

The Lobster Mafia Story

MY husband's funeral was a modest affair. The coffin was pine, as he would have wanted. The minister, who is new, and so young my husband would not have trusted him to pump his gas, said little. Mostly people came and went, delivering their casseroles, touching me gently. Then, at last, everyone was gone except for a small group of women who stood huddled at the front door.

"Hello, Marcie," said one, though my name is Marcella and I've never given her any reason to think I want to be called anything else.

"Hello," I said. I could not remember if she was Ginny or Janet. They were all dyed blond. All with the same gray roots. I know the women by who their husbands were—nothing more, nothing less.

"We're sorry for your loss," said another.

"Thank you."

"You should come downtown sometime," said the third, by which she meant I should sit with them on the benches outside the Saint Peter's Club. The benches are where their husbands used to sit, with my husband, after they got too old to pull traps.

"Yes," I said. "Maybe I will. Thank you."

The women watched me suspiciously. Perhaps they knew that I was lying. Or their suspicion was a cover for jealousy: my husband was the last of the gang to die. But there was something else on their faces, too, a passing terror, as if an awful noise had swept through the doorway. The look was gone the next instant—there they were, three wives contemplating me with adequate pity—but it had left behind, lingering among us, an unmistakable presence. A terrible thing our husbands did together, more than twenty years ago. Another funeral, for a man we barely knew.

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

Still the women didn’t leave. Two of them parted slightly, revealing a tall, skinny girl of twelve or thirteen who stood, head drooping, on the step behind them. She was pulled up, and through, then pushed toward me.

“This is Emma,” said the first, blondest woman. “My granddaughter. She lives down the road, with her mother. *Not* my daughter—my son’s ex. Not the smartest cookie, that one, she’s really not. You get my gist. In any case. I’ll see that Emma visits you from time to time. You could use the company, certainly.”

Behind me the old house was its usual haunted self. The woods rustled: animals getting ready for winter, wanting nothing to do with us. Emma looked shyly up at me, the whites of her eyes reminding me of a small, cold fish. I smiled.

“Come anytime, dear,” I said.

She nodded, barely.

Then the wives pulled her away, fast-walk-waddled to their cars, and drove off.

Here is how I believe it happened:

At five o’clock in the morning, on February 6, 1978, four men sit in their shack on the wharf drinking rum and Coke out of Thermos caps. They listen to the forecasters on the radio saying heavy snow on the way, strong winds; one channel says blizzard; another, “historic storm.” The men have heard it before, heard it all winter; one storm after another has failed to live up to expectations, left them stranded at home, feeling useless for no good reason. From the shack, at least, they can see for themselves: the warning flags in the harbor, the swell already forming, even in the cove. Four dying flashlights hang from nails, layering the men in a grisly yellow.

Or maybe the flashlights aren’t dying; maybe someone’s wife bought new batteries, and the men are lit too harshly, their features clownish, causing in each other unspoken bursts of fright. These men are part of a lobster gang stuck somewhere in the middle ranks of the gangs, powerful enough they can sabotage their inferiors but weak enough they need the mafia kingpins to protect them. They are the sort who never imagined being anywhere other than this middle, who at sixteen would have said that washing back rum and Coke next to an electric space heater with their finest friends would mean they had achieved a place in the world. None of them imagined that they would reach this place and feel nothing.

The radio crackles. One man adjusts the dial, another the antenna. The third reaches for the rum, the fourth shakes his head: "February," he says. "Why even bother? We should be asleep right now."

The others nod in agreement, but they are lying. They don't want to be in bed next to their wives with their pale, suffering breaths. Under attics that have not been insulated, in view of traps that lie unmended in the yards. Close to the children who have grown, and the children who've not been had.

"Going to be a storm," says the man pouring the rum.

Another raises the liter of cola. "Who?"

The men hold out their caps. A gust shakes the walls, the wind already strong enough that they don't hear Tom Lanza start his motor. Instead, they feel the vibration in their feet, then his wake, soon after.

The men have plenty of reasons not to like Tom Lanza. He moved up from Rhode Island a few years before. Some outsiders make it just fine here; they accept their status, follow the rules, go humbly. But Lanza has done none of this. He refuses to join the union. He doesn't belong to any gang. He works alone and all over the place, on the edge of established territories, drawing off lobsters but quiet about it, smart and quick. He had an arrogant house built for himself, blond Italian brick with pillars. He is a bachelor.

They open the shack door just in time to see his broken stern light trembling before it disappears out into the main harbor.

That light is another thing they hate. Tom Lanza has money, but he puts nothing into his boat. The hull is peeling paint; all he has for navigation is a compass; he shits in a bucket instead of fixing his toilet. A man can be this way without a wife. Just as he can head out in any weather he wants, alone, not spreading the work around, no "Morning" when he passed their shack on the way to his boat.

Not that they would have wanted to see his smug Eye-talian face anyway. But it's the principle. The way it works, or the way it's supposed to work: nobody goes out, or everybody goes. Going out on a bad day is like stealing and showing off about it at the same time. It's an insult: the sight of his crappy boat going out to make money and the men already half-drunk, having succumbed to another alarmist forecast, and in an hour or so daylight will come. Their wives will be awake by then and listening to the radio, too, hearing the warnings. They will insist that the men come home, like children.

The men do not wonder whether for some of the women this sternness is something they have to put on, like a stiff, fancy hat.

But maybe they could manage all the pressures bearing down on them. Maybe all they would do, if things weren't about to go the way they go, is curse Lanza to the air and slump back onto their crates. They might go on with their lives; there might be no story to tell. But in that moment in the doorway, they make the mistake of looking at each other. They see their own rummed eyes in each others', and the fear there, and the shame, and the wives in the houses swinging their ankles down from the beds now, the wives with their skinny or swollen laments—and when the men turn back into the shack, they see the flashlights hanging. Then the rum bottle slips from one man's fingers, and the rum spills onto the floorboards, making a preposterous map, and the men can no longer deny how cold it is or how inadequate their space heater. One man kicks its grill, and they are off.

They follow Lanza at a distance, ten or so lengths, though it must be hard for them to judge: they are crammed onto a single boat, the pilothouse barely big enough to fit them; their breath is one raw, stupid thing. Past the break-water Lanza opens up his engine, and they do the same, their boat nosing up, then flattening again as she gains speed. They stay behind and a little landward of Lanza. The noise of the engine drowns out any need to talk, allowing them to pretend the weather is no worse than they imagined, though it's squalling now, a light snow starting to fall. They lose sight of Lanza for seconds at a time.

He knows they're behind him. He must. Yet they're fifteen minutes out before he slows to pull a trap. They slow, too, a few lengths away, watching as he grabs the buoy and begins to pull in the line. Through the snow they can just barely make him out, but the buoy's stripes appear in flashes, orange and blue. It's one of his own, which is another thing about Tom Lanza: he's never messed with anyone else, never showed any envy. He hauls the buoy up over the rail and works the line onto his winch head; he's the only man in the harbor who hasn't gone to a hydraulic hauler. As he starts to crank the line up, the men must recognize what they haven't seen in years—the muscles and methods of their fathers, and their fathers' fathers, who worked harder than they ever will, who suffered not a single convenience.

They are close enough now that Lanza looks up. They step out of the cabin, yanking up their hoods, forearms to foreheads to keep the snow out of their eyes. Then they are close enough a man could jump from one rail to the other, close enough they could cut his line with a good knife, but Lanza—they can see his face now in his hood, its dark skin and tired eyes and lips too full for

a man—smiles. And his smiling is a problem as unredeemable as his not being born here. They cannot help him any more than they can help themselves.

Lanza stops his winch. He reaches into his pilothouse for his Thermos and starts to unscrew the cap. For a minute, they think he is about to offer them coffee—he is warm, they know, from his work, whereas they are bone cold, their chests starting to quiver. The men might hope that Lanza's offering will save them. But he pours into his own cap. He pours like he can't imagine a nicer day, like he's sitting down to high tea; then he grins, tilts the cap back once to drink, and tosses the rest over the side. A gust picks up the spray and they smell coffee in the snow, Lanza's coffee in their faces. Someone throws the throttle into reverse, and they bump Lanza's boat; someone else jumps the rails. The others follow and join in, punching Lanza's face, pinning him to the deck. The waves have grown larger, slicing and tossing the boats; the wives, at home, listening to the radio, are growing angrier. The men beat Lanza bloody, and then there is no way back and no way around what they've done, and when Lanza's Thermos rolls past them, one grabs it and hits him over the head.

There is a lull in the squall, there has to be, for the men can hear Lanza's engine. They can see the charts by his wheel and his gaudy Jesus flailing, pinned to the ceiling by a thumbtack and string, and a homemade wooden shelf nailed to the wall, perfectly sized and with a hole to secure his Thermos. One man cries out. Then the wind finds its pitch again; the snow sticks to their bare hands. One of them pulls off Lanza's boots, a desperate attempt at politeness. But that only makes things worse because there, on the deck, shrouding Tom Lanza's feet, are two yellow ankle socks with little bears on them. For an instant, the socks seem like another shot at salvation—because of their brightness, or the happy bears, or because they remind the men of their mothers. Then the promise is gone and the socks are only heartbreaking. The snow is thickening fast, and the men throw Lanza over the rail.

They must move quickly now to find their boat. They were rash not to tie a rope off. Stupid. But Lanza's boat has gas, Lanza's engine works—of course. His frugality was the clever kind, the always-right kind, the kind a wife would prefer. This fact maddens them and helps them concentrate.

The lobster mafia spun Tom Lanza's death as an accident, the sort that happens all the time, no one responsible but the man himself or a dead motor or a wind changing direction without any warning. The men bribed the paper. They had cops for brothers. They did what they always do when one of the

gangs cuts traps or puts water in a gas line or messes up the gears on a boat caught working their territory: they drowned the truth. This was easy because Tom Lanza was so scorned in the harbor and beyond it nearly unknown, but even easier because he died two days before the blizzard pummeled the coast from the sound all the way up to New Hampshire. It's easy to blame a man for his own death when he doesn't have enough humility to obey the weather. Five full days passed before the Coast Guard could go searching, and by the time they found Lanza's boat adrift out at Stellwagen Bank, the world was shut up under five feet of snow, quiet as a pillow.