

ONE

“Mluviti stříbro, mlčeti zlato.”

A czech proverb.

English Translation: Speaking is silver, silence is gold.

The sun was a blinding white in Amy's green eyes. Squinting, all she could see were splotches of black and yellow over hazy faces. As she struggled to gain focus, she felt a large hand grip her shoulder.

“Ma'am, can you hear me?”

“Yea, yes. I'm sorry... what?” Amy was lost in the chaos of the morning, and not wholly convinced it was over. And the sun was so sharp, it was taking all she could muster, just to focus on her surroundings, much less the questioning of...

“Who are you?” She whirled around, out of the man's firm grip, swinging a fist around to push him away from her.

Eyes still squinted, and finally adjusting, she could see corners of a badge, and a blue uniform. Officials. Her chin relaxed slightly as she breathed out. She held her

hands up and open, a sort of universal symbol for “don’t come any closer.”

“Thank you, God, thank you, God...” she muttered, but still kept a hand out, holding the man at a safe distance, even as she spoke the words.

The man in uniform smiled at her, from behind the speckles in her vision. “Your eyes will adjust soon, ma’am, I know it was dark in there and you were all hiding. I’m a paramedic,” he told her calmly and slowly as if he knew the trouble she was having bringing her mind to focus on his words.

The man lowered his head and shoulders, bringing his face closer to hers, inspecting her face.

“You’re covered in blood, so we need to examine you, and the police will need you to give a statement later. When you are ready.”

The next several moments were a blur; or maybe it was hours. To be honest, Amy had no idea how long she sat on the back of that ambulance being examined and asked questions; and she wasn’t sure whether she had answered any at all. The confusion of the morning was coming back to her in flashes, pieces of a terrifying puzzle she didn’t want to complete, but had to.

“I never did care much for guns,” were the first words the paramedics heard from her loud and clear. And that was all she said. She blinked her long lashes over tired eyes and pushed some matted hair back off her face.

A middle aged woman came shoving through the crowds. "My daughter, I'm looking for my daughter!"

The woman peered into the faces of the people in the crowds, muttering, "No... not you... no," then rattling off more descriptions of her daughter.

"She's thirty, but looks maybe a little younger, red hair... not you... no... my daughter... not you... have you seen her?"

She continued through the crowd, looking at each person then asking if they had seen her daughter. Finally she made her way to the ambulance, and asked the paramedic if he had seen anyone by that description. He told her no, and continued to examine Amy. Through her spotted vision as she looked into the sun, Amy saw that this woman was familiar. Her mother was beautiful, too, and held her age well. The fifty something blonde woman looked older somehow today; the stress of the danger the two women recently overcame had given her deep and dark circles under her green eyes.

Amy wiggled out of the ambulance with a wince, and moved toward the woman, touching her gently on the shoulder. "Mom, it's me," she breathed, and hugged the woman who hugged back, a tearful and confused look in her eyes. Amy's face filled with pain as she embraced her mother's shoulders; for that short moment her gratefulness outweighed the pain of the injuries.

The tears the older woman cried were tears of immeasurable relief, as she knew this was her daughter. The voice was so distinctive, there was no question: high

pitched but with an underlying rasp, as if she had a slight ongoing laryngitis. The rasp was from all the talking Amy did at work and on the phone, always pleasant and sociable.

As she pulled away from the hug and looked hard at Amy's face, she knew why no one responded to the description she had been asking about. Amy looked different in every way a mother could think of. Her fair skin was covered in blood and mud and who knows what else so you would never know her lips were naturally vibrant red in color, or that her cheeks were freckled; her previously strawberry hair was blackened and matted to her head, and looked like it had been cut short somehow. Amy was squinting into the sun, so her mother couldn't have seen the color of her eyes, though they matched her mother's identically in green shade. The woman stared at the daughter not daring to make any sense of the sight before her.

Just that morning, Amy had come to her parent's house; they were going to carpool from Tucson to Phoenix for a special Easter service her older sister had picked out. The church Julie had selected had special activities for the children on Easter: perfect for Amy's niece. For Julie, the drive was worth the events, and so the family had planned to make a day of it.

Amy had rifled through her closet for something to wear, and tried on seven different outfits. The clothes she wore were important; she knew there would be family pictures at lunch that day, and those photos would be

passed around in letters and social media for years. After two stunning dresses that made Amy feel older than she wanted to feel, she settled on a vibrant green silk blouse, ruffled at the top, with a skirt and leggings. Even though it was Easter, she had on flat slip on shoes to match the green blouse and keep her feet comfortable. She wore heels all week at work for hours on end, so she cherished her cozy weekend shoes.

Her father had gone on and on about how beautiful she was, going so far as to pick out a green tie to match her shirt. Amy hugged him that morning before moving to the back bathroom to watch her mother finish getting ready.

Since she had been a small child, she always loved watching her mother do her hair and makeup. Now the two were both older, the mother in her fifties and Amy at thirty, but the ritual was the same. Amy hopped up on the counter and perched there while her mother pulled the rollers from her hair. Somehow it always felt wonderful to watch her move with such polish: reminding Amy of Grace Kelly somehow. In between chatting, Amy would borrow a lip gloss or lotion, and peer at her face, poking at the barely formed wrinkles, reminding herself not to complain.

The two women had always shared a special bond. Though Amy and her father were close growing up, she and the older woman were two of a kind from the time Amy could walk. The morning ritual of dressing together had been a regular for at least twenty-five years,

continuing weekly or more even after Amy had moved into her own apartment at nineteen.

They shared much more than just beauty. Amy had learned what she called “big love” from her mother, and they had practiced it together in their time at the animal shelter and other volunteer activities. They also shared some more challenging traits, such as their strong will. Yet, they had rarely butted heads with one another though the years.

In the current moment, the woman continued to look her daughter over. She cried out a small sound of surprise when she saw that Amy was no longer wearing her pretty green blouse; instead, a white t-shirt stained in blood, with a pristine hole pierced through to the chest. “Amy, you were ... wait - shot?” she exclaimed, slowly reaching her hand out and touching the hole with thin fingers.

Amy stared at her mother, blinking, wanting to comfort her; but “I’m fine,” were the only words she seemed able to speak aloud.

How could she tell her mother what really happened to the shirt? How could she tell her own mother that she stole the clothes off a dead body, whatever the reason?

As she recalled the moment, Amy felt cowardly and disrespectful. She looked past her mother; as if by some sort of providence, at that moment, Amy could see the body of a young boy being carried out: he was shirtless. It seemed so wrong, beyond immoral. How must his own

mother feel, knowing his dead body was so slighted by what amounted to nothing more than a tomb raider?

In shame, she gripped her mom's hand, then hugged her tightly. Amy couldn't find the words to say all she wanted to: *I'm glad you're safe, I'm so sorry, let's go home.* Still unable to find the right words, she just stood there, holding her mother, in the midst of this chaotic scene around them.

"If you do not need medical care, we need you to evacuate the premises," the voice boomed over a loudspeaker. It came from who knows where. "Injured and deceased individuals will be taken to Saint Mary's medical facility, so you can meet injured relatives there. If you are still missing family members, you should also report to Saint Mary's where there will be a listing of identified injured and deceased persons."

Amy swallowed hard thinking again about the young boy whose shirt she was wearing. She stepped back from her mother, realizing she had missing family. "Dad?" she squeaked out, her eyes opening wider.

"Dad's okay. He and the little one rode to the hospital in another ambulance already, but they weren't injured badly. He got a little banged up when that blast went off, but bumps and bruises primarily. They rode up in the ambulance because Becky is so small, the paramedics just wanted to be extra cautious. Your sister went to get the car while I found you. With all the commotion, I hope she can find us okay." Their mother looked worried and relieved all at the same time.

Amy was just relieved. “Everyone? Everyone in our family is okay?”

“Yes, everyone. Just the bumps and scratches from the explosion, if you believe it.” The older woman aimed to reassure her daughter.

Even as she said the words, the older woman evaluated the injuries of her youngest child. “Focus on yourself, my darling, you seem to have taken it for all of us.”

Amy looked beaten and abused, burned maybe. Not to mention yet-unexplained-bullet-hole. Still, somehow everyone else in their family group was unharmed. It was some type of marvel that the mother briefly struggled to compute. She was keenly aware that survival was a miracle, innately conscious of the adrenalin her daughter must be feeling. She struggled to balance a juxtaposition of terror and blessed comfort. As a mother she was both terrified and proud.

A silver van pulled up, and the mother smiled. “There’s Julie. I’ll ride with her and meet you at the hospital?”

Amy nodded agreement, then reluctantly sat back into the ambulance, which would be her mode of transport, taking in the scene around her.

Her mother leaned in and kissed Amy’s cheek as an official looking man interjected, “Actually, the police will need to speak with Amy about the events of the day. She will be transported directly to the police station, and medical personnel will attend to her there.”

The older woman swallowed a small lump and nodded acceptance, keeping eye contact with her daughter for a moment before climbing into the van. Amy could sort of make out an image of her sister waving frantically her way. The strength required to focus on the image was almost too much for her mind to handle. Amy did not wave back, just watched the world around her. In the background, Julie's lips were moving, but Amy was struggling to bring her sister into focus.

To the outside eye, someone on the main street a hundred yards away, this strange scene might almost look like a church picnic. Well, if you took the away the thirty or so emergency vehicles. At least a hundred people in church dress were still milling around, waiting to be interviewed and cleared medically. Some were walking to their cars; many ate sandwiches or drank waters that the emergency services had provided as they debriefed everyone. After a day of such panic and horror, you would almost expect to see rubble, debris, smoke. You would expect some kind of horror scene after a day like today, with news people clambering about and maybe even helicopters. Reality was different.

The reality before her was in stark contrast to the opening scenes Amy had seen on television. Which is exactly what a person would have thought, having lived through what she just had. Some part of her felt like Bruce Willis ought to come out of the woodwork to save the day. Someone should certainly save the day.

In her mind she pictured the first episode of an old cancelled show where the entire human race passes out for thirty seconds. The show starts with a terrible catastrophe: pilots having lost control of planes, drivers lost control of vehicles, and more during that thirty seconds. The camera starts on a small car crash where the drivers are in a panic; then the camera pans out and reveals an entire city filled with smoke and burning, crumbling buildings. In shows like that, the horror is overt and visible. But this... this reality could only be described serene, more awkward and unsettling than anything else, with a thick unpleasant and pungent aroma in the air.

Amy did not know whether to marvel at the differences between reality and fiction, or to feel worried that things were so off from what her gut told her to expect.

Amy could no longer smell the smoke from the explosion, but it seemed the paramedic could. He wore a dust mask and blinked repeatedly as if his eyes were burning from what was left hovering in the air around them. To the back of the ambulance were the remnants of the front entrance to the church building: formerly several glass doors, now a cluster of shattered glass. The fires had been extinguished, but firemen continued to crawl the area.

No, what Amy smelled was much more disturbing. The smell was disturbing, but even more troubling was that she could identify its components. The smell was

blood. The smell was sweat. The smell was urine. The dead bodies being hauled out reeked of the fecal matter that a dead body excretes. The smell is what made the scene truly dreadful. And no television show can ever convey that.

“How long has it been since you received the 911 call?” Amy asked the paramedic, her eyes fixated on the face of an elderly man who was praying nearby.

The paramedic looked at her in shock; he was surprised to hear her sound so aware, after almost an hour of her sitting in a dazed state.

“About 3 hours ago,” he told her. “Now lay back, you should keep your ribcage still until it can be fully examined. You probably have a break in there and don’t want to worsen your situation.”

She blinked several times fast. “Can I smoke here? It’s been a long morning.”

Amy knew the habit was unflattering and unhealthy. She had heard the lectures, and was working toward quitting mainly because she knew it bothered her fiancée, Kent. Yet, she had not managed to get below one cigarette per day. Two on a rough day. But today, today seemed like a day to forget the count and just roll with it. There was always tomorrow to quit smoking.

The paramedic pointed her to a cement bench several feet from the ambulance. As Amy fiddled with her lighter, her mind demanded thoughts of normalcy. Her thoughts went back to when she had first become engaged. Her friends had giggled like school girls at the

thought of her changing her name. Amy Adams, just like the actress. She had vowed not to take on the name. But, then again, maybe she would hyphenate. After this day, something as small as a name doppelganger seemed paltry.