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I'm Always Too Late

Emily Schaller



Encompassed in two thirty-pound backpacks and almost an hour late, my father and I sprinted through Dulles International Airport on the way to gate A23. We were on our way from gate B76...the exact opposite side of the airport. Out of breath and uncharacteristically sweaty; we finally made it - just as the attendants were calling the last boarding group.

“Last call for the outgoing flight to Antwerp International Airport, this is the last call for boarding.”

We get ourselves situated on the plane, my father and I not sitting anywhere near the other, and lock eyes to share a slight head nod and an exasperated sigh. Surely wrapping myself in the scratchy, but somehow soft and comforting airline blanket and watching movies for eight hours will assist in my relaxation. Only, there is no screen on the back of my chair like there had been previously, but from my window seat in the back I can just barely make out the corner of a small screen hanging from the cabin ceiling. I have two choices. I can either make an attempt at sleeping or lean on the not-so-great smelling stranger beside me to watch whatever movie they are playing. Deciding on the former, I close my eyes just as I hear the stewardess once again.

“Thank you for joining American Airlines today, now sit back, relax, and enjoy your flight.”

After that whole ordeal in the airport, it was as if she could sense our diminishing stress. At least we weren't too late.



It was May 26 of 1940 that Operation Dynamo came to be. As the soldiers waited on the cold, blood-soaked beaches of Dunkirk, France, the admirals were devising a plan to get their soldiers back to England and back to relative safety. Weeks had gone by with no hope or promise of returning, but soon a large transporter ship arrived, reviving some of the light in the eyes of the soldiers. Wishing to be among the first of many to escape the desolate and dispiriting beach, soldiers ran, pushing each other out of the way; they could not wait. This was a matter of life and death. As the lucky few sailed off with high hopes, German blitzkrieg rained down upon them, destroying the ship and many onboard. It was now or never. After word had spread of the terror raining down in France, British fishermen and civilians packed their sailboats, attempting to be ready for the unimaginable. The colorful British flags removed from the sails, all entertainment gone and replaced with as many lifejackets as their dainty wooden frames could contain. This was war.

As the Little Boats prepared for a signal from Operation Dynamo, the fishermen paced along the piers shrouded with the telling overcast skies while the soldiers solemnly waited for something unknown. But they were all thinking the same thing.

“Hopefully it’s not too late.”



Finally able to actually relax as we settled into our secluded bed and breakfast, my dad and I took our time acclimating to the surroundings. There was a small, bright blue door located beside the house surrounded by elegant cherry blossom trees. And, when opened, the entire city of Bruges, Belgium was revealed. Crossing countless canals covered in bright blooming yellow flowers and meandering aimlessly down curving cobblestone streets, I found it. Belgian chocolate. We stumbled upon a spot in the road that smelled of the best chocolate ever made. Warm notes of cocoa and everything sweet wafted up and around us, encasing us in the scent. It was as if the rich scent of the chocolate carried us into the store because the next thing I knew we were walking out with an “I <3 Bruges” bag and twenty euros worth of chocolate.

Spotting a lonely white bench in the middle of the neighboring park, my father and I quickly make our way over, ready to indulge ourselves.

“Do you know which one you want?”

“Come on Father, don’t make me wait just choose one!”

As my dad picked one up and bit it in half, I watched as decadent caramel dripped from the other half. He looked at me and gestured I do the same. So

there we sat, not speaking, for at least twenty minutes, simply enjoying the sounds of the calm city and sharing in the delight of the best Belgian chocolate to be found. We then wound our way to a restaurant, packed to the brim with customers and happiness, making it impossible not to immerse ourselves. We happily ate our platefuls of fresh spaghetti and bread on our cramped corner table with no worries in the world. As the night sky began to darken its hue, we realized our time in this temporary bliss was over, and it was time to get back to the house. A quick walk back was all it took and from there on, all was well.

I thought.

I allowed myself the indulgence of a quick bath filled with zoonenbloem (sunflower) bubbles and wrapped myself up in the fuzzy robe with all intentions to sate myself with one final chocolate. Only I couldn't find them.

I had left the chocolates in the city.

Stumbling down the stairs, and completely falling down the last few, I let the news loose.

“Uhm, Father? You're going to be mad, but I'm pretty sure I left our chocolates under the table of that Italian restaurant.”

“You're not serious,” he questions as he immediately looks up the restaurant on his phone, “the restaurant closes in 8 minutes!”

I thought it would be gone forever due to my mistake, but when I looked back all I caught was a brief glimpse of my dad fleeing out the door on the way to retrieve our chocolate. So I sat, disheartened and ashamed on those last few stairs of the spiral staircase, not even wanting to take a glimpse out the window.

“There is no way he is going to make it, in a foreign country, in the dark, and rescue our chocolates,” I muttered to myself.

It was as if he was just waiting outside the house to hear me admit my desperation because when I looked up, there he was, smiling at his accomplishment with the bag hanging from his hand. Though I could sense a lingering tension in his smile, he still found the ability to gloat at me,

“Despite what you did, I made it! I was right on time.”



A fleet of approximately 700 small wooden boats, known as the Little Boats sit, awaiting their call to action. Navy officers begin to file up and down the pier, shouting essential information and orders to the brave civilians.

“It’s time to go! Go save those troops and bring them to safety!”

Loud cheers rang through the air as the quest came to its commencement. The men rushed to their respective boats, ready to save their men and their country. They took off, traveling down the English Channel and navigating to the shallow Dunkirk shores. The bleak sky never ceasing, almost as if it could sense what lay ahead. A small group of boats pushed into a strangely murky area of the waters where it was no longer blue, but black. It was oil. Looking further into the horizon the fishermen caught a glimpse of a decimated ship of their own and German Luftwaffe ruthlessly attacking. Having already braved the wrath of mines, bombs, and torpedoes, the Little Boats refused to turn back. They waited just in case. Then, from seemingly nowhere soldier’s heads began to emerge from the water. They were covered in oil and needed help getting into the boat and to safety before the sinking ship set them and everything nearby ablaze.

This was it.

Immediately getting to work with the equipped ropes, the sailors began their rescue. As many people as they could fit on the boat, comfortability was out of the window. The empty lifejackets now filled with the rugged soldiers of the war, these Little Boats turned back through the sludge of water and oil, returning those soldiers to safety.

The evacuation had begun, they had made it.



It was a new morning as my dad and I woke up to quiet chirping from the delicate orange and black birds perched in our window. As we carefully made our way down the treacherous spiral staircase; we were met with the warm and enticing smells of fresh, bright red berries, hand-squeezed orange juice, and warm Belgian waffles. How were we supposed to leave this wonderland? But we had to focus on our next task, not the latter. We sadly packed up our few belongings and set out to leave our perfect, secluded little world. But everything would be fine, because today was the day that we would reach Dunkirk, France.

45 miles.

That’s all that stood between me finally being able to stand atop the history-soaked sands of the Malo-les-Bains. The car came unequipped with an aux cord and English radio stations, but 45 miles? I’m sure my dad and I can figure some way to pass the time. We sit in silence for a few miles, staring out

the window at the rolling plains of old forgotten pastures and overcast skies. The fields break for a moment and I notice a large back up of cars in front of us. Normally this would be nothing but a simple inconvenience, but Dunkirk is only greatly visible at certain times of the day and I will not miss this.

“What do you think all of this traffic is for? Certainly all of these cars aren't on their way to the beach, let alone in March? It's cold outside!”

“I'm not sure, I sure hope that's not the case, or else we might miss low tide, and then you won't be able to see anything.”

My nerves raise, this was the one place on the trip that I had picked and planned, but here I sit, unable to contribute anything. I watch, picking at my fingernails and constantly twisting my hair as my father turns on the radio and listens intently.

“Il y a actuellement des retards sur la côte en raison des frappes environnementales mondiales qui se produisent dans le pays. Veuillez faire un détour.”

“I know I've taken three years of French, but what does that mean, Mr. “I have a degree in French”?”

He looks at me with a stern glare, and I cower back slightly, awaiting his prognosis.

“It looks like environmental strikes are causing road closures. We're going to find a detour.”

Off we set, exiting on the next ramp, ridden with anxiety and uneasiness - the grey skies once again mimicking the mood. But then I see it, a sign proudly displaying the name, Dunkerque. This is it; nothing is stopping us now.



The soldiers wait, cowering in the shadows provided not only by the dreary clouds layering the sky but from the war itself. Commotion is heard by the pier, causing blood and tear-stained faces to turn quickly and expectantly, awaiting their saviors. Only, it is just a smattering of warning missiles from the Germans, as if they hadn't seemed hopeless enough. All hope had gone. This had to be the end for them. No one was coming to save the soldiers; they had simply been sent here to die. And for what? All hopes of neutering the Germans had sunk as quickly as one of the British transport ships. There it is once again, slight commotion coming from the front of the waiting lines. No missiles are discernable, but there is something that is just barely visible through the thick fog of the Malo-les-Bains.

No. Not something.

Somethings.

The front bows of at least 50 boats push through the thick fog to the rescue. Shouts and whistles are heard from every direction.

“Is that the Germans?”

“What is a little fishermen’s boat doing all the way out here? They do know that this is war, don’t they?”

“No! They’re beckoning at us. . . THEY’VE COME TO RESCUE US!”

Not wasting any time, soldiers pile into the ocean, and like fish in water, begin swimming towards the boats; starvation, sleep deprivation, and hopelessness forgotten, and instead the soldiers are filled with adrenaline. They pile into the boats, fitting like sardines in a can, and it becomes obvious who this is.

Fishermen and townsfolk out in the midst of war, braving the sea and any complications. Just to get to them.

“Settle in men, you’re safe now. We’re going to get you back home to Britain. It’s only about 95 kilometers. We’ll drop you all off and be right back out to rescue the others. Thank you for everything you’ve sacrificed for us so far, but it’s our turn to help you now.”

95 kilometers.

That was the only distance that now stood between imminent danger and the safety of home.



I sat, unsure of what to expect as we pulled up to the desolate and sandy parking lot. It wasn’t raining, but I anticipated a cool breeze and possible salt spray, so I pulled on my light raincoat, rain boots and got out of the car. In front of us stood a large old sign, made of decaying wood that illustrated the events of a war that took place 79 years ago. There, right next to the “you are here” dot, in big bold letters read, “Operation Dynamo”. As my dad and I stood, silently reading the sign, an older gentleman came slowly up the stairs, trailed by his trusty golden retriever. Being that we are in Europe, the man didn’t return my smile, but thankfully his dog was there to return the exchange.

“So, what do you say, Em? Are you ready to stand where your boy Harry Styles stood?”

“I know you think I just like this place because Harry was in the movie but come on! Look at all of this history, man! Let’s go, maybe you’ll be the one to see Harry.”

We make it down the rickety steps and onto the beach. We had finally made it. The beach spanned for miles and met with the ocean amicably in dark contrast. It was low tide and all of the small tide pools were overflowing with shells and salty water. Edging ever-further into the sands the breeze is gone. The wind is not, however. Out of nowhere, the wind came at us at full force, almost bowled me over. The wind and sand together created a hypnotizing rolling effect that made the beach look even more open and desolate than it was. I planted my feet more firmly in the sand this time and set out to my father who was hundreds of feet in front of me, seemingly heading to the middle of the ominous water.

“Where are you going?”

“WHAT? I CAN’T HEAR YOU OVER THE WIND.”

I give up on my attempt at communicating with him and push through the harsh winds. As I get closer, I can see that my dad had finally stopped, so I walked as quickly as I could whilst bracing myself against the winds. That’s when I saw it. Sitting in the middle of the sand was what looked just like a jumble of garbage, but upon further examination was the outline of a shipwreck. On it was a barnacle-covered sign that had been bolted down years ago.

“The Crested Eagle”.

This ship, decimated and forlorn, rested in front of me in a heap. There had been real soldiers here, real parts of the war, and here it was just laying amidst the shores of this isolated beach. The plaque spoke of the perils of the war, but also of the brave men who risked their lives in Operation Dynamo saving more than 300,000 soldiers. I am overcome by all of the intense information that has been thrown at me and am unsure of how to process it all. We had made it, the Malo-les-Bains, and all I could do was stand and picture the endless lines of soldiers on the sand desperately waiting for anyone, while the Germans mercilessly attacked them. But now it was just us. The lines of soldiers were gone, some having returned home, and some in this very beach. We were alone with nothing but the history surrounding us.