

“Dignity”

Amy hates airports, always has. She used to think that it was one of those little quirks that would fade away as she got used to her job—something that would disappear along with her aversion towards blood and needles.

But no matter how many times she makes the drop, no matter how many times she weaves through the crowds—a short blonde woman with a stout aquamarine roll-on—she still can’t get used to it.

There’s something about the airport itself that never goes away; the duty-free gift shops with ridiculous prices, the bathrooms, the typically looming glass ceilings, giving her the false impression of space even as she’s squeezing through the constant flux of people.

Funny thing is, Amy likes the airplane ride. A few hours of oblivion, of namelessness, of time to herself where she can read or listen to music or even just watch the people around her and not have to worry about the rendezvous point, the police patrolling the airport, anything at all.

It’s too bad the dropoff doesn’t take place on the plane. Actually—she thinks about that for a second—that might ruin the peace of it all. Maybe the fact that all of her job happens at the airport is what’s kept her hatred fresh.

“United Airlines flight to Toronto, flight number 3164, is now delayed...”

Amy flinches, cracking her neck painfully. She’d been in such a nice haze for a moment there, an idyllic kind of drowsiness. The few minutes right before falling asleep. And now she is delayed.

“An hour at most....”

She sinks back into the chair (as best as she could, anyway—another thing to hate about airports: the perpetually uncomfortable seating). Then she remembered.

The drop. She has to tell him that she was going to be late by an hour. He isn’t the type who’d appreciate driving to the airport and waiting around for an hour. As he often reminds her—a disembodied, cold voice over the phone most times—he is a busy man and delays are not tolerated, period.

Amy stands up, awkwardly tugging her roll-on behind her and headed for the bathroom across the way. Only twenty or so feet away, but there are so many people clogging up the arteries of the airport that she feels suddenly, irrationally, afraid that she won’t make it.

The facets of conversation, deafening and impossible to distinguish, fills her ears like white noise. It’s like a nightmare she’s had too many times before—stuck at a slow walk while running away from some faceless danger, numb, unable to do anything but stare straight ahead and just keep walking.

“Ah—”

A woman in a neat pantsuit nearly knocks her over, walking fast and in the opposite direction. She is so tall and thin that she looks like she belongs on a catwalk. Amy gets a split second glance of her face as she struts off, and that idea immediately fades.

Almost as if God is punishing her for the unkind thought, Amy turns around ends up facefirst in the chest of a man wearing a trenchcoat.

It takes a few moments of apologies and trying to regain her already precarious balance on four-inch heels, but then she is off again and this time with her eyes fixed on the floor.

God, she thinks, stepping around a piece of bright blue gum stuck to the floor. She hates this job. Shame it pays too well to turn down—and it's not exactly something you can quit from.

Finally, she steps carefully over the tiny, ridged line separating the bathroom from the artery of the airport. She feels a momentary surge of relief. Not that it lasts.

Airport bathrooms, all the same—the sickening perfume smell from a thousand women trying to hide the odor of airplane, mingled with disinfectant. It hits her like a wave. She hurries to a stall, roll on clacking noisily on the tiles. If she hates airports, she hates the bathrooms more.

Amy holds her breath for a moment when she enters the stall, trying in vain to escape the warm muggy smell. Of course it doesn't work, but at least she doesn't throw up into the very thing making her puke.

Maybe trying to distract herself, maybe just in that strange sense of urgency that possessed her from the moment the delay was announced—she pulls the phone out of her back pocket a little too fast.

In movies, this is the kind of cruel twist in fate that would be shown in slo-mo, the better to convey the importance of this one moment to the viewer. In real life, it takes a few seconds—the fall, the soft *plop* as her phone lands in the water, and the *oh shit* realization a little too late.

She curses, hand raised, about to grab a fistful of toilet paper to brace herself for what would follow—and then the automated panel behind the toilet beeps.

Maybe this would be another slo-mo moment, but she doubts it. This seems inevitable—a desperate scrabbling dive for the phone as the water in the toilet bowl begins to swirl, cold hitting her sleeve but not soaking in, not yet—as if the whole endeavor is pre-ordained, another step in her new life.

Just another thing she'd lost, Amy thinks with a faint sigh. Her dignity.

“Let’s pop that door open.”

I’ll never forget that—that word, pop, said with a crisp inflection as they drag my brother out. My big brother, looking awfully small in the twisted remains of his friend’s sports car; my big brother, who blew bubbles for me when I was small, smiling as I chased them into the clouds.

His friend is slumped over in the driver’s seat, dead, but with her eyes still open. Only the seatbelt keeps her body upright. Nobody bothers to take her out, nobody bothers to touch her except for the few paramedics that haven’t heard that terrible pronouncement: that poisonous label, dead, dead, dead.

Even her family members don’t dare touch her.

Death is contagious. So I run to touch my brother’s shoulder, to let my fingertips trace the edges of his life as it spills from him. Because maybe if death is contagious, life is too; maybe if I just keep holding his hand, he will stay anchored to Earth.

My brother’s eyelids flutter.

“Can you hear me? Stay still, don’t speak, just hold your head nice and still, nice and still,” says one of the paramedics.

For a brief, wonderful, perfect second I think that he’ll sit up, and that the blood on his body will turn out to be nothing more than the red paint from the car.

For a brief second, I think he thought that too.

Because the muscles in his neck tense. His eyes open wide. The stretcher rattles underneath him. We, my mother and father and I, stand there, soundless, expectant. Even the paramedics seem to be frozen in surprise.

Then the gurgle of blood breaks our fragile silence, shatters it as he coughs, coughs, coughs, his neck at a strange angle, his mouth terribly red. The paramedics aren’t shouting, not quite: “calm down, hold still, don’t speak, relax.”

I think they’re talking to themselves, because he’s certainly not hearing anything. His eyes are rolling wildly, out of control. He’s straining against the paramedics’ desperate calming words, flung wildly like stray bullets.

But he doesn’t stop. He fights, as he always has. He fights for his life even when the only thing he’s doing is killing himself.

I open my mouth, wanting to say something, anything. What comes out is a strangled little hiccup. I realize, a second too late, that it’s a laugh.

Fighting until the very end is supposed to be the best way to go—but somehow, I don’t think people meant it like this. No, anything has to be better than this.

But at the same time, I don’t want to see him stop struggling, stop fighting, because we all know what that means. There’s no doubt in any of our minds, I’m sure, seeing the bubbles of blood in his throat, seeing things inside of him I never wanted to see.

“Goodbye,” I whisper when his body stills, just to see if it’ll bring me closure.

It doesn’t.

In a time long gone when I was seven and he was eleven, we played outside on the front porch. It was a bittersweet moment for me; I remembered it as being the last time he’d played with me like we were the same age.

After that, he was irrevocably and boisterously a teenager. At least in spirit, he was. That was enough. My first heartbreak, my mother joked, laughing when my brother pulled a face of complete revulsion. I wasn't sure quite what she was laughing about, but I think I assumed she was making fun of me and went running off to cry to my dad.

But we'd been playing before, playing with bubbles blown from the best, the strongest solution, softly metallic in the light. Looking back, that's how I'd describe it.

Back then, it was just "shiny water" or "bubble water".

He blew the bubbles, of course; it'd been like that for as long as I can remember. I never had any interest in the colored plastic rings, except to point out the biggest. He blew the bubbles, slow and fat, leaning back against the wood steps and watching them float away with the oddly pensive look only a child can have.

I ran after those glassy balls like they held everybody in the world inside: which, for me, probably consisted only of my brother, my parents, and a few select friends. I never hesitated to pop them.

Then my brother would send a fresh assault against me. A squadron of little bubbles, catching the wind and sometimes escaping my seven-year-old reach. He seemed to find it entertaining, watching me throw rocks up at the bubbles when they rose high enough to blend in with the sky. He probably thought of it like his *Battleship* game.

But it was never a game to me, somehow. No, I took it very seriously. Missing a bubble was enough to send me into a sulk for hours. Thinking back, he probably went easy on me, knowing that the constant complaining if I lost a bubble outweighed the moral satisfaction of fairness.

I remember those days so clearly. Those moments when the sky seemed no more than a patchwork of bubbles; that time when my whole world was him and my house and my parents.

I remember those days.

I wish that was how I remembered him.

****To fix the ending:**

I wish that was how I remembered him.

Pop.

But that would throw the reader back into the bubble flashback scene, so it wouldn't really tie together. Hm...