



TANGO IN AMERICA

the story of a little green
parrot from Argentina

By Steve Baldwin with
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TANGO IN AMERICA



Chapter One

FROM ARGENTINA TO NEW YORK CITY

Tango was a little green-and-grey parrot that lived with her father and mother in a high tree nest in the lowlands of Argentina. She loved to fly, and chatter, and play, and eat, but more so than anything, Tango loved to sing.

She sang in the morning when the sun came up over the mountains.

TANGO IN AMERICA

She sang at high noon, as she and her family gathered wild fruits and tasty seeds from nearby fields.

She sang when the sun had gone down and twinkling stars rose in the skies.

Tango and her family were very happy in their high tree nest. Even when the weather was cold, the nest was snug, because her father had built it so well from hundreds of thorny twigs.

One day, men from far away set up camp below the big nest in the tree.

“Why are the men here, Papa?” Tango asked him that evening.

“I don’t know, Tango.”

“Perhaps they’re here to study our parrot ways.”

“Perhaps,” said her father. “But tonight, let’s stay close together here, just in case they’re here for another reason.”

Late that night, the men came and set nets.

Then, they started a fire.

TANGO IN AMERICA

The little family of parrots flew off, but was trapped by a net that a second group of men had hung between two trees. They were captured and put into a cage with nine other parrots that had lived nearby. Soon another cage was placed next to them containing twelve more.

The men put both cages in a truck and drove to a big metal bird many miles away in a wide place with no trees that smelled like smoke.

The big metal bird flew north with the sound of thunder.

For many hours the cage rattled and cold air blew across Tango's feathers. There was no water and little food, but Tango did not cry.

"At least we're all together," said Tango to her parents, who were very sad.

The big metal bird landed at an airport in a place called New York and both cages were rolled into a hanger. Nearly all the captured parrots were crying, but late that night, Tango's father had an idea.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“I think I can open this cage,” he said.

He worked and worked on the lock with his beak.

And soon the cage was open.

Tango, her mother, and the nine other parrots flew through the open door and landed on a beam near the ceiling.

“Come, Papa!” cried Tango. “Vamanos!”

“But I must open the other cage,” he said, and started to work on the second cage with his beak.

Just then the lights came on in the big hanger. The men had sounded an alarm and soon many came running.

“Papa!” cried Tango, but it was too late.

The men roughly grabbed Tango’s father and put him back in the cage. They wrapped both cages with heavy wire and attached big locks that could not be opened by any bird.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Look,” said one of the other parrots. “The men are closing the big hanger door. We must go now!”

The eleven birds flew out of the hanger just before the big rolling door could close.

“We shall find a way to get your father out,” said Tango’s mother, once they had gathered on the roof of the hanger. “But first, we must find shelter, or we all will die in this cold.”

The parrots huddled in the cold all night until the sun came up. Then Tango and her mother perched next to a window of the hanger to look for her father.

But the cage was gone.

“Where’s Papa?” asked Tango.

“I don’t know,” said her mother. “But we cannot stay here, for the men will trap us again. We shall find your Papa later.”

Tango, her mother, and the nine other birds flew far away from the airport. They hunted and hunted for a tall tree to build a good nest in.

TANGO IN AMERICA

But when they found one, they learned that other birds already lived in the tree: two mockingbirds and a jay. They would not let them stay, so they moved on.

Another big tree looked promising.

But squirrels and raccoons already lived in the tree, and Tango's mother knew that they loved to eat birds' eggs.

One day, they found a nest that had been abandoned, moved into part of it, and began to bring up thorny twigs to improve it.

But then the owl that had lived there returned in the middle of the night.

Tango and her mother were terrified of the owl, because he was a raptor. But the owl retracted his talons to show them he meant no harm.

"I regret that you cannot stay here, but I need this space for my own young," said the owl.

"Is there anywhere our kind can find refuge?" asked Tango's mother.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Go to Brooklyn,” said the owl. “Already many of your peculiar ilk has gathered there.”

“How can we find them?” asked Tango’s mother.

“Just listen,” said the owl. “Your chattering flock is noisier than an expressway at rush hour.”

TANGO IN AMERICA



Chapter Two

WILD PARROTS OF BROOKLYN

In the place called Brooklyn, Tango and her mother soon found many of their own kind. Some had lived there for years, after escaping from pet stores and shipping crates from the same airport Tango had escaped from.

After two days of nest-hunting, they found a spot that looked perfect: a high pole made out of wood, steel, and wire.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“This is a funny tree, Mama,” said Tango.

“But the wires make it warm,” said her mother. “And it’s so high that the rats and squirrels will not bother us.”

All through the winter, Tango and her mother brought thorny twigs up to the nest.

First they built a floor.

Then walls.

Then a ceiling.

The nest didn’t look very pretty, but it was strong enough to give them plenty of warmth to survive the winter.

Tango and her mother lived in the tall wood and steel tree nest throughout the winter. There were no tasty fruits or vegetables to eat in Brooklyn, but a few kind people had set out bird feeders in their back yards and they were able to eat enough to survive.

One day in early spring, there appeared a group of men at the foot of the tree. They looked a lot like the men in Argentina and the airport.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“I’m frightened,” said Tango.

“We shall fly away if the men come close,” her mother said. But the men did nothing: they just looked up at the nest with shiny eye glasses.

The weather got warmer, which made many of the wild Brooklyn parrots happy. Soon they were playing on the grass, and foraging, and chattering as they had in Argentina.

During the long evenings after the sun had set, the parrots would often gather on the green of the Brooklyn College Athletic Field to make music. Playing a small instrument made from a folded cardboard milk carton called an Accordionette, the birds would sing songs from the old country.

Whenever Tango’s mother heard this music, she’d begin to weep.

“What’s the matter, Momma?”

“It’s the same music your father used to play. I miss him so much, Tango.”

“He’ll come back, Momma.”

“I hope so,” said her mother.

TANGO IN AMERICA

The summer wore on, and Tango tried to be happy, but it was very difficult. Especially when, in early September, her mother met another green-and-grey parrot who was very nice to her. His name was Pablo.

Tango didn't really like Pablo. He was not, she thought, as wise or as strong a bird as her Dad.

Pablo was very nice to Tango and her mother but she refused to be nice in return.

Whenever he asked her to sing for him she turned her back.

"I won't sing until my Papa comes back," said Tango.

"I think your father is alive," Pablo said, trying to comfort her. "I've flown out to the airport many times, and I think that your father's cage was shipped out on another big metal bird that night. But I don't know where the metal bird went—they travel a long, long way."

"Well if he's alive he's coming back and you'll have to go!" Tango screeched.

TANGO IN AMERICA

Her mother got very angry at Tango when she screeched at Pablo.

“You have no right to treat Pablo this way,” she said.

“Can’t you wait even a single season for Papa to return before taking up with another bird?” asked Tango with tears in her eyes.

“Pablo is a fine bird who’s helped us keep this nest repaired,” said her mother. “Besides,” she said sadly, “your father wasn’t the easiest bird to live with.”

“What are you saying? Papa was the best bird ever!”

“Your father loved you very much and I hope you see him again. But I cannot survive here without help from a strong bird like Pablo.”

“Pablo will never be my Papa!” shouted Tango, tearing away with her beak at thorny twigs that Pablo had placed there only an hour before.

“Stop it!” said her mother. “I want you to apologize to me and Pablo both.”

TANGO IN AMERICA

“I’ll never apologize!” screeched
Tango.

TANGO IN AMERICA



Chapter Three

FLYING WEST

By October, Tango had made up her mind: she would leave her nest, go find her father, and bring him back so they all could be happy again.

But her mother thought this was a bad idea. “Your Dad could be anywhere,” she said. “Please stay here where it’s safe.”

“I’ll find him,” said Tango.

“Maybe he’s in New Jersey,” said her mother. “Some of our kind lives there.”

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Where is New Jersey?” asked Tango.

“You must cross two big brown rivers. Our kind lives in the town of Edgewater, on the second bank of the second river.”

“I will go there first,” said Tango.

One day, before dawn, Tango kissed her sleeping mother goodbye and flew west.

She flew and flew, across the first big brown river toward the island of tall stone blocks.

She flew up Broadway and over Washington Square Park.

She flew up the Avenue of the Americas, passing Rockefeller Center and Radio City.

In the middle of the island, there was a big green rectangle, and Tango rested there.

The big green rectangle was very nice, although there were so many people that it made Tango very nervous.

TANGO IN AMERICA

There were also too many squirrels, and big crows, and even a pair of hungry hawks!

So Tango flew on, across the next big river. After she had crossed it, she looked for her father, but instead found many green-and-grey parrots of her own kind. They were friendly and offered her a place to rest.

“What kind of bird was your father?” asked Jorge, an old, wise, green-and-grey parrot that had lived in Edgewater for many years.

“He was the cleverest, the wisest, the strongest and the best nest-builder in Argentina,” said Tango proudly. “He freed many of us who now live in the Brooklyn steel trees.”

“Did your father build his nest in wooden trees or steel trees?”

“Wooden trees, of course,” said Tango. “The grandest in the country. Over one hundred of our kind lived in it.”

“There is one place I know of where such grand nests exist,” said Jorge. “It is

TANGO IN AMERICA

in a place called Chicago, more than fifty flight days away to the west. Perhaps your father now lives there.”

“Fifty flight days!” said Tango. “How will I ever survive it?”

“No parrot of our kind has ever tried,” said Jorge. “But why not settle here? We have everything — water, plenty of seeds, plants, and tall trees, both of wood and of steel, for nesting. Even the people are kind to us here. And you would be welcome in our flock.”

“I must know what became of my Papa,” said Tango.

“You are a brave but foolish bird,” said Jorge. “But if you really believe that you must do this, don’t travel directly west from here, which takes you across the land of Penn. Things are bad for our kind there. The men trap us, shoot us, and destroy our nests. Even native American birds aren’t safe there this month, because it is hunting season. Instead, travel north, past three steel bridges, then follow

TANGO IN AMERICA

the setting sun. Otherwise you will be lost.”

Tango thanked Jorge and stayed the night. The next day at dawn, she flew north.

She flew high over the first great steel bridge, and by evening of the first day had reached the second.

But then the weather turned stormy and she could not say whether she had passed the third steel bridge. Foolishly believing that it must have been hidden in the fog below, she turned west anyway.

The nights were windy and wet, but Tango knew how to survive such discomforts.

She puffed up her feathers and huddled on high branches at night.

She zoomed down to trees with apples on them and gnawed at them during the day.

She always flew low and hid in tree cover safe from marauding hawks.

TANGO IN AMERICA



Chapter Four

CAPTAIN ZERO

On the fifth day of her flight West, Tango was having a drink at a small pond in a pretty park when a flight of wild ducks splashed down noisily in the water.

“Whoa, what have we here?” called out a duck from the water. “Unidentified green-gray avian at 3 o’clock!”

The flight leader, whose name was Captain Zero, climbed out of the water, waddled over and inspected Tango.

“Where are you from, sister?”

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Argentina, by way of Brooklyn,” said Tango.

“Brooklyn, New York, or Brooklyn, Pennsylvania?” asked Captain Zero.

“New York, of course,” answered Tango.

“What brings you to this place?”

“I’m flying to Chicago to find my father.”

“Number One,” quacked Captain Zero to his deputy, “How far a distance to Chicago?”

“Quack-a qua quack-a qua-quack,” said duck Number One, which, roughly translated, meant “631 miles west by northwest.”

“Well,” said Captain Zero, “you’ve got a long flight ahead of you. Unfortunately, we’re not going anywhere near Chicago or we’d offer you escort. Our flight is headed to Virginia, via West Point, New York City, Annapolis, and Washington, but right now, we’re flying north.”

TANGO IN AMERICA

"Don't you ducks fly south in the fall?" asked Tango.

"Quite right, miss, but our flight got blown off course by that big wind a few nights back, so we're doubling back to avoid the long guns. Fact is we nearly got shot out of the skies a few miles back by a squad of hunters."

"I'm confused, Captain. I thought hunting season was over in the State of New York."

"Correct again, miss," said Captain Zero, picking a few small pieces of bird-shot out of his flight feathers. "But this charming little park is in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and bird hunting season happens to be in full effect at this time and location."

"Oh no," said Tango. "I imagined that I was in New York all along!"

"Number One," called Captain Zero to his deputy.

"Sir?"

"What say we escort this exotic as far as the New York State line?"

TANGO IN AMERICA

“If she can keep up with us, sir,” said duck Number One.

“How good a flier are you?” Captain Zero asked Tango.

“I can hover like a helicopter and zoom like a starling, sir,” said Tango proudly.

“No, I mean how good are you at covering long distances?”

“Well, I flew here from Brooklyn.”

“In how many days?” asked Captain Zero.

“Um, two days,” Tango fibbed.

“That’s good enough,” said Captain Zero. “All right ducks,” he called out, “make camp for 30 minutes. Be prepared for inspection at 17:15 and takeoff at 17:30. Number Eight – please brief this young lady on flight rules and operations. That is all!”

The ten ducks in Captain Zero’s command gave a proud salute, he returned it, and waddled off to his temporary quarters under a holly tree.

TANGO IN AMERICA

Duck Number Eight briefed Tango on the duck squadron's procedures.

"There's not much to learn," he said. "When the Captain calls 'Bank left thirty,' he means fly left in a slow turn. If, say, he calls 'Bank right sixty,' he means turn right sharply. 'Climb to 200' means rise up to 200 feet; 'dive to 100' means go down to that altitude. You'll get used to it after a few miles."

"What if I fall behind?" asked Tango.

"You won't. Your position is at the end of the right wing – it's the best spot for weaker fliers. You'll be carried along by the slipstream of the whole flight. Relax and keep your flap feathers and feet tucked in. You'll be fine," said duck Number Eight.

"I sure don't want to mess up," said Tango. "Your Captain Zero seems a tough duck to displease."

"He's tough but he's not mean," said duck Number Eight. "You'll do fine," he

TANGO IN AMERICA

said, patting Tango's head with his long wing.

As late afternoon shadows lengthened in the park, Captain Zero inspected the ducks under the protective canopy of an oak tree. He paid special attention to the condition of their feathers, feet, and anything else that might cause enough wind resistance to make the ducks slow down. Although Tango was not formerly part of the flight, she stood at attention beside them, at the extreme right side of the line.

"You sure do have funny feet," said Captain Zero once he had reached her. "What are they good for?"

"Grabbing, climbing, and building, sir!" said Tango.

"Well, just keep them tucked in once we're airborne," he said. "Number One – please brief the flock on today's flight plan."

"Our objective is Ross Park, in Binghamton, New York," said duck Number One. "Longitude 75.88, Latitude

TANGO IN AMERICA

42.14. Distance, as the duck flies, 60.8 miles; approximate flight time two hours, forty-five minutes. We shall follow Interstate 81 all the way north at an altitude of 330 feet. This is a no-talking, no-quacking flight, as per standard operating procedures in this area. Are there any questions? Number Five...”

“That’s all open country, sir. What about flak?”

“Being that it’s late on a Thursday afternoon, we can expect low to moderate flak in open areas. This is why we’re going to stay very close to Interstate 81. But if we do meet any hunters, bear in mind that they’re not expecting us to be flying from a southerly direction, so we may well catch them with their guns pointed the wrong way. Anyone else? Yes, you, at the end.”

“How will we know when we’ve crossed the New York State line?” asked Tango.

“The duck ahead of you will tell you when it’s safe,” said duck Number One.

TANGO IN AMERICA

The ducks assembled in a V-formation on the lawn, facing the wind, with the odd-numbered birds, 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, on the left, and the even-numbered birds, 2, 4, 6, 8, and Tango, on the right. Captain Zero occupied the lead or “Zero” position at the top of the “V”, and as he called out items in his checklist, the ducks made final flight preparations.

“Flight flaps at fifteen degrees,” Captain Zero called.

“Check!” said the ducks.

“Foot webbing: visual check.”

“Check!”

“Check magnetos.”

“Check!”

“*Magnetos??*” whispered Tango to duck Number Eight, who was standing ahead of her.

“He just likes to say that,” said duck Number Eight.

“All right ducks,” called Captain Zero. “Let’s go grab some air!”

And with that, the flight of ducks began to waddle, then jog, then run, and

TANGO IN AMERICA

soon, with a loud beating of wings, they took off. After they'd cleared the trees, Captain Zero called out "Gear Up!" and all the birds, including Tango, tucked in their feet. Soon the flight was winging its way north toward New York.

Tango had never flown with wild ducks before, and it took her a couple of miles to get the proper hang of it. In some ways flying in formation was easier than flying alone, because the powerful slipstream created by the ducks' quickly beating wings created a friendly cone of air that pulled her forward so that she didn't have to beat her own wings hard. But if she didn't stay very close to the duck ahead of her and drifted out of the cone of air, she had to fight her way back into it, which made her wings hurt a great deal.

As the V-formation flew north, sticking close to the gray ribbon of highway, Tango started to gain confidence.

"You're doing okay," said duck Number Eight, who flew just ahead of her. "Are you sure you're not a duck?"

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Quiet!” called Captain Zero from the front of the formation. “Do I have to remind you that we’re still behind enemy lines? This is a no-talking flight.”

The formation flew on and Tango noticed how carefully the ducks scanned the terrain below for anything that might be an ambush. All the birds got a scare when, a half-mile from a truck stop, they heard a loud “boom” from below.

“Don’t break formation,” ordered Captain Zero. “That’s either a truck back-firing or a dispute between humans. Climb to 360 feet but stay on course.”

A few minutes later another “boom” came from below, this time, off to the right of the highway.

“Number One, what do you see?” asked Captain Zero.

“Four, possibly five sport utility vehicles, sir, parked on an access road. They really shouldn’t be there, sir.”

“Number and type of ordnance?”

“I see two shotguns and a bolt-action rifle.”

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Pointing at us?”

“Not yet.”

“How much time before we’re in range?”

“No more than twenty seconds, sir.”

“Let’s see if we can get them to unload while we’re still out of range,” said Captain Zero.

“Okay ducks, make some noise back there!” yelled Captain Zero. The whole squadron began to quack loudly.

The hunters, who hadn’t yet seen the ducks, heard the quacking and swung their guns around.

BOOM! – Tango felt a cloud of bird shot whiz by about 20 feet below the flight of ducks, who were just outside the limit of the shotguns’ range.

“Gun it!” yelled Captain Zero. “Maximum RPM!” The ducks’ wings pulled desperately at the air.

BOOM! – another cloud of birdshot came up, missing the ducks by less than fifteen feet.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“It’s the rifle I’m worried about,” said Captain Zero. “Okay ducks – DIVE to 220!” The ducks descended, gathering speed.

“Nothing yet from the rifle,” said duck Number One.

“Left sixty!” called Captain Zero. The ducks screamed into a leftward dive, and then BLAM - the rifle fired.

The first rifle shot whistled through the center of the V-formation.

“He’s got our range, sir!” shouted duck Number One.

“Right forty-five!” called Captain Zero. BLAM! BLAM! – the second and third shots screamed past to the left.

“CLIMB to 240!” called Captain Zero. “Maximum Military Power!”

Tango was sure that the next shot would bring down somebody. But then the shooting stopped. Either the rifle had jammed or the shooter had realized that he was wasting ammunition as the ducks pulled further out of range.

TANGO IN AMERICA

“Come to a heading of zero-one-five, climb to 330, seventy percent power,” ordered Captain Zero.

“Well done, sir,” said duck Number One.

Captain Zero just shook his head and muttered a duck curse.

Tango’s little heart was pumping like a fast-beating drum. She had never experienced anything as scary as this wild ride through the sky, but soon, her little wings started to feel worn out, and she really began to wonder whether she could make it the full sixty miles to Binghamton.

But then Captain Zero called out “Bank right fifteen, descend fifteen to heading zero-nine-zero at twenty-five percent power.”

Tango’s heart was still thumping so hard that she didn’t really understand these complicated instructions, but duck Number Eight simply winked and whispered “just follow me – we’re taking a rest stop,” and soon the flight of ducks was

TANGO IN AMERICA

dropping down to a pretty lake in a settled suburban area.

The lake looked inviting – Tango was hungrier and thirstier than she'd ever been and she longed to drink some cool water and munch on some tasty dandelion leaves along the shore. But suddenly she remembered: she couldn't swim!

“Oh no,” said Tango, as the lake got bigger and bigger. She realized that her only chance was to break away from the ducks and try a landing on the grass. But the slipstream cone of air from the flock was so strong that she couldn't break away, and she was pulled right down with the ducks. She hit the water with a “plash” and somersaulted into the water.

“Help!” Tango called, flapping furiously in the water, but with her wings so wet, she couldn't lift herself out of the lake. She went down, engulfed by the black water.

Tango thought she would surely drown, but then a strong soft-billed beak grabbed her body and lifted her to the

TANGO IN AMERICA

surface. It was Captain Zero, and he flipped her onto his back and swam quickly to the shore. Tango coughed, sputtered, flapped, and blinked, but she was soon well enough so that beak-to-beak resuscitation was not required.

“I’m to blame for this,” said Captain Zero. “It never occurred to me that you can’t swim. I really should have realized it when I looked at your funny feet.”

“I guess I should have mentioned it,” said Tango. “But it wasn’t until I was about twenty feet above the lake before I realized that your slipstream wouldn’t let me go!”

“You’re all wet and worn out,” said Captain Zero. “We’ll camp here tonight and set out for Binghamton at dawn. What do you say?”

“I’d like that fine,” said Tango.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said duck Number One. “We can’t stay here tonight.”

“Why not?” asked Captain Zero. “This area is reasonably settled. I don’t

TANGO IN AMERICA

see any hunting platforms. I think we'll be quite safe right here."

"Tonight, yes, sir, but how about tomorrow?"

"What about tomorrow?"

"Well, sir, tomorrow's Friday, and you know what that means."

"Yes," said Captain Zero grimly. "Weekend warriors. Brave heroes in their SUV's with long guns. I see your point, Number One. Tango, we've got to move on. Do you think that if you rested here for an hour, you'd be fit to fly with us again?"

"Honestly, I don't see how I can," said Tango wearily. "It will take a couple of hours for my feathers to dry, and my wings are pretty tired already."

"I hate to leave a bird behind," said Captain Zero. "But I can't jeopardize the mission."

"I understand," said Tango.

"Look," said Captain Zero, "you'll be safe here tonight. Tomorrow, I want you to follow our flight plan to the letter, up I-

TANGO IN AMERICA

81 to the city of Binghamton. Number One, what's the weather forecast for tomorrow?"

"Overcast with a forty percent chance of rain."

"Good. Take off at dawn and hide in the fog. Avoid lakes, rivers, and meadows. If you see cars parked off-road or anywhere else where they shouldn't be, especially SUV's or pickups, prepare to take evasive action. Stick close to the highway. Once you cross the border, you should be safe enough. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Number One," called Captain Zero.

"Sir?"

"All present and accounted for?"

"Yes sir."

"Prepare for takeoff," said Captain Zero.

"Captain," asked Tango, "can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Please don't take any offense. But where I come from, our kind knows each

TANGO IN AMERICA

other by name, but why is it that you ducks don't have names, but know each other only by number?"

"Our kind has always known each other by rank, not by name," said Captain Zero. "I guess it just makes the accounting a lot easier."

"Accounting?"

"Let me put it to you another way. When I started flying this route, I was duck Number Twenty-Three. Now I'm duck Number Zero. What do you suppose happened to those ahead of me?"

"Long guns?" asked Tango.

Captain Zero nodded sadly. "I guess the thinking is that when you only know each other by rank or by number, you don't grieve as much when you lose a duck."

"Does it really help?"

"I can't say, miss. All I know is that our system has been in place for a long time, and I'm not going to be the first duck to change it."

TANGO IN AMERICA

"I wish you all the luck in the world," said Tango.

"Give my regards to the Windy City," said Captain Zero, saluting her with his wing.

"I will," said Tango.

The ten ducks paddled into the lake, faced the wind, and began to flap, making choppy whirls on the water. Then they took off and circled to gain altitude. They crossed over Tango, wagged their wings, came to a northerly heading, grew smaller, and disappeared.

Tango waited a long time, listening for any shots from hunters, but heard nothing. She hoped that the ducks would be all right as they made their long journey north, then east, then south, all the way to Virginia.