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The Danger of Landing

It wasn't the accident that split us apart. I blame the virus for that. For your landing. Make good decisions, you'd say. Be careful.

Even as Sam and I were hanging on either side of the wire—she the only one left in the wicker basket, me tangled in the ropes and the balloon drifting down between us in flaming tatters—she and I knew we were in it together, peanut butter and jelly. I think we were laughing. She laughed at everything, like it was a solution. I desperately wanted a solution.

Let's start with the hot air balloon. You'd want to know about the hot air balloon first. Everything about a hot air balloon is gentle. Even the danger is gentle. You still wouldn't have done it. Or you would have, but you'd be asking questions the whole time about safety. You would've been annoying. Sisters always are.

I wasn't nervous about it until we got there. It was our summer of saying yes, of feeling alive, of whitewater rafting and buying a new (used) car and going up in a hot air balloon. Sam and I had been cooped up for too long. We were doing it all, before the virus surged again. Before life ended. If the virus surged again. Either way, we'd decided to live.

When we got there, to the open field with a couple pickup trucks, a big, flattened fabric, and a wicker basket, we sighed in relief. We'd driven too fast to get there; it was getting too late in the day and we might have missed our window for flight. The hot air balloon man introduced himself as the pilot; Sam and I shared a look. He was too messy, with his stubbled chin and tousled hair, to be a pilot. And seemed more likely to take us to the Land of Oz than efficiently pilot us anywhere. That's the other thing about hot air balloons; they're not efficient.

He explained what he was doing and what to expect from the flight, as he set the wicker basket upright. The carabiners held it all together. That's when I felt a little nervous. I was putting my life in the safety of a few carabiners and a wicker basket brought thousands of feet in the air by pure flame. Sam squeezed my hand, and before I could finish my thought

we had climbed in and we were drifting. The flame, as it turned out, was beautiful.

You know when we were kids, and I'd let go of a balloon to watch it drift into the sky? You'd yell at me; tell me I was killing the turtles and the whales. But do you remember what it looked like? It might bob a bit, waver in the wind as it steadily drifted away from us? That is exactly what it feels like to be in a hot air balloon. But instead of something drifting away, you are the thing that is drifting. Flying. It felt light, powerful. I felt like maybe I could catch up to you.

When we paused to breathe, after the laughter, which was after the screaming, I looked around. Sam was clutching the side of the wicker basket, the sole remaining passenger, soot on her face, reaching for me. I'm not sure her eyebrows were there anymore. I looked down and just past the smoking fabric of the balloon, I saw the on the ground the limbs of the balloon-man askew. I didn't like to see that. I looked up instead.

Where the ropes were caught on the electric lines, sparks were flying. It explained the bits of fire raining down on us. And as the ropes held onto me for dear life, I glanced up and to my right. Several yards away, past the danger and the fire and the ashen remains of a gentle flight, a bluebird sat on the wire. I knew he was a bluebird because I was below the wire by a few feet, and I could see his underside; it was orange. Mom always taught us to look at the underbelly of the birds. He stretched his wings and settled onto the wire. He flitted up and settled, flitted up and settled, every time a shower of sparks went off. I think he chirped, but I couldn't hear because Sam was talking. Or screaming. Or laughing. I wanted to hear him. I wanted to hear Mom, making up lives for the bees and the birds, bringing to voice the nature around us.

The rope slipped, caught. My fingers twitched. They weren't tangled, just my arm. I grabbed a bunch of fabric and rope above me with the other hand. I was trembling.

I looked down, at my legs dangling, the legs of the balloon-man down below my own.

I looked up, at the wire and the sparks, and for the bluebird. The bluebird looked up, too.

“We’re out of rooms, but you can have an orange Barcalounger.” The nurse said the words as if telling a child she could have the last piece of spinach, what a treat. I nodded, sitting down gingerly. The ER is full of germs. I don’t know how you ever worked here. Even before the virus.

The nurse paused before walking away. “What exactly happened out there?” she asked.

“The wind. Blew us into the electrical wires. We were supposed to be landing. And then I fell.”

I settled into the orange Barcalounger, my new world. Waiting here seemed better than waiting on the wire. Here, I was waiting for them to take pictures of my insides. They’d already stitched up my arm, where the rope had dug welts into my flesh and tore it apart. I tucked the blanket under my chin for comfort. Somebody had probably died on this blanket two hours ago. You would kill me if you knew I was down here, Lyss. I wished I could take my orange Barcalounger and go wait on your floor.

“Excuse me,” I attempted to pause the nearest nurse passing down the hall. “How is my friend? Sam?”

“Sam...” she turned on her heel to step back towards me, waving the doctor to go on by. Cocked her head sideways to read my wristband. “Emily Barnes. You mean the other girl from the hot air balloon?”

I nodded.

“She’s going to be fine. They want to keep her for observation, because she hit her head in the fall. It’s quite a miracle you two are okay.”

Okay, I thought. My thoughts looped over themselves as the pain medicine eased up the stabbing in my belly. And where did the bluebird go? Did he watch me fall?

They put me in a wheelchair and wheeled me down for an X-ray, a CT scan, covered me with a warm blanket after.

“No internal bleeding,” the doctor said. “You have some rib fractures, so you’ll have to take it easy.”

I nodded tentatively from my orange Barcalounger in the hall. As she walked away, I considered that you were right upstairs, unconscious. If you’d been there, you’d be asking her all the right questions. I didn’t know the questions—or the answers—so I just drifted back to the moment of flight, before the crash.

The grass waved good-bye as we drifted, though I didn't notice until we were high enough that I couldn't just jump out. I wanted to, for a moment, when I realized that opportunity had passed. Then the little songbirds waved at us with their fickle and buoyant wings, as we floated above them, too. And then the tops of the trees, looking like waving broccoli, greeted us with their foreign outermost leaves, sending off the last of the sunlight for the day.

"Wow," we said to one another. It was really all we could muster, overwhelmed by the beauty and by the balloon-man as he told us more than we wanted to know about the fuel, the flames, how he could dip us down to the tops of the trees. My stomach flopped when he did, but I obligingly grabbed a handful of the tree's leaves, as instructed. I didn't care about the trees. I just wanted to fly. To be away from the ground. Sam knew we didn't need to talk. She just wanted to be high.

And we flew. Standing so close it was impossible not to touch, we separated from the earth and its pull and joined the sky, the flame propelling us to the middle space between ground and cloud. I closed my eyes, briefly, only to dizzy myself when I opened them.

I wanted to stay there. But it's nothing more than the moment-before, when I think about it now. The landing ruined the flight.

I wanted to stay up there then, too, but the sun was going down. No flight at night, balloon man said. Planes wouldn't be able to see us. Not safe. He wasn't a man of many words while he was in landing mode.

So he picked out a clear field, looking for the chase truck that would meet us there. We started to descend. And then the wind blew, and we were flying again.

"We'll touch down one field over," he called out to the chase truck as we ascended again. To us he said, "It may be a bumpy landing. Wind's picked up."

We flew again. I wanted to keep going, higher, into the night where we could disappear and never touch the ground. I knew you were on the ground. I'm sorry.

We were just high enough to see the next field, the tallest trees at eye level, the electrical lines just below. We began the descent, again. Another gust blew us sideways, catching the edge of the balloon fabric. It crumpled, denting our balloon and the flame shot up, no longer underneath the bulk

of the balloon. The fabric rustled as it slid over the electrical wires, pulling them down and pulling our basket sideways.

Another gust. Balloon-man slipped out, like a seal sliding into the water. I reached out for balance and grabbed the ropes as the fabric slipped further on the other side, pulling my arm and tangling it in the process. My legs slipped from the basket as gravity sought to remedy the wind's push. The flame shot up, capricious pulses of light, connecting with the electricity worn through the wires.

I wasn't flying any longer. I was swinging. Hanging. I wondered if that was how your body had felt, too, the moment before you lost consciousness.

We always wanted to fly. We'd ride our bikes down the biggest hill in the neighborhood, you and I. Arms outstretched, eyes closed, balancing just with our knees. I would make up a story about how we were fairy princesses, imaginary chiffon dresses of violet and blue billowing behind us as our bikes lifted us from the pavement. You were too old for fairy princesses but not too old for bike rides. You'd smile, close your eyes too, and shout at me over your shoulder not to forget to brake. I always forgot to brake until it was too late. There was a permanent dent in the neighbor's bush at the bottom of the hill from where I forgot to brake.

You'd look back as you flew past.

"You good, Em?"

"All good!"

You didn't brake, either, but not because you forgot. You didn't need to; you had the balance to maneuver around the curve at the bottom of the hill and use the momentum to get up the next one. I'd end up walking my bike, bested by the uphill. You'd be waiting for me at the top.

I didn't lose Sam like I lost you.

She was just fine. Even her eyebrows were just singed. And when we were discharged, the reporters were waiting. I thought about turning the other way, going upstairs to be next to you, but I couldn't have you see me this way. I'd feel the judgment of my irresponsible decisions even through your coma.

Sam looped her arm through mine; I winced where she pressed against my new stitches. There wasn't any comfort in the act, anymore. She said, "Peanut butter."

They shoved a microphone in our faces.

“I’m gonna jelly from over there,” I motioned to the side of the building. She nodded, distracted by the camera as she began retelling the flight and the fall. I walked away.

I blinked and the balloon-man’s legs were there. I shook my head, turned it up towards the morning sun, not yet warm with the fall dew still cooling the air. I blinked again; there was the bluebird, looking up. Much better.

We met while waitressing, Sam and I. Three years ago. Not quite the trenches of the ICU, like you and your blood sisters (your nickname for your fellow nurses, I haven’t forgotten), but it got stressful at times and we needed someone to have our backs. Or at least to watch them, for the customers who got grabby, or mean, or entitled. I take that back; they were all entitled. That we expected, working at a fancy steakhouse. The grabbies, as well called them; *that* I didn’t expect.

I admired Sam. I didn’t like her at first, until she decided I should. She was showy, and clearly loved working there. I didn’t dislike the work, but I knew it was a stop on the way somewhere. I just didn’t know where, yet. You weren’t too sure about her either.

Sam was frosty to the newbies. I was frosty to everyone.

One night, we were short-staffed and had run out of the most popular entrée, a honeycrisp roasted duck (honey-roasted to a crisp and served with honeycrisp apples; the chef couldn’t resist the play on words). You were there that night, celebrating your promotion. I turned to my left after pouring the first glass of wine at my table. Sam was walking away from the next table laughing, a throaty laugh that made you want to join. She was laughing, but she wasn’t looking.

She bumped into my elbow, knocking the bottom of the bottle from my hand as red wine soaked down the front of my crisp white shirt.

I looked up and saw you from across the room. You had seen it all. You kept eye contact for a brief moment. Your lips were pursed, charge nurse style, as if to say, *not again, clumsy*. I finished the thought by adding to myself, “Can’t you do anything right?”

Sam responded to the statement I’d apparently uttered out loud with her placating but flirty voice, soothing the diners around us. “Oh, I can

do plenty right, darlin’.” She gripped the elbow she’d bumped, her acrylic talons digging into my skin. She leaned just past me to my table. “She’ll be right back with a fresh bottle and a fresh shirt. I know you want to drink your wine, not look at it.”

As soon as we got back to the kitchen she started laughing, the same laugh that had caused the trouble in the first place.

“Girl, you need a new shirt. There’s one in my bag—in the back—it’s yours, just get it back to me at the end of the night. And watch where you’re going.”

I wanted to yell at her; it had been her fault. But she’d just solved the problem she’d caused, so what could I yell about?

I furrowed my eyebrows. She continued.

“It happens to the best of us. Take a breath, change your shirt, get back out there. When the night’s up we’ll have a sandwich, finish off the roast duck for the evening.”

“There’s no roast duck left. But there’s always almond butter, and that plum jam... We can do a PB&J of sorts.”

“You got it. PB&J, we’ll make a great team,” She picked up her tray of orders. “Elbows in.” She winked.

Sam was great in a pinch. When she wanted to be. When she gave a damn.

I couldn’t tell her about you during our summer of yes. I couldn’t let her make that decision for me. But I could say yes to every adventure out there with her in the meantime.

“Every now and then the pandemic will fill me up and I need to pour it out,” you said to me one day. Like you were a teacup. Always the big sister, always the nurse, protecting me from the truth despite the tears streaming out of your eyes.

You made it, right up to the day they released the vaccine. In your note you said simply, “They didn’t need to die.” You knew it wasn’t your fault. And you were right, the hundreds of thousands who died didn’t need to. But it doesn’t mean your work was in vain.

I tried to tell you that, when I first visited the hospital. I know you couldn’t hear me (or maybe you could, the nurses said it’s possible), but your work wasn’t in vain and my words aren’t, either.

After the hot air balloon accident, people kept telling me how lucky I was to be alive. Not caring much for decorum anymore, I answered frankly. “Dying isn’t always the worst outcome.” They’d look at me funny, pretend they didn’t hear. The handful of people who knew about you looked stricken, like I’d slapped them in the face. I could almost see the finger marks as they touched their cheeks, sucking them in as if to bring back the words. Sam would just look at me like I had two heads when I said that. “Being alive is the best outcome,” she’d say, quashing any subtleties I’d implied.

I wasn’t just talking about you when I talked about dying. I was talking about the future, too. I lost my ability to say yes, to drift, to fly. You lost out on everything. Hypoxic brain injury, your chart says. Due to self-asphyxiation.

They blame you. I blame the virus.

If I let go, I won’t be killing a turtle or a whale like those childhood balloons. I’ll be killing you.

The nurses tell me not to look at it that way. They tell me in kind voices that really, you’ve already died. They tell me it’s my decision, I’m the one you named.

You and I had a conversation about this, once. I wish my memory were sharper. You paused the movie we were watching (one of the characters was in a coma) and you said, “If that’s me, don’t let me just rot slowly in a hospital bed. I’d rather be dead all the way than kind of mostly.”

“Nothing less than one hundred percent, for you.”

“What about you?”

“Ew, why are we even talking about this. I need more popcorn.”

“Seriously!” you called towards the kitchen. Some conversations are too hard to have face-to-face.

“There are miracles!” I shouted back. “Keep me around ‘til you have proof that miracles are dead, too.”

You pressed play before I even made it back. I grumbled about how you were the one who paused in the first place, so we could talk about the most morbid topic ever. You reached over and ate half of my popcorn. Why we ever made friends outside our sisterhood, I don’t know.

A week after the accident, Sam and I walked along the lake. It had been such a good summer of saying yes, before the hot air balloon. On the way out, we relived our favorite moments, as if the falling had never happened. Sam was already planning the next adventure, to hike in the Adirondacks. I was done with Sam's adventures.

It was sunny, but the white caps on the water sent wind whipping around our words. When we turned around the wind forced the sound back behind us, before it could reach our ears.

Some conversations are easier shouted. We took advantage of the opportunity not to hear one another.

"I CAN'T KEEP SAYING YES. SUMMER'S OVER."

"YOU CHANGED. BUT YOU DON'T NEED TO. THINGS WERE PERFECT."

"I THINK I NEED TO SAY NO."

"I MISS YOU." I was making up half her words. I couldn't hear them. I knew she'd said something heartfelt, though, because she looked at me then.

"I NEED TO LET MY SISTER DIE." I shouted, staring straight ahead, unleashing the thing I'd never told her. Crows don't share their grief with other birds. The wind pulled tears from my eyes, and I was grateful for the excuse. She kept plummeting, her words hunting for mine.

"I'M MOVING. MOVE WITH ME. I love you," she said as we entered a tree grove and the wind died down.

"Did you say you were moving?"

"I said I love you."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"The wind was loud. Em, I love you."

"Did you hear any of what I said?"

The grace of the noise-cancelling wind caught up with my cowardice. I was unable to repeat what I'd said, only sharing my grief with the soundless roar off the lake.

She took my hand. It was limp, clammy.

"I said I love you."

I straightened my shoulders before I responded. Ballet posture. She hated it when I did that, because it was the only time I was taller than her.

“You don’t love me. You love yourself when you are with me. Sam, I’m not gay.”

“But, after all we’ve been through together—”

“Still not gay.”

“You can be bisexual, you know.”

I knew. “You can be, but I’m not.” I stepped past the grove, back into the wind, the roar that allowed the quiet. I was done with her conversation, her decisions.

She stomped away from me to the car, muttering how she was done with me. You were right, you had warned me, she didn’t really listen further than the sound of her own voice leaving her lips. I walked back to the car feeling lighter than I’d felt in months.

I thought it was the summer of saying yes to life, but really it was the summer of saying yes to Sam. It was easier than saying yes to you. And when we drove home, it was silent. And I really wanted to tell you about it. To let you know I was ready.

I heard a honk. I honked back. More honking. It was coming from above. I looked up, to a haphazard V formation of straggly looking geese heading south. They looked disheveled, lazy, no clear lead to their formation.

“C’mon, guys. You can do better than that,” I muttered as I swerved into a parking space.

It was a short line inside. Since the virus, most people ordered ahead for their coffee. But I wanted to order in person today.

“Two pumpkin-spice lattes, please. One for me and one for my sister. I’m bringing a coffee to my sister.”

“Size?”

“Grande.”

“Name for the order?”

“Em. And Lyss.”

“Just one name’s fine. Em, you said?”

“No. It needs to be both names.”

“I can only put one name for the order, sorry. Which one do you want?”

I closed my eyes, hard. First the geese and then this moron. You would’ve told him off. I compromised.

“Just put ‘my sister’ for the order. As the name. MY SISTER.”

“Okay.”

I waited, remembering the times you brought me a pumpkin-spice latte on the first day of fall (even if they released it in, like, August).

“Coffee for My Sister, at the counter!”

It wasn't all selfish, you know. I wasn't just ordering an extra vanity coffee, or pretending you were fine. I wanted the room to smell nice when they released you from the tubes. And I think you would've wanted me to have something warm to hold while I waited for you to die.

I used to make notes to you, in my brain, throughout the day. Little post-its stuck to the recent memory of the day's events. *Tell Lyss about the disastrous Calculus prof*, I'd flag after class in college. *I can't wait to tell Lyss about this apartment—French doors into the bedroom!* I'd stick to my mind when you couldn't come apartment-hunting with me. *This girl is so self-absorbed*, I told you when I first met Sam. You had just decided to transfer to the Intensive Care Unit. They needed more nurses. You thought you could do the most good there, until the bodies that used to be people started showing up, already starved for air. You knew my problems were nothing, but you humored me anyway.

You always had some words for me, even when you were spent from a long day on your feet. Or you did, before the virus. Your words got fewer and fewer. You got sick. You got better. You went back to work. People kept dying. You needed out. I get it.

I still make post-it notes for you. I kept some of the ones I wrote out and stuck around your room, in case you woke up. I wanted to be prepared; it's what you would've done for me. I brought them home, after. Now I stick them around the window. They frame the occasional bird that flits through. Sometimes the post-its ask you a question.

The only answer I ever hear from you is in my head, the last word you said to me. I was walking out the door after dinner—I'd brought pizza over to your place, remember. And we said our usual “See ya, love ya, later!” but your eyes were dull as you said it.

You added one more word, the thing you'd always told me when we were kids, wanting me to watch out for the log that could trip me up on the trail or the picnic table behind the car as I was going in reverse or the

boyfriend who might break my heart or the brakes on the bicycle as we flew downhill.

“Careful.”

I think it would be nice to be a bluebird. Or a red bird, or a yellow bird. Not a hawk, though. They have all those mouse bones poking around in their bellies. And they seem kind of violent.

The songbirds, their only crime is against the worms. And the worms are stupid enough to dry up under our feet anyway when the rain stops. So I say the birds should get to have at ‘em, anyway.

I think I’m more like a crow. They make that awful “caw, caw.” They’re smart—apparently they can even recognize faces—and they know well enough to follow their murder. That’s what a pack of crows is called, a murder. I’m a part of a murder. And nobody wants to welcome a member of a murder to their pretty birdfeeder in the backyard.

Sam, she’s like a swan. Seeking a partner and the admiration of onlookers. Her reputation and her beauty take up more space than she does. She looks enticing from far away, but she can get aggressive if you get too close.

You were like one of those birds at the beach that flies up high, higher, higher and then dives straight down into the water for its lunch. Only focused on the thing at hand. I think those are pelicans, though I’d prefer a nicer-sounding name for your bird. Everyone liked to watch you, sitting on the beach soaking up the sun as you flew with your purpose.

I bought a birdfeeder, hung it up outside my apartment window. I watch them in the mornings while I drink my coffee. I don’t need to fly above them, now. I just let them come to me. And every time they land I catch my breath, just a little.