

Farewell, My Love

I'm looking for a proper grave for my beloved. Her cadaver is on my shoulder, a hefty weight. I use a shovel as my cane. The coffee aroma from a corner shop engulfs me, awaking hunger. I lean the carcass against the wall—you'll wait for me, won't you, my beloved?

The waitress fills my cup without even asking. I order bacon and eggs. Reminiscences of our life together flash before my eyes as I sip the coffee and wait for the food to arrive.

An Asian man approaches, emerging seemingly from nowhere.

"Say, is it your stiff out there?"

"No. Mine is right here." I point at myself.

"Don't be a wiseass with me," he advises. "The little lady out there—she yours?"

"Yes," I admit reluctantly.

"What happened to her?"

"She died."

The man loses any interest in my situation, as if he had expected a more unusual case. He walks over to the counter to study the menu. I stare at him, seeking in his eyes a reflection of my beloved—an image stolen from a stranger's perception, a different view of my lover's familiar image.

My interlocutor walks out without ordering. My food arrives.

I eat hastily and without due pleasure. My beloved's demise has spoiled my appetite.

"Listen, do you want to bring her in?" the cook offers from behind the counter, his grill steaming with provisions. He's elderly, bald. His smile is genuine.

"She's dead," I explain.

"I know she's dead. Still, don't you think she might be lonely out there all by herself? You never know."

"I work a twelve-hour shift; she's used to being on her own."

"Oh, well then. Suit yourself."

We are silent as I finish my coffee. The brown counter matches the brown walls. I dig a few coins out of my pocket.

"What happened to her?" the cook asks. "She looks pretty dead."

"She is dead," I say.

"I know she's dead. But she looks more than just dead."

"Well, she's been dead for a while," I explain.

"Where're you taking her?"

"I'm looking for a grave for her."

"To buy or to rent?"

"To rent. I don't have enough money to buy."

"I know someone who can rent you one for \$100 a month. It's a good deal. They'll want first and last month though."

"Last month?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking."

"Why?"

"Well... what if you decide to move her without notice?"

I wouldn't do something unfair like that. My beloved deserves a long-term resting place.

"\$200 in one shot is too steep for me," I say. "But I'll keep it in mind."

"You do that!"

I nod and walk out. The corpse of my beloved on my shoulder, I continue my quest.

A platoon of Boy Scouts is marching in my direction. When they approach, the elder addresses me in a breaking voice, "Sir, excuse me, but is she dead?"

"Yes."

"How much would you charge us to do her?"

"All of you?"

"Except for Bob," he points at the youngest Boy Scout. "He's still a virgin. It isn't time to break him in yet."

"\$200."

"No way! She's too old for that kind of money."

"What do you mean too old?" I'm indignant. "She's only twenty-four!"

"That's not what I meant." The boy brings his right hand to his heart for maximum sincerity. "She's been dead too long. I say, \$75. How about it? Take it or leave it."

"Sorry, but no way."

I walk on. The Boy Scouts resume marching behind my back. The stiff of my beloved weighs heavily on my shoulder, but I will carry her until I have found a proper burial place.

The sun is approaching the zenith. I should have gotten up a little earlier, but that's unimportant, since nothing is going to bring my love back. Life is immaterial. I keep walking toward the edge of town.

It's a warm day. A butcher is sharpening his tools by the doors of his establishment. As I pass by, he shouts, "Say, how much for the stiff?"

"Why?" I'm indecisive.

"I'll give you \$50 for her. I bet she's at least a hundred pounds."

"Ninety-eight," I correct, considering the subtle shapes of my darling. Lying would do me no good today.

"Two pounds more—two pounds less—who cares. How about that \$50?"

"The Boy Scouts just offered me \$75, and that's only to rent her, if you know what I mean."

"Why didn't you take advantage of their offer?"

"Sentimental reasons."

"I understand," the butcher says. "Well, it's different for me. I ain't gonna fuck her, I'll just cut her up and sell 'er. A beautiful young girl like her or a burly sack of a man don't make no difference to me once I take the skin off. It's pigs I prefer myself, not any of them young folks. That why I don't sell no pork."

My eyes wander, and I catch a glimpse of meat and blood inside, the sharp tools strewn about on white counters. I must be honest, my beloved's honor demands that.

"You'd have to cook her soon. She's not that fresh."

"How old is she then?"

"Well . . . three days."

"Okay, \$40 then."

It doesn't make any difference, since \$50 would not suffice anyway. What was I thinking? If I sell my beloved's stiff, I'll have nothing to bury. My mind must be off track from grief.

I walk on, looking right in front of me, feeling the butcher's stare.

"Bring her back if you change your mind," he yells.

It's too late for changing my mind.

I consider my options. In this weather, my lover's deterioration will be fast and vivid. A vague smell is already beginning to bother me. By tomorrow, she will be completely unusable. If I intend to make any money off her stiff—at least enough to rent her a grave for the next month—I must do it today. But the streets are empty as if everyone had inside matters to attend to; life is at low tide, and my love's cadaver is not in demand.

I may have no choice but to bury her illegally. But I must be careful: every spot of land belongs to someone.

As I walk on, absorbed in these thoughts, I run into a little girl sitting on the sidewalk, playing with a kitten. Her blue dress is faded but still pretty.

"Who is she?" the girl points at the load on my shoulder.

"My lover."

"What happened to her?"

“She died.”

“Yuck, she stinks,” the girl says, confirming my worst fears. “Why does she stink like that?”

“Because she’s dead.”

The girl takes off, holding her nose. Poor little darling, one day you too will leave this world, stinking away on the shoulder of your lover!

I continue walking. It’s well into the afternoon, and I know that I must solve my problem before darkness. What shall I do? Where should I look for a proper burial place?

A group of fishermen appear from around the corner, and I can’t help noticing their interested glances. They stop, pretending to examine a jewelry shop window. I know that just like myself, these simple men have no access to jewelry. One of them stands apart from the rest, openly awaiting my approach. When I come closer, he says:

“Say, would you sell her to us?”

His scruffy beard is gray, but he is fit, muscular.

“What do you need her for?”

“Bait. Dead meat is best! I use it whenever I can. Them fish bite like hell, I swear. And you know why?”

“No. Why?”

“It’s all because of the smell. You don’t feel it no more, her being on your shoulder like that, but them fish feel that big stench from miles away. No shit, man, miles away!”

“I see. How much?”

“Say, \$30. Sound fair?”

“No way.” I’m ready to walk away.

“What is she to you?” the fisherman asks, while others, tired of observing the window, openly examine my beloved.

“She was my lover,” I explain.

“Well, how about \$35 then?”

A nice gesture. I think about all the food this can get me—perhaps a month’s worth. But I’m not desperate yet. I won’t do this to my beloved.

“No, no, forget it!”

I nearly run away, stumbling under the load. The rapidness of my beloved’s depreciation scares me. How sad that we must live in a world where the monetary value of a corpse is insufficient to pay for its own burial or even for a month’s rent. Our society has many problems, but this one is among the most significant. I bitterly regret the three days I wasted in meaningless, painful laments. I should have taken advantage of her freshness, never to be regained. I have the rest of my life to lament her.

I remember the day we met—her white dress, her transcendent beauty.

The smell has grown more vivid, and the dark spots on my lover's skin are darker than they were this morning. As I walk away, the fishermen's mocking shouts continue indefinitely.

My back and shoulders tired from my love's weight, I become depressed. I think of the times we have shared, bright days saturated with happiness.

A limousine flies by, then stops. An exquisitely dressed gentleman emerges.

"How are we doing today?" he addresses me.

"Not so good."

"Why is that?"

"My beloved is dead."

"What a shame." He rubs his palms together, as if making a fire. "Perhaps you would like to make some money off it? I bet it would make you feel better."

His smile is sincere, one you want to believe.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Would you consider selling the body? See, I manufacture dog food, and I'm always on the lookout for some quality meat."

"How much did you have in mind?"

He can't keep eye contact, the bastard.

"\$25. Sound good?"

"No."

"No one's going to pay you more for an old stiff like that."

"I know."

I keep walking. The man laughs and heads back to the car.

"Hey, man!" someone shouts from above. I see a head sticking out of a third floor window. "Would you sell her to me? I can make use of her for soap. I'd really appreciate it, brother! I can make it nice and aromatic. You get a free sample."

I don't even bother to answer. I keep walking. I'm sure he wouldn't offer more than \$15. I begin to regret rejecting the Boy Scouts' offer. I could have had \$75 from them and then \$50 from the butcher. I could have made up the remaining \$75 one way or another, even if I had to go to the corner and sell myself to the Oak Street guys for a few nights. You have to do that from time to time if you want to survive.

A black-clad figure approaches, a priest.

"I'm so sorry, my son. What a tragedy."

"Thank you, Father."

"But everything is God's will, as you know. So it must be God's will that I ran into you just now, don't you think?"

"Maybe."

“You know, we are staging the Lazarus scene at the church tomorrow night. She would be just right for that. We can pay.”

“But she’s female.”

“Yes, but we wouldn’t let the parishioners close enough to see.”

“You think God might resurrect my beloved?”

The priest gives me a look.

“Why don’t you ask Him? Personally, I’ve already found someone to play the part, and it’s a man. We don’t do miracles, you see. We just remind our parishioners about the miracles that happened in the past.”

“How much?”

“I’m afraid \$10 is all we can offer.” His face expresses the most profound regret. “It’s not like we absolutely must have her; I’m just being creative, for a realistic effect. We can’t pay any more than \$10. The church is poor these days; no one comes.”

I just wave my hand and move on. I have no words left. The world without my beloved is a sad place. My legs are tired, and as I keep walking, my spirits keep declining.

I stumble upon a playground: a sandbox, a little kid playing. My decision is instant. The kid doesn’t notice me at first, but as I approach, the stench becomes too obvious. He looks up.

“Why does she stink like that?”

“She’s dead. Listen, do you want a candy?”

“Sure,” the kid replies, his big eyes blinking up at me.

“Well, go buy one for yourself.” I hand him some change, and he takes off running down the street.

It’s almost dark; the day is developing faster than usual. I have covered seven or eight miles with a stiff on my shoulder. I’m tired. The kid gone, I realize that I have lost my shovel. I can’t remember when I had it last. I must have left it in the coffee shop. It’s too late to go back.

I kneel down. The sand is soft; the shovel is not needed. The hole I dig is shallow. I don’t have time for a grander project. The sandbox is probably not that deep anyway.

What if someone spots me?

I must do it fast.

I fit my love’s stiff into the opening, then lean over and kiss her lips, so dear to me. The kiss leaves a strange taste in my mouth.

Unexpectedly hesitant, I stand there for a minute, steeling myself for the final step. Then I muster the courage and drop the first handful of sand into the grave. It’s not a good grave: the body is almost level to the ground. I do my best to cover her with sand. Never to see her again—what torture can be compared to this?

I look down at the sand's even surface: no one would have guessed what's just happened. I have fulfilled my duty. I have found the final resting place for my lover.

I wipe my hands with a handkerchief as I walk away. The smell of my beloved is on me all the way back home.