

Precious Cargo

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San Francisco airport, en route with you to Oregon. Gathering my carry-on luggage after the security X-ray, my mouth is dry, my skin clammy. I know they'll pull me aside.

A cobalt blue-shirted form approaches, a robotic male voice states, 'Ma'am, I need to ask you about a powdery substance we detected in one of your bags.'

His eyes fix me with the cautious stare of someone about to expose a felony. This scrutiny unsettles me further.

'Y-yes...i-it's some of my late brother's ashes,' I stammer, my voice croaky with nerves. My late brother's ashes. I register these words, but drift off from the woman I hear saying them. My eyes dart to my hands, watching them fumble in my handbag. 'I have the papers here...'

Those hands now awkwardly brandish an envelope with the death certificate and 'Disposal of Human Remains' form in front of the TSA officer. He waves my hands away, shaking his head.

'I'll need you to get the contents out of your bag,' he instructs.

I silently obey. With stilted moves, I retrieve the small cardboard gift box that contains the white fabric pouch that contains the plastic ziplock bag that contains your 'powdery substance'.

More like crumbs than powder, I'm reminded, squeezing your remains in my palm.

When I'd first touched what the flames had reduced you to, scooping you into this bag, I was surprised I felt no emotion.

I watch the TSA officer take the bag in his latex-gloved hand and walk behind a counter with a high screen that obscures my view.

Without warning, my world drops away, like it did when you died. A sudden weight crushes my heart, forces the breath from me. Panic jolts my nerves, like you're leaving me a second time, and I just want what's left of my brother back—NOW! I steady myself against this surge of separation with both hands on the table, planting feet beneath jelly legs firm on the floor, trying to still my trembling bottom lip, gasping in air.

My mind slips back to that time in our thirties on that Oregon beach, the one I hope to return you to. We're trudging along the sand, our bodies

whipped, our eyes stung by the salty winter gusts, singing together – a moment in tune, in synch.

The refuge of this brief memory dissolves when the TSA officer returns. He hands me back the ziplock bag, with no, 'Thank you, ma'am', no, 'Sorry for your loss'.

Winded, wounded, I scramble to collect my belongings, eyes scanning for the nearest restroom. Once inside a cubicle, I slam-lock the door as my composure unravels. Bags fall, sobs heave from my core, my legs buckle and I collapse to the toilet seat before I can undo my jeans.

Rocking gently forward and back, I whisper, self-soothing, 'It's okay, I'm safe. You're with me now, it's okay,' checking and re-checking I have the bag of your chalky crumbs.