

Final Call (3921 words)

Gracie looked up from straightening her name tag, and shouted as loud as she could.

“Sir! Stop!”

The old man was less stooped than she would have imagined, given his hair. He had a full head of it, poking in every direction, but it was the purest white she could remember, with not a fleck of any other color, including grey.

I wonder how old he is?

But she couldn't worry about that now. If he opened the door, they'd be shutting down the whole airport, and she was in enough trouble already. She'd punched in “late” for the third time this week, only to find her supe, Morris, first name unknown, looming over the clock, and serving up the same lecture she'd heard half a dozen times now.

“I want all of you here half an hour early. That way, when we switch shifts, it goes smooth as silk.”

A dozen thoughts had swirled in her head.

First off, “All of you” sounded an awful lot like “You people,” and if he ever used that particular phrase then this former soldier turned agent would lay him out.

Only, reconsidering, she probably wouldn't. She'd just say nothing, leave, and fume in anger for the day.

She needed the job.

She was caring for four kids - two of her own, one of her brother's, and one from her ex's second marriage (*don't ask*). And for her mom, whose dementia ranged from forgetting that she'd had oatmeal and blueberries for breakfast already that morning, to asking ten times in a row “Why do I need to get on this bus? Where's it going?”

It was going to adult day care, which cost a fortune, but right now was a godsend, but even that might go away soon.

The nurse was nice enough, but had been clear.

“Your mother's OK for now, but it won't be long before she'll be too much to handle. “

So, Mr. Morris, I'd like to see you get a first grader, a middle schooler, two foul-mouthed unruly teens, and an uncooperative, sometimes crotchety, sometimes yelling and screaming and half-crazy old woman out the door every morning, and still make it in 28 and a half minutes before your shift was scheduled to start, no matter how you defined late.

And if you ran your organization with any kind of precision, if people gave you any respect, you wouldn't have to have people coming in early. They could show up on time.

The army might have had its issues, and its bullies, but at least it had been organized about it. Not like this ragtag group of ex-cops, bureaucrats, wannabes and general malcontents.

But I need this job. And the benefits.

So, she'd said nothing.

When Morris promised he'd punch her in on the hour, she had just said "Yes, Sir," and headed for the door to patrol the terminal before coming to the checkpoint to speak in a "clear and distinct voluble tone" to businessmen (and women), vacationers and retirees to empty their pockets completely, and to remove all metal objects, and their shoes.

As she did, and had been thinking things couldn't get any worse, they did.

Tyrese and Bo had blocked the door out of the break room, having overheard the lecture. It annoyed her to no end that they always hung out together, talking trash about the American public in general, and, she was sure, about her behind her back, and fist bumping whenever one of them made a stupid joke.

"TaeBo is in the house!" Bump.

As if only one out of date reference wasn't enough.

But, just as with Morris, she'd elbowed her way through the pair, who'd stood their ground in the doorframe maybe just a little too firmly to be casual, and out into the main concourse.

Remembering where she was, she ran toward the full white head of unruly hair, trying again, this time her voice a little higher.

"Sir! Stop! That's for airport personnel only."

Still, he shuffled forward.

She accelerated, her shoes clip-clopping on the tile like a galloping horse's. Heads turned toward her at the sound. She didn't really notice, preoccupied instead with the thought that she could probably afford to skip the morning doughnut once in a while, but what were you supposed to eat when you're pushing everybody out the door?

She lunged, just as an age-spotted hand reached for the red lever, and caught the old man's shoulder.

The room flipped on itself, and after a "whoosh-thump," she found herself on her back on the floor, staring up at ceiling tiles that clearly needed to be replaced.

She focused on the craggy face that stared down at her.

The hand that still held one wrist felt like the paper sack she'd packed her lunch in on those days when she had time to pack a lunch - dry, light and crinkled from heavy use.

She wondered again about his age. The deep lines in his face alone put him well past eighty, but his eyes showed experience and a knowledge of the world that could have easily put him over a hundred.

A clear, slow deliberate voice said "Sorry about that. You surprised me."

She reddened. After all, she'd come in third in hand-to-hand training (*that's third overall, mind you, not third for females*), and had thrown one opponent after another to the mat. She hadn't been on the mat herself very often except as a training exercise, or if the instructor had chosen her for a demonstration.

Yet grandpa had just thrown her to the floor as easily as if she'd been lifting her youngest on to her hip on the way into the grocery store.

He helped her up, and she was astonished at the ease with which he did it.

Dusting herself off (*somebody should clean these floors, she thought, maybe even before replacing the ceiling tiles*), she moved between him and the door, and repeated her message about it being out of bounds.

By this time, a crowd had assembled. This time she did notice them, and that they seemed heavily anti-authority.

"Why are you picking on an old man?" was one comment, but "Wow! He really laid you out, lady" came right after.

A red-headed man stopped chewing on an apple long enough to shout "Leave gramps alone, you government drone."

She seethed, and then calmed, trying to reason out exactly what to say.

The old man's lips were moving, but she couldn't hear him over the chatter.

She leaned in, and picked up 'my wife,' but that was all she could catch.

She scanned the crowd, and yelled "Quiet!"

Most of them complied, but with a lot of mumbling and a few scattered boos.

She turned to ask him to repeat what he'd said, but before she could, a familiar, deep resonant voice interrupted. She recognized it at once. Ty.

"Problem, here?"

And then Bo's nasal twang, "Yeah. What's going on?"

She was boiling. Not only had the crowd instantly hushed for the two of them, but, as usual, they'd managed to find her at her worst.

Well, not quite her worst. At least they hadn't seen her flipped head over close-toed, governmentally approved, highly polished shoes.

Ty's basso echoed again. "Break it up, people. Break it up."

And Bo's squeak. "Yeah. Go back to whatcha were doing. Don't anybody wanna miss their flights."

The crowd scattered, and wandered off to whatever was next on their itineraries.

In the meantime, Grace went back to basic training.

Not army basic training, but security training.

She smiled at the man, and asked about his wife.

He didn't respond, but raised a finger as if remembering something, and made as if to go through the door again.

"Don't!" cried Grace.

She had meant the warning for Ty and Bo rather than the old man, but unaware of her intent, both had reached out at the same time to grab his arms.

And both, after a "whoosh-whoosh-thump-thump," found themselves looking up from the floor, stunned. She couldn't help but chuckle.

Ty was the first to shake himself off and stand. Bo's reaction was different. Weasel eyes bulging even more than normal, a scowl on his face, he jumped to his feet and hit the broadcast button on his radio.

"We got a threat here, attempted unauthorized access. He's dangerous. Come now!"

Grace stifled her chuckle, and her smile vanished.

If there'd been a crowd before, the one assembling now made it look tiny. The redhead was back, apple still in hand, this time with new suggestions about what the government drones should do.

How'd he have time for this? Long layover?

She noticed that neither Ty nor Bo had tried to touch the man again, but both had stepped beside her between him and the door.

Once again, the man tried to say something.

This time she couldn't hear him at all, but read his lips enough to understand 'my wife' again.

What she did hear was a commotion from the main concourse.

The three of them, still maintaining their wall between the man and his objective, pivoted in unison to scan the back of the crowd as they heard “Out of the way. Coming through” from multiple voices. Soon there was a cadre of five more somewhat nervous agents, as well as Jim, the on-duty airport cop, surrounding the man, whose back was still turned away from the crowd, as he faced the three original agents and the door.

Jim fumbled his gun out of his holster, almost dropping it, then pointed it at the ground, and looking a little sheepish, put it away again.

Grace noticed a ripple in the crowd, like a shark making its way through the water.

No, she thought. Like the damned mole who’s been digging up my yard.

Morris emerged, eyebrows beetling into a single large caterpillar above narrow eyes and a tightly drawn mouth, next to which, Grace couldn’t help but notice, perched a dab of mayonnaise.

Of course. Bad enough he’s here for this chaos. I had to interrupt his lunch break too.

Morris reached toward the man as each of the others had done.

Grace pictured him flying through the air, and it brought her smile back, but the image was immediately replaced by Jim drawing his gun again, and she, Ty, Bo, Morris, the old man, the redhead and several others in the crowd all falling to the floor, at least one of them bleeding in spurts and gushes.

“Sir...wait,” this time to Morris. “That’s probably not a good idea.”

Ty and Bo both nodded vigorously in agreement.

Surprisingly, Morris paused, glaring at the three of them. *Might mean my job, she thought, but can’t have people getting injured. Or killed.*

She remembered the exchange of smiles she'd had with the man.

"I think I can reach him."

She waited a beat, and added "Sir."

Morris' expression stayed stony. Ty and Bo nodded again. After a bit, Morris kept the same stiff face, but tilted his head, almost imperceptibly, in approval.

Grace read the full meaning of it. *Try it, but one more screw-up and you're out of here.*

Instead of reaching for the man this time, she moved back to where she'd been with Ty and Bo, between him and the door, and smiled her brightest smile, all the while thinking *Oh no. I'm going to be back on the floor again, and out of a job.*

She moved her hand, not to grab him, but in a gentle "Wait. Wait" motion, looked him squarely in the eye, and said "You're looking for your wife."

His comprehension wasn't immediate, but he seemed to understand. He pointed at the sign by the door, and said, in that same measured crystalline voice, "I left her at security."

Ah. A breakthrough.

Emboldened, she amped up the smile a bit further, and motioned with the same hand for him to come along with her.

That's right. Just going for a stroll with the smiling governmental drone.

He shocked her by following, as did Morris, Ty, Bo, a couple of the new guards, Jim, the redhead, and a few of the other lookie-loos.

Outside security, Morris sent the remaining agents other than Ty and Bo back to their posts, shoed away the gawkers, and watched as Grace beckoned the old man inside. Jim followed.

The space was almost empty, save for a couple who sat explaining something to an agent.

Congo, Grace thought almost automatically, *or Angola*, noticing the black passports and matching them with the couple's dress and skin tone.

They must have been wrapping up, as the agent looked one last time at the couple, in what Gracie thought of as the icy immigration agent pre-approval stare-down, stamped their passports, and showed them out.

Jim removed his belt and gun and put them on the desk in front of him, made his usual complaint about sciatica, collapsed in a chair with a thump, and went back to finishing a coffee that, if it had cooled during the action, didn't stop him from sipping at it as if it still might burn his lips. His actions suggested a path forward to Grace.

The advice going through her head though wasn't from her hand-to-hand trainer. It was from one of the nurses at the adult day care explaining how to deal with dementia patients.

Calm them down. Put them at ease.

"Have a seat," Grace motioned to the gentleman, and though clearly still a little agitated, he sat.

"Would you like a drink?"

He didn't respond.

"I think he's a little messed up in the head," said Bo. Grace smiled at the man once more, pointed at his chest (but not too closely), and mimed pouring a cup of coffee and drinking it.

He nodded.

She was about to ask him how he took it, but sensing much greater difficulty than her simple question of whether he wanted it at all, brought it to him black, with a couple of sugar packets and creamer cups on the side.

He left the sugar and creamer alone, blew on the mug, sipped, sighed and then spoke.

“I need my wife. I left her at security.”

Ty’s voice cut in. “This one’s looney. I saw him come through alone.”

“Yeah, like I said, screwy,” said Bo, who made the universal circle around the ear for crazy.

Indeed, when Grace looked at the hand holding the coffee cup, she saw no ring.

Yet, she mused, he seemed genuine. There was real concern in his eyes.

She noticed something else too. It didn’t explain where his wife was, but it did explain why she seemed to feel a kinship with him, and she respected him even more than when he had flipped her like a pancake.

He bore a tattoo on his forearm, faded, and not exactly like hers, but similar. She decided he was worthy of some courtesy.

She turned to Ty and Bo, and without thinking, shushed them both, as if one of her little ones had used a bad word at the dinner table.

They each took a step back, and stood mute, with heads slightly bowed.

Jim paid no mind, and looked as if he were about to nod off.

Grace again thought of something the nurse had told her when Mom had asked what time Aretha was going to show up for the concert.

Sometimes it's best just to agree with them, hon. It's easier for them, and it's easier for you. Play along, and they'll forget about it soon enough and move on to something else.

She bent in close, right to his face, and mouthed each word slowly, carefully, independently.

“Where were you and your wife last together?”

It looked like, miracle of miracles, he understood her, at least in part.

And while she expected him to say Hawaii, or at church, or at WalMart, he said, also slowly and carefully, “I...left...her...at...security.”

Then more rapidly. “Like I told you already.”

Apparently, Ty thought his time-out was over.

“And like I told you., I seen him come through. Nobody with him.”

Grace held up a hand.

Again, she looked directly at the old man.

“Sir, what’s your wife’s name?”

He simply replied “My wife. I left her at security.”

Everyone groaned.

“Yes. What...is...her...name?”

Still nothing.

In a flash of inspiration, she pointed at her name tag, and held it toward him a little. "Her...name?"

Something seemed to register.

They all leaned in.

He said only "My."

Bo threw up his hands. "I know. **My** wife. I left her at security."

The man had said something while Bo was complaining.

Grace shushed him again.

The man spoke.

"Her name...is Mai."

Grace's smile broadened, this time naturally.

"Not 'my,' like in 'my wife.' It's 'Mai,' like in a name. We can page her."

Bo smirked. "Good luck, Grace. How you gonna get a last name?"

After half a second, he added "Maybe it's 'butt'." He snorted, and Ty chortled along with him.

Morris stared them both down. It was the first time Grace had seen him take charge of anything more than a time card or assigning (well suggesting, really, but you knew it was assigning) doughnut pick-up.

"Stay here," he said. Calm down a little. Can't be too many women named 'Mai' in the airport. I'll do it."

He stepped through the exit, and soon his amplified voice rang through the speakers.

"Mai, please report to Security Checkpoint #2..."

He paused, seemingly unclear what to say next.

“...to reclaim an item left behind.”

Then he repeated it.

Ty took advantage of Morris being out of the room to grab Jim’s gun off the desk, Jim now fully dozing in his chair. He twirled it around in imitation of a cowboy, pretended to shoot at a filing cabinet, then blew imaginary smoke away from the barrel.

“Give it a rest, Ty. It’s a real gun. Put it back.”

Ty sneered at Grace, stepped toward her, and gun at his side, towered over her.

Grace didn’t budge.

“First, I don’t take orders from you.”

At least the gun was at his side.

“And second, where do you get off, shushing me?”

“Shushing *us*,” chimed in Bo.

“Yeah, *us*,” said Ty, thumping his chest as Bo did the same. “Tae Bo!” They fist-bumped.

“They’re not gonna find her,” chirped Bo.

Ty swept his arm holding the gun around the room. “Might as well look in here as anywhere else.”

He pulled out a file drawer, peered under a desk, and walked over to the bin that said *Lost and Found*.

Underneath, someone had scrawled *but never forgotten*.

“Maybe she’s in here,” he said, and started pulling things out with his free hand, first, a frayed green jacket, then what looked like a brand-new computer, and now a graying ballcap that said “Vietnam Vet.”

“Oh my,” he said, reaching in again. He pulled out what looked like a hunting knife about ten inches long. “Some idiot always thinks this will go through.”

He dropped everything back in.

Then several things happened at once.

The old man’s eyes opened wide. He put down his coffee, and moved toward the bin.

Morris hip-checked the door open, only to hear Grace, unaware of Morris behind her, lecture the other two agents.

“Listen, **Bow-Tie**. You two deserved to be shushed. You were mean and condescending to him, just like you are to me every day. And he deserves respect. He’s a vet. One who saw live action, judging from his tat.”

She paused only briefly, then added “and you’d better start respecting me too.”

The man, having reached the bin, held up the hat and jacket in one hand, and the knife in the other, and yelled a triumphant “Hah!”

Ty raised Jim’s gun, and pointed it at the old man’s back. His hand was clearly shaking, as he said “Put down the knife.”

“He can’t understand you,” cried Grace in desperation.

“He’s holding a weapon. He put me on the floor. I have a right to shoot.”

“No, you don’t. You’re TSA, not a cop. And he’s not a threat!”

“I’m counting down from three. You’d better drop everything.”

“Ty!” screamed Grace. “Please.”

“Three.”

Morris moved toward the man, but tripped over Bo, who had been busy backing up from the possible line of fire in a panic, sending them both sprawling.

“Two.”

The man, still facing the other way, dropped the hat, jacket and knife, and reached back into the bin.

“There you are,” he said.

“What’s he got there? What’s he got? Another weapon?”

Ty’s hands were shaking so violently now that Grace knew if he did shoot, he might not just hit the old man, but one of them, or one of the passengers on the other side of the wall.

Just as Ty shouted “One,” Grace moved in, wrested Ty’s gun hand toward the ceiling, and twisted his wrist so the weapon dropped to the floor. For good measure, she flipped him on his back for the second time that day. The gun never fired.

All four of them watched as the man turned, and put something in each ear.

“Ah. That’s better.” He grinned. “My hearing aids. Now I’ll be able to understand you.”

Then he held out his other hand. It had a standard sized drugstore prescription vial in it.

“Found her. Here she is.”

Some time later, things were more peaceful.

“You’re going to need to show up on time, Alvarez, with Tyrese and Buford out on probation.” Grace grimaced.

“Let’s say five minutes before shift change? Maybe ten?”

She brightened.

“Yes, sir.”

She could handle that. Piece of cake compared to four kids and an unruly grandma.

She’d seen the man to his gate, along with his wife’s ashes.

“We’re practical, my generation,” he’d said. “No sense letting a good container like this go to waste. My wife would have had my head if I’d bought one of those fancy urns they were trying to sell me.”

He looked good in his hat, his jacket, and his wedding ring, all of which had been reclaimed from the bin. The knife hadn’t been his.

“I bet there’s somebody trying to get something like that through security all the time. There are a lot of idiots out there.”

She laughed, and nodded.

“There are a few in here too.”

They shared a few stories about how his army was different from the one she’d served in.

“I was in the jungle.”

“I know,” she said, pointing to his hat, and then at his tattoo. “I was in the desert.”

“I know,” he said, pointing at her forearm. “Same fight. Different enemy. Different location. But... the same fight.”

She felt a warmth of affection, something beyond common experience, growing inside her.

“Word of advice, soldier?”

She leaned in.

“Pay attention to what’s most important. Forget the rest.”

They snapped a quick salute to each other. Not the long, drawn-out one from the end of a movie. Just a quick sign of the bond between them.

He made his way through the gate door and down the ramp toward the plane.

She smiled again, thinking about what he’d said.

I can do that. Pay attention to what’s most important.

Her grin broadened.

But maybe I’ll put in for that promotion too. Then after that, Morris’ job.

I can handle it.