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Until We Land  
by [Susan Hodara](#)

For the last four hours of our flight from Nice to New York, the man’s body lay across the middle seats of the row behind us. The flight attendants had draped red airline blankets along the tops of the seatbacks and tented them over him. They’d wrapped his calves and feet, which extended into the aisle so that passengers had to step over them on their way to and from the restrooms. The man’s wife hunkered in the window seat across from him, staring blindly ahead.

It was the end of our week-long trip to Provence, where my husband, Paul, and I had attended a wedding, then driven the serpentine roads of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. A couple of hours after takeoff, I looked up from my book to find Paul standing beside our seats talking to a flight attendant. He was offering to help her open the bathroom door nearby, suggesting she use the metal end of a loose seatbelt for better leverage on the emergency release. It was like him to get involved when he spotted something amiss.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He turned toward me and spoke in a lowered voice. “Someone collapsed in there,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“His wife got worried when he didn’t come back to his seat. Now he’s on the floor, and they can’t open the door.”

I loosened my seatbelt and twisted around so I could see. The wife, on the opposite side of the plane, was pacing up and down the aisle. She looked to be around 70, a petite woman with straight auburn hair cut short. She wore khaki pants and a matching shirt. Her face was flushed, her mouth set tight.

I shifted up onto my knees. They will manage to open the door, I thought. They will revive the man, help him up, bring him back to his wife. He will sit with her until we land.

But the door was still jammed. While Paul edged closer to the bathroom, I remained sitting. I told myself there was nothing I could do, but I know now that I was also stung by the horror of what might be.

Finally, the door was forced open. By this point, the passengers in the nearest row had been moved, and the pilot had joined the group. He and a male attendant unfolded the man from the stall, one grabbing under his arms, the other taking his feet. There wasn't enough room and the body sagged until someone stepped in to support it. When they lay the man along the empty seats, his shirt was unbuttoned. I could not see his face, but I saw his belly flecked with white hair, a scar from what might have been an appendectomy dipping below his belted pants. His left arm had been shoved by the seatback across his body; his hand rested palm down on his ribs, watch on his wrist, gold wedding ring on his finger.

There was a flurry of activity around him. Much of what was taking place was blocked from my view, but I could see the up and down of a doctor who was on board pressing over and over on the man's chest. The wife came back down the aisle. "Il est morte, il est morte," she said, until an attendant urged her back to her seat.

It was at least fifteen minutes that the man had been in the bathroom, and another half hour before there was some kind of consensus that the intervention should stop. The doctor was sweating. One of the attendants was crying.

I looked for the wife, who had returned to her husband. She stood as if frozen, and I mirrored her, immobilized in my seat. I thought of Paul, with his high blood pressure, sitting endlessly at the computer, then pushed the image from my mind.

Even though, for the rest of the flight, the body's presence filled the plane, and the heavy shadows of loss and fragility pressed down around us, I couldn't find my emotions. From time to time, I peered back at the man, so I could feel once more the jolt of his death. But what really compelled me was his wife—his widow, I said to myself.

I wanted to study her, watch her for clues. She'd wrapped herself in an airline blanket. I saw her take out her cell phone, then put it back in her purse. It wasn't until we landed, and she took out the phone again, that I saw her tears.

But for all those hours in the air, whenever I turned to look at to her—and I did it often, I couldn't stop myself—her eyes were on mine, as if she had gotten there first to deflect me, and I had to look away.

*[Susan Hodara](#) is a journalist, memoirist, editor and teacher. Her articles have appeared in The New York Times, Communication Arts, and more. Her memoirs are published in various anthologies and literary journals.*

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