

Word Count: 2399

Fighting Gravity

Amy crouched, trembling, on top of a pole that was 2 feet wide and 20 feet tall, wearing a helmet and harness, and tied, by many feet of what she hoped was sturdy cable, to her belay partner on the forest floor.

“What are you waiting for?” yelled Thomas.

“Shut up, please,” she yelled back.

Thomas snickered. “You said easy-peasy, nice and easy, Amy. That was 15 minutes ago. We haven’t got all day!”

“Shut UP, Thomas!” she yelled back, again.

Standing next to Thomas, a motherly middle-aged woman with tan skin, greying black hair, and kind eyes covered her face in both her hands and groaned. “Thomas, you are not helping,” she protested. Looking up, she pointed a finger at Thomas accusingly and laughingly chided him. “You, Thomas, are not helping one bit.”

“Yes I am, Yolie. Amy won’t ask for help, and she won’t back down. This is the only way she’ll get off the pole,” said Thomas.

The CCE teacher shook her head, cupped her hands around her mouth, and shouted up to the young retreat chaperone. “Amy? What do you want to do? Do you want to come down? The foothold is just back and to the right of your right foot. You can climb down the same way you climbed up.”

Amy shook her head. “No, Yolie. I can do this.” Amy gulped and, shakily, straightened. The change in posture threw off Amy’s balance, and for a terrifying few seconds, Amy threw her arms wildly in the air, wind-milling them to regain her balance on top of the slightly wobbly pole.

Below Amy, the teens and other adult chaperones gasped. Thomas, seeing his friend's precarious wobble, felt his heart tighten and grasped the belay ropes tighter around his arms and hands in response. "Oh no you don't," he muttered under his breath.

Amy screamed with genuine fear, but eventually righted herself. Breathing heavily to calm herself, Amy balled her fists and called out shakily, "Thomas?"

Thomas nodded even though she couldn't see him. "I've got you Amy. All you've got to do now is jump."

Amy looked down at the faces below her. The teens on confirmation retreat, all 50 of them, were standing to the right of the pole and watching her from below. The other adult chaperones were standing to her left, some watching her and some watching the children. Behind her, from the sound of their voices, were Yolanda and Thomas.

Amy took in another big breath and looked away from the ground and up at the tops of the trees around her. Below her, the crowd milled about, a hive of buzzing activity and worry, but where Amy stood, above the canopy of the warm, moist, East Texas forest, everything was blue sky and clouds, sun and breeze. It was quiet and peaceful, and for a brief moment, Amy wanted to stay.

A bemused voice from below broke her reverie. "Not to rush you, Amy, but my dissertation is due next year, and I'd like to graduate. So, if you wouldn't mind, please?" yelled Thomas.

Amy rolled her eyes and, gingerly, turned around to glare at Thomas. "I hate you . . ." she mouthed silently, biting back a laugh.

Thomas grinned impishly. ". . . so much," they finished silently in unison. At her response, Thomas laughed and knowingly increased the slack on the cable.

Yolanda, watching their exchange, rolled her eyes and shook her head with amused exasperation.

Amy turned back around and signaled for the crowd below her to move out of the way. “Okay, I’m ready. I’m coming down. Count me off!”

Happily, the teens gave their female chaperone a smattering of applause, whoops, and cheers, and, together with the adults, started the countdown. “TEN! NINE! EIGHT!”

“Seven. Six. Five,” counted Amy.

“Four, three, two,” muttered Thomas as he managed the slack on Amy’s belay line.

“ONE!” everyone yelled.

Amy took a deep breath and, with a yell, leaped into the air in front of her, free-falling.

As he had for the teens and adults who had jumped before her, Thomas managed Amy’s belay chord. Because the tie between them was the only thing keeping Amy from plummeting headfirst into the ground below her, despite his teasing, Thomas had waited patiently and faithfully for Amy to jump. Once the countdown began, Thomas focused on his duty, measured off the rope, and secured the line with his arms, hands, and strength. During the few seconds of Amy’s free fall, Thomas did his best to make sure she would be safe and braced himself for the forceful tug of the line that would signal the end of her descent.

Three, two . . . Thomas felt the line beginning go taut, and he pulled firmly on the line with his gloved hands. Putting his weight into the counterbalance, Thomas planted his feet firmly on the ground and shifted his center of mass backward against the pull of

the rope. As Amy fell, Thomas finally felt a sharp, hard tug on the line, and, looking up, he saw in front of him a short, feisty, woman with dark eyes and tanned skin dangling merrily two feet off the ground.

Amy grinned at Thomas and gave him a cheerful wave from her harness.

Thomas exhaled with relief at his finished job and, gently, he released the tension on the rope. Slowly, Amy finished her descent back to the earth, and within a minute, she was walking toward him.

Amy took off her helmet, and, with a good shake of her head, the long, dark waves of Amy's hair emerged. Thomas stretched out his hand, took the helmet from her, and gently moved her hair from her face and shoulders. "Good job, Amy," said Thomas as he helped her remove the harness.

"Thanks, Thomas. And thanks for helping me get down," she said, happily.
"That was fun."

Thomas gave her a quick smile and then looked over her shoulder at Yolanda.
"Anyone else?"

Yolanda turned around and addressed the teens and other chaperones. "Anyone else want to go? Kids? Any other chaperones?" With a loud chorus of no's from the crowd, Yolanda turned back around and shook her head. "No, Thomas. You're off the hook. Thanks for all your help!"

"No problem," said Thomas as he and Amy finished taking off her harness.

"Okay, kids, back to the cabins. Dinner is at 5:30, so you have time to wash up and change your clothes if you want. Don't be late!" Yolie called out as she started leading the group of teens and chaperones down the trail.

Amy, who was listening to Yolanda's announcements, turned back around to face Thomas. "You are a big dork, you know that?" she asked with mock grumpiness. "Here, it'll be faster if you let me help you."

Thomas bent his knees slightly and offered one shoulder to Amy. Amy reached up and undid the clasp of the harness at Thomas' right shoulder as he made quick work of the buckle on the opposite side. The harness, its fastenings undone, broke away from Thomas' torso and slid with a clink-clank-clunk to the moss-covered forest floor.

"Hey, it was getting to be that either you had to jump or the campground staff would have to bring dinner out here," retorted Thomas as he picked up his harness from the ground.

Amy walked to where she had left her harness and retrieved the safety equipment. Slinging it over her shoulder, she then stretched out her hand and took Thomas' equipment from him. "I was coming down. I was just enjoying the view, that's all," Amy said breezily.

"Thanks," said Thomas as he started coiling the end of the belay cable around his elbow and shoulder. "I don't know, Amy. You looked like you were thinking of staying there awhile. But then, dinner outdoors does sound nice," Thomas conceded. "You, me, dinner, the sky and grass and trees all around us?"

"With 50 confirmation students, 10 other chaperones, and one of us on top of a pole?" Amy laughed. "That would be some awkward dinner conversation. 'Hey, Thomas? Anyone? Could you please pass the salt?'" she mimed as if yelling down from the top of the pole.

Thomas mimed picking up the salt and climbing up the pole. “Sure, Amy,” he said as he mimed climbing back down the pole.

Amy waited a beat. “And the pepper too, please?”

Thomas and Amy snickered in unison.

“Okay, so maybe not,” said Thomas, smiling.

“Maybe not,” agreed Amy. “But, thanks for getting me down, Thomas. And thanks for the belay. That was a scary couple of minutes up there,” she admitted.

Thomas thought of Amy teetering on the end of the pole earlier, and he felt his chest constrict fleetingly with remembered fear. “Yeah, no problem,” he said with forced nonchalance.

Thomas and Amy walked to the edge of the clearing and replaced the climbing equipment into the storage box next to the ropes-course trailhead.

Amy turned and looked at Thomas quizzically. “You didn’t want to climb up on the pole and jump, too? It was pretty neat, standing there above the canopy . . . I thought it was a lot of fun.”

“Fun?” asked Thomas incredulously. He shook his head. “No, thank you. My feet need to be planted firmly on terra . . . firma,” he ended awkwardly. Amy laughed gently. “Besides, I was the only one with belay experience. If I went up and jumped, who’d make sure I didn’t end up splattered on the forest floor?”

Amy smiled and gamely raised her hand. “I would, Thomas. You caught me, and I’d catch you. That’s what friends are for, right?”

Friends, Thomas thought sadly. Thomas shook his head, placed his hand gently on Amy’s shoulder, and straightened her shirt collar, which had been pulled to one side

by the harnesses she had carried. *Soft*, his mind registered as his fingers brushed lightly against her skin. “I think I’d be better off asking one of the other chaperones, Amy. I know you mean well, but you’re so small, if I fell, I think I’d take you with me,” he said with a quiet laugh. “Besides, I think jumping off a tall pole—the reward to risk ratio is a little too low for me.”

Amy laughed, raised an eyebrow, and took a step toward him. “But Thomas, the risk is part of the reward, isn’t it?” she asked, challenging him.

Thomas narrowed his eyes thoughtfully in response. “Maybe, for some people. But if the outcome is too uncertain, maybe the risk itself is the reward. Maybe, for some people, standing there, on the edge of a cliff . . .”

“Or a pole,” countered Amy.

“Or a pole,” amended Thomas. “. . . thinking about jumping and not knowing whether you’ll make it down in one piece? Even if there’s a rope or a belay, just the thought of throwing yourself into the open air with nothing below you to catch you is pretty thrilling,” said Thomas as he gently tucked a strand of Amy’s hair behind her ear. “And if you don’t jump right away, if you stand at the edge of the cliff day after day and still don’t jump? Maybe, after awhile, just thinking about falling becomes enough.” Thomas placed his finger beneath her chin and softly tilted her face up to his. “You tell me, Amy,” he said quietly. “Is it worth it? Would you do it? Would you jump?”

Amy looked into Thomas’ face, and found that his hazel eyes had turned dark and unreadable. Unexpectedly, Amy’s heart began to beat faster, and her chest began to rise and fall quickly with each of her rapidly shallowing breaths.

Two years ago, Amy, who then at 19, was young and inexperienced, would have ducked her head and blushed, unsure of herself and her reaction to Thomas, the tall, athletic, dark-haired grad student with a passion for science and an impish sense of humor. But two years had passed, and as their friendship had grown, so too had the prickly zing of electricity that had characterized their first meetings. Now Amy was 21, a woman, and felt more certain of herself and her attraction to the quiet, faithful, loyal man who had become her dear friend. So, with the strength and confidence that came with experience and friendship, Amy, today, stood her ground and answered his question with one of her own.

“I might jump, Thomas,” Amy replied softly, “but it depends.”

“On what, Amy?” asked Thomas as he glanced at her lips.

Amy saw the flicker of his eyes to her mouth. “On who’s waiting for me down at the bottom?”

Touché, Thomas thought with surprise, and a frisson of unexpected pleasure passed through him.

Amy paused, waiting hopefully for Thomas’ response.

Thomas looked down at Amy and, for an instant, imagined their affair. When he first met Amy, he had looked at her with concupiscence and taken pleasure in the feelings of vigorous sexual desire that the attractive, stubborn, snarky, woman with dark hair and eyes had engendered in him. But time and friendship had added affection and regard to his desire, and now, though Thomas still wanted nothing more than to press his lips to hers and to claim her slight, precious body with his, the bittersweet longing to yield his

freedom and his heart to the soft-hearted, generous, beautiful friend he had come to know made Thomas feel weak and brittle.

I'll catch you, Thomas, Amy's eyes beckoned.

You'll break me, Thomas thought. *Into a thousand pieces and I'll never be whole again without you.*

Thomas gently removed his hand from Amy's face and gave her a rueful smile. "Then you're braver than me, Amy," he said, giving a last glance at her still-waiting lips before he closed his eyes and severed his connection with her.

Amy sighed. *Maybe next time,* she thought hopefully as she stepped out of his reach and turned to walk toward the campground. "I'm hungry, Thomas. Are you coming to dinner?" she asked as she sauntered off toward the canteen.

Thomas opened his eyes. *Maybe next time,* he thought with disappointment as he watched her walk away from him. Thomas shook his head and ran to catch up with her.