

FROM HERE TO THERE
And Other Stories

By Patty Somlo



ParaguasBooks

FROM HERE TO THERE

IN the middle of the night, a plane flying from here to there disappeared. Just like that. The bright green line moving inexorably toward land and the quick, steady beep-beep-beep marking hundreds of miles traveled went right ahead and quit.

A space in the vast universe of air opened up. Clouds parted for a moment but then drifted back. The atmosphere all around made a strange gulping sound, amazed that such a modern capable convenience could simply vanish. A collective gasp went up all around.

Calvin Watts had been fighting to stay awake, his eyelids tempted down by invisible fingers in the direction of his cheeks. His gaze flitted back and forth across the screen, searching in vain for the calm, clear line of a plane that had left here and was soaring through the air, almost inevitably making its way to there. Unbeknownst to Calvin, he began to blink three times faster than normal. His mouth suddenly went dry.

“We’ve got a problem,” he proclaimed.

The urgent realization woke him up like a cold shower. He tried to get the pilot on the radio. “324 come in, 324 come in.”

There was no response.

Major Cliff Wilson drove himself to the flight line. His wife had been sound asleep. He hadn’t seen any point in waking her.

He jumped out of his gleaming white SUV next to the silver plane with its blue and white-winged Air Force insignia. While he stood there, the rest of the crew, Lieutenant Bill Stephens and the others, arrived.

Wind whipped around the airfield. Wilson frowned. Smoke from Stephen’s cigarette had blown over and was drifting up into his nostrils.

The flight path from here to there was dotted with planes,

but not 324. The other aircraft didn't matter to the controllers, whose eyes refused to leave the space on their screens where Flight 324 might have gotten lost. Starting with Calvin Watts, the controllers began to communicate, one to the other to the next and the one after that. They spoke in English, some with accents like warm syrup dripping across a pile of pancakes, others crisp, and still others lingering hard on the consonants, sounding like wood being sawn. Calvin naturally reached out and a colleague in Ireland assured him that the vanishing of the plane couldn't possibly have been his fault. The Irish colleague knew a heck of a lot about the sudden, startling appearance of bombs and how one might be going about the business of life and without the least warning, death shattered everything around.

Talk amongst the mostly male controllers caused a deep, low hum to exhale across the airwaves. Each and every one of them feared the very thing that had happened to Calvin Watts—losing a plane. And though they were men, a rather unfamiliar empathy wrestled its way into their hearts, causing soothing words to slip off their tongues, in an effort to console the distraught American.

The American military response was intended to convey a strength and certainty about the incident no one at the highest levels of the government actually felt. If the disappearance of this plane was the act of terrorists—and there had been no claim of responsibility yet—the government wanted to make clear that not a single other plane would be harmed, at least if they could help it.

At the same time, orders had been given to clear the airspace and bring thousands of planes back to the ground. The controllers had no more time to console Calvin Watts or worry. Everyone needed to be at two hundred percent alertness, to bring all those bright green lines safely to the tarmac.

Reporters arrived at the airport as if they'd been parachuted in. National Guard troops, or at least the handful not fighting in countries throughout the Middle East or participating in peace-keeping missions in Africa, stepped out of Humvees and took up positions under fluorescent lights buzzing overhead in the major terminals. Passengers kept their eyes glued on TVs, while reporters outside the waiting areas repeated the same three unconfirmed reports about the missing plane.

Only one week before a line on his computer screen vanished without the least bit of warning, Calvin Watts had asked Emily Ether to marry him. In the same way that the plane didn't hesitate prior to vanishing, Emily gave Calvin an immediate yes. This surprised Calvin, who hadn't been sure

what her response would be. The two had known each other for just one week shy of three months, which Calvin's mother warned him was way too short.

"You haven't even gotten through the honeymoon period," she told him. "You barely know her."

Calvin sighed. His mother treated every decision in his life as a mistake, so he shouldn't have expected anything different with his choice of a bride.

"I know Emily," he said. "We love each other."

"You know your fantasy of Emily," his mother said. "You don't know Emily. Knowing comes with time."

What Calvin knew was that he and Emily had lots of sex and it was outstanding. Even on nights he was exhausted from work, his eyes ready to leap out of their sockets from hours of being fixed on the computer screen in the tower, he managed to make fierce, sweaty, even screaming love to Emily. He did this at least twice, waking in the morning and starting in again a third time. He loved the way Emily's nipples grew hard at his touch and how steady her hand was when she stroked him.

Of course, Calvin had never been through the most insignificant stirring of the waters with Emily. They hadn't yet disagreed about whether to go out for Mexican food or Chinese. Now, Calvin had lost a plane and he wouldn't be going home to make love to Emily until he had done everything he possibly could to find it.

Major Wilson had been in the air for more than an hour and had nothing to report. The only planes flying were military jets. No wreckage had been spotted. He'd already gone back and forth over the area where the plane had skidded off the radar. He was flying under the clouds for better visibility but it didn't help.

Wilson wanted to be the one to find the plane but he nevertheless continued to hope for a miracle. As a pilot with fifteen years under his belt, Wilson knew that mechanical trouble could bring a plane down or necessitate an emergency landing. He'd had enough time already to come up with a scenario he liked. An engine went out due to a sudden and unexpected bird strike, the pilot quickly scouted out an open field, landed the plane safely, and everyone on board got out alive. The radio wasn't working, so several members of the crew were walking in an attempt to get to the nearest town.

The major knew there were serious holes in this story. Like, why didn't the crew members just call the tower on their cell phones? Wouldn't the passengers have been frantically texting their loved ones, to let them know they'd survived? And could both the one engine and the radio have had mech-

anical trouble at the same time?

Forty-eight hours after the plane disappeared, a previously unknown terrorist group sent an e-mail to *The New York Times* claiming responsibility for having brought the jetliner down. The group had a nearly unpronounceable name, with at least seven syllables and more than one appearance of the letter z. Reporters frantically Googled the name, becoming instant experts on this obscure group from an island none of them even knew existed. They stood before the airport terminal here, where the missing plane had taken off, and rattled off the history of the organization and its leader, whose bearded face was shown so many times on television, he soon became as familiar to American audiences as Oprah.

The problem with this claim of responsibility was that the missing plane had not been found. This, of course, didn't help the reporters, who every time they had to pronounce the group's interminable name, were forced to slow down. It wasn't surprising that TV news viewers watched in anticipation, of one overpaid anchor suddenly stumbling over the fourth or fifth syllable and getting completely tangled up.

Calvin Watts refused to leave the computer, even when his replacement Doug Fisk arrived. Doug put his hand on Calvin's right arm and said, "Get some rest, Calvin. I'll take over." Calvin refused to budge. Fisk walked down the hall to the conference room, lifted up one of the cushiony dark blue chairs and carried it back to the tower. He understood Calvin's reluctance to leave before the plane had been recovered.

A yellow-white band of light appeared on the horizon. It would be daylight soon, Fisk reassured himself. That would make it easier to find the plane.

Calvin wouldn't let Fisk take over, though. After arguing with him, Fisk gave in, making a mental note that if Calvin didn't turn over control in the next two hours, Fisk would be forced to report him.

As often happens with events in the real world, unlike their counterparts in the movies or on TV, no quick resolution to the problem of the missing plane surfaced, try as everyone might to tie up the crisis like a loose shoelace and get on with life. Calvin Watts refused to leave his post. At nine o'clock, with dazzling rays from the sun bouncing off the silver wings of jets parked next to the terminal, two burly airport security guards arrived. They did their best to minimize the disruption, repeatedly asking Calvin to calm down. Eventually, they had no choice but to handcuff the controller

and let the local police take him downtown.

With his one call, Calvin did not phone Emily. He understood that his fiancé wouldn't have a clue how to help. Instead, Calvin Watts called his mother.

The all-news cable station suspended its usual coverage to focus on whatever the heck might have happened to Flight 324. Seven reporters were assigned to the story, stationed in places around the globe. The news director even sent one prominent anchor to that tiny island off the coast of Africa no one had ever heard of before. This was a challenging assignment, given that the island didn't have a single runway. There was, of course, a dramatic segment in which the buff, tanned, and tee-shirted anchor stood swaying on a boat in brutally rocky seas, making his way to the island. The wind was howling, so he needed to shout.

The entire world was on the highest alert. Bearded leaders from every imaginable terrorist cell were frantically posting statements on their websites, showing planes being blown up by men wrapped from head to foot in camouflage and black, looking like commandos in a Hollywood blockbuster. It was as if the planet had tilted from the weight of too much anger, disillusionment, and fear. When the tension couldn't have climbed a single notch higher, an extremely short leader of an eternally petulant Asian country began shooting off missiles in the middle of the night.

And then the heat wave started.

It settled first in New York, with temperatures soaring to a hundred and six for three endless days in a row. The heat then swarmed up to New England and down the East Coast. Hot air blew west, to Chicago and St. Louis, Cleveland and Detroit, then climbed over mountain ranges, including the Rockies and the Cascades, to plop right down onto Seattle and Portland, Oregon. The only good thing about the heat was that it gave reporters a crisis to cover besides the frustratingly puzzling disappearance of Flight 324.

Pilot George Hannan donned a bright red and yellow Aloha shirt, moments after Flight 324 dropped off the radar. The co-pilot manned the controls. The plane, Hannan felt certain, was headed for warmer climes. He didn't want to be overdressed.

Hannan's decision to drop out of the airspace had not come as a surprise to co-pilot Heather McFadden. She and Hannan had discussed the plan countless times.

Heat has a way of breaking even the strongest spirits. And so it did that summer, as the endlessly hot dry days wore on. Throughout the country, blackouts became an almost daily

occurrence, with air conditioners straining the overtaxed system.

As difficult as the heat had become, no one could face the fact that two months after that steady, reliable green line slipped off the screen, Flight 324 still had not been found. After keeping planes out of the air for more than a week, the American administration allowed normal flights to resume. But it quickly became apparent that *normal* was not in any hurry to return. Flights were canceled one after the next. No one wanted to step onto a plane that might take off from here and never be seen or heard from again.

Calvin Watts was questioned by the local police and by the FBI. In those difficult days, when temperatures continued to hover around a hundred and five, Watts had become a suspect. He'd watched enough television to understand how it would play out. The guy in the baseball cap and black t-shirt and jeans named Eric was the good cop and the other guy, in jacket and tie who introduced himself as Al, had taken on the role of bad cop. Calvin knew he'd done nothing wrong, except let his mind wander for an instant while fighting to keep his eyes open. He'd seen enough TV, though, to understand that sometimes, and especially when a real suspect couldn't be found, the cops pinned the crime on an innocent man.

The problem was the crime. Without being able to locate the plane, who could say what crime, if any, had been committed?

Major Wilson—not unlike the president of the United States and all the other heads of an alphabet soup of intelligence and security agencies, along with leaders of dusty and far-flung terrorist organizations—saw the missing plane as a stepping stone to career advancement. Week after week as the crisis and the exhausting heat wave wore on, Wilson volunteered for extra duty, to keep up the hunt. The second month rolled into a third. Wilson logged more hours of flight time than he had in the previous three years. Not surprisingly, he spent only a handful of nights at home in his bed. Turns out, his wife Laura didn't mind.

Sometime during the second month of the crisis, Laura, in an uncharacteristically aggressive move, invited her young tattooed trainer out for a glass of wine. She told herself the invitation was harmless, simply a way to pass a little of that vast and empty time. Sure, she'd sometimes fantasized about him—his name was Marc—while staring at the muscles in his calves or the rose tattoo on his upper arm. No harm in a little daydreaming, she thought at the time. It didn't mean she

wasn't in love with her husband.

Marc was the one to suggest they order a bottle. Laura would have settled for one glass. She sipped nervously. It was different trying to make conversation with him, instead of simply following his instructions with weights in her hands.

He was so terribly young, she thought once the wine had started to make the walls of the restaurant appear soft. She had done the math. Seventeen years. That was the difference in their ages. Oh, it sounded so much like a cliché, but, yes, Laura was practically old enough to be Marc's mother.

At the start of the third month, Emily met with Calvin's lawyer.

"I don't know what to tell you, Emily," he said.

Emily stared at the disorganized piles of paper that covered attorney Robert Albright's desk like dry brown leaves scattered by the wind. How could he ever find a single thing, she wondered, and that thought convinced her that Calvin would never be freed.

"It's a strange time," Albright said as he sat down and leaned back so far in the chair Emily worried he might tip over and fall. "The government has accused your fiancé of a terrorist act. The charge is fuzzy. The evidence—or at least they claim they have evidence—is classified, so we can't see it. I'm doing what I can, Emily, but that's about as much as running in place."

"So," Emily said, at last letting out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "You don't know if he'll ever get out."

Her voice trembled as she spoke. She couldn't decide whether to be angry or cry. And if she got angry, should she be mad at Calvin, his attorney, the government, or herself?

"That's right, Emily. I don't know."

Emily had stayed up nearly half the night composing the letter. It seemed unfair, she knew, and selfish to give up on her fiancé at the time he probably needed her most. But what if the government was right and Calvin had caused an entire planeload of people to die—if that was what happened? Or if Calvin was innocent, what if the authorities kept him in prison the rest of his life?

The letter was folded neatly in thirds and slipped into a matching, small square blue envelope. Emily looked at the envelope for a long time before sealing it, thinking how people never wrote letters anymore. When she was a girl, her mother made her write notes to her grandparents every year at Christmas and on her birthday, thanking them for things she hadn't wanted and would soon throw away. *It's what I've always wanted*, Emily inevitably wrote.

Crises have a way of shifting relationships, and the disappearance of Flight 324 was no exception. Married couples—including Major Wilson and his wife, Laura—divorced at record rates. The engaged, such as Calvin and Emily, broke their promises. Longtime employees were let go. Even the most insignificant relationships were affected. Favorite restaurants were abandoned. People even began to drop off their dry cleaning at different shops.

A nervous energy hovered in the air, mixing with the heat and humidity and unsettling even the old. The event had the effect of an earthquake, except one where the earth's shaking never stopped and the ground beneath everyone's feet continued to split apart. Women were especially prone to weeping, as if every day had become that overemotional time of the month. It was only natural that men lost their tempers more than usual. One after another, men stormed into office buildings and post offices, shopping malls and a church or two, brandishing guns. This gave reporters another welcome break from covering the crisis.

Conservative politicians suggested the president declare war and mobilize the Air Force for a spectacular bombing raid to prove once and for all that the United States of America was in charge. Many of the old men in Congress recalled the widespread patriotism during the Second World War and thought a war might be just the thing to get voters' minds off the plane that couldn't be found and ensure their re-election. Several younger female members brought up an overlooked point. Since no one knew what had happened to Flight 324, how would they know who to bomb?

As if things couldn't become any more unsettled, a previously unnoticed line of green suddenly entered the atmosphere of an exceedingly busy computer screen. The line, like so many others that must have come from there, was making its way inexorably to here.

Seeing that green line, Doug Fisk involuntarily held his breath. He knew the line had not been there a moment before and it had no reason to have entered his screen. He was temporarily frozen, not sure whether the unexpected appearance of a bright green line was a good sign or another unsettling event with consequences no one could imagine.

As the line continued to move, Fisk couldn't help noticing that its destination was nowhere else but here. He let his breath out and his pulse roared, as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over his head.

"It's back," he yelled.

All the controllers in the tower felt their hearts knock.

Reporters couldn't get to the airport fast enough. The news had been twittered and texted, cell-phoned and blogged from the instant Doug Fisk said, "324 come in. 324 come in," and a deep, calm voice responded, "This is 324, coming in for a landing."

It was as if the sky had rained down hundred dollar bills or Americans all across the country had come to the end of a very satisfying Hollywood movie. Of course, Flight 324 had returned. How else could the story have ended, if not happily?

But what about the risk of letting this plane back in? Might terrorists be on board, waiting for the exact right moment to blow themselves up, taking the plane, its passengers, and all the other aircraft on the runway and in the sky with them?

The president ordered Air Force fighters into the air. Once again, controllers had to bring as many planes as possible down to the ground. Outgoing flights were delayed but no one seemed to mind. Everyone was glued to the television screens hanging here and there in the airport lounges, waiting for the next segment of this far too real reality.

Flight 324 came in for a landing like any other plane, circling overhead and preparing for its approach. Flight attendants checked the cabins, flipping and locking tray tables, running their hands over the overhead bins one final time. Passengers pushed buttons to bring their seats to the upright position. Those along the aisle craned their necks for a glimpse of the Bay and the place they'd left so many months before, wondering how it might feel to be home. A few women checked their makeup in small compact mirrors hauled from leather handbags.

Pilot George Hannan had returned to his uniform, as had his co-pilot Heather McFadden. Like the passengers, Hannan appeared darkly tan, healthy, and relaxed. He wanted the landing to be perfect, aware that it would probably be his last.

No one bothered to tell Calvin Watts about the landing. He sat on his cot, remaining in the isolation that quickly followed his arrest. On this morning as Flight 324 made its way back to here, Calvin was counting the days spent in his tiny, brightly lit cell. So far, he had made it to three hundred and eighty-three days.

Calvin couldn't have explained the counting, other than to say that he'd seen a World War II movie where Americans in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp counted to hang onto their sanity. As the weeks wore on, Calvin found it harder to keep his mind focused on the numbers. In recent days—and this was something he didn't want anyone to learn—he'd begun to

see strange shapes emerge. They formed in the air, just at the left of his sight—flowers and, worse than flowers, snakes, and one time this awful face with a large and bulging eye.

“You must have hope,” his mother continually reminded him in letters.

Just as his hope that he’d ever get out began to fade, the hallucinations began.

“What if,” Pilot George Hannan had said, as he held the tall glass of gin and tonic in the air and gazed into it.

“What if, what,” his co-pilot Heather McFadden asked.

They were sitting in the hotel bar after seven straight days of flying.

“What if we took the plane off-course,” he asked.

“What are you saying?” Heather said, leaning in close to study him. “That one drink has really gone to your head.”

“I am perfectly sober,” George said back. “This is a serious idea.”

“A serious idea. Sure. How about instead of flying to L.A., where we’re supposed to go, we head over to Tahiti? Is that a serious idea?”

“Yes,” George said and took a long swallow of Bombay Gin splashed with Canada Dry Tonic.

George Hannan didn’t say that he’d grown tired of it all. Twice-divorced and deep into an affair with Heather McFadden that would have to stop before long (Heather was starting to bring up marriage), George couldn’t help it. He needed to shake things up.

“We could just take off,” he said, more to himself than to Heather.

As the weeks wore on, he brought the subject up again several times. Then he started to add some details.

“We could come back after a while but that might be hard. In the meantime, we’d have an awfully good time. Think of it. Warm sun, water. Making love.”

He eased his tongue into Heather’s right ear and moved his fingers around her breast and then down.

Fire crews from stations all over town were called to the airport. Police moved reporters and pushed the curious crowds back. The area surrounding the runway was cleared. Trucks were driven in to spray foam, to put out a fire, if necessary.

George, and most of the passengers, felt as if they were floating during the last minutes of flight. George couldn’t help but grin, even though he was aware that what awaited him would not be pleasant. *A person needs a little break sometimes*, he planned to say to the obsessive media questioning

he expected upon arrival. Doesn't everybody dream about taking off and spending time in some exotic place?

George Hannan made a perfect landing. The passengers barely felt the plane touch down. Just as easily, Flight 324 slowed to a near stop. Then the pilot's deep, calm voice announced, "We are back, ladies and gentlemen. I sure hope you've had a pleasant flight."

From Here to There And Other Stories is available from these fine booksellers:

[Amazon](#)
[Barnes & Noble](#)
[BetterWorldBooks](#)
[Powell's Books](#)

Find Paraguas Books us on [Facebook](#).