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Come Fly with Me

NEW YORK AWOKE THAT THURSDAY MORNING IN JANUARY TO A STORY-book scene—Manhattan in a snowstorm; the flakes whipping almost sideways through the skyscraper canyons and a bright coat of white blotting out all of mankind's gray. Storybook, that is, if you were hunkered down and had no intention of flying.

Arctic air had also brought in the winter's coldest day, with early-morning temperatures in the low teens and single-digit wind chills. Ice formed around the edges of the Hudson and floes halted ferry traffic in the northern suburbs upstream.

Along the Avenue of the Americas, Tripp Harris bent into the wind as he bucked his way to get his morning coffee at Starbucks. The one-block walk seemed like a mile. A technological adviser to

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banks, he had flown up the night before from Charlotte, North Carolina—“Wall Street South,” as his hometown, a burgeoning banking center, had become known. For the past four months, the banking calamity had helped keep US Airways, which had a financial calamity of its own, flying almost at full capacity on its premier north-south runs.

Harris, one of the modern “road warriors” who racked up miles with back-to-back business flights, had scheduled a single morning meeting at Citibank. He would make the turnaround in twenty-four hours, less if he was lucky. Knowing the kind of mess the snow would make of LaGuardia, New York’s ancient but conveniently located airport, Harris had booked the five o’clock on US Air. With a little luck and the hole card of his frequent-flier status, he’d push for an earlier one—Flight 1549, a two-hour, home-for-dinner flight to Douglas International.

Not far away, a few blocks east of the Waldorf, in a window seat at the Café Basil on Third Avenue, Beverly Waters, another Southerner, born and raised just south of Charlotte, drank in the scene with pure joy. She *loved* the snow, “the flakes were big and Christmas-y,” and she thrived on watching the sidewalk drama, too. With their long, rapid strides, the native New Yorkers moved through the storm as if it didn’t exist, and nothing else did, either. Beverly had had a successful business trip but she was ready for home and her family. She was a nervous flier, but she hadn’t joined the Xanax set yet. Her boarding pass—seat 21E, Flight 1549—sat snugly in her purse.

All around the metropolitan area that morning, others were making the choices that would place them on the flight of the decade.

In the historic little town of Goshen, New York, an hour and a half north of the city, the woman who would be Flight 1549’s most senior citizen, eighty-five-year-old Lucille Palmer, took a midmorn-

ing call from her son: “Why are you going down there today? The weather is terrible,” he had said. Her great-grandson was down there and it was his first birthday, that’s why. And though she couldn’t get around very well without her walker, she’d have her daughter, Diane Higgins, with her. In any case, a little thing like turbulence at thirty thousand feet didn’t bother her a whit. Neither did snow. She was Brooklyn born, and Brooklyn tough.

Bill Zuhowski left Mattituck, Long Island, just before 7:00 a.m. with six inches of snow on the ground, no match for his ’03 Chevy Silverado. His flying plans didn’t include Charlotte, though. He was headed for an 11:30 Spirit Airways flight to Myrtle Beach, where he planned to celebrate a buddy’s birthday. Zuhowski didn’t fly much, sticking close to his job at a Long Island swimming-pool company. But he intended to drive the sixty-five miles down the Long Island Expressway to the Manhasset Station, ride the train the last fifteen miles to LaGuardia, and be wearing his shorts in Myrtle Beach by mid-afternoon. Best-laid plans . . .

The snow turned the LIE into a mire of fender benders. By the time Zuhowski parked the Silverado, his train had left. Grabbing a cab, he made it halfway to the airport before he discovered that his ticket was still in the truck. When he finally showed up, his flight had not left; it had been canceled. But the snow had let up and his dreams of a warm weekend in Myrtle Beach remained alive when his pal promised to pick him up in Charlotte. Zuhowski booked a rear seat on US Airways Flight 1549, which still showed on the reader boards as a 2:45 p.m. departure, although not many LaGuardia veterans thought that meant much.

LaGuardia is an urban airport, *not* one of the modern exurban jetports with long, multiple runways and a lot of give and take. It has two stubby crisscross runways, seven thousand feet each, with three of the endings over water. Despite its limitations, LaGuardia remains

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a favorite for New Yorkers and visitors alike. The airport was born in good New York fashion, and that is why, with luck, you can take a cab to midtown Manhattan and get there in twenty minutes. Back in the 1930s, the city's legendary mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, flew home one day with a ticket marked: Destination New York. The plane, as usual, put down in New Jersey. Enough is enough, stormed the mayor of the greatest city in the world, and by 1939, New York had not only its World's Fair but its own modern airport, then considered the greatest advancement in aviation design and eventually named in honor of the hell-raising mayor.

Seventy years later LaGuardia has become the most congested airport in the country, a takeoff or landing occurring every forty-seven seconds. It also has the most flight delays. Add a snowstorm and not only do New York skies close down but most of the Northeast corridor goes with it. The delays on the morning of January 15, 2009, averaged two hours and fifty-eight minutes until the sun broke through around noon. Then flights began to open up, though they were still running late. Early birds and latecomers leapt at the chance for a spot on US Airways Flight 1549, the beleaguered, twice-bankrupt airline's mid-afternoon mainstay to one of its hub cities, Charlotte.

The group joining Harris and Waters and Palmer and Zuhowski at LaGuardia was as great a cross section of modern America as New York could produce. It was also a group of people weighed down by all the woes of a world teetering on the edge of economic collapse. Twenty passengers were from the Charlotte-based Bank of America, just a small contingent of the company's weekly commuters to New York, there to work on the government-driven merger with failing Merrill Lynch, which had gone through four months to the day earlier. "The merger from hell," they called it in Charlotte, forcing a square peg into a round hole.

Some, out of date and out of tune, thought of a flight from New

York to Charlotte as Babylon to the Bible Belt. In 2009, you couldn't get much further from reality. Charlotte had long since become the second largest financial center in the country. Its skyscrapers didn't stretch as high as those in New York, but sixty stories can scrape some blue and, in good times, a little green. At the start of the financial crisis, the city's banks counted their assets in the trillions, not billions, although some of the zeroes had started peeling off, along with the hopes and futures of many of the people flying that day. More than one of the bankers on board was carrying his résumé—out of self-defense. The layoffs in Charlotte had been extensive. House prices were plunging, pensions disappearing, worries soaring higher than bank stocks had ever gone. On January 15, BoA shares dropped to a midday low of \$7.35, heading to half that price a month later and down from their onetime high of near \$55.

The circumstances at Charlotte's other major bank, Wachovia, which had just been bought out of certain bankruptcy by Wells Fargo, were even more tenuous for the flying merger transition teams. Three Wachovia executives were returning on the flight after another round of trying to mesh the inner wheels of their bank with the mysterious turns of Wells Fargo's.

Charles Spiggle, an executive in leveraged buyouts and acquisitions, was heading home. Spiggle was a top dog at Wachovia. But, like millions of Americans at that time, he and his wife had already had their family meeting, cut their discretionary spending, and tried to imagine what their alternatives might be.

"Yes, we were worried," Spiggle said. "Not petrified. But we didn't know then what was coming. We had had eighteen months of a credit-market meltdown."

But the people coming together at LaGuardia were a cross section in many other ways, too.

A who's who of Flight 1549 ranged all over the map:

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A gangsta rap, hip-hop music producer from Miami, Raymond Mandrell

A Jordanian Arabic-language specialist from the United Nations, Heyam Kawas

Salespeople of everything from patio doors to newly organized financial plans to intricately sophisticated software

Department-store buyers picking over a shattered New York apparel market after a disastrous Christmas season

One of the country's leading professional drag racers, Chris Rini

A dreaming young singer from Australia, Emma Cowan

Young lovers, one a veteran of twenty-seven months in Afghanistan

A Charlotte bride-to-be thirty days away from her wedding

Two copilots from other airlines deadheading to their own next stations, Derek Alter of Colgan Air and Susan O'Donnell of American Airlines

Several students, including a med student researching hospital jobs in the big town, Alberto Panero

A NASCAR executive, Amber Wells

A television executive whose network had filmed the story of September 11's United Flight 93, the hijacked airliner brought down in a fiery nosedive by passengers who fought back, Billy Campbell

Two New York-based Japanese traders, Hiroki Takigawa and Kanau Deguchi

A computer specialist born in India's Silicon Valley, Balaji Ganesan
Add in three small children—one a nine-month-old lap passenger—a personal trainer, a Feldenkrais practitioner, a nurse, a teacher, a cartographer, a waitress, lawyers, students, retirees

The passengers of Flight 1549 would be anybody and everybody.

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THREE HAD SAT in on the taping of the David Letterman show the previous night, when the sardonic late-night comedian made two airplane-crash jokes before turning serious to reveal that the day marked the ninth anniversary of the quintuple-bypass surgery that gave him what he called the “gift of life.” In granting him the miracle of the extra years, he said, the gift also gave the world his five-year-old son, Harry. None of the three passengers would remember the airplane jokes. They would remember the “gift of life.”

No group in the crowded US Airways terminal bounced around more happily than six golfing buddies, including a father and son. They all hailed from the little New England crossroads town of Chicopee, Massachusetts. Heading for a long-awaited vacation in Myrtle Beach, the same Spirit Airways cancellation that sent Bill Zuhowski to US Air brought them over, too. They wrestled a bargain price out of the airline by using Flight 1549 to Charlotte as a connection. To celebrate, they headed for the bar. There, over the first drinks of the vacation, they worked out teams and settled the courses they would play, all the things weekend golfers do. Before leaving, Jeff Kolodjay, the de facto leader and son in the father-son team, phoned his wife and told her he had just finished the best ten-dollar beer he'd ever had.

Another group that drew attention in the crowded waiting room was a gang that came to be known later as the “Belk Six.” Named after the “Oceanic Six” who went down in a plane crash in ABC's hit series *Lost*, the five women and one man were buyers scouting out junior miss clothes for Charlotte's Belk Department Store, a home-owned enterprise that had grown to include three hundred stores throughout the South. The women were dressed as if they were about to enter a stretch limo for a Manhattan party instead of the coach section of an Airbus to North Carolina. The group would stand out anywhere. They worked a-mile-a-minute, high-pressure Manhattan-style jobs, cracked wise and sharp-tongued as they went.

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One of their managers, thirty-five-year-old Lori Lightner, statuesque at six foot one, stood with her long black hair coming down over a full-length black down coat and fashionable black boots. The only Belk man, thirty-seven-year-old Michael Leonard, seemed a little pudgy for the group—five foot ten and about two hundred pounds—but he stood out in one other distinct way. “I am about as politically incorrect as you can get,” Leonard said. “I think I am the only straight-male buyer in junior misses in the entire country. That must mean I’m good.”

Laura Zych, a comely five-foot-ten new arrival to the group from Fargo, North Dakota, did not look like anyone from the Fargo we know and love. Just before boarding, she sat alone eating lunch at a table next to the golfers. When they got up to leave, one of them stopped at her table and wondered if he could ask her a question.

“Of course,” she replied.

“We have a bet at our table,” Rob Kolodjay, Jeff’s father, explained. “Are you a model?”

Zych smiled, even blushed a little, and then said, “Thanks, but I’m not. I work in the apparel/fashion industry.” Flattered, she giggled to herself all the way back to Gate 21, where boarding was beginning almost forty-five minutes late—not bad for a snowy day at LaGuardia.

Brian Moss, a thirty-five-year-old business analyst for Bank of America, remembered he had to call his ex-wife about their daughter. With all the merger travel, they had made a deal that he would try to get home in time to pick up their six-year-old from after-school care. He called to tell her that the snow had cleared and flights were taking off, adding one of those lines you wish you’d never said: “If you don’t hear from me by five o’clock, that means the plane went down.”

Moss shrugged about it later. So it goes. “I thought it was pretty witty at the time,” he said.

At the entrance to the jetway, US Airways made the usual last call

for a handful of standby seats yielded by no-shows. Brian Siegel, a BoA executive who runs their golf sponsorships, arrived too late to join the standby list. No chance. But as he was making a phone call nearby, he heard names being called for the last seat. “Mary Jones, please step to the ticket counter.” No one showed. “William Smith. . . .” No one showed.

Finally, Siegel walked over and interceded in the reading of the names.

“Sounds like you’ve got a seat,” he said.

“Aren’t you lucky?” the ticket agent replied. “One left.”

Siegel could feel the heat of glaring eyes near him. But no one embarrassed him out of it.

“I really hate to say it because it sounds like such a cliché,” Siegel said later. “I travel so much, but there’s always that thing about the last seat. There’s always the thought. . . . But I decided long ago I wouldn’t play that game. If I don’t take it, something will happen on the next flight.”

Meanwhile, a day that had started bad was turning worse for Martin Sosa, a Greenwich Village architect, and his wife, Tess, who were headed to Charlotte because of a family emergency. They had just suffered the indignity of security officials insisting on checking their nine-month-old infant’s baby food, jar by jar. Sosa couldn’t believe it. “Do you want to go into a private room for the inspection?” the inspectors had asked. *Private room?* thought Sosa, thoroughly annoyed. *It’s just baby food!*

Sosa’s muttering did not speed up the process. Fifteen minutes later the family moved on with growing anxiety.

The delay made them—father, mother, nine-month-old Damian, and four-year-old Sofia—still later for a flight on which they weren’t even seated together. With luck they would find passengers who would switch with them once they boarded.

On the tarmac outside Gate 21 stood the Airbus, tail number

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N106US, gleaming in the winter sun with its classic US Airways colors—snow white with a touch-up of red and blue. The plane had been flying for ten years and was about to make its 16,300th takeoff.

The European A320 was a handsome and symbolic airliner, built by a consortium of nations that effectively ended America's and Boeing's domination of the worldwide commercial aircraft industry.

As the passengers entered the cabin, turned right and headed toward their seats, most had no sense of a tattered airline or a tattered airline industry, although both were true. The coach passengers jockeyed their way down a single aisle of cleanly upholstered deep-blue leatherette seats, three on each side. In first class, the seats—heavily sought after by the road warriors—were arranged two on each side for a total of twelve seats in three rows. The Airbus was a flying cigar canister, no place for a claustrophobe, but it did its job well and looked pleasant enough.

In the aisle, Martin and Tess Sosa worked the crowd hard for a seat switch but were only partly successful. Bill Zuhowski, the young man who made the long drive from Mattituck in his Silverado eight hours earlier, yielded his seat to the father so he could be next to Sofia. But Tess Sosa couldn't get anybody to budge. Later, other passengers said they had never seen so many heavily traveled men bury their faces in their newspapers as she approached. Her anxiety rose and both she and Martin implored the flight attendants to do something.

"I can't order passengers to change their seats," flight attendant Doreen Welsh said evenly.

Even so, tempers flared briefly.

Michael Leonard remembered watching the scene unfold and telling Lori Lightner just before he buckled in two rows behind her: "Whenever I fly with my two girls, I can be a real jerk with the airline people."

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“You can be a real jerk any time,” Lightner replied, cracking wise in the Belk Six way.

Then all were buckled in and the passengers could feel the tug of the pushback from the gate. Suddenly, Tess Sosa unbuckled and started into the aisle, as if she wanted one more chance. This time Welsh spoke sternly: “Sit back down.”

The plane began the slow maneuver toward the runway.

The happiest members in the Sosa family were the children. Damian began nursing. Sofia pulled at her father’s arm.

“Are we flying yet, Daddy?” she asked. “Are we flying yet?”

“Not yet,” her father said. “Not yet, Sofia.”

Flight 1549 moved into eleventh place in line for takeoff.