

Hello readers and friends. As some of you already know, I have an annual tradition of writing a story of this season, which I share as my small gift for the days ahead. Feel free to read it, share it or send friends the link. It will remain available here until the new year.

Of course I'd be pleased if you'd consider making a holiday gift of one of my books, *Last Rights* or *Authentic Patriotism*. And as always, I'd be delighted to hear your reactions to the story.

Thanks for supporting my work. Serving you is a great privilege.
Happy winter.

-- Stephen

ONE MORE SNOWFLAKE

Thomas stepped out of his truck into an inch of fresh snow, and it gleamed from the light post he'd installed by the mailbox twenty years before. A backbreaking job it had been, digging a trench for the wires from the house, and seeming to strike every underground rock along the way. Oh to be that strong again, that tireless. Now his pants sagged in the seat. With a grimace he tightened his belt another notch, his thumb feeling two holes up to the leather's usual groove.

Thomas took a deep breath, drawing the chill far into himself, then releasing it with a cloud toward the heavens. The silence was impeccable, not the faintest hush of wind through the row of spruces he'd planted eighteen years ago. The lights of the house beckoned; he reached back into the truck for a canvas grocery bag. His face leered from the side mirror, flecks of white paint in his grey beard. It took three slams for the door to catch and stay closed. Then he strode toward the lights and warmth.

Before he'd gone ten steps, Thomas smelled the wood smoke and it stopped him as always. Something animal in him was stirred and comforted by that scent. But it was a false stirring, and a false comfort. All it really meant was that Barbara had thrown a birch log on the flames along with the usual hardwoods. And he knew better than to think she had done it for his benefit. Thomas came onto the porch and rang the bell. The house remained silent. After waiting long enough to begin shivering, he rang the bell again.

A moment later the entry light went on and he could see her hurrying in her apron, then the outside overhead shone. He opened the door himself. "How are you Barbara?"

"Anna's flight was delayed," she said, already heading back into the house.

“I wondered,” he called after her while he slid out of his boots. “I noticed mine were the only tire tracks.”

“She insisted on taking a cab,” Barbara boomed from the kitchen. “So I wouldn’t have to wait at the airport.”

He walked through the house in his socks, past the statue of lovers he’d bought seventeen years ago, the incense burner for her birthday fourteen years ago, and on a side table stood the evidence of his ever-expanding ex-husband expertise, a village of miniature buildings he had given her one piece per Christmas these past twelve years. If ever a gift could not be construed as offensive, vindictive or manipulative, it was a Victorian-era tack shop or butcher or hat maker three inches high with a little light inside.

Barbara was still talking at top volume. “There’s no telling what time she’ll actually get in. Half the world is flying today, and LaGuardia was completely backed up.”

“Apparently the storm swung south of us,” Thomas said in a soft voice that made her turn. “It went out to sea.”

“Since when have you been Mister Weather?”

He shrugged. “Never. I just was hoping for a blizzard. To make the holiday complete, I guess. I could use a good dumping of snow.”

“Even if it makes your daughter late?” She returned to stirring something on the stove. The tree stood bare in the next room, boxes beside it with lights and decorations awaiting Anna’s return. It smelled, Thomas thought, heavenly. Barbara had lit candles, as she did every December night, and the platter of them behind the stove gave her a halo of light.

“You look lovely tonight.”

She spoke to the stove. “You’re not in one of your moods, I hope.”

He gave a dry laugh. “Perpetually, I suppose.”

“You’ll just have to ration it out, then. Anna won’t be here for at least an hour.”

Thomas went to the cabinet, peered inside, and stepped back. “You moved the wine glasses.”

“I’m not tall enough to reach there. Never have been, though it took me twelve years to realize it.” She pointed with her spoon. “Over by the silverware drawer.”

He nodded and crossed the room, finding two flutes and setting them on the counter. Barbara glanced over. “Champagne?”

“Why not?” He pulled a bottle from the canvas sack, unwrapped the foil and began uncoiling the wire hood. “It’s not every week your daughter gets into law school.”

“You are OK with her being a lawyer?” She paused in her stirring.

“I’m amazed.”

“I am OK with Anna, period,” he said. The cork gave a satisfying pop and Thomas watched closely as vapor rose from the bottle. He poured one glass till bubbles reached the top, waited for them to subside, then filled it again generously. He handed it to Barbara before pouring his own.

She took a sip. “Wow. What kind is this?”

He turned the label toward her. “I splurged.”

She set her glass on the counter. “You’re not spending money from pieces you haven’t sold yet, are you?”

“Not at all.” He took a big gulp, closing his eyes as he felt the effervescence in his nose. Then he contemplated the glass from the side, bubbles rising and a few clinging partway. “It’s just that my financial goals have changed recently.”

She snorted. “You have financial goals?”

“OK, let’s say my financial needs.”

“What, have you met someone? And is she loaded?”

“You are the only loaded woman I’ve ever loved.”

“Fat lot of good that did you.”

“Well, there is Anna.”

“There is.” She noticed him looking for a place to sit, but both kitchen stools were stacked with papers. Barbara grabbed a pile of magazines and catalogs from a corner of the counter. “Try there.” She carried the pile out to the entry closet, where he knew a blue recycling bin sat on a shelf he’d built. “Does this have anything to do with the retrospective at the Institute this spring?” she called over her shoulder.

“No.” Thomas rubbed his nose. “Though I suppose I have you to thank for that good fortune?”

“Not at all,” she said, returning. “I don’t even sit on that committee anymore. They have me doing development now, if you can believe that. Me, asking people for money.” She shook her head.

“I imagine that thrills you down to your toes.”

“Yass, Thomas dearest, would you happen to have any spare change?”

He sat on the counter. “If I did sweetheart, I’d give it all to you.”

She looked at him, almost for the first time that night, then turned away. “I’m sorry to be cooking on you, and not have appetizers or anything. But I decided on risotto, and if I stop stirring it will burn.”

“Not to worry. It’s worth waiting just to taste your risotto.”

Barbara considered him with one eye. “What are you up to?”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about sweetheart this, risotto that. Because if you came here intending to ask for another loan –“

“Please.” He held up one hand. “Please. I don’t want anything from you, Barbara. I mean yes, I would love to do three or four years over again with you. Two years at least. But in terms of right now however stupid this sounds, I am glad just to be sitting here while you cook something flavorful, and our inexplicably suddenly grown-up daughter flies home for the holidays, and we sip something as ordinary and extraordinary as champagne.”

“Come now. Honestly?”

“What I want right now, Barbara, is all of the richness that life has to offer. The beauty in every single moment. I want a blizzard, sweetheart. And if I can’t have that ... well, then I want a snowflake. Just one more snowflake.”

She wisted a stray hair back from her forehead. “You *have* met someone.” She poured broth into the pan and continued stirring.

Thomas drained his glass, refilled it, put a fresh inch atop hers. He took a plate from a cabinet, rummaged in his canvas bag, and produced an array of food that he brought back to the counter.

Barbara was holding her glass, sipping while stirring, till he set the plate down. “Smoked trout?”

“Still your favorite, right?”

“What are you doing, Thomas? Of course it is.”

“Why do I have to be doing something? Can’t I just be a man who knows what life is worth? Why can’t I bring foods you like and booze you like and wait with you for our beautiful daughter to come home?”

“Because it is not like you, dammit.” She put her spoon hand on her hip. “I know you, Thomas, we have done this Christmas Eve thing for twelve years now, and we both know precisely how it goes. You arrive insultingly late. And starving. And distracted. And all you can talk about is the current painting or the next show. And you argue about everything. Last year it was cloth napkins versus paper napkins, in case you forgot. And you make snarky comments that to ordinary people would sound fine but that you just know will prick me good. And usually you haven’t washed. And most of the time you –“

“Enough,” Thomas said. “Enough.”

“Well it’s true.” She took a piece of trout and gobbled it.

He contemplated his hands. Paint clung to the cuticles. One stain on his thumb was shaped like Idaho. After a moment he raised his eyes, then pointed. “Your spoon is dripping.”

She startled, put it in the risotto, then grabbed a sponge and wiped the floor. But while she was down there, she slowed. When Barbara straightened she studied the sponge like it was a foreign object, and the silence grew.

“Which was I in favor of?” Thomas eventually asked.

“Which what?”

“Cloth or paper?”

Her shoulders dropped. “I can’t remember, Thomas. It didn’t matter then, and it doesn’t matter now.” She tossed the sponge in the sink and went back to stirring in her haloed place.

“You know sweetheart, I am so glad you never cut your hair.” She went still, the spoon barely circling, listening as he continued. “When I see so many women now of a certain age who chop their hair so short, to make it easy to care for I suppose, I think they don’t realize how masculine it might make them, how less likely to be admired in a certain kind of light, and well, I am just glad that you have never been afraid to be beautiful, in all the ways a woman can be beautiful for her age, whatever age, glad not for myself but

for what it says about how you see yourself, glad that you can love and accept yourself in that way. Am I making any sense?”

Barbara turned the heat off under the pan. She stood near him and took his hand. “What is it, Thomas?” she said. “Tell me.”

He shrugged. “It’s not enough to savor life?”

She shook her head. “You have always savored life. Like no one I have ever known. Now tell me what’s going on.”

Thomas straightened his back and let out a sigh, but it caught on the way out.

“You’re scaring me,” she said.

He inclined his head, a boyish tilt. “It’s back.”

“It? Which it?”

“Sweetheart.” He put down his glass. “It’s in my bones.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “Oh, Thomas. That’s why you’ve become so skinny.”

His voice was soft now. “And my liver.”

“Oh God.”

“And my brain. My brain, honey.”

She could not help herself. She placed her free hand on his face.

“Not in my lungs this time, though.” He took a deep breath. “There is that.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing *to* do, sweetheart. I could chemo it again, but look where that got us. It’s in far too many places to radiate. And I won’t let them surgery me to ribbons, if they even proposed it, which they haven’t.”

“What did the doctors say?”

“One said I should get my affairs together. Affairs, there’s a word for you. Another gave me a brochure about hospice, which actually was fascinating. The last one said ‘Go with God’.”

“He said what?”

Thomas nodded. “That’s right.”

Barbara stepped away, pushed back her hair, then used one forefinger to count off the fingers of her other hand. “All right. First thing, we’ll call my contact at Dana Farber, get you in to their best people. Of course John knows people at Sloan Kettering too, from his residency.”

“I really don’t think your brother –“

“And then there’s Mayo. I’ll get online later tonight and see if I know anyone on the board.”

“Barbara.” He took her hands in both of his. “You are kind, but you do not understand.”

“What’s not to understand? There are plenty of people and resources to help you fight this. Now Thomas, don’t allow your pride to stop you from letting me help.”

“There isn’t going to be any fight,” he said. “It’s too advanced.”

“Dammit Thomas,” she said. “If you don’t fight it, then what *are* you going to do?”

He smiled. “I am going to appreciate.”

“To what?”

“Appreciate, sweetheart. Champagne. Anna in law school. Painting yes, color and light every chance I get for as long as I can. Blizzards, trout, *everything*. Even you. Especially you.”

Eyes brimming, Barbara turned to face the stove. “How am I supposed to cook risotto, with you like this?”

“Please cook it exquisitely, sweetheart. I cannot wait to experience the flavor.”

“I don’t know what to say to you.”

“Whatever you have to say, even in scorn, I cannot wait to hear.”

She put the spoon aside. “That sounds like an exhausting way to live.”

“I hope to become very tired by my appreciating. I am tired already.”

“Maybe this year ...” Barbara took both of his hands this time.

“Maybe you’d better stay, and help decorate the tree.”

He whispered. “I would love that.”

She leaned forward, an inch at a time, till her forehead pressed against his upper arm, and they held there, still, silent.

Just then a horn honked; it startled them both. Barbara backpedaled. Thomas dropped from the counter and peered out the front window. “It’s a taxi,” he said.

They went to the porch together and stood outside in the cold, watching Anna hoist her bag from the trunk. Her back was to them while she paid the cabbie. As he returned to the driver’s side he thanked her and wished her a Merry Christmas. Thomas noticed how tailored Anna’s coat was, how it complemented her long, slender back.

He found himself distracted for a moment then, by a snowflake tumbling down into the spill of light. Just one, it hovered so briefly as he watched. Then it caught an invisible wind and spun off somewhere unknown, into the infinite dark.