Death Gets in the Nostrils

The last time they went to the apartment in Lisbon, the guy from the agency, Bruno met them at the door. He was cute, Carolynn thought, their son’s age, with a mustache waxed and curled at the ends like a circus strongman’s. Standing in the sunroom, with its view of the Tagus, while Jim went to relieve himself, Carolynn touched Bruno’s arm.

I’m being ridiculous, she thought. She never would’ve betrayed Jim. Hadn’t done that in 45 years of marriage. She was 67—an old woman—with two grown children.

But something about that place and why she’d come there promised freedom. Didn’t that mean the freedom to make mistakes? To be ridiculous? Sometimes the knowledge that you might eat the fruit was as sweet as the fruit itself. She made a mental note to write that later in her journal.

Behind the thick lenses of his glasses, Bruno’s eyes goggled. He swallowed. Was she making him nervous? On the river, a Royal Dutch cruise ship was moving against the current, and her eyes misted. She’d be on one of those boats soon enough. Schoolchildren were laughing a couple stories below the open windows. Bruno was stammering out a list of restaurant recommendations when the toilet flushed.

God, had it been 15 minutes? It took him longer all the time. Don’t let anyone tell you getting old wasn’t hell.

“What’d I miss?” Jim was fastening his belt, his fly unzipped, and Carolynn was furious at his helplessness. *Do I have to do everything around here?* How often she’d thought that, even when they were younger. He’d earned the money, but Lord knew there’d never been enough of that. Every few years, they managed a trip like this one, but they’d never been able to buy their

own place and retire over here like they'd wanted to do. She'd worked too, but she was the wife—a woman—with less earning power and a natural caretaker, as anyone knew. Everything else fell to her.

"Jim." She coughed into her fist. "XYZ, PDQ."

She meant to spare him the humiliation of telling him to zip his pants in front of a stranger. But Jim squinted at her, leaning closer. On top of everything else, his hearing was going. But he was still handsome, with dreamy blue eyes and a graying mustache that lifted when he told a joke. Until recently, he'd kept in shape walking the links three times a week.

"What are we playing," he said, "*Wheel of Fortune*? Are we making alphabet soup?"

"Jim." She was raising her voice but didn't want to snap. "The barn door is open." And when he still didn't get it, leaning toward her with his brow furrowed in frustration, Carolynn said, "Your fly is unzipped."

Jim looked down, his ears turning red.

"Thanks," he said. Under her anger she felt pain at his diminishment, the unfairness of life, the aging process coming for him first, his decline faster than hers. He fumbled with his zipper. On the crotch of his khakis was a wet spot the size of a silver dollar where he'd dribbled.

Bruno's eyes followed hers. She wanted to shove him out the door.

"Are you new with the agency?" Jim said. "We've rented this apartment before, but I don't remember meeting you."

"I've worked for them," Bruno said, "only a few months."

"I'm sure our friend Bruno," Carolynn said, "has to go."

"Are you from Lisbon?" Jim said, and Bruno said he was from a village a few hundred kilometers up the river. He'd come to the city for graduate school, he told them.

Lord, Carolynn thought, *here we go*.

If she didn’t put a stop to this, Jim wouldn’t quit until he got the guy’s life story. Jim was one of those people who went lollygagging through the world, making friends with strangers on the bus. He could talk to everyone from the CEO on down to the guy mopping the toilets, and she loved that, sure. But it was exhausting. A time and a place, buddy.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shepherding them toward the door, “but I need to lie down.”

“If you need anything,” Bruno said, “give me a call. But you sound like pros. I hope you enjoy the neighborhood.”

He left the spare key in a dish in the hall and went out to the street, closing the door.

She went to the kitchen to put the kettle on for tea. Jim was in the living room, staring out the window at the cruise ship, which had docked at the bottom of the hill, dwarfing the buildings in the Alfama like a monolith.

“Still so strange,” he said, “to see those things.”

“Why?” she said.

Maybe he suspected. Soon, she’d be on one of those boats. She had the ticket, traveler’s checks, the money drawn from savings, which she’d always managed, so Jim wouldn’t know.

“That’s where it all started,” he said, “isn’t it?”

“I thought it started in a market in China.”

Jim waved, impatient. “How it got to the U.S. I mean.”

Not that she needed reminding of that. Carolynn had spent the last three years holding her breath, having a panic attack every time the phone rang, lest the group home where their daughter lived in Albuquerque call to report an outbreak.

Three years of that, and now a prognosis that meant Jim’s body was failing, those trips to the toilet in the middle of the night becoming more frequent until no one in the house slept, and she would be left alone during those small hours between four and five o’clock in the morning.

“It’ll be okay,” he said.

She leaned into his shoulder, doubting she would have the strength to do what she’d come here to do.

As massive and inescapable as that boat, it loomed in her consciousness, the thought that lay underneath her anger, her hurt, her pain.

“Jim, what am I going to do without you?”

Damn his eyes, he laughed. “There’s a chance.”

“Thirty percent.” It had seemed so cruel when the doctors told them that.

“It’s a good batting average,” he said, the corner of his mustache lifting. He was joking. But how could he find humor in this?

The first time they’d come here, fifteen years ago, they’d talked about buying in the Algarve, but they’d chosen the familiarity of Santa Fe, close to friends, family.

These were supposed to be their years to enjoy all they’d worked for, to reap the fruits of their labor. And life had betrayed them, robbing them of that time, that freedom.

The seven-thousand-dollar deductible was the beginning. After that would come home care, rehabilitation, the prescriptions. How long before it ate up everything they’d put away?

And this was her time. She’d never gotten weekends. She’d never left her work at the office.

“Do you want tea?” She stood, woozy.

Wasn’t she the one to take care of everything? She’d done for both of them in the ways that mattered.

“Thanks.” He went back to watching the boat, which was moving away from the dock and into the current. That was the way with big things, those massive shifts that changed your life: they happened slowly, under the surface, then all at once you couldn’t recognize yourself, and you didn’t know where you were standing.

Later, she would write that in her journal, too.

“I’ll bring you a cup,” she said.

She went to the kitchen, where the electric kettle had gone off, the water still hot.

Do I have to do everything?

She poured the water, the teabag puffing up, and set it on the counter to steep.

II

“Poisoned?” Behind thick glasses, the young man’s eyes widened. A graduate student in international relations, no doubt one of these activists protesting everything from the treatment of women to the housing crisis, but he needn’t have worried: the guy wasn’t a suspect. The inspector prided himself on being able to take a man’s measure, and this boy didn’t have the stones to kill.

Still, with these activists, one never knew.

“Fentanyl.” The inspector described the process—ingenious, really—by which the woman had boiled a patch, made an extract, and brought it from the United States in a perfume bottle, giving it to her husband in a cup of tea. The man was dying, anyway, a rare form of bladder cancer, very advanced. A week had passed before the body was discovered. “I’m sure

you’ll need to air the apartment.” He was taunting the kid, who looked green around the gills. “The smell of death gets in the nostrils, eh?”

His stomach grumbled. It was lunchtime. He could go for a plate of bacalhau.

“Yes,” the boy said, “the smell is awful.”

He looked like he was about to cry, but his expression changed, like something had occurred to him.

“What is it?” the inspector said. “Anything you could remember, even a small detail, it could be important.”

“I was remembering,” the kid said, “how she touched my arm. I thought—never mind.”

“Thought you were going to get lucky, eh?” At the kid’s expression, the inspector choked off a laugh. If the idiot reported him, he’d get sanctioned. A person couldn’t say anything these days.

“I can’t imagine,” the kid said, “a nice lady like her murdering anyone.”

The inspector grunted. He didn’t like his policework being second guessed. “It takes all kinds, don’t you know.”

Bruno nodded. Something about the way the woman’s eyes had misted watching that cruise ship stuck with him.

But this man was police. And police were the enemy. Why should Bruno help a pig?

He stood. “May I go?”

The inspector scowled. He was starving, in a sour mood. He waved the kid away.

“We’ll get her,” the inspector said with more certainty than he felt, “eventually.”

He watched the kid go, taking long steps out the hallway in his baggy pants, like he couldn’t get out of the office fast enough. The inspector still wasn’t sure about the boy.

Yes, it was true: one never knew about anybody.