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Betsy

Twenty-five minutes from now a plane will crash. I'll watch about a hundred and fifty people die. The doomed passengers have just started boarding, two gates down from where I sit, peering at them over the top of *Teen Vogue* magazine. It will take another twelve minutes to finish the boarding process. Four minutes more for the plane to push back from the gate. Seven minutes for it to taxi to the end of the runway. There's a small chance the plane will wind up behind Flight 1517 to Memphis on the taxiway—it's happened three times in the last sixty days. Add three minutes to the timeline if that happens. Ninety seconds for take-off. Another eighteen seconds until the plane reaches the perfect position in the sky.

And then Flight 117 from Indianapolis to Washington, D.C. will plummet to earth.

What will it look like? Not the fireball of a movie plane crash, I think, although the plane will be loaded with fuel. I may not see anything from my vantage point in the airport. Just a sudden descent and the sound of a low, distant thud.

The congressman closes his copy of the *Indianapolis Star* and sets it aside. He stands, entering the boarding line. He flies this route often. Sometimes he gets upgraded to first class, but today he's in coach. His frequent flier status lets him board ahead of most of the passengers. As he steps onto the jetway, I tap out a text on my phone. "Getting a bacon & egg biscuit. Want one?" The reply comes quickly, "No thx." If I'd typed sausage, it would have meant the congressman wasn't on board. If the reply had been yes, the operation would have been scrubbed.

A woman runs down the concourse, practically dragging a little girl of four or five. They're both out of breath and sweating. The little girl's hair is done up in poofy pigtails, held in place with yellow plastic barrettes that look like tiny bananas.

The barrettes remind me of my mother. She used to put my hair up like that. She used to hum or sometimes sing while she did my hair. I'd give anything to hear her sing again. I even had banana barrettes like the little girl's. What is it with banana barrettes? Does every little girl own a pair? Do they give them away at hair salons?

I sent out a silent prayer: Please don't stop at Gate 12A. The congressman deserves to die. And I've accepted the fact that there will be some collateral damage. A lot of collateral damage. But this is an early-morning flight normally frequented by businessmen, not little girls and their mothers.

They stop at Gate 12A. The mother rushes to the desk, holding out her phone. She shows it to the gate attendant, and they exchange a few words I can't hear. Then the mother shoves her phone into the outer pocket of her purse and trudges to the back of the boarding line.

I could call off the operation with a text. But later, I'd need to give a reason, and a little girl with banana barrettes isn't a reason my father will accept.

I rise from my chair, setting aside the fashion mag. There are only a few passengers waiting at this gate—14A. A few of them eye me suspiciously. A grandmotherly type gives me a kind smile. I've attracted a lot of attention, which is exactly how I want it. It's not really me they're looking at; it's my clothing. A flowing dress that covers me from wrist to ankle. A scarf wrapped tightly around my head, so nothing but the oval of my face is showing. The scarf is unfamiliar and feels confining, pressing my hair tightly against my head. I prefer to wear my hair down, free and flowing around my shoulders. My disguise probably won't help if I'm arrested, but witnesses will report that a Muslim girl was here, and the police will focus on that.

I walk slowly toward Gate 12A. I pretend I'm heading for the Starbucks just beyond the gate. The woman is clutching her little girl's hand tightly. The woman's purse is slung across her back. I pretend to trip, crashing into the woman.

"I'm so sorry, how clumsy of me," I say as I surreptitiously lift the woman's cell phone from her purse.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Fine. Sorry again." I clutch my hand to my stomach, bending over slightly, hiding the cell phone under the fabric that drapes off my arm. I pass her, continuing to the Starbucks.

I stand with my back to the line of passengers, shielding the cell phone with my body. I turn the phone off, wipe it with the sleeve of my dress, and then drop it into the Starbucks' trash can. I pretend to examine the cookies in the bakery case for a moment, and then make my way back to my seat at Gate 14A. I take out my boarding pass—it's a totally legit ticket for the flight to Chicago that boards an hour from now—and pretend to examine it. No matter what happens, I won't be on that flight.

A few moments later, the woman and her daughter have reached the front of the boarding line. She digs around in her purse, looking for the missing cell phone. Her movements become increasingly frantic as she searches. The gate attendant ushers her out of line, and she continues her frantic search as the other passengers board.

The gate attendant is shaking her head, trying to be sympathetic. The woman is in tears now. The gate attendant shakes her head again and shuts the door to the jetway.

I type another text into my phone. "I've got about eighteen dollars left," it says, which is perfectly true; I'm carrying eighteen bucks and some change. I don't hit send. The plane taxis out of my field of view, and I wait until I see it roar down the runway. As its wheels leave the ground, I push send. The people on that plane have a little over eighteen seconds left to live.

I rise from my chair, strolling to the women's restroom. As I reach the door, I look over my shoulder and out the huge glass windows that overlook the runways. In the distance, the plane, small enough that it looks like a toy, plummets straight down. It slowly tilts from horizontal as it falls. It disappears behind the low hill and trees past the end of the runway.

Nothing else happens. There's no noise, no shock wave, no explosion that I can detect from the airport. It's terribly anti-climactic. No one else at the airport even noticed it, as far as I can tell.

I step into a stall in the women's room and strip off my dress and headscarf. Under all that silk, I'm wearing jean shorts and a tee. I stuff the dress and scarf into my backpack and leave the restroom, sauntering down the concourse.

I reach the arrivals level outside the airport. The driver is waiting to extract me, exactly on time. As we pull away from the curb, the sirens begin to wail.