

# 1

IT WAS MID-APRIL, EARLY MORNING, and I signed in at the checkpoint: *Gary Waldman, Transportation Security Officer*. I was almost ready to focus through another shift at Albany International Airport. Before I could get down to it, though, I needed to stop daydreaming about the run I'd take later, after work, when I'd hustle over to the campus of Haven College and huff it up the winding gravel path on Monument Hill. I called it the Hill of Sorrow now and it offered the best, most economical therapy around. Up at the summit I'd stand wheezing before the sandaled toes of the thirty-foot-tall marble sculpture of young Mary Haven. She remained frozen there, leaning against a cross while holding her broadsword forever aloft, brandishing it at the distant sky, as if vowing revenge against someone up there for her terrible fate. Poor girl, mauled to death by a black bear in the woods of Albany when she was twelve. Her father rushed with his Remington toward the sound of her screams. He managed to shoot down the bear, but failed to save the child. The bear's pelt still hung in the college museum, right next to a few framed, carefully preserved locks of Mary's curly red hair. There was no statue to mark the grave of that father, just a plain, well-worn headstone for yet another powerless man with a gun—another man who lived unaware of doom until it was far too late.

I snapped out of my reverie when my straight-up, no bullshit supervisor, Carelli, pointed me to the divestiture spot on lane three. Carelli was five seven or so, trim except for his beer belly. He kept a photo of his two hay-blond toddlers pressed behind his ID in the

lamine pouch clipped to his chest pocket. The guy was a lifer, a grunt, a fellow grinder, and because of that I felt at ease with him.

I grabbed a radio and a few extra pairs of large blue gloves, stepped into position, and launched right into the script about liquids, gels, aerosols, laptops, jackets, sweaters, shoes, belts, and empty pockets. It was the part of the shift that reminded me most of coaching, how, back on the courts, I could spend hours repeating the same phrases I'd lifted early on from Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis: Show interest in the ball. Be aware of your racket. Find your quiet mind. Let it happen.*

I had become accustomed to a different set of phrases during my almost seven years at the airport. From day one on the job, it was 9/11, 9/11, 9/11, and War on Terror mantras. *Not on my watch. Not in my airport. Never again.* The higher-ups liked to invoke the fact that some of those terrorists started their fateful September morning in airports even smaller than Albany. "Albany *International*," they insisted, because of the daily commuter flights to Montreal and Toronto. They felt the need to fight against complacency and they talked about it like this: *We're 150 miles from New York City. The terrorists have as many chances as they want; we only get one chance to stop them. It could happen here. If you see something, say something.*

But what if you don't see something?

Apply the guiding principle of my thirties and forties—of my whole life, really: *What you don't see is what you get.*

Still, no matter what they said, no matter how much fear they mongered, I believed Albany would always resemble the old fluffy sitcom *Wings* far more than the flashy, high-body-count dramas of *24* or *Homeland*.

Or, to borrow another popular TSA mantra: If you've been in one airport, you've been in one airport.

There's a useful concept with many possible applications. A bleak version of how much experience will help you prepare for the future. Or maybe it was a celebration of the particular. Or, most likely, it was both, and more.

*If you've been an only child, you've been an only child.*

*If you've had one kid, you've had one kid.*

*If your wife died in your arms, your wife died in your arms.*

Better to move from position to position—divestiture to bag search to X-ray to walk-through metal detector to document checker to exit to the scanner then back to divestiture and round and round—more or less like that for eight hours with breaks for briefings, occasional online training, coffee, and breakfast, lunch, or dinner, depending on the shift. *Never the same day twice*, some said, because the passengers were always different. Even when the passengers were the same, taking one business trip after another, their moods varied widely. Still, the tasks could get repetitive and tedious; rotation from position to position helped keep everyone alert and engaged. Walk up to a fellow officer, say “I’m tapping you,” and you could feel the gratitude flowing back your way. When we were short-staffed or slammed or a supervisor slipped up, the rotation rhythm could get thrown off and we’d all start looking over our shoulders for relief, eager to move on. If we couldn’t move on, people would get irritated, and woe unto the passenger who pushed back at such moments.

But most of the time, especially in the mornings, the rotation stayed smooth and close to peaceful, which was just what I needed, now more than ever. When I was surveilling the lines I wasn’t agonizing about the fast-approaching birthday of my dead wife.

“Everything out of your pockets,” I repeated. “Laptops get their own bin. Coats off. Shoes off. We recommend belts off as well. All liquids, gels, and aerosols need to come out of your bags.”

My crowd-surfing gaze caught a young woman in purple yoga tights. She was sipping a bottle of water, enjoying it, as if it were the best beverage she’d ever had. Early thirties, right around the same age Laurie had been when she died. If the situation were different, if I were in a different place, at a different time, with a completely different personality, I might have told her I had a break coming up and I’d be honored to buy her more water and I’d buy one myself and we could drink together and maybe talk about life and death and love on the other side of the checkpoint.

Unfortunately, August Harnett was nearby, working the walk-through metal detector, otherwise known as the mag. August was not a grinder; he was a cowboy, a wannabe cop who had so far failed the Albany Police entrance exam twice, in part because he’d

lost most of his left foot in a snowmobile accident. “You need to drink up, Miss,” he barked.

The woman smiled, a bright flicker of grace added to my shift. “I spent the whole morning on the phone with my mother,” she said. “Forgot to hydrate. I’ll be done in a second.”

“When you’re done isn’t up to you,” August said, and I watched him limp forward, apparently ready to shunt her directly to a full-body standard pat-down, which he’d no doubt perform himself, if only the rules didn’t interfere. But I didn’t want an incident. I saw an old man approaching with a small yippy dog in a carry-on bag. The man and his pet would need to pass through the mag, so I directed them that way. “Here comes one for you, Officer,” I said, and August had no choice but to stay at his post.

Then I turned to face the woman again. Her thin-lipped mouth was half-open, her emerald-green eyes showing sadness and hurt. Maybe she’d been up all night. Maybe she’d never done yoga in her life. Maybe she was a runner with a terrible headache. How could I possibly know the precise ways she might be lost? All I knew was she was enjoying that water and I was enjoying her enjoyment. She had slender, toned legs, but her heart could still be broken. I imagined her standing in this checkpoint line after an awful night, an awful week, an awful year. I didn’t have to stretch my imagination very far. “Take your time,” I said, hoping to make the simple words soothe, hoping she’d see beneath my starched shirt, the shoulder patches, the ridiculous epaulets, all the way through to my own flaws, my own errors, which, I’d be the first to admit, were legion.

She smiled again and I stood taller, which still wasn’t very tall, five eleven, on a good day. She offered the water bottle to the older man standing behind her. Was she a trophy wife? The guy looked wealthy, ready for business in a soft, gray sport coat, thick silver hair gelled back. “I’m fine,” the guy said, brushing the bottle away.

Yoga woman shrugged and drank some more. It would have been a pleasure to continue watching her, but August was glaring over, eager to reassert himself. I wanted to keep the peace. Isn’t it funny, I could have peacefully pointed out, that the abbreviation on the job for passengers is PAX? Instead, I said, as calmly as I could, “Please move along when you’re ready.”

I yearned to speak more with her, but I switched my attention to a little boy, six years old or so. Same age as my son, Ben. He was speed-drinking from a fist-sized purple juice box. Then I caught yoga woman flashing her sweet smile my way before she entered the scanner. Did she mouth “Thanks” at me? Sure looked like it, and I felt grateful even as the boy’s stern mother scolded the potbellied father about how all the sugar was going to make the kid hyper for the flight. “I’ll let you deal with it,” the mother said, and they shuffled toward August, who was once again on the correct side of the mag, finishing up his rigorous inspection of the pet owner’s palms.



I spent the next hour trying to sink deeper into the rhythm of the job. August chattered away with his cowgirl buddy Gloria Sanchez about the latest push at TSA HQ to arm at least a few TSOs on every shift.

“We’d get a lot less flirty talkback that way,” he said.

Sanchez had a boxy head, and the way she wore her curly black hair accentuated the squarish shape. The straight lines and sharp angles added to her authority. “That’s right,” she said. “And we’d be ready to help if any demonstrations went south.”

I didn’t bother to point out that Albany International had no history of demonstrations. Instead, I drifted toward Laurie’s old dream of moving to one of those countries where people shunned guns and cars while pedaling around on sensible bicycles. Amsterdam, that was her ideal city, and had been ever since she’d spent her junior year abroad studying history in Leiden. In Amsterdam, we’d find a real social safety net in place. Significant maternity leave. Dependable public education. She could live life to the fullest, raise a bunch of multilingual kids, get stoned with impunity, and fantasize occasionally about a tall, slender Dutchman while staying true to our marriage. I wondered, for the millionth time, what would have happened if I hadn’t raced her, if I hadn’t tried to pull in front, if I’d let her lead the whole way down the hill.

If this, if that, if the other thing.

Meanwhile, August and Sanchez were complaining about how ridiculous it was that TSOs always had to defer to the Law Enforcement Officers. If someone ran, TSOs weren't supposed to intervene directly. We were supposed to follow, keep the person in sight, await those LEOs. We'd be easy targets for any TSA-hating moron with a fancy rifle and bag full of ammo, like the guy who terrorized the checkpoint at Los Angeles International. It was exactly the sort of protocol that Laurie's older brother, Hank, loved to mock. Hank, who'd been working in and around the military and the FBI for more than twenty years. Hank, who'd called in late last night to say he'd be in town for the birthday. "Still with the TSA?" he'd asked, as usual.

"Affirmative," I'd answered.

"Thousands Standing Around," he'd said. "Tough Shit for America."

I took a breath, focused back on the job, and a few minutes later I was at the scanner being tapped for break. I wandered out of the checkpoint. Any chance yoga woman was still around? Should have stolen a glance at the gate number on her boarding pass. It might have been nice to look her in the eyes and wish her a relaxing trip. Or I could keep my distance. No conversation required. Buy her that water and get someone else to give it to her. Let her live the rest of her life never knowing it was a gift from me. Maybe an anonymous act like that would boost my beleaguered karma.

Instead, I headed for the men's room and locked myself in a stall to take a piss. When I opened the stall door and saw a guy rushing toward me, I panicked. Then I realized I was face-to-face with a flustered, terrified traveler who was desperate for help. "An old man collapsed over here," the guy said, pointing. "I was standing by the sink. I don't think he's breathing."

I considered running to get Carelli. That would be standard operating procedure. More TSA protocol for Hank to mock. Defer to the LEOs and defer to the EMTs. But maybe this was something minor, and why create unnecessary commotion? Create calm, right? One look at the man on the floor, though, and I sensed a real emergency. Two college-aged guys were trying mouth-to-mouth on the lifeless, splayed-out body. A once-white V-neck T-shirt partially covered his silver-haired chest. There was a bright-blue button-down

shirt balled up next to him. Pungent aftershave, sulfuric like a polluted stream. Something about the man was vaguely familiar—maybe it was the smell—and then I noticed the soft, gray sport coat. My heart raced. I watched as one of the college guys did the compressions, counting them off, while the other guy clamped the old man's nose and breathed into his mouth. The guy doing the compressions needed to lock his elbows and move his hands lower.

I radioed Carelli and told him to send the EMTs over. As I spoke, I realized I was the one person in the room who knew exactly where the closest AED was. I quickly adjusted the college guy's arms. Command presence. "Get that T-shirt off while I'm gone," I said. "You're doing great here. Don't panic. I'll be right back."

I hustled out of the bathroom, thinking the old man was about to die. He was so pale and pasty. Those college kids would be the last ones to see the guy alive. Where was the yoga woman now? I didn't see her anywhere. I grabbed the AED off the wall. The traveler who'd surprised me by the stall trailed behind, repeating what he'd seen, maybe to get the images out of his head, or maybe to explain how it wasn't his fault. "He was standing by the sink. He reached down for the water, then his hands clawed at his chest. He didn't say a thing. Looked like he decided to sit down and then he just plopped over backwards."

"Don't worry," I said, shocked at how relaxed my voice sounded, as if I spent everyday rushing through the concourse with a defibrillator. "You did the right thing. Less talk, more hustle now, and we might do some good."

I stepped through the crowd of people, knelt down, opened up the AED, and it started squawking out instructions as soon as I switched it on, just like in the first aid course I'd taken before Ben's birth. All I had to do was follow the directions, get everyone to stand back, place the pads correctly. Then the man vomited and that changed the situation. The college guys, so brave at first, couldn't handle it and they backed away. I was disgusted too, but I didn't flinch. Credit fatherhood, I guess. I looked at the chunky, peach-colored mess and wondered what the man had been eating. The image of a smorgasbord, like the ones I used to love in college, flashed by. The steam rising from the buffet. The Sterno fumes.

Ponderosa, baby, I'd say to my willing friends, and off we'd go, ready to graze those tables.

Without more thought than that, I took over completely. I wasn't going to wait for the EMTs. I cleaned the area as best I could and kept the mouth-to-mouth going. I felt so calm. Was something wrong with me? What diseases can you catch from someone's puke? Maybe this was Ebola and not a heart attack. Then it got spooky for a moment when I felt the weight of the man's head. Nothing more or less than a heavy round object, awkward to lift, and the extremely oily hair didn't help. There was the pull of Laurie, what it was like near the very end. I'd never felt so powerless and there was no one in sight and I couldn't move her and I had to move her. I was breathing for this stranger and I felt as if I were inhaling death and I'd had enough death, thank you very much.

But I shook that off, backed away again, and listened as the machine did its work. *Do not touch the patient. Analyzing heart rhythm. Preparing shock. Move away from the patient. Shock delivered.* I focused on the body in front of me, observing it as carefully as I could for signs of life. Lately, Ben and I had been scouring Washington Park for signs of spring. Crocuses. Robins. Hyperactive squirrels. A hint of green in the tree branches above our heads. I worried again about the dictates of SOP. Should I really have waited? The first order of business must be to help everyone survive. Shouldn't you save someone if you can?

Then, in an astonishingly short amount of time—it felt like seconds—the old man stirred. The room smelled of barf and barbeque now. The man sat up, nearly bashing his head into the long row of sinks. His skin flushed, his lips reddened, and he seemed to start talking before he was breathing. I tried to take it all in, but my wandering mind seesawed back to Ben's birth, back to when he wasn't even Ben yet, just a waxy, motionless, tiny body the midwife was lifting out of the bathtub's reddening water and settling onto Laurie's chest. I kept trying to be the best labor partner ever, leaning forward, waiting, in my boxers and T-shirt, right behind Laurie in the tub, hands on her shoulders. The baby didn't breathe and didn't open his eyes and the candles I'd balanced on the shelf above the sink guttered off black smoke, as if they were about to be snuffed

out too. I kept staring at the bruise-blue baby's blank, unmoving, shut-eyed face and I heard only the sound of murky water sloshing in the tub, and I felt overwhelmed by the fear that I was the father of a stillborn baby, soon, no doubt, to be divorced, because how could we recover from this? Fatherless myself for most of my life, I would now never become a father. I'd die alone, remembered by no one, which must have been my destiny all along. But then the midwife interrupted my pity party. "We're good here," she said, and the boy we'd name Benjamin opened his tiny mouth and gasped and wailed away, his cries an answer to the cries Laurie had pushed out for hours. His skin pinked up and minutes started speeding by again and in a daze I was cutting the umbilical cord. It felt like slicing into a thick piece of sashimi. Octopus. And before I could get my mind around what I'd just done—what Laurie had just done!—I was standing in front of those bathroom sink candles—still burning!—holding the towel-wrapped baby to my chest while the woman I loved more than anything in the world showered herself off and then stood beside me, leaning in close, warm, so completely alive. At that moment I felt a sparkling in my lungs I'd never felt before, like a torch igniting inside me, burning brighter, until the heat could barely be contained within my body. I closed my eyes and the torch flared higher and it was almost blinding. Was this what people meant when they talked about a third eye opening? Transcendence? I had no clue, but I could not stop grinning.

And that's when the airport EMTs rushed in, two rail-thin guys, both tall and twitchy with caffeine or something stronger to help them through the long hours. They probably had plenty of options in the enormous bags slung over their shoulders. But they looked devoted to their work, and they immediately took charge. They kept the man seated and checked his signs. "He's stable," said the one with the mullet. "Nice work. Way to save a life."

The EMTs who eventually found me carrying Laurie down Monument Hill Road never said anything remotely like that. In the ambulance, in the ER, in the waiting room, they left me alone, in silence, except when they interrupted my dread with useless questions: *How fast was she going? What did she hit? Where did she land?*

The question I saw on every face was: *Why her and not you?* Now this mullet EMT was asking something different. “What’s your name, Officer?”

I rubbed my eyes, wondering if I should keep my last name out of it. “I’m Gary,” I said. “I didn’t do a thing.”

The EMT leaned in closer and then, too late, I remembered my name tag, pinned to my shirt pocket. “Gary Waldman,” he said, writing it down.

The old man tried to stand. “I’m feeling much better,” he said. “Where are my shirts? It’s chilly in here.”

“You’ll be coming with us for a bit,” the other EMT said. “We need to run some tests. We’ll talk on the way.”

“My stepdaughter and I have a flight to catch,” the man said. “I don’t think I have time.”

The mullet EMT laughed. “Actually, you do have time, and for that you can thank Officer Waldman and his two samaritan assistants. I’ll have someone make an announcement for your stepdaughter. What’s her name?”

“Diane Percy Strand,” the man said.

The people who’d been milling about, including the once-frantic traveler, chose that moment to break into a round of applause. The echo of it made my chest swell and helped me refocus. I waited for the yoga woman—Diane—to appear.

“Nice to have the TSA stepping up,” Nonmullet chimed in. “Last time I flew, one of my boots disappeared in that damn X-ray machine. They shut the whole line down. Took them twenty minutes to find it in there. Must have irradiated the shit out of it. Foot cancer’s coming my way.”

“I think I remember a Waldman,” the suddenly very alive old man said. “You’re Lloyd’s son. Gary, right? Tennis player?”

“Smallbany,” I said, nodding. But I didn’t know what to do next, especially since there were twenty-some people still lingering in the tight space. Were the hangers-on expecting more? Would they have a happy or sad story to tell when they arrived wherever they were going? Would the old man offer something to the TSA employee who’d just shocked his heart back on track?

"I'm Alex Strand," the guy said. "Knew your father slightly. Still hitting the courts?" I laughed and searched for the right response—I gave it up after my wife died. Dropped all forms of competition for a year and now, well, sometimes I think I should shut it down for the rest of my life. But the EMTs wanted Strand on a stretcher stat. And then Diane rushed in. "Dad!" she shouted.

"Where were you?" Strand asked.

"Another lousy call with my mother," she said. "Here's your phone back. What happened?"

"My heart started racing," Strand said. "I couldn't get enough air and I was sweating. Then I felt myself going down and I reached for the sink—"

"Let's continue this happy reunion in the ambulance," Nonmullet said, and they started wheeling the older Strand away.

"We'll have you over for drinks," Strand called out. "That's Gary Waldman, Diane," he said. "Saved my life. Get his contact info."

"I'm staying with you, Dad," Diane said, her hand resting on the stretcher, but she followed his gaze and looked my way. "You!" she said, shaking her head. "I'll come find you again."

And then they were gone and it was like when the house lights come on after a show. No encore, not tonight, the band left it all on the stage, and, quickly, that seemed okay. Sure, I might have treasured a few more grateful words, a heartfelt handshake, a hug or two, but I was pretty sure I hadn't seen the last of the Strands.

That thought helped me find a path through the short conversations that arose as I tried to leave. "Anyone could have done it," I said, chewing three pieces of wintergreen gum at once. "I was only doing my job. The real heroes are those guys who started right in with the mouth-to-mouth."

And in that way I left the bathroom behind.

Some break.

I had plenty of adrenaline still flowing, but I'd need more than that to get through the rest of the shift, so I bought another coffee and drank it by one of the large windows, trying to remember when I'd ever felt so alive at work. It didn't take long to drift toward the

obvious thought: I hadn't felt anywhere near this alive since before Laurie's death.

Back at the checkpoint, Carelli was nowhere to be seen—he might have rotated to break or some sort of training class—and news of my bathroom “heroics” had not yet traveled very far. *Never the same day twice*. I knew how to *keep it simple, stupid*. Rodgers, another solid, grinding supervisor, an older woman with thick black glasses and steel-gray hair styled into the shape of a knight's helmet, steered me toward bag check, lane two. I grabbed more blue gloves, slipped on a pair, stuffed a few extra pairs into my back pocket, and took up my position, trying to be friendly to each and every weary traveler, concentrating, again, on standing taller, presenting my best self to the world parading by. This was the way the job should be done. Touch people. Save lives. Make a shitty world a little less shitty, one person at a time. Why not, for a change, try feeling proud?