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# WAIT



by Amy Clements • May 7, 2023

<https://www.litromagazine.com/usa/2023/05/wait/>

 Amy Clements

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# Wait



Story and picture credit: Amy Clements

She was responsible for the truth. Not in charge of it, but responsible – eager middle manager with no visible authority on the org chart but copious capacity to prevent the publication of a falsehood. Did Bob Marley die from gunshot wounds? No. Melanoma, four years after he survived an assassination attempt. Correction: alleged assassination attempt. Should dumpster be capitalized? Not anymore. The Dempster Brothers’ trademarks have expired.

When Tanya was hired more than a decade ago, she received emails of gratitude from the reporters. “You really saved my reputation,” they said. “I didn’t expect such high standards

from an online magazine.” But recently, despite healthy revenues from banner ads, an outside consultant had produced an alarming infographic that showed how few readers were liking or sharing the articles, so the staff writers were laid off. “Engagement is king,” the consultant insisted, “and with freelancers, you can pivot.”

She feared being blamed for a humiliating online correction or, worse, a defamation lawsuit. She tried to live an error-free life. She thought it gave her job security.

“We’re eliminating your position,” the publisher said one morning. It was a Friday in August; he never worked a full day in the summer. “This is good news,” he assured her. “It means you’ll get to collect unemployment. You can only collect unemployment if you lose your job through no fault of your own. And that’s what’s going on here. Our engagement levels have soared. Our reach is skyrocketing. But that means we need to post the content even faster. Having a fact checker – not to mention a copyeditor – slows everything down. We’ve got to publish at the speed of light.”

She fixed her eyes on the window behind him. The sunlight was blocked because his office faced the mildewed bricks of an air shaft, so she could easily see the bright reflection of his oversize computer screen. He had recently bought a new desktop system with an automated photo gallery. All of his recently viewed pictures were scrolling across the monitor. He didn’t realize she could see them in the wall of glass that served as his backdrop. Tanya glimpsed a picture of the publisher drifting in chlorinated water on a silver float. Next, she saw a series of women’s breasts flourishing across the screen. Hands behind their cheekbones, the models had been paid to look pouty because their target audience liked the illusion of a chase.

Wide-eyed, she returned her gaze to the publisher. “How can you risk publishing without a copyeditor and a fact checker?” she asked quietly.

“Tanya,” he sighed, checking his watch and rolling his eyes. “The truth is no longer a priority. That’s why, starting today, we’re shifting our focus entirely to self-help.”

He slid a letter across the desk. Written in the voice of an experienced flight attendant, a bulleted list told Tanya about the support she would receive from the Parent Company.

Assistance with her resume. A taxable lump sum equal to her ten days of unused leave. The ability to continue her health insurance coverage at a rate of nine hundred dollars a month.

“But... there’s a doctor’s appointment I have to get to this afternoon,” she told him. “I’m waiting on some tests. Can I stay on for just one more month? I can help you manage the transition to automation. No one knows your brand better than I do.”

The publisher reached for a corrugated box. The packing tape shrieked as he secured the bottom flaps. “It’s time, Tanya. The intern will help you clear out your desk. I have a train to catch.” Seeing her hesitate, he added, “If you prefer, I can reclassify this as a termination due to misconduct. No unemployment check for you after all.”

“You’d never get away with that. I’ve aced every performance review!”

“Yes, but they’re all stored on our server. Don’t bother trying to download any files. We’ve already re-set your password.”

She silently admitted to herself that she had not saved hard copies of her evaluations. She had exported them as PDFs, but they were stored on the computer at her work station. The hard drive and the cloud had seemed like the most efficient, eco-friendly method, and she did not want to look like a dinosaur by using thumb drives. Now she realized why the publisher had recently banned filing cabinets. “But I have a doctor’s appointment,” she moaned. “Can I come back and get the box afterward?” Even then, she wasn’t sure how she would lug it home. “Can you ship it?”

“This is it, Tanya. I’ll need your key card.” Wistfully, she looked down at the electronic badge hanging from her neck. Her employee photo had been taken in the days when she wore a bushy ponytail that the managing editor liked to yank every time he passed her cubicle.

Tanya placed her badge on the publisher’s desk and walked away in slow motion. The box was as wide as her hips. She set it next to her computer, which the intern had already shut down. Tanya’s office possessions were few, with only one photograph – a picture of herself with the original team, raising their beers to toast the guileless outgoing founder who had hired all of them. She slipped the picture into her handbag and deliberated about adding a

decorative Kleenex dispenser before tossing it into her handbag, along with a purple stapler and a matching container of ballpoint pens. She decided against taking an unopened box of red pencils. She added her lunch bag (potato chips, nuts, dates), wishing she had been able to take a picture of the publisher's porn. But breasts would not be enough to get him fired. Only a drop in revenue would lead to his dismissal.

The humid outdoors smelled like chemicals and compost as Tanya emerged onto Jackson Avenue. Her soft-soled shoes were nearly silent against the pavement as she drifted toward the Queens Plaza station. The parent company had moved all its subsidiaries to smaller quarters in Long Island City a month ago. She would have to change subway lines to reach her doctor's office. The appointment was not for another two hours. She hadn't planned to lose her job today, or ever.

Boarding the train, she stood behind a man who was transporting a tall reading lamp. Its chrome rod with adjustable screws lay millimeters from her armpit. As the train braked to a halt, the man's lamp jabbed her left breast, which was already bruised from a biopsy. No one wanted to make room for her, but her existence inevitably took up space.

When she emerged, she gulped the fresh air and adjusted her grip on the cardboard box, which now had a damp corner made soft by her sweat. Dr. Campbell's office was on the garden level of a brownstone. The walls were lined with textbooks, and Tanya was asked to sit in a wingback chair. She had been a patient there ever since her first period, twenty-eight years ago, when her pediatrician in Brooklyn declared her to be an adult.

Over the years, she had watched her doctor's hair gradually turn from red to gray, her thin hands shrinking but remaining steady. Dr. Campbell entered the room wearing her perpetual smile, which was coated in lipstick the color of rhubarb pie. She sat down on an ottoman and handed the fax to her patient. The smile made Tanya feel relieved, and she started to read the report. Dr. Campbell put her hand over it and turned off her smile. Leaning in, she said, "Your path report does show a malignancy."

Tanya thought she heard thunder, hoping for a summer storm that would give voice to her tidal wave of fear, but it was only the sound of a trashcan being rolled past the window. Rays

of sun cast a thin beam on her legs. "There's no question about it," Dr. Campbell told her. "All five specimens contained invasive carcinoma."

Tanya pictured a swarm of carpenter ants. "What do I do now? Am I going to die soon?" she asked. She wondered if she would outlive her unemployment benefits.

"You'll need to go to a specialist and have more tests run."

"Will I need surgery? What am I supposed to do?"

"You need to go to my brother. He does it all. Surgery, chemo, radiation. All he knows is breast cancer. You're still living in the suburbs, right?" Tanya nodded. "He's in White Plains. I can give you Manhattan names too, if you really want them. But the commute will be tiring. You're better off receiving treatment close to your apartment. What you have is standard. There's a known protocol. Your particular type has been very thoroughly studied."

An imaginary ladle of nausea trickled into Tanya's stomach as she pictured the cancer patients she'd seen on television. Through a tall window that was speckled with mist, Tanya watched the sun vanish. Clouds inflated and converged while the doctor telephoned her brother's nurse. Flicking a dried cranberry from her desk into the wastebasket, the doctor carefully enunciated the numbers from the lab report. Then she smiled at Tanya and mouthed "I'm on hold... sorry!" while they waited for the appointment scheduler. Almost silently, without thunder, a sheet of hot rain descended on the pavement. Umbrellas, mostly black, bloomed among the passersby. "Can't you see her any sooner?" Dr. Campbell pleaded. "I understand. Well, I guess that's good news. OK. Bye-bye."

"How long do I have to wait?"

"A week. You're on his calendar for next Friday at nine o'clock."

Tanya reached into her cardboard box before remembering that she had already slipped the snapshot into her purse. She said, "Here. Have some office supplies. I don't want to carry this around in the rain." Dr. Campbell nodded. She'd seen patients do stranger things after receiving a grim diagnosis.

Tanya knew it was time to leave this space and re-enter the world with a new identity as a cancer patient. She edited out the word “victim,” as she’d been trained to do. “Put people first,” she had been taught. “Person with cancer. Person living with cancer. Person diagnosed with cancer. Unemployed person with cancer. Unemployed person having a nervous breakdown on the sidewalk.”

She popped open her pocket-size umbrella. It was the color of a ripe lime, and as she stood under it, dry and protected on a quiet corner, she stared at the lush growth of flowers in varying shades of yellow along Park Avenue and wondered if she knew anyone who could cheer her up. Her friends were detail-oriented and would ask increasingly terrifying questions. Her parents weren’t alive anymore.

She was clutching her phone when the calendar chimed, alerting her that she was supposed to have a date with Douglas the Developer (software, not real estate). She didn’t need a reminder; they saw each other every Friday night, and only on Friday nights. He was an enigma who rarely spoke but wrote friendly text messages. She was indifferent to him, but she was very attached to his apartment, which had spectacular views of New York harbor. From Douglas’s seventy-fifth-floor living room, she could easily see the neighborhood where she’d grown up.

In the six months since they’d been dating, his list of non-negotiables continued to expand. Sex only in the morning. Sex only on Saturday mornings. Dinner only in front of the flat-screen. Wine only from an economy-size box. No carbohydrates except wine so that he could remain lean and muscular and capable of endurance. Yet he only had one requirement during the actual sex: he wanted her to make the first move, and he wanted her to make all of the decisions about techniques and positions because, he said, he wanted to reduce his risk of being accused of assault. She would awaken after a solid nine hours of Friday-night slumber and find him alert and naked in bed beside her, usually reading a fitness magazine online, looking like a dental patient in a waiting room getting ready for a procedure. She would rev up her cravings, reach for his hairless chest, and have it her way, which always included three forms of birth control.

The more time she spent with him, the more of a conundrum he became. Although he clung to rituals, he was equally averse to minimizing clutter. Even though his calendar gave the

impression of an impeccable adherence to repetition, Douglas filed nothing, stacking delivery menus and magazines and credit-card bills in precarious piles that, from certain angles, blocked her view of the harbor. The bills didn't matter, he told her, because everything was on auto-pay. Dirty skillet and plates were always stacked in his sink, but the height never changed, leading her to assume that he washed the dishes at some midpoint between her nights with him.

He believed she was staying in the relationship because of the mind-blowing pleasure he gave her on Saturday mornings, but what she really needed – what she couldn't provide for herself – was the sound of someone else's heartbeat and the deeply relaxing feeling of being held in a strong embrace on a routine schedule. People paid professional cuddlers for this service. She was getting it for free.

She wasn't due at Douglas's place until six o'clock. She missed going to restaurants with him, even though they had only sat face-to-face at a table once, on the first date. After that, he always asked for a table at the bar so that he could watch sports. Gradually, he restricted their Friday night meals to his living room. She once asked about his availability on other nights of the week, but he told her that rescheduling her wouldn't be possible because on other nights he did other things with other people. And yet there was something alluring about his predictability, especially when she could predict that her long workweek would end with a dazzling view, and plenty of wine, and the utter laziness of not having to look someone in the eye and say something to them. They didn't have a relationship. They had a habit. She just couldn't tell if it was a bad one.

She had two more hours to kill and opted for the lobby of a worn-out hotel that she had started using as a second living room when she became a Grand Central commuter in the quest for more space for less money. She wanted to google medical facts on her phone: mitosis, lobular, invasive, death rate, survival, treatment plans, side effects, mastectomy, lumpectomy, lymph node, what is the difference between stage one and stage two and stage three and stage four, radiation vs. chemotherapy. But Dr. Campbell had made her promise not to google, or at least to resist it for as long as she could. The internet was full of falsehoods. Tanya needed to have more tests run. The best information would come from her



new oncologist. In a week. Seven days from now. The very next Friday. She wanted to google whether googling would drive her crazy.

She ordered club soda with lemon. No ice. In a tall glass. No booze? “No,” she told her usual waiter, explaining that she had to make a chart and wanted to keep a clear head. She needed to make a chart of anything. Sometimes, charts were more calming than liquor. Pulling a stenographer’s pad from her handbag, Tanya began the process of deciding whether to break up with Douglas. On one side of the red vertical line, she wrote dump him. On the other side, she wrote hump him. She contemplated while snacking slowly on complimentary mixed nuts, washing them down with fizzy gulps. On one hand, Douglas never smiled. On the other hand, he never frowned. On one hand, he never talked. On the other hand, he never yelled. On one hand, he was a workaholic. On the other hand, he was rich.

She was in debt from daily life, only making the minimum payment on her student loans and watching the balances multiply for more than a decade, as she sometimes had to pay interest on the interest. *Are my cancer cells multiplying that fast?* she wondered. *Is mitosis like compounded interest?*

He would have no trouble replacing her, thanks to his high-rise apartment and taut physique. She might have trouble replacing him, though. What would happen if the oncologist prescribed chemotherapy and her hair started to fall out? She wouldn’t be able to hide that from Douglas, or from anyone. She pictured herself astride him in bed, clutching a wig to her chafing scalp.

Tanya decided she couldn’t do it. There was no way she could continue seeing Douglas, with or without the cancer. She typed, deleted, and retyped a message canceling their date. She knew she could catch the next train and be home in less than an hour. But what if she was wrong? What if Douglas was exactly what she needed right now?

She paid the bill and headed downtown, transferring to an express train even though it looked stuffed with rush-hour passengers. She was eager to be on time and put him to the test. No longer hungry, she picked up a kale salad from his favorite organic deli. In the lobby

of his building, the attendant gave her a thumbs up and smiled with a crude wink, as if to say, "Go get 'em, Tiger."

In the hallway, she heard explosions coming from Douglas's apartment. He was watching a movie. His ceiling was wired with custom speakers so loud that the sound reverberated in the walls when he watched anything thrilling. He opened the door, said hello, and gave her a fast, dry kiss on the lips. Then he returned to his white leather couch and switched the channel to public television to make her happy. She had told him that she would not watch scenes of torture, bombings, car crashes, rape, beheadings, people begging for their life, or situations in which two people insult each other in escalating degrees of intensity and then break things and/or kill each other in an attempt to win a war that had begun with the blunt weapon of words.

"It's fiction," he once tried to tell her.

"No, it's not," she said. "Maybe someone made up the plot for this show, but tragedy and sadism are actually happening somewhere on the planet right now. As we speak. It's all too real, and if people get used to these shows, we won't take suffering seriously anymore."

Tonight, he stared straight ahead at the television, not even moving his eyes when he lowered his head to consume a forkful of the food she handed him in a compostable paper clamshell container. He wore a black tank top, as always, and his bicep fluttered as he fed himself.

She headed to the refrigerator, where on the second shelf she found her weekly vat of tranquility. She held a crystal tumbler to the spigot and filled the glass to the brim with sour Chardonnay. She rehearsed the words. Which news should come first? *I have cancer. I lost my job. I lost my job. I have cancer. I got canned, and I've got cancer.*

On the flat-screen, a physicist was being interviewed about the origins of the universe. As he spoke, he appeared to have stage fright.

"The heat was unimaginable," he told the show host. He took a sip of water and added, "As I say in my book," echoing the lessons he had learned from his publisher's media trainer, "it was beyond our imagination. Between thirteen billion and fourteen billion years in the past,

everything you see and can't see today was contained in a microscopically small particle. And then boom." The camera turned to the rapt audience. "But not really boom. There wasn't an explosion. Just expansion, which has never stopped and which causes everything to move away from everything else, like a never-ending breakup. With mini gravitational fields within. That's what keeps the objects attracted to each other until a greater force intervenes."

"And so when these atoms started expanding..."

"Oh, there wouldn't be atoms for at least another hundred thousand years. In the beginning there were just particles."

"Subatomic particles?"

"Exactly."

"Protons, electrons, neutrons?"

"Even smaller: quarks."

"So then what happened a hundred thousand years later?"

The physicist's eyes widened with joy. "The first molecule!" he cried. "A chemical bond. Two atoms. Probably helium and hydrogen, sharing their electron clouds with each other to form the first stars. The universe was a very empty place until that moment."

"Why do you think those two atoms decided to stick together? Why didn't they just give in to expansion?"

The physicist shrugged. "Electromagnetism just happens."

Tanya knelt on the rug and looked up at Douglas's face, deciding to start with the cancer. She reached out to touch his hand. He cast his eyes down at her and said, "I can't see the screen when you sit there."

*And that's your final answer,* she silently told him. He had flunked before she'd even asked him the test question. She felt a familiar flush of hot sorrow. She stood up and said, "I don't want to do this anymore," retrieving her MetroCard from her handbag. He continued to stare at the television and replied, "OK," as she set down her glass on his entry-hall bench and shut his heavy door behind her. In the marble-tiled hallway, where she'd emerged so many Saturdays with her disheveled hair tucked under a cap and her perfumed body hastily dressed in wrinkled clothes, riding the elevator alongside a stream of other residents' lovers, she wistfully began to see the flip side. She knew she would probably never be invited to this building again.

She paused at the window at the end of the hallway, watching the reflection of her wet eyes and face. The city looked sublime as natural light gave way to the manmade glow of workaholics lit by long-lasting bulbs. It was like a second sunrise of radiant windows while, down below, the pin-sized dots of yacht parties churned through the harbor. She watched the bridges flicker and then come into full view against the darkening waters lapping at their abutments.

There was the Verrazzano, at the foot of the water's edge, where her parents had been raised and where they had raised their daughter. Could the residents of her old neighborhood see the building where she was standing now? Did her parents aspire for her to have a boyfriend in a high rise? She couldn't remember them aspiring to anything more than her obedience.

In the lobby, the attendant seemed surprised to see Tanya swimming downstream, making an unusually early departure in a crowd of evening arrivals who would surely spend the night. Rain began falling in earnest, obscuring the windows with layers of gray droplets before lightning flashed like a sudden noon. She rifled through her purse and realized she'd left her umbrella upstairs.

Lying on his couch, Douglas felt unsettled. Not because he missed Tanya but because he could tell she had been upset when she had walked through the door. He had been debating about whether to ask her if she was all right. Not because he cared but because he was curious, and he liked to know the answer to things. But forming a question, out loud no less, would take effort. He would have to be careful to not say the wrong thing. Whenever he tried

to say things to women, it often turned out to be the wrong thing. Or, if he said the right thing, Tanya might become dependent on him. But now he regretted not asking her why she had seemed so sad and so deflated. He scrolled through his dating account, searching for someone new who looked just like her while the physicist chattered away on the screen. He glanced up in time to see a cloudburst become a crackling gold flame just a few feet away, barely visible above the piles of bills he'd stacked in front of his kitchen window. Two seconds later, the long, low roar of unusually loud thunder set him on edge. The television went silent. He tried to stream a show, but he had no connectivity. His phone still displayed the faces of women, but the images were frozen, and he realized there was no longer any service. Surely just a temporary outage, he told himself, blaming the city's outdated infrastructure. He rebooted to no avail and decided to try a few moments of mindfulness. His personal trainer had been recommending it.

The silence irked him at first, so he picked up a yellowed paperback from a stack of books he had stored under his bed. He tried to hear the words of a novelist painting a bucolic scene for him. It didn't work; as the minutes ticked by, his solitude soon became an inescapable chamber where all he could hear was the dull roar of his own low-grade mental fragility. Douglas anxiously re-pressed the reset buttons again and again and mashed his fingertips onto touchscreen icons. He needed to hear a voice other than the one in his head. But only the rush of the wind and the plink of the rain had anything to say to him. He wanted Tanya to return. He wanted her to sit beside him so they could watch the electrical storm together. He wanted to ask her if she'd had a bad day.

Thinking that the elevators might stall if the power went out, he entered the stairwell and clipped his way down twenty-five flights, racing faster as the possibility of being the last person on earth began to overwhelm him. Television, especially streaming content that was violent, kept his thoughts of doom at bay. If he turned out to *not* be the last person on earth, would Tanya even be in the lobby anymore? Surely she'd already made her way to Grand Central. He didn't even know which train she took, or which station she lived near. He tried to send her a text, but his phone had faded to even fewer options.

As he neared the fortieth floor, Tanya was stepping into an empty elevator in the lobby, bound for Douglas's apartment. *I'll just grab my umbrella* she told herself. *I have to go home.* As the

automated voice chirped, “Going up,” the metal doors snapped shut, and the overhead lights gleamed. The beautiful box, its interior clad in lemon-colored Lucite, zoomed to the blank zone where there were no numbers, skipping all stops between the twentieth and fiftieth floors. At the halfway point, the elevator shuddered to a stop and went dark, except for the glow of an emergency button. *Goddammit*, she thought. *I’m about to die over a five-dollar umbrella. I should have just waited out the storm.* Heart racing, she tried to crush each button and screamed for help. When a crackled, indecipherable reply eventually arrived through the tiny speaker, she began to hyperventilate. She pounded on the sleek, modern walls, begging get me out of here! The speaker replied with a bark that made her think of electrocution, and then the wires went mute.

Tanya sat down on the floor where frisky dogs and sticky shoe soles had tracked in all of the city’s grime. She slapped the wall softly but incessantly, trying to communicate but not wanting to shake the car into a more precarious position. Turning up the volume on her vocal cords while patting the surfaces with her stinging hands, she counted to a hundred, and then to five hundred, and just as she was stumbling over the ever-higher deciles (*five hundred ninety-one . . . or am I at five hundred eighty-one?*) she heard the soft drumbeat of someone pounding back. A voice called her name, and she couldn’t be sure if she was hearing a rescue crew or Douglas. She now realized how very unfamiliar she was with his voice.

“I’m here!” Douglas hollered, doubting that he was getting through to her. “I’m right beside you,” he added. “Keep counting! I’m right here. On the other side of the wall.”

“Don’t let me die in here! You have to get me out!”

He recoiled; he was being asked to do the impossible. *I’m inadequate.* “You won’t die!” he said, which they both knew was untrue. *All humans are terminal from the moment they’re born.* “I’ll go to the lobby!” he promised. “I’ll get help.”

“Don’t leave me!” she shrieked.

“I have to!” he insisted. “My phone doesn’t work. But I’ll be right back. I swear! Scout’s honor.”

“How can I be sure?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you!”

“I’m going to lose my mind if you leave me here all by myself!”

*So will I*, he wanted to say, fighting the urge to reveal the panic he’d felt when she left him alone just minutes ago – alone in a room where he failed to solve a situation that he didn’t understand.

But he didn’t tell her this. He wouldn’t admit their common ground just yet. At least, not like this. He wanted to confess it to her when they were no longer apart. He would keep it to himself until they were finally able to look each other in the eye again. He shouted her name and called out, a little more quietly, “Just wait.”

Picturing the possibility of him, Tanya listened to the sound of his fading footsteps. A mile-long breath seeped from her lungs and lips, and the echo of her pulse persisted.



## Amy Clements

Amy Root Clements writes about the quest for empathy in humans who are tempted to abandon their humanity. She lived in New York for several years, earning an MFA in creative writing from The New School, and she now teaches in the writing program at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, where she lives with her husband Andrew and a cat named Sunny. Her fiction has appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, and other publications. She is also the author of *The Art of Prestige*, a history of the early years at the publishing house founded by Blanche and Alfred Knopf.

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