

1.

Mother choked on a bowl of wonton soup. A tangle of bok choy, a larger-than-expected dumpling. A wayward thatch no one could foresee.

Asphyxiation is a silent but awful affair: the soundless yelps, the evocative hand around the throat (the universal signal for choking). The desperate pantomime, *help me*. I leapt to perform the Heimlich maneuver, driving my fist into the soft space underneath her breastbone, but I elicited only a pathetic hiccup.

“Breathe,” I commanded, driving my fist harder.

The foreign body insinuated itself in the trachea, disallowing air passage. No words to communicate her distress. Like a harpsichord with a truncated disposition, certain notes impossible to sound.

“Mother!” I prevailed upon her. But it was too late. The foreign body had irretrievably lodged in her airway. My efforts to expel the wonton – desperate thrusts, imprecations to a heaven I only provisionally believed in -- futile. An inadvisable blind “sweep” of the airway -- contrary to all protocols for administering aid to a choking victim -- drove the object deeper, beyond the grasp of my feeble digits.

Oh, Mother!

She was only sixty-two. It was a stupid way to die, and she did not even get to enjoy her General Tso chicken. The wonton soup was a free appetizer, included in the meal. The dinner special from Seven Happiness Chinese take-out: choice of entrée, wonton soup, \$14.95 plus tax, guaranteed to arrive in under twenty minutes.

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She did not eat her fortune cookie, which I opened long after the ambulance crew had left with my expired mother on a gurney. A crumbling oracle. It said: *Someday everything will all make sense.*

* * * * *

My girlfriend Cecilia is a therapist. She encouraged me to see someone, a colleague who specialized in traumatic bereavement. Dr. Fein and I discussed how American burial customs left the next-of-kin feeling estranged from the process of death, how mortuaries profited a tidy sum from their comprehensive packages (pick-up, embalming, pallbearers, tissues for the mourners), yet offered little solace to those left behind. She urged me to file a complaint with the Better Business Bureau regarding Mr. M., proprietor of M. & Sons Funeral Chapel, whom she believed subjected me to unnecessary and criminal stress in selection of the casket and bundling of mortuary services which by law were to be offered *à la carte*.

Dr. Fein nodded sympathetically, encouraging me to use the tissues on the table in front of me. “Do you think you’re obsessively revisiting the incident?”

“Perhaps,” I offered, not willing to discuss my preoccupation with Chinese takeout and the choking capacity of the menu at Seven Happiness.

“Next session,” she leaned forward, “I’d like to review the incident in detail, so we can purge the negative content from your mind. It’s very important in cases of traumatic bereavement. The experience will be cathartic.”

I resisted. What was the point? So I could sit on her overstuffed leather chair, eyes shut, recounting the final moments of Mother’s life? So that all of it could be dispelled with a wave of Dr. Fein’s magic wand, no longer to trouble my sleep, to cause me to awaken, screaming, in the middle of the night?

I was not yet ready to banish Mother from my mind. If she continued to haunt me, what of it? She had been my mother after all, my only relation (I lacked siblings, aunts, uncles, not to mention a father), my confidante during long years when I aspired to be a harpsichord virtuoso, then settled for a post as an associate professor of musicology (medieval, Renaissance) at New York State University. It seemed only right that I should carry this memory with me, to remind myself of the precarious state we all exist in and to fan my anger toward Seven Happiness, whose sloppy cooking techniques were no doubt responsible for the “accident.”

The “package” I bought from Mr. M. included use of a chapel for the viewing, a hearse for transit to the cemetery, and, of course, the casket – the “Eternal Bronze” model, top-of-the-line, satin-lined, to ensure that no maggots would disturb what the undertaker had wrought in his preparation room with his ungodly cements and embalming fluid.

The priest, whom I did not know, referred to Mother generically as “the deceased” or “the dearly departed,” rather than by her given name, Celeste van der Loon. Henry Phipps, president of the Tudor Greens Society, lauded mother for her efforts with the spring plantings. Jose, our faithful doorman, cried, and remembered how Mother baked him an apple tart every Christmas. I wanted to say something, but could not: grief had stolen the words from my mouth, made me mute, unintelligible. My girlfriend explained that I was in shock, and everyone nodded sympathetically. It was Cecilia who recited the Twenty-Third Psalm, *Lo tho I walk through the valley of death.....* She also selected the attire for the corpse: a smart herringbone suit and pearls.

Before they closed the coffin, they allowed me one final moment with Mother. Her hands had been molded around a crucifix in a position of permanent benediction. She rested on a satin pillow, eyes glued shut, never again to look upon this world. Her hair seemed to me the only thing that had not been retouched by the mortician with his ghastly pan makeup and array of corrective creams. Her hair was freshly shampooed, a gentle shade of white. I stroked her hair and saved a lock. The rest of her, in reptilian fashion, had adjusted to the outside temperature (in this case, the chilly 60 degrees of the funerary chapel, the thermostat no doubt set to ensure optimal preservation in the days before burial). I refused to be assured by all of the usual platitudes -- Mother was in final repose, she was in heaven among a pantheon of angels and saints, she was in a “better place,” and would want me to “get on” with my life.

The drive to the cemetery was a blur. The putrid exhalations of the Long Island Expressway, always choked with traffic. Motorists with no respect for a funeral cortège tried to insert themselves between our slow-moving vehicles, honking, *honking!* to signal us to speed up, else let them pass.

Mr. M. unlocked the door to the stone crypt. The pallbearers laid her on the altar. Mr. M asked whether I would like to gaze upon the deceased one final time. Cecilia tried to dissuade me. Already hinting that I was “obsessing” over the physical manifestation of Mother, unduly interested in embalming procedures, etc., etc. I said yes, please. Mr. M. opened the upper half of the casket. Mother had shifted somewhat during transit. I readjusted the satin pillow under her head. I inhaled the smell of her hair, freshly shampooed. A fresh coat of mascara on her lashes. Patches of corrective cream that my tears, my copious tears, had washed away.

2.

In the weeks following Mother's death, I found myself stunned, staring into space, subsisting on nothing more than stale pastries, ghastly casseroles and a fruit tower of mandarin slices and sad, bruised pears.

I tried to pen some thank-you notes on the stationery provided by the funeral home. *Dear So-and-So, thank you for attending my mother's wake, great of you to come, thank you for the mass card and the cherry-filled chocolates. I have been stuffing my face with them as I howl in desolation.*

Dear So-and-So, it was so kind of you to attend the services at M. & Sons Funeral Chapel, thank you for the calla lilies and the generous subscription to the Harry & David fruit of the month. I am enjoying a kiwi as I write this.

Dear So-and-So, thank you for the sensitive words (May God save you, you look like a wreck), together with the tin of butter cookies.

Dear Mr. M. (or whoever it was who "prepared" my mother in the cold antiseptic room, head poised on a block while the life blood was drained from her):

Thank you for preparing my dear mother for burial, for steering me to the Eternal Bronze line of quality interment products. Thank you for holding my hand and allowing me to snivel on your cheap suit. It was unfair of me to accuse you (and your certified cast of morticians, cosmetologists and coffin salesmen, forgive my ignorance of proper job titles) of being interested only in the enviable economics of the business. People suffer, people die, people will always die.

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I ripped the notes up and never sent them.

She was, according to the official register, DECEASED, no longer of this world, unmarked time, a hovering suspension, an overtone beyond the realm of audible perception.

Margin-less days, days when I hardly left the apartment, subsisting on stale peasant bread and preserves, wandering from bed to bathroom to bishop's chair, and back again, a recursive loop.

My only solace music. My harpsichord is a nineteenth-century Flemish instrument. I call her Aveline, after the heroine in a popular medieval morality play. She is not a Ruckers-Couchet (Flemish), nor even a Schudi (a slightly less reputable English instrument maker), but she has a tone I can only describe as otherworldly.

Some might find it difficult to understand my obsession with period performance. Why it is preferable to use plectra made from crow's quill? To tune the instrument in the quarter-comma meantone, the standard tuning of the era, rather than the equal temperament? The harpsichord, after all, is an obsolescent, dynamically-limited clavier, an instrument locked in one key; its popular descendant, the piano-forte, has no such strictures.

The Renaissance composer had to find beauty in the texture of the line, in the interplay of voices, in the use of hocket ("hiccup"); he could not, like the later Romanticists, change key, or burden chords with hideous extensions and inversions.

I had not played since the eve of Mother's death. I sat at the keyboard, adjusted the bench (my aging back prone to spasm and sensitive to the slightest differential in the

bench's height), opened the brittle songbook, and played Guillaume de Machaut's *Ha! Fortune*—*Et non est qui adjuvat*. I translate from the medieval French:

Ha, Fortune, I am placed too far from port when you put me on the sea without an oar in a little boat, flat and without sides, weak, rotten, without a sail; and about (me) all the winds are contrary to bring about my death, so that there is no comfort nor salvation, pity, nor hope, nor means of escape. . . .

The text conveys the writer's desperation as he founders (literally) in rough seas. His flimsy boat has no sides nor sails and is rotting from within; waves threaten to overwhelm him; there is no hope of rescue. The only sure prospect is drowning; the bleak imagery of the stanza underscores the futility of our pathetic existences.

It might be said that I am inclined to melancholy, that my view of humanity (*i.e.*, man is frail and his nature essentially corrupt; there is nothing for us on this Earth save brief moments of transcendence) has been shaped by immersion in medieval texts and morality plays. Some might say -- pointing to an obsession with sacred music and the principles of counterpoint -- that I live in another era and am uninterested in the present day. Being unable to save my mother, to perform a maneuver so simple Heimlich himself says it can be "self-administered" or "performed by a child of six or seven" --- had left me hollow, unstrung.

Though Mother preferred the Romanticists – Beethoven, Brahms, and of course, Wagner – she understood my affinity for the contrapuntal lines of de Machaut and de Vitry. She would sip tea while I practiced the harpsichord, pausing now and again to give me unsolicited advice – *rubato*, or *un poco espressivo* -- and on her face, eyes closed, lids fluttering, lips uttering silent incantations – I saw a look of rapture. I

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stumbled through to the end of *Ha! Fortune*, thinking that if I harnessed enough emotion, if I concentrated more on the text, if I executed the second strophe perfectly, I might summon Mother from the grave, or at least the apparition of Mother, something to convince me that she had, in fact, existed in this time in space, that she continued to exist, a parallel perfect interval, in another dimension.

6.

Returning home from work, I dared to pass by Seven Happiness Chinese take-out. The illuminated menu. The photos of sesame beef, Sichuan fried rice, cashew chicken, moo shoo pork. Behind the counter, the requisite poster for how to render aid to a choking victim. The usual traffic of rice buckets and dumplings in exchange for crisp American dollars. Nothing to alert the consumer of the fatal potential of the menu. Nothing to apprise him of the inadequately cooked wontons, of the dangers lurking in the murky broth.

Accident victims have their roadside memorials, their shrines of melted candles and teddy bears, RIP scrawled in magic marker. It did not seem right that Seven Happiness had no similar markings: no carnations on the sidewalk, no flickering candles. It did not seem right that customers could walk up to the counter and place their orders as if nothing had happened, nothing to alert them to the fact that a life had been lost, a life that might not have been cut short had some employee thought to observe proper food handling procedures.

Seven Happiness had only four or five tables inside. A few customers, generally eating alone. By far, the greatest part of its business was the take-out enterprise: bicycles were chained to a post outside, for hasty dispatch of orders. I recognized the worker who had delivered Mother's fatal meal blithely getting on a bike and pedaling away, plastic

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takeout bags in his metal basket. Come back, I shook my fist at him. Don't you know the tragedy you wrought? Don't you know?

But he was already pedaling down Thirty-Ninth Street.

I wandered into the bodega next door, bought some daisies, and left them on the pavement outside of Seven Happiness.

Bird on a briar, bird on a briar,

Mankind is come of love, love thus crave,

Blitheful bird, on me have pity

Or dig, love, dig thou for me my grave

In the lobby the following morning I chanced to bump into Adrienne La Planta, a fellow shareholder. She offered me her condolences, nodding sympathetically as I described, perhaps too graphically, the manner of Mother's death. She was a counselor-at-law and unduly interested in the minutia of the accident: Was my mother drinking at the time? Was she under the influence of prescription medication? Did she have a swallowing disorder? Was she trying to talk and eat at the same time? Was she eating in the usual sitting position? Did I perhaps save the rest of the soup or had I hastily discarded it? Did I partake of the soup? If so, did I encounter an impossible-to-chew wonton?

I enjoyed being able to discuss freely these topics, rather than receiving the usual grimace, the gentle reproach – Are you okay? Have you gotten help? The pained expression of the grief counselor, who tried to steer me into more productive areas, else purge the entire negative content from my mind via a marathon session of assaultive

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stimuli whereby the entire experience was stripped of import, rendered meaningless, so that I might return to the “business of the living.” Given Ms. La Planta’s professional calling, I recognized that her interest in Mother’s death might well be pecuniary, her thorough dissection of the events leading up to Mother’s death an informal case evaluation.

“If I may,” she patted my arm. “I think you’ve suffered a loss for which you may be entitled to compensation.”

“You think so?” I asked. I, of course, viewed Seven Happiness as the agent of Mother’s death, in the same way Zarlino blamed his treacherous pupil Vincenzo Galilei for the demise of the mean-tone temperament, but I had not considered that Seven Happiness might be liable in the legal sense, that I might be entitled (as Ms. La Planta explained) to compensation for my losses, both in my individual capacity and as Mother’s heir.

“Do you think she suffered?” Ms. La Planta inquired, head sympathetically tilted.

“I’ve tried not to dwell on that aspect,” I replied.

“Of course, of course,” she nodded, averting her eyes.

“The wonton became stuck in her throat and the life drained from her.”

“Was she aware of what was happening?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure of it. I could see it on her face. She clutched her throat.

Shook her head. I tried to perform the Heimlich maneuver--” here I stumbled, “but was not successful.”

“I’m so sorry. Terrifying,” she commiserated. “I can assure you that you are entitled, as her distributee, to be compensated for her conscious pain and suffering. I

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know it's small comfort, but you can make them pay for your mother's suffering, put a stop to this irresponsible practice of dispensing wonton soup to the unsuspecting."

I nodded.

"Take my card," she offered. "If you're interested in pursuing legal action, just give us a call."

I looked at the ivory moiré card: Adrienne La Planta, Esq., Attorney-at-Law, Bloodstone & Moore, LLP. "Thank you very much, Ms. La Planta."

"Well, I'm off to court. I hope that you'll call. You really deserve to be compensated for your loss."

Her heels clicked across the floor.

That evening I told Cecilia about my encounter with Ms. La Planta.

"Oh, Luther," she shook her head, "she's just trying to take advantage of you."

"Why do you say that?" I demanded. "She was just offering her professional services."

"What good can come of this? It was no one's fault, Luther. Not yours. Not the Chinese deliveryman's. Not the short order cook's."

My fury mounted. "Well, whose fault is it then? Mother's? She should have foreseen that she would choke to death on a wonton?" My voice cracked.

"No, of course not," Cecilia said. "It's no one's fault. It was just a tragic accident."

"I refuse to believe that no one is culpable, Cecilia. In your universe we have only to go with the flow and accept what comes our way as Karma. Here, however, there

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was a clear agent in Mother's death, and that agent was Seven Happiness Chinese take-out."

"Luther, I'm just saying that I've seen patients go through this. They want to blame someone. They bring lawsuits. They're not able to progress through the stages of grief. It can be very destructive."

"I am not Arthur L.," I said, referring to a patient of hers who, following his wife's plunge from the northbound platform of the number 6 train, sued the City, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and Emergency Medical Services for failing to prevent her suicide or to restore her pulse.

"Are you listening to yourself?" she sighed. "You're obsessing. You're casting around, trying to find fault. Was the wonton too chewy? Was it indigestible...."

"With all due respect, Cecilia, those are valid questions." I recalled my enlightening conversation with Ms. La Planta, who informed me that negligent food preparation methods were responsible for thousands of deaths nationwide. Litigation was the only means of assuring that these purveyors of fast food and destruction obeyed the requisite food handling procedures and did not try to "cut corners," as she put it.

"Just don't jump into anything. You're in no position to be making decisions." What she meant to say was that I, having suffered recent, grievous loss, lacked certain critical abilities, among them the ability to function on a daily basis, the ability to rationally evaluate the circumstances surrounding my mother's death, the ability to engage competent legal counsel, if need be, to vindicate my rights.

"I just don't want you becoming stuck," she said, with a look of professional concern.

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“I am not stuck,” I assured her.

The doorman buzzed to inform us that the deliveryman from Sushi-on-the-Go was on the way. I grabbed some bills and waited by the door. The same way I awaited the deliveryman who brought Mother’s last meal, handing him two twenties and letting him pocket a generous tip.

