

Noo Yawk Noo Yawk

by John Farrow

Yes, boys and girls, air travel is still possible these days, albeit with a few minor adjustments -- like getting to the airport last week for your flight tomorrow. This is, they say, because of all the new security measures to protect us from whomever it is that we're up against. But here I was, off to the Big Apple and a race in Central Park.

When I finally got to my gate, I was selected for the honor of being all but stripped-searched in front of God and everyone, with this little procedure conducted, appropriately enough, by the classic good cop-bad cop team. The former, a matronly, grey-haired lady, asked sweetly, *Would you mind if I had a look in your bag, dear?*

This was followed by her steely-eyed partner's icy instructions to empty all my pockets and assume the position, or something like that. He was armed with what appeared to be a cattle prod thinly disguised as a metal detector, or maybe it was a cattle prod simply set on low. But a cattle prod was certainly more in keeping with his countenance.

Finally, mercifully, I was in my seat. These new measures do seem to be having an effect, however. Elderly grandmothers have been kept off planes for carrying knitting needles. These, of course, are for homeland defense. No one is knitting Afghans any more.

While I was hoping for a normal, uneventful flight, "normal" is a relative term these days. Usually, the early part would be taken up with the crossword puzzle in the flight magazine. Today I was more concerned with whether I could take the dark-skinned guy with the beard seated across the aisle. Probably not. His left leg was bigger than my entire body.

The guy in 18B was more like it. Small, skinny, a runner-type. He turned out to be someone I ran with during a race in Texas a few years ago.

Soon we're over Kansas. Not a lot of tall buildings out here -- comforting in a way. Funny how one's perspectives can change so quickly.

Flying into the city, you can see it -- a deep, dark, smoldering hole right in the middle of one of

the most vibrant cities in the world -- a sobering and gut-wrenching sight to be sure, but in a way, strangely uplifting, too. Life goes on, proudly, even defiantly.

You have to go down there. You have to see for yourself the evil that was once beyond comprehension and immerse yourself in the grief and emotions all around. In so doing, you come away with a strengthened resolve to see this to the end so that it never happens again.

It makes you angry, with terrorism in the skies and anthrax in the mails, that a few madmen in caves half a world away feel the need to hijack their religion and drag the rest of the world down to their own bleak, wretched existence. If they hate us so much, deep down you have to wonder if they don't truly hate themselves even more for their own blind bigotry that condemns women to a life akin to that of a beast of burden and everyone else to an austere and inflexible daily regimen that bans most things civilized societies take for granted, even music. It figures.

*The man that hath no music in himself
Is fit for treasons, strategems and spoils.
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted.**

* * *

Central Park is a runner's paradise, a calm oasis in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the city, its paths and roadways clogged most evenings with the rush-hour traffic of runners. In fact, the diversity and openness of the running community stands in stark contrast to the hatred and intolerance of the attackers.

Mingling with the crowd before the start, I was astounded, but not surprised, by the babel of tongues all around me. Here were thousands of runners from dozens of nations gathering peacefully in an easy polyglot of comradery, with every color of humanity represented. Would that our enemies could see this.

For all that has happened, this place is still its big, brash self and New Yorkers are still big and brash, too. *You wanna go to the Battery? Turn around and hang a left when you get down to hell.*

But sometimes they don't seem quite like stereo-typical New Yorkers. There is a lot of heart and soul just beneath that tough surface. People

look out for one another more these days and tears come easily, especially during the National Anthem. Flags are everywhere and fences are covered with flowers and banners and memorials left by those who have come from near and far to bear witness.

Are things back to normal? Define normal. It used to be normal to not have metal detectors in airports and public buildings. Will shutting down entire city blocks while alien-types in haz-mat suits investigate the remains of a powdered jelly doughnut become normal? One would hope not.

The brashness may seem a bit forced at times, but the spirit is still there and that bodes well for both the city and the country. In a sense, we are all New Yorkers now -- Grete Waitz and the New York City Marathon -- Radio City and Fifth Avenue -- Yanks in the Series -- the Chairman of the Board at the Rainbow Room -- *Start spreading the news, I want to be a part of it -- New York, New York.*

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* Lorenzo, *The Merchant of Venice* [Act V, scene 1],
William Shakespeare.