only one chance. A dead body in Mexico would stand out about as well as a cow pie in a busy pasture. Ain't nobody going to care.

I didn't eat much over the next few days. I tried to put it out of my mind, I just couldn't do it. Finally, one evening after a bottle of wine, I decided to do it. I and I alone was going to have to stop Cyrus from putting this monstrously evil plan into place. I wasn't sure.....that was the problem, I was like eighty percent sure, maybe even ninety percent. There was just enough room for error to really make me step back and think. Pilots should not be talking about their LSD use. I then realized that he was telling me precisely because he wanted me to stop him.

I took some time off work and said I was going to check on Cyrus in Mexico. His communication had been rather sporadic as of late. Faraday just said good luck and to text him when I got to the hotel. If only he knew what I was going to do to his little wunderkind.

I knew full well what I had to do. It was almost twenty hours to the border. I drove across the border with a loaded gun hidden in my front seat. The Mexican cops never even stopped to check. I found out where he was staying. I called my boss and told him that I wasn't going to make it and was going to stay in the city for the evening. I checked in and went to my room. I climbed out the window and made my way to my car. I drove for almost two hours until I came to the hotel where he was staying. I found him sitting on a villa, alone smoking a cigar.

"Jack, what on Earth are you doing here?" he said somewhat startled.

“Cyrus, I need to talk to you, alone. In my car. It’s very important.”

“Okay.”

We walked over to my car. I pulled out my pistol. We walked behind the parking lot, to a secluded area. “I’m not going to let you do it!” I said and pulled out my pistol.

Cyrus immediately raised his hands. His cigar dropped out of his mouth.

“Jack, what the hell are you doing?”

“You know why I’m doing this. I’m not going to let you do it!”

“Do what?”

“Spray someplace with LSD. It would be worse than 9-11.”

The look on his face changed suddenly. I knew I had him. It was like he had finally found the missing piece to some puzzle.

“Jack.....you’ve got this all wrong. I’m not going to spray anyone with LSD.....*he is!*”

What?” I said. I knew I couldn’t waiver. I had to act without hesitation.

I shot him twice in the chest. I don’t even know why. I just wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. I wasn’t even thinking about how I was going to escape. I just wanted to make certain he was dead.

“You idiot!” he said, fighting for air.

“I can’t let you do it Cyrus. I won’t!”

Cyrus began to laugh and coughed up blood in between. He was dying and dying quickly. He would be dead in a few more minutes.

“You don’t even know who got me hooked on acid, do you?” he asked

“It doesn’t matter.” I said

“Oh, but it does matter. Our boss, Mr. Faraday. He’s the one who’s going to spray a city with LSD. I was trying to stop him!”

The words cut through me like a knife.

“You’re lying!” I said with tears in my eyes.

“I wish I were. I only wish I were.” he said and rolled over onto his back.

I just left him there to die. What on Earth had I done? Was Cyrus just saying this to cover his own ass?

I ran out of there as quickly as I could. I had parked almost half a mile away and in Mexico City in less than two hours. I checked out of my room and drove back to the border at Laredo. I was fully expecting to be picked up by the police, or the border patrol, but instead, they just waived me through. I had just killed an innocent man.....I had to have answers.

My phone rang as I drove through Houston. It was one of my co-workers.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Jack.....are you watching this. Faraday went nuts. He just took off in one of our Air Tractors and is headed right towards Des Moines. Everyone’s trying to catch him. They say if he doesn’t land, the Air National Guard is going to have to shoot him down. He’s lost it.”

“Did he leave a note or anything?” I asked meekly.

“Yeah, sure did. It read: *The prettiest rainbows are the ones in our minds.* What the hell does that mean?”

I hung up the phone and pulled over into a rest stop. I was reasonably sure the Guard would be able to blow and old Ag Tractor out of the sky. How hard could it be? They’re slow as hell!

Cause if they don't, the city of Des Moines is going to have an afternoon to remember.....forever.