

By Melissa Fay Greene

🕒 Updated 2:11 PM ET, Thu January 30, 2014



Abandoned cars are piled up on the median of icy Cobb Parkway in Atlanta.

## Story highlights

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Melissa Greene: Fort Lee, New Jersey, traffic jam was nothing compared with Atlanta's

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Greene: Everybody tried to go home at once with the first snowflake in 16-degree weather

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Greene: "SnowedOutAtlanta" connected the stranded with help from those at home

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Greene woke up to 46-degree weather, but that was the temperature of her bedroom

posted on Facebook: "Six hours and 18 minutes to get home from Perimeter Mall. Wish my car made it, too." My husband's law partner, Ed Garland, inched along I-75 north toward home from 5 p.m. Tuesday until 1 a.m. Wednesday, at which point his car ran out of gas. He abandoned it and set off on foot through

Here's where things went wrong: On Tuesday, January 28, 2014, at 1:30 in the afternoon, in response to the sparkle of several snowflakes in the air above Atlanta, virtually the entire adult population of America's ninth most populous metro area stood up, left their workplaces, got into their cars, and created a traffic deadlock of legendary proportions.

Good news for New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie that he was nowhere near here at the time, nor could he be linked via administrative assistants to our wintry surprise. But among Great Traffic Jams of the 21st Century, move over Fort Lee, New Jersey.

My friend Johanna Norry, a Georgia State University grad student, tried to leave her parking place on a downtown parking deck and traveled -- in one hour and seven minutes -- 23 feet. My friend Elida Baverman

the snowdrifts, reaching his home at 2 in the morning.



Melissa Fay Greene

demoralized with the warm, housebound, and generous. People in vast traffic jams, with taillights twinkling in endless lines toward every horizon, not only sat in cars steadily running out of gas, they called for help and comfort on cell phones running out of juice. Thus most people seeking help online did so for third parties: "My boyfriend has been stuck in traffic for nine hours now," wrote a woman named Laura. "He has a heart condition and told me he's starting to feel lightheaded."



**Related Video:** Mayor Reed: Atlanta is up and running 02:51



### What other cities can learn from Atlanta's ice debacle

By all accounts -- I wasn't going out there -- the city's thoroughways on Wednesday looked like parking lots, where cars with empty gas tanks sat frozen in the Arctic air. (It was 16 degrees Fahrenheit Wednesday morning.) Some of the cars had been abandoned; others might have still had people in them. "If you are stranded and cannot get through to 911," announced the Atlanta Police Department, "please send the Atlanta Police Department a message through Facebook or Twitter."

One can only imagine: #GetMeTheHellOutOfAtlanta.

A special Facebook page, "SnowedOutAtlanta," was created to connect the cold, stranded, and demoralized with the warm, housebound, and generous. People in vast traffic jams, with taillights twinkling in endless lines toward every horizon, not only sat in cars steadily running out of gas, they called for help and comfort on cell phones running out of juice. Thus most people seeking help online did so for third parties: "My boyfriend has been stuck in traffic for nine hours now," wrote a woman named Laura. "He has a heart condition and told me he's starting to feel lightheaded."

Some posted longingly: "My husband left work yesterday at 4 p.m," a woman wrote in at 9 a.m. Wednesday morning. "Of all days he left his phone at home. ... He had no means of getting in touch with me. If anyone has seen or heard from him, please reply."

Scores of people wrote to offer beds and meals to freezing, stranded travelers. Many offered to drive to pickup points to meet the strangers. Home Depot announced all stores would remain open all night, offering warmth and shelter. Photos surfaced of people in their business clothes asleep on the floor in the aisles of CVS drugstores.

A bakery owner offered to donate goods to any place stranded people were gathering. "Warm home, food, and phone to anyone who needs it!" posted a woman in Monroe, Georgia.

### Was Atlanta asleep at the wheel?

"My sister has been stuck in her car since 4:30 p.m. yesterday," posted a woman named Valencia on Wednesday, 17 hours after her sister got on the road. "Nothing to eat. She's nearly out of gas. She is diabetic. Does not have her meds. Can someone please help? She's at Memorial Drive by Alonzo Crim School. Please somebody?"

**Related Video:** Hot chocolate given to stranded drivers 04:02



**Related Video:** Snowstorm sleepover at Home Depot 03:24

5,490,000 citizens? What kind of whiteout does it take to halt every artery and interstate of this national traffic hub, this city that is home to a highway intersection known as "Spaghetti Junction" and to a college (Georgia Perimeter) and a former Atlanta Braves player ("Perimeter" Perez) both named after Interstate 285?

How much snow did it take to strand thousands of children overnight in their schools, send trucks and buses spinning out of control on surface streets and highways, decree that a baby should be born in a car trapped by traffic gridlock, and inspire Gov. Nathan Deal to declare a statewide State of Emergency and to call out the National Guard? It was 2.6 inches, OK? Or, as some news sources reported, "up to 3 inches," a bit of forgivable inflation that would seem to suggest it might have been quantities up to and including 2.9 inches. Nearly 3!

But it doesn't take depth of snow to ice the streets, and it doesn't take a blizzard to panic the citizenry in a city without snowplows, snow shovels, windshield ice scrapers, or even, seemingly, a product known as "salt." Just a sprinkling of snow will do, a delicate frosting, a few curlicues from Jack Frost -- and here we are, immobilized, freezing, turning in desperation to strangers and Home Depot.

### [Opinion: Stranded in Atlanta](#)

I wasn't on the road Tuesday. And I woke up to 46-degree weather, not 16. But the 46-degree weather was in my bedroom because our furnace died during the night. Two weeks ago, when a deep freeze rolled across Atlanta, our pipes burst. We seem to be living in close synchrony with every national weather event.

So while tens of thousands of our fellow citizens rumbled nowhere, I screened "How to Fix Your Own Furnace" videos on Youtube. Inspired, I descended into the freezing basement and spent 15 minutes trying to remove the front of the furnace. Then my husband unscrewed a protruding screw and it fell off.

I peered deep into the machinery of the still and very cold machine and confirmed by phone that no repair person south of the Mason-Dixon Line could travel the treacherous roads to our house.

My husband, children, two dogs, two cats, and I huddled around electric space heaters all day. As I type, my feet are wrapped in a blanket and a space heater is warming a 4-inch stretch on the side of my right

"Lawd I'm praying!" was the first response, from a woman named Kye, after which a woman named Keirsten posted: "I can walk to her! Call me. Trying to find insulin!" Then: "Sending people that way now. What kind of car and where?"

"Champagne-brown Infinity. She made it to the gas station across from AutoZone."

"My friend Jessica is walking that way right now."

"Thank you! You found her!" posted Valencia; then, a bit later: "She made it home! Praise God!! ... Good people still left in this world!"

The landscapes and language of apocalypse -- many headlines compared Atlanta to a scene in "The Walking Dead" -- bore no relation to the footage, the yardage, the square ... inchage of snow actually dumped on the city.

How much snow fell? What quantity of snow do you think it takes to paralyze a metropolitan area of

leg. My teenage daughter has spent the day wrapped in an electric blanket on the sofa, with the dachshund wrapped inside it, too.

But it could be worse. I could be on I-285.

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