



# SKYJACK

THE HUNT FOR D.B. COOPER

GEOFFREY GRAY

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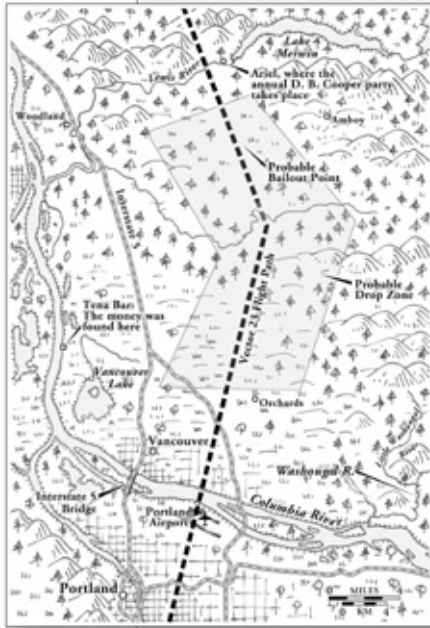
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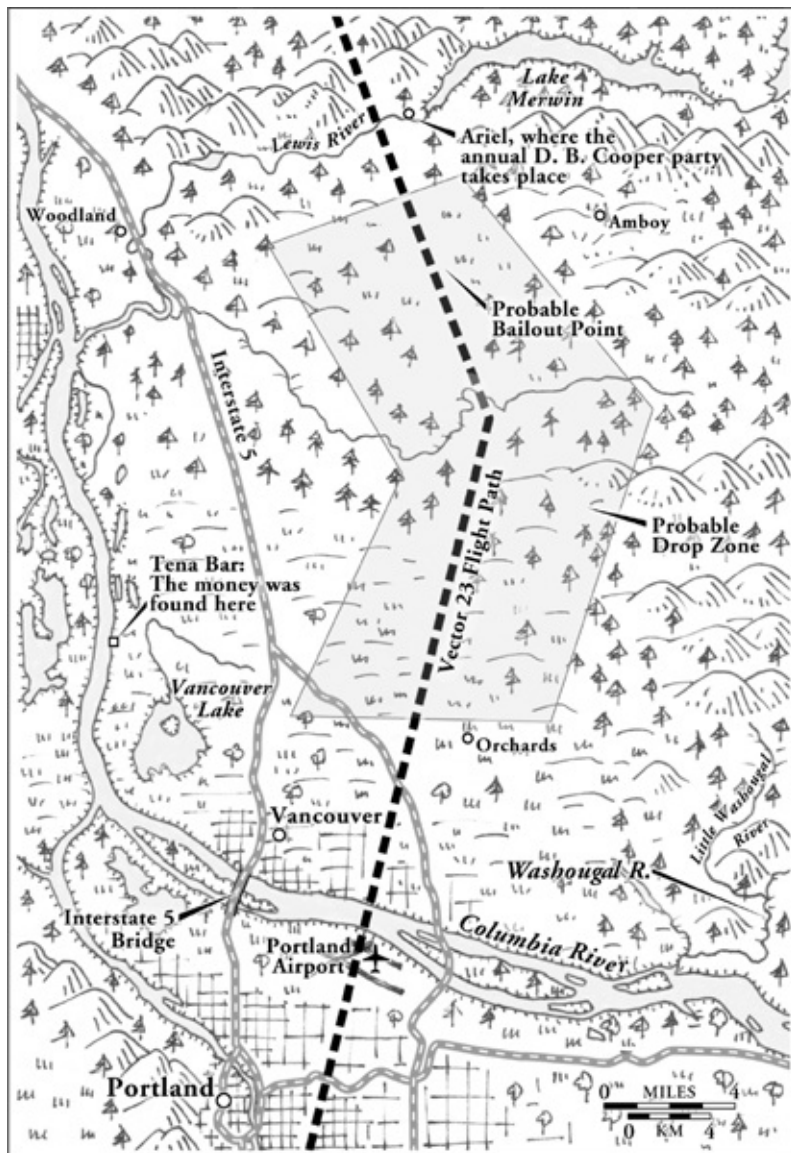
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*About the Author*

# THE FLIGHT PATH



PACIFIC OCEAN



Bombproof and crowded with oxygen ... terrace, volcallure at casa Cugat, Abbe Wants Cugie Gets.

We're up against an enemy, a conspiracy. They are using any means. We are going to use any means. Is that clear?

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—Richard Nixon



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**THE JUMP**

July 6, 2007

New York, New York

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**S**KIPP PORTEOUS WANTS to talk and says can we meet and I say fine. He arrives in a suit that is South Beach white, and between the wide lapels is a T-shirt that is snug and black. He has black leather sandals on his feet, no socks. His hair is curly and brown. His goatee is trimmed and has a few gray in spots. He removes his sunglasses, which reveal hooded eyes, and gives the room a looky-loo.

The bistro is typical midtown Manhattan. A fruit basket of martinis on the menu—mango, peach, Lillet. The clatter of voices at the banquettes and the clank of dishes ricochet over the roar of lunch talk. In the gilded mirrors on the walls are reflections of Windsor knots, hair gel, six-figure cleavage.

I have dealt with Porteous before. He had a few story ideas; none worked. I can't remember why now. Porteous was his own story, and maybe I should have written about him.

He used to be a preacher before he became a private investigator. In the late 1960s Porteous ran a church in Los Angeles and worked the Sunset Strip with his Bible. He preached to hippies, the homeless, anybody who would listen to his salvation pitch. "Excuse me," he would say, "if you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?"

The game for Porteous then was to win souls for the Church, until he lost his own. He saw corruption in the Church and started digging around. What he found was that he was good at digging around, often in disguise. Porteous liked undercover work so much he made a second career out of it. For a small-town sheriff, he bought drugs as a narc. For the FBI, he infiltrated gangs and groups wearing a wire. It was a decent living. The feds paid on time, and in cash.

His style is not tough-talking or pushy. Porteous has a holistic approach toward PI work. Some retired cops flash badges or guns. Porteous starts each investigative day with a meditation session.

He also hires mostly women to do PI work.

"Women have better instincts than men," he told me when we first met.

Sherlock Investigations, his agency, had the gimmicky type of title that attracts a lot of attention on the Web. It snared me, and countless others needing help solving problems of an unusual kind. Like the disappearance of Captain Jack, an iguana that was stolen through an open window in Greenwich Village. Or the woman who called because she was convinced that actress Lily Tomlin was stalking her (she wasn't). Or the man convinced his wife was having an affair with his father (she was). Or the runaway from Israel they found living under a bridge in Arizona. Or the mother from India who wanted to spy on the man her daughter was dating, and all the suspicious spouses and suits who are convinced (and wrongly so) that their phone receivers are tapped and their offices are bugged. Sin and paranoia form the backbone of his business.

It's loud in the bistro and I can't hear the private investigator so good. I lean over my *moules*, anxious to hear what case has come over Porteous's transom. Another missing person? Another teenage runaway? Gypsy scams?

Nope. It's a new client, Lyle Christiansen.



His intel is sparse. From what the private detective has pieced together, Lyle Christiansen appears to be a kooky old man, an eccentric, and prodigious. He is eighty years old, and lives in Morris, Minnesota, a prairie town closer to Fargo, North Dakota, than it is to Minneapolis. Lyle grew up in Morris and worked for the post office there. In retirement, he has become an inventor. He is in the process of patenting a hodgepodge of household contraptions: the Yucky Cleaning Wand (it slips into the neck of a bottle to clean the tough-to-reach places), an egg breaker that cracks eggs perfectly every time, and a shirt that disguises the appearance of suspenders (he finds them distasteful—in his version, you wear them on the inside of the shirt).

Christiansen's wife, Donna, has a creative mind, too. Over the years she has assembled a collection of expressions, adages, sayings, idioms, clichés, and senseless American verbiage. The title of her book is *As Cute as a Bug's Ear*. It has 2,270 entries, ranging from "As Bald as Billiard Ball" to "You've Got it Made."

Great. But so what? What's the story here? Why would a retired post office worker and aspiring inventor from Bumblefuck, Minnesota, need the services of a Manhattan sleuth-for-hire like Porteous?

Porteous was puzzled too. The first e-mail he received from Christiansen was cryptic. It read:

*Dear Good People at Sherlock Investigations,*

*I would very much like to contact Nora Ephron, Movie Director of the movie, "Sleepless in Seattle". I think she would be interested in what I have to say.*

The Sherlock employee who handled the note was Sherry Hart. Before she became an investigator, Hart tried to make it as a singer-songwriter and actress. Her training in the dramatic arts now helps with her undercover work. She's handled hundreds of cases for Porteous, and as she read over Christiansen's e-mail she thought, *Here we go. Another whackjob*. She wrote back:

*We would not be able to give you a famous person's address. If you want to write a letter to Ms. Ephron, we would deliver it to her ourselves. The fee would be \$495. Proceed?*

Proceed. Christiansen's check and letter arrived shortly thereafter. Porteous handled the letter with caution, as if it contained a nuclear code. He held the envelope to the light to examine it. He rotated the edges. He peered through the fibers of the paper and checked the pockets for powders.

The note was clean.

He read it. Lyle's letter to Ephron was a pitch for a movie. Lyle wanted to base the film on the life and times of a person he knew. The language was vague. The person he knew was quiet and shy. *Bashful* was Lyle's word. Mr. Bashful also happened to be a culprit to a major unsolved crime, Lyle said.

He also suggested a title for the film: *The Bashful Man in Seattle*. A tip of the hat to Nora Ephron's blockbuster, *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Reading the bizarre note, Porteous did not attempt to understand it. He wasn't getting paid to understand it. He hailed a cab to Ephron's building on Park Avenue and approached the doorman.

"Nora Ephron live here?" he said.

"Yes," the doorman said.

Porteous placed Lyle's envelope in the doorman's white-gloved hands. He then hailed a cab home. Easy money.



As the weeks passed, Lyle Christiansen was patient. Did Ephron know he was a retired civil servant living on little income, and paid so much money to send her a note? Ephron's films were so warm and tender. How could she be so cold and rude as to not respond with a note of her own?

In her home on Park Avenue, Ephron did receive Christiansen's letter. She saw his note on her kitchen counter and maybe later in the office. Or did it land in the wastebasket with her junk mail? She couldn't be sure. It disappeared.

In Morris, Christiansen was flustered. He decided to write Ephron again. Did she not receive his first letter? Would Porteous deliver it for him? Whatever the fee was, he'd pay it.

Porteous was baffled. Why was Christiansen so desperate to reach Nora Ephron? And what was he talking about when he said he knew a person connected with a famous crime? Which crime? How famous?

In e-mails, Porteous prodded for more information. The old man was cagey. He wanted to tell his story to Nora Ephron, give her the exclusive. But Ephron never wrote him back. Lyle finally gave up. He told Porteous everything.

His hunt started on television. Flipping around the dial, Lyle settled on the program *Unsolved Mysteries*. The topic of the episode was D.B. Cooper: the famous hijacker who in the fall of 1971 parachuted out the back of an airplane with \$200,000 in stolen cash—and was never seen again. D.B. Cooper had become a famous American outlaw, the legendary Robin Hood of the sky. The subject of poems and ballads and rock songs, D.B. was up there in the crime annals with Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, and Bigfoot.

*D.B. Cooper, where are you now?  
We're looking for you high and low.  
With your pleasant smile  
And your dropout style,  
D.B. Cooper, where did you go?*

His identity is a mystery. For four decades, agents, detectives, reporters, treasure hunters, amateur sleuths, and others have quested for clues that might reveal who the hijacker was. But no effort has yielded definitive results. Cooper remains only a face seen in sketches composed by FBI artists. And what a face!

Lyle Christiansen perked up in his chair when he saw it. The face was familiar. The receding hairline, the thin lips. The sloped forehead. The perky ears. The smile—the mischievous smile.

A cold and queasy feeling swept over him as he looked at the face. Could it be? It could. Lyle wrote to Porteous:

*Yes, I knew the culprit personally.... He was my brother.*



The PI looks discouraged as I slurp up the garlicky broth at the bottom of my bowl of *moules*. Cooper? Sky pirate? Never heard of the guy.

The name is alluring, though. *D.B. Cooper*. It's fun to say out loud. It has a royal ring, rhythm, with those stately initials that look so good in history books. J. P. Morgan. D. H. Lawrence. J. S. Bach.

Back at the office, I look up the case. The headlines continue, forty years later: VANISHED IN THIN AIR. THE PERFECT CRIME. THE WORLD'S MOST DARING CRIMINAL.

Cooper was a genteel thief, according to legend. He wore a suit and tie. He was polite-caring, even—to his hostages. He developed his own cult following. On the anniversary of his crime, in the forests of southwest Washington State, where many believe his parachute came down, worshippers toast his feat and keep the legend going at a party that has been running for forty years.

“He comes off as a kind of curious Robin Hood,” a sociologist said. “Taking from the rich or at least the big and complex. It doesn't matter whether he gives to the poor or not.” The symbolism of the skyjack was “one individual overcoming, for the time being anyway, technology, the corporation, the establishment, the system.”

And the posse. Cooper spurred one of the biggest manhunts in law enforcement, as search planes orbited over search areas and soldiers and generations of FBI agents on the ground waded through snow, mud, and rain in the most remote forest in the nation looking for him. Some lawmen were so impressed with the cleverness and courage of the getaway, they hoped the hijacker was never caught.

“If he took the trouble to plan this thing out so thoroughly, well, good luck to him,” one sheriff said after the jump.

“You can't help but admire the guy,” another federal agent on the first search teams said.

Cooper's crime transcended crime. In one jump, the hijacker was able to make the good guys root for the bad guys. So who was he? Why did he do it? And what happened to him?

Over the decades, the number of suspects and persons of interest in the Cooper case had grown to more than one thousand. Buried in the basement of the Bureau's field office in Seattle, the file runs over forty feet long. Inside are dossiers, letters, photos, interviews from witnesses, airline officials, parachute packers, tipsters, fraudsters, psychics, suspicious neighbors, business partners, conspiracy theorists, parents, jealous lovers. Some suspects disappeared. Some suspects faked their own deaths. One man nearly died in a custom-built submarine, scanning the bottom of a lake for the hijacker's ransom. One renowned reporter attempted suicide after his suspect was proven to be a fraud; only a steady program of electroshock treatment jolted him back into coherency. Countless impostors emerged. Men went to prison. The hijacking became myth, and over time the myth became truth. It was no longer clear what information was fact, or what was legend.

Like the quests to find the Holy Grail and the Lost Dutchman Mine, the hunt for the

hijacker is an odyssey that tests the boundaries of obsession, and the farther along the path one gets, stranger and stranger things happen.

The Cooper Curse is what those who have felt it call it. But is the Curse real? Or something we create, then blame when we fail to find out what happened? Or the by-product of a moment in time defined by chaos and paranoia?

When Cooper jumped in the fall of 1971, the nation was at war with itself. In government buildings and on college campuses, bombs went off. In cities, looters roamed as riots raged and buildings burned. At demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, protesters were arrested by the tens of thousands. A defeat in Vietnam was imminent. The nation was also mired in recession. Labor strikes crippled the workforce. Unemployment soared. So did the crime rate. Prisons were overcrowded and taken over in riots. Communes were built. Cults formed. Otherwise normal teenagers ran away from home, and had to be “deprogrammed” after they were brainwashed.

“The music is telling the youth to rise up against the establishment,” Charles Manson said during his trial for murder. “Why blame me? I didn’t write the music.”

A mob had formed. The underground was rising. Terrorists were homegrown. Community fears were reborn. Inside J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, a campaign was afoot to compile information on protesters and anarchists. Phones were tapped.

At the center of the spookfest was President Nixon, whose motorcade was pummeled with rocks and surrounded by protesters.

“I just want to ask you one favor,” Nixon told top aide H. R. Haldeman. “If I am assassinated, I want you to have them play Dante’s *Inferno* and have Lawrence Welk produce it.”

The president feared blackmail from so many different directions, both in and outside his administration, that his aides formed the Plumbers, the White House’s own dirty tricks brigade. The Plumbers’ black-bag jobs eventually led to Watergate and Nixon’s resignation from office, perhaps the lowest point in the nation’s political history.



Skyjacking was then a national epidemic. Throughout Nixon’s term, there had been roughly a hundred hijackings of American airplanes, and over half the attempts had been successful.

The airplane had become the next stagecoach, a crime scene for dangerous jet-age robberies, and the skyjacker a momentary cultural hero. Like no other innovation, the invention of the airplane in Kitty Hawk and the evolution of American airpower were testaments to the nation’s technological virility and essential to the American ethos. Air power had been instrumental in winning the World Wars, in ushering in the jet age, in developing the space program. America had put man on the moon. Boeing had built the 747, the jumbo jet. And yet, in one impulsive action, the lone skyjacker was able to show the fallibility of the costly flying machines. What good was the power of the Air Force in a country like Vietnam where American soldiers were slaughtered under the canopy of the jungle? What good was flying a jet to vacation in Miami when so many flights were getting rerouted to Castro’s Cuba?

The skyjacker himself was a kind of schizo-transcendentalist. Onboard a jet, taking passengers and the flight crew as hostages, the skyjacker was able to create his own society.

He became his own head of state, directing others—the pilots, the stewardesses, the lawmen, mayors, governors—to act upon his whims. In one flight, the skyjacker went from nobody to somebody. And with reporters from newspapers, radio, and television stations monitoring the drama in the air, the culprits achieved celebrity. Dr. David Hubbard, a psychiatrist interviewing nearly a hundred airplane hijackers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, described taking over an airplane as a holy experience. “The skyjackers,” he once wrote, “seemed intent to stand on their own feet, to be men, to face their God, and to arise from this planet to the other more pleasing place.” To date, hundreds of skyjackers and terrorists have taken over airplanes. Only one remains unknown.



Shit. Porteous and Lyle Christiansen are on to something. The Cooper case is a big deal. Uncovering the identity of the hijacker is a major story (Pulitzer, hello!), and it’s mine so long as I don’t mess it up. Of course, I’ll have to prove Lyle’s brother was actually the hijacker. How hard could that be?

Back at my office after lunch, I call Porteous. I want to read the file he’s put together on Lyle’s brother. I want to see it fast, before Porteous decides to call another reporter. As a general rule, PI’s can get giddy over the prospect of publicity. Breaking the Cooper case would make Porteous the most famous PI in America. At least that’s what he must be thinking. That’s what I’m thinking.

I race over to Sherlock headquarters. The office doubles as Porteous’s one-bedroom co-op apartment on the Upper West Side. He opens the door and the classical piano music noodling away on the stereo oozes out. The place is like a zen palace for gumshoes.

I sit down at the dining room table. Porteous slides me the file. I pull out a few papers. One is a photo. The image is of a gravesite, for Lyle’s brother. I read the name.

**KENNETH P. CHRISTIANSEN  
TEC 5 US ARMY  
WORLD WAR II  
OCT 17 1926—JUL 30 1994**

So Lyle’s brother’s name was Kenny. I wonder what he died from. Cancer, Porteous says. The pancreas. That’s what Lyle told him. I read Kenny’s military record.

**PARACHUTIST’S BADGE, ASIATIC PACIFIC THEATER.**

So it was true. Kenny knew about parachutes. He could have jumped out of that plane just like D.B. Cooper had.

I pull another photo. In this one, Kenny is in uniform. He wears a skinny tie with a clasp. He is standing in the aisle of an airplane.

Kenny worked for Northwest, the airline Cooper hijacked, Porteous says. He wasn’t a flight attendant. He was a purser. A purser is a senior flight attendant who handles the money and immigration issues on international flights.

In the photo, I can see Kenny is grinning. Or is it a smirk? It looks as if Kenny knows something—a secret he is keeping. Kenny, what is it? Why the smirk? What is your secret?

Porteous hands me a sketch of the hijacker.

I place the image next to Kenny's face. Time to compare.

Whoa. Porteous is right. The resemblance is spooky.

"Oh, I think it's him," Sherry Hart says. Porteous's ace is typing away at a computer terminal next to the kitchen.

If Hart's femme instincts are so good, what is she sensing?

"Oh, coincidences lining up," she says.

I'm not convinced. But I'm getting there.

I flip back to Kenny's military records. In the far corner of one form I see his thumbprint taken May 25, 1944, when he enlisted. I place my own thumb on it. I close my eyes. I imagine what Kenny's hands must have felt like. I imagine my own thumbprint on his— I summon a feeling, an out-of-body clue that would tell me if Lyle's brother was indeed D. B. Cooper.

I feel something. Really. I swear. *Kenny?*

Or do I feel anything? Am I trying too hard and making it all up?

I look at another paper in Porteous's file. 18406 OLD SUMNER BUCKLEY HIGHWAY, BONNEY LAKE, WASHINGTON. That's Kenny's address.

Where's Bonney Lake?

"About forty miles from Seattle," Porteous says. He's seen the town on Google maps. He also noticed that Bonney Lake is strategically located. It's only twenty miles away from SEA-TAC, the airport where the Cooper hijacking took place. The authorities suspected Cooper was familiar with airlines and the area.

Coincidences, as Hart said, are lining up.

Do I have a choice? I have to fly West. I have to go to Kenny's old house, feel around for more spirits, knock on the doors of his neighbors, find old friends, colleagues from the Northwest. I write to Lyle for more information about his brother. I want to know him as Lyle did. I want to understand the way his mind worked. I drop all assignments. I do more research on the case. I read several books, newspaper clips. Soon I am leaving for the airport and now I am on the plane and I can't get the ballad out of my head. I can hear guitar strings I hum along to the chords.

*With your pleasant smile*

*And your dropout style,*

*D.B. Cooper, where did you go?*

I know exactly where: 18406 Old Sumner Buckley Highway.



November 24, 1971

## Portland International Airport, Oregon

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She is a specimen of red. Red lipstick. Red nail polish. Red uniform. It is not a candy apple red or a fire truck red, but the coral red you find on a necklace. Red is a central component of the “new look” campaign Northwest Orient Airlines launched the previous year. The makeover means new menus, mottos, ticket jackets, logos, and lots of red. Blue is out. Blue is conservatism and depression. And red? Red is passion, strength, arrogance.

Flo Schaffner hates Northwest’s new-look uniforms, designed by Christian Dior. She has to wear the Carnaby Street cap with a duck bill and ear flaps. The dress and jacket ensemble are too mod. All the straight lines make her look fat. She feels like Elmer Fudd.

Now she stands on the top of the aftstairs, and cold wind off the tarmac blows through the silk of her stockings and into the maw of the cabin. She looks out and sees the last passengers for the 305 flight. Huddled in their coats, they had been waiting at Gate 52, Concourse 1. Now they are on the tarmac in Portland, lining up to board under the giant red fin of the Northwest Orient jet. Above them are clouds that are dark and heavy with rain. Heavy storms are predicted for the next few days.

The first passenger in line walks up the stairs.

Flo meets him. Two years working for Northwest, her lines are automatic.

“Hi. Welcome aboard. Can I check your ticket?”

She reads the name on the boarding pass. Finegold, Larry.

He has frizzy hair, chunky eyeglasses. He does not look like a federal prosecutor. He spent the day in Vancouver, Washington, on the border of Oregon, to watch his colleague prosecute the mayor of San Francisco on corruption charges. Finegold needs to get home. He and his wife, Sharon, have an event at their synagogue later in the night.

Finegold is nervous about the flight. Only two months before, the same type of plane, Boeing 727, disappeared. Preparing for a descent into Juneau, the navigational system on the Alaska Airlines jet malfunctioned. The pilots and passengers were never heard from again.

“It apparently crashed into a sheer wall of mountain,” an airline official said.

The Alaska Airlines crash was the worst airline accident to date in the country’s history with 111 fatalities. Officials still haven’t figured out what mechanical failures caused the crash of such a big plane. Flight computers can’t be trusted. Or pilots. Or passengers.

The fear of flying is pervasive. To ease nerves, passengers on morning flights drink breakfast martinis with their cornflakes. Others use hypnotists or take tranquilizers before boarding. A group of psychologists recently started the Fly Without Fear Club, whose members are so petrified of airplanes they can’t look at them on the ground. The underlying causes of the fear, psychologists say, are feelings of claustrophobia, a lack of control, a fear of achievement. “There you are, up there, strapped in, trussed up, unable to affect your own destiny in any way,” one passenger told the *New York Times*. “If the plane goes down, so do you. What a perfect place for God to get you.”

To quell the nerves of passengers, airlines invest in advertising campaigns. “Hey there! You’re with the sweaty palms,” read the copy for a Pacific Air Lines ad. “Deep down inside, every time that big plane lifts off the runway, you wonder if this is it, right? You want to know

something, fella? So does the pilot, deep down inside.” At Northwest Orient, one early idea was to stage a photo with a group of Crow Indians. In front of a Northwest plane, the Indians wore headdresses and moccasins and posed for the camera stone-faced and bare-chested. “the Indians aren’t afraid of the white man’s bird, nobody else should be,” a Northwest pilot said.

The ads weren’t enough to put passengers at ease. Stewardesses are the new panacea they’ve become sex objects, redirecting passengers’ fears. At Southwest, the stews wear white leather boots with porn-star laces and tangerine hot pants.

For Braniff, Italian printmaker Emilio Pucci designed the Air Strip, uniforms that come off during the flight. “Introducing the Air Strip,” the Braniff ads read.

*When she boards our airplane, she*

*Zip*

*sheds these outer garments to greet you in a raspberry suit and color-coordinated shoes. This ensemble is too expensive to risk soiling during dinner, so at the appropriate moment, she*

*Zip*

*Snap*

*Zip*

*changes into a lovely serving dress which we call a Puccino (named for its creator, Emilio Pucci, who believes that even an airline hostess should look like a girl).*

Braniff stews were then nicknamed “Pucci Galores” after the Bond girl in *Goldfinger*. At United, the ads are generous: “Every passenger gets warmth, friendliness and extra care. And someone may get a wife.” At American, ads boast that the airline’s stews are marriage material. “A girl who can smile for five hours is hard to find,” the brochure says, “not to mention a wife who can remember what 124 people want for dinner.” At National, the pleasing spirit has been taken to the next level. Last month, the airline spent nearly \$10 million on this Madison Avenue campaign: “I’m Cheryl. Fly me.”

National’s stews also appear in their airline’s television commercials. They stare lustily into the camera as they deliver their punch line: “I’m going to fly you like you’ve never been flown before.”

To boycott National, protesters have formed picket lines in Washington, D.C., and New York. Women’s libbers are filing papers in court and demanding judges ban the Fly Me campaign. On the streets they march behind barricades.

“Go Fly Yourself, National,” their pickets read.



At Northwest, petitions are going around for the stews to sign. The flight attendants want to unionize. Flo hasn’t signed them. She’s happy to have her job, after what she’s been through.

“Hi. Welcome aboard. Can I check your ticket?”

Kurata, George. A steel importer from Japan.

Next in line. Zrim Spreckel, Cord. He runs a printing company in Seattle.

Flo checks more boarding passes. Her head itches. It’s her wig. The bob is brunette and shaped like a space helmet.

Next passenger. Pollart, Les. Big feller. Could have been a tackle. He owns a trucking company. Next: Labissoniere, George. Pollart's lawyer.

"Hi. Welcome aboard...."

The wig. Flo needs it. She never has time to do her hair before flights. She keeps it long and black, like Cher. Cher is number one on the charts. Flo knows the lyrics to her songs.

*I was born in the wagon of a travelin' show ...*

Flo knows a bit about fame herself. She won several beauty prizes as a child. She was voted Miss Pink Tomato, Miss Swimming Pool, Miss Fordyce. Freshman year she made Redbug varsity cheerleading. She barked out the letters so loud—*Gimme an R! Gimme an E!*—she could barely speak the next day. It was cadet-style cheering: lots of straight arms and snaps of the black and red pom-poms.

Fordyce is the name of the town where she grew up. It is a speck on the Arkansas map located on the way to New Orleans. It was too small for her. After high school, she wanted to go to the most exotic place she could think of. Tahiti. She wanted to stick her feet in the black-sand beaches and learn the hula dance.

She applied for work at eleven airlines. Her pa drove her to Little Rock and to Nashville for interviews and told her not to worry, Flo, this was the one, he could feel it. She got the same letter back eleven times: "Dear Miss Schaffner, We are sorry to inform you that ..."

Flipping through *Glamour* magazine, Flo saw an ad for a flight training school in St. Paul. She enrolled. It felt like the military. There was a giant pool and she had to dive in the water and save dummy passengers. She was given instructions on beauty. How to apply foundation, how to sit, how to talk. Guidelines for stewards had been printed in manuals.

1. *Be a good, sincere listener. Ask leading questions and show interest in conversation. This allows the passenger the feeling of importance.*
2. *Avoid talking about yourself and encourage passengers to talk about themselves. This procedure will make their trip pleasant.*
3. *Avoid argumentation. The aim of Stewardess work is to please passengers. Argument creates opposition and disgust and will not please, therefore defeating the aim of Stewardess work.*

The airlines were not the Great Escape she imagined. It was a cruel and lonely journey without a destination. To pass time, she ate. Doughnuts disappeared by the glazed dozen. Empty buckets of chicken and pizza boxes stacked up by the garbage. Flo tried to disguise the weight by wearing her serving apron, but her bulging hips bumped passengers in the aisle. On the way to Fargo, she was caught.

*Spotters.* Flo was called into the Northwest management office and told to step on the scale. This time she shocked herself: *185 pounds!* Northwest placed her on unpaid probation. She went to a doctor who prescribed diet pills. The pills made the pangs of hunger disappear. She starved herself and got her job back.

Next passenger. Mitchell, Bill. University of Oregon sophomore. He wears a paisley shirt, shows his ticket, and sits in 18B. It is the last row of the jet, port side, middle seat. Mitchell is looking forward to Thanksgiving weekend. His old friends will be back home in Seattle and they will all party by the lake like they did in high school. He looks over the rows of seats in the cabin. The flight is half-full. He notices her immediately.

Tina Mucklow is the youngest stewardess on the crew. She has simple looks. Her blond hair

is not shaped or sprayed or styled. It is long and clumped together into a ponytail. The ribbon holding it together is as basic as the string on a bakery box.

Mitchell wonders about her. Maybe she is as lonely as she looks or as lonely as he wants her to be. She is standing in the galley now, preparing the drink cart. What will he say to her when she passes? The flight to Seattle is only twenty-eight minutes long.



“Hi. Welcome aboard.”

Flo looks at the name on the ticket.

Cooper, Dan. His suit is dark and his raincoat is black. He is holding a dark attaché case. He shuffles into the cabin and sits in the last row, 18, starboard side. The row is empty. He places the attaché case on the seat next to the window. He keeps his raincoat on.

“Hi. Welcome aboard.”

Gregory, Robert. The passenger is out of breath. He ran to catch the flight, almost missed it. He sits across from Cooper in 18C, aisle seat, port side. Gregory is the last passenger to board. He is part owner of a paint company in Seattle.

The engines turn. The captain is speaking over the intercom.

*“Uh, ladies and gentlemen ...”*

Flo pulls the lever, and the aftstairs bend and creak and tuck themselves into the fuselage. Located in the rear of the plane, these stairs are a signature feature on the Stubby, as the Northwest stewards call the Boeing 727. Pilots do not require a boarding gate or airway to load passengers. They don't even need an airport. Passengers can board or deplane directly onto the tarmac. The aftstairs run on a simple hydraulic system. Pull the lever inside the jet, the stairs descend. A pull in the other direction, the aftstairs retract. The engines on the Stubby are so powerful and the design so nimble, stewardesses joke they'll land behind every tree to pick up passengers.

The model is popular with airlines. The aftstairs allow the 727 to land in small and mid-size cities that have not yet upgraded their airports. Or in jungle fields. In the mid-1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency relied on Stubbies to conduct secret missions over Laos. Through CIA front groups like Air America Inc., the aftstairs were used by operatives to drop cargo. “Soft rice” was food. “Hard rice” was arms. It wasn't only gear. The CIA also used the Stubby to deploy American operatives who parachuted off the aftstairs and down into the jungles of Indochina.



He looks at Flo. She is ready to take Dan Cooper's drink order. What will it be?

“Bourbon and Seven-Up,” he says.

The price is a dollar. He hands her a twenty.

“Anything smaller?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I can't give you change until I finish,” she says.

She moves up the aisle. In row 12, Pollart, the trucking company owner, is talking with his lawyer, Labissoniere. The trucking business is suffering in the recession. Pollart is now using

his refrigerated trucks to ship blood. The samples come from the junkies at the Seattle missions, who sell their blood for drug money.

Pollart feels a lurch. The wheels of Northwest 305 are moving. He hears a stewardess voice. It's Alice Hancock, the flight attendant in first class.

"All carry-on baggage must be stowed under the seat or in the overhead compartments," she says. "Please check your seatbelts in preparation for takeoff."

At five two, Alice Hancock barely passed Northwest's height requirement. Her hair is chestnut and bobbed. You look like Mrs. Spock, her friends tell her. She has soft eyes and speaks in a voice that is playful and light and trails into a honey-dipped giggle.

She recently got engaged. Jim, her husband-to-be, is a Northwest pilot. He is also flying to Seattle, on another flight. Thanksgiving dinner will be at Jim's uncle's house in Seattle. The uncle has a hothouse. He raises orchids. Alice is eager to see them.

She goes through the preflight announcements. Flo is done serving drinks. She stands next to Alice and inhales and exhales into a dummy oxygen mask. The captain is on the intercom again.

"Uh, we've been cleared to taxi, so if the cabin attendants will take their seats, we'll be on our way."

A front is moving in. The reports are calling for sleet, fog, snow, and rain. Some Thanksgiving, the pilots think. At least for now, the weather is clear. The sun has come out from the clouds and casts a beam of light against the aluminum belly of the jet and N467U, its registration number.

Inside the cockpit, Capt. William Scott and copilot Bill Rataczak go over the takeoff checklist once again.

"Window heat?"

"High."

"Pitot heat?"

"On, checked."



Flight 305 is a milk run. The route made Northwest Orient. When the airlines were controlled by the post office, the route across the empty northern lands of the country was barren and dangerous. Planes just disappeared. Flying through mountain crevices, with gusts of freezing wind sweeping down off the plains of Canada, Northwest pilots proved (with the navigation help of a sheep herder and Amelia Earhart) that a direct route from Minneapolis to the Pacific Northwest was safe. Now, decades later, the airline flies to Seattle across the northern Midwest each day.

This morning, the first stop was Great Falls, South Dakota, then Missoula, Montana, then Spokane, in eastern Washington, then over the Cascades to Portland. The last leg is Portland to Seattle.

Harold Anderson, flight engineer, monitors the wall of instruments behind the pilots as they prepare for their final takeoff. Other than talking about sports, the custom of most airline pilots is to stash a *Playboy* magazine in the cockpit. Miss October 1971 has filled her cleavage with beads and draped her torso in a tasseled buckskin bikini. Miss November 1971 is kneeling on a bear rug, her skin as white as the snow piled up in the ski cabin window.

behind her. She has doll lashes, and between her legs, draped from her belly just so, dangles a red scarf.

*NAME:* Danielle De Vabre, 36,25,34, Montreal, Quebec.

*AMBITIONS:* To become an airline stewardess.

*IDEAL MAN:* Age does not matter, as long as he has character.

Northwest Capt. William Scott has character. He has brown and gray-flecked hair and combs it full. His cheeks are jowly and smooth. Everyone calls him Scotty, even his kids.

Up close, the captain's body tells the stories he won't. He's missing his ring finger. He was working in his garage when his band saw snagged onto his wedding ring and lopped the finger off. Some muscles and ligaments never healed. His middle finger went so stiff he can't move it. Even when he's sleeping, Scotty looks like he's flipping people off.

Like many of Northwest's senior airline pilots, Scotty learned to fly during the war. He was assigned the least desirable route. The Hump, historians called his mission. Operation Vengeance the pilots called it.

In Allied freighters, Scotty and other Hump pilots lugged cargo over the Himalayas to the Chinese. In the mountain labyrinths, gusts of wind would blow the freighter planes into rock walls. Temperatures in the cockpit dropped to forty below. The navigation systems on the planes were so poor that pilots drew their own maps. The best way to get to China through the Himalayas, Hump pilots said, was to follow the glimmer of airplane wreckage below. Down in the valleys, the charred parts of Allied planes were used by nomads as shrines.

Coolies, laborers hired by the Chinese army, believed the wind from the propellers of the huge American cargo planes had magical powers. To rid themselves of evil spirits, they planted their faces in front of the giant engines, and many were fatally sucked in.

Scotty's base was in Assam, India. He slept in a *basha*, or bamboo hut, and kept a panther as a pet.

Supplies ran thin, especially during monsoon season. Electric wires doubled as shoelaces. Shoelaces doubled as hat straps. Pilots hunted for wild pigs and cooked the carcasses on makeshift spits.

Scotty doesn't talk about India. He is quiet and reserved, rarely speaks at the dinner table. Says what needs to be said. That's all.

His kids would like him to say more. A few weeks ago, Scotty's daughter Catherine asked him to come to her high school. Catherine wanted Scotty to talk about what it was like to be a Northwest Orient captain, but she worried. She knew Scotty did not like to speak in public. Would he clam up and bore her friends?

Scotty arrived in his Northwest uniform and cap. He waited for the questions.

"Ever been hijacked?" a student asked him.

"Ah, never," Scotty said.



The wheels of the jet are moving across the tarmac. In first class, Alice takes her seat near the front door. In the rear, Flo and Tina sit next to each other and wait for a month of flying and living together to finally be over.

The tension started their first night in the hotel room. Flo was getting ready for bed. Tina asked her a question.

“Are you a Christian?”

Flo was taken aback. Where were they, church? Flo also noticed that Tina carried a Bible with her in the hotel and on flights. Tina would say things to her like, “Have you been saved?” Tina also spoke to passengers about Christianity, Flo noticed. Was Tina some kind of undercover missionary? Was she deployed by the Church to cleanse the airlines of sin?

Twenty-eight minutes to Seattle ... Twenty-eight minutes to Thanksgiving vacation. Soon Flo will be in the hotel room, and the hot scalding water of the shower will massage her itchy scalp. By this time tomorrow, Flo will have flown back to Arkansas to reunite with her mother and pa in Fordyce. After Thanksgiving dinner, she will cruise to the Dixie Dog with her old friends.

“Miss?”

A man is talking to her. She looks up. It is the same man who ordered a bourbon and Seven. He is holding a white envelope in his hands. Flo takes the envelope and drops it into the pit of her purse. She'll look at the love note later. Or never.

The jet moves faster along the runway. The fuselage shudders. Northwest 305 will be in the air any moment.

“Miss?”

Him again. Mr. Bourbon and Seven.

“I think you better have a look at that note.”

She reaches into her purse. She retrieves the envelope.

The Northwest jet barrels down the runway. Seventy knots. Eighty knots.

In the cabin behind the pilots, passengers cross themselves and close their eyes. Some grab the armrests bracing for liftoff, hoping the jet doesn't explode.

Flo opens the note. She can see the words are written on a thick piece of paper. The ink is black. The words look printed by a felt-tip pen. She can see the curls of the letters—near-crisp. The words are pretty to look at. Is this man an artist? She looks into his eyes. She reads the words again.

*MISS,*

*I have a bomb here and I would like you to sit by me.*

August 25,  
2007 New York, New York

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His eyes are not dark and demonic. They are soft and compassionate. Sad. No, tragic. They are the eyes of a loner, a man on the lam from his own secrets.

I have compiled my own dossier on Kenny Christiansen. I've spoken and written to his brother Lyle every day for the past month or so, and now I have my own collection of Christiansen family photos.

Here Kenny is, maybe eight years old, curling up to a cat and gazing into its eyes and petting its fur. Here in black and white is the family farmhouse outside of Morris where Kenny and Lyle grew up, and around it there is snow and barren flatlands. Here, another black and white: Kenny in his Northwest Orient uniform, wearing a captain's hat as if he were the pilot. His legs are short and his arms are long and dangle below his waist. Here is his passport photo. He wears a crew-knit sweater like a high school social studies teacher. And here, in color, is the front door of 18406 Old Sumner Buckley Highway. It's a small house, slightly larger than a trailer. Its country door is painted blood red, and above it is a black American eagle clutching a quiver of arrows in its talons. One panel in the front door is missing. In its place is a black, medieval-looking grate. That way, Kenny could see who was at his door without opening it. It's creepy.

I look at more photos. I look into his eyes again. They appear darker now. Did I miss something before? I must have, because behind the sadness, especially in his passport photo, I now see a quirk.



Lyle told me about growing up on the farm outside of Morris. Kenny was second oldest. Lyle was youngest. Their pa was always frustrated with Kenny. He was not good at farmwork, at least not as good as their older brother Oliver. When they were boys, the Dust Bowl of the Great Depression hit. Grain prices collapsed.

"Our folks were so busy," Lyle wrote me. "Pa in the field and Ma, cooking, sewing, washing clothes. All of us kids did not get lots of hugs ... I think it made us all a little bashful and made us long for the hugs."

To entertain them, their pa built toys. One invention he called the Perpetual Motion Machine. It ran on marbles. The weight of the marbles pushed the others through and kept the wheels of the machine spinning. Kenny spent hours in the attic marveling at how the machine worked. Kenny's mind was like a puzzle, always hunting for the missing piece, always looking for the answer.

As boys, they were also taught to be tough. At the county fair, one attraction was the strong-man competition. Last a round with a prizefighter, collect \$100. Their pa took the challenge, stepped in the ring, and came home with five \$20 bills.

Kenny didn't like to fight. His passion was theater. He was the lead in school plays. He and their sister Lyla developed their own acrobatic act and performed at the county fair. Kenny also tap-danced.



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