

She-Crab Soup

Dead bodies are hard to move.

Not that we should let them lie. Nor sit, as the case may be. Has been. I should say not. They distract, after all. Dismay. Discourage. Distend, even, should they linger. Active verbs for so passive a subject; yet nothing demands attention like nothing. No squaller, screamer, shouter, sniper, spitter, spooner, streaker, sobber, stalker; no sodden, swilling, stool-stumped songster poses quite the call to action as a stiff of any vintage.

The dead are hard to ignore.

I'm a little old lady on a big new airplane. A lumbering Lockheed; two aisles, ten seats across. So many seatbelts buckling. The overhead bins are latched and loaded; the cabin is politely pressurizing. Soon they'll show the video: The one where you learn to hug your cushion to your chest and to slip smiling down a slick, straight slide, and help the old and young and clumsy with their air masks only after you've safely secured your

own. We're bound, supposedly, for Sacramento. But let one damned thing go wrong—one lapse, one lazy lollygag at thirty-nine thousand feet, and we will spiral, in flames or otherwise, into a prime-time fiasco of limbs and litigation. Or, let the girly girl on my mercifully deaf left side pass on with no warning. Let her jaws freeze fast on her incessant Trident gum; let her gasp the gasp we all will gasp; sing but one note of the only song we all know by heart, and my call button can burn itself black before the first Bloody Mary is concocted on my flat-folded tray table. The dead are like that. Insistent. Impertinent. Intrusive. Ill-mannered. They upset the order of things.

Say I'm sitting in a restaurant. No. Say we're sitting, Felicia and I. She orders the she-crab soup. Our talk is small. We are catching up slowly. We think that nothing rushes us. We think we have all day.

--Why she? ask I. Why she-crab? Would she eschew a he-crab, even in a soup?

We talk like that. A lifetime of talk like that. Words that mean no more than they mean, yet never a mean word. "Eschew," I say, and she makes it a sneeze for me to bless; a joke at least as old as we are. Small jokes, big times. Few secrets. Felicia is scared to fly; I to drive. She saved the shirt her Franklin wore, the last day he dressed himself. I have a shiny black Norelco, its rotary heads stuck still with stubble, in a leatherette case, in a drawer, in a drawn-curtain room with a lock and one key. What then is left to say?

--Eschew.

--Bless you.

--Eschew.

--Felicia?

Thirty-nine thousand feet. Five hundred eighty-three miles per hour, ground speed. Yet I am sitting so still. The girly girl pops her gum. They'll show us a movie soon. I can't see the sky for clouds.

--Excuse me, ma'am? Was there something you needed?

The waiter bends, a fulcrum in his belly.

--I believe my friend is dead.

He looks.

--Dead, ma'am?

--Dead, yes. It appears that she has died.

He looks again.

--Surely not?

We are such jokers, Felicia and I. Why shouldn't he doubt me? We eat here often, alone and together. Odd hours always. After the lunch rush. The rolls are dry but the service is snappy. The afternoons are eternal.

Unbidden, I rise. Felicia does not. She studies her soup. Close up. Were she breathing, she would inhale it. Her eyes, open, are on the brink of submergence. Her hair is flecked with crab.

--Dead. Understand? She has died, eating your she-crab soup.

--The soup is excellent. The crabs are flown in, live.

--But dead, can't you see? In the soup.

--Of course they are dead in the soup.

He seems confused. Again, he looks. Felicia has not moved. *Eschew*, she said, then kissed the bowl goodbye. Me, she ignored. Perhaps we had no more to say.

--Your friend is sick. I will call a taxi.

--She is...

--One moment.

...dead.

In the empty restaurant, at a corner table, far from any window, we are alone. I am alone. The dead are mediocre company. Fulcrum-belly reappears with a burly taxi man, a face the color of saddle leather. The waiter and I converse, so:

Dead. Sick. Dead. Sick. Dead. Sick. Dead. Sick. Dead. Sick. Dead.

Mr. Taxi's eyes suggest a tennis match. Felicia remains neutral.

Our descent begins. I open my seventh pack of peanuts. Girly girl gives me hers, considerate of her Trident. Mountains and rivers and cities have hurried by unseen below us. Outside it is black dark.

Felicia in the cab. The waiter lugged her, lumpy but unresisting. He appeared to strain himself, and locked the door behind us. From her face I wash she-crab with a pink pocket hanky. I want to ask the saddle-colored driver if this is his first corpse. But what if it is? What if it's not?

--Your friend she sick.

--The she-crab soup, I manage.

--She better in the morning.

I take Felicia to her apartment. The cab man hauls her, huffing, up three flights.

--Hard to move, he says.

He leaves without his fare. I make a call, and tea for one, and wait.

The cabin is dark but for a few white reading lights and, over every seat, a red “X” through a glowing cigarette. Do not kill yourself on this airplane. Do not, please, die aloft. She did so hate to fly.

Smack, crack goes the gum. My reading light is dark. My Bloody Mary already a memory. In Sacramento waits my sister’s son, dusting a downstairs room.