

## Stephanie J. Waterman

### THE SCRIBE

“Someone, *please* answer the phone,” Addie yells as she swirls around to stir the pot. The phone rings for the fifth time. Exasperated, she drops the spoon on the rest, turns to wipe her hands, just as the 12-year-old answers the phone.

“Mom, it’s for you.” Mindy drops the phone on the table.

Addie sighs, shuffles over to the phone wiping her hands, shoulders drooping, hair out of place. She takes in air, “Hello.”

“Addie,” says a raspy, elderly male voice. Addie smiles. “Good evening,” she says with fondness.

“Addie, I need you to take a letter, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Addie looks at her kitchen, the messy living room, a hard look at the clock. “Sure. I can take your letter,” she says, her voice more cheery than her face.

“Can you come tonight?” the voice says slowly, each “t” clearly pronounced, the “c” sharp and cutting.

“I can come tonight. I’ll be along after dinner.”

“Don’t rush. I don’t want you to have indigestion,” he says, very clearly, very slowly.

“Oh, I don’t rush through any meal,” Addie says with a laugh. “I’ll be over before 8:00.”

“See you then, *oneh.*”

“*Oneh.*”

Addie hurries off to the stove to stir before dinner burns. The dogs are barking, announcing that Bags is home from work. The kids come out of nowhere to greet him, the dogs bark louder, the house is suddenly complete chaos. The phone rings again. “Someone get the phone,” she yells.

“Mom, it’s for you.”

“Tell them I’m busy.” She smiles at Bags as he puts down his briefcase and tries to pry children and dogs off his body. His mouth smiles, but his eyes have gray circles under them.

Joey says above the din, “It was Mary from work.”

“Okay. Did she say what she wanted?”

“I think a ride she said.”

Addie nods to her son and commands, “Set the table,” in the general direction of the children.

No one moves toward the table. All three children tell their father what happened in school: another bomb scare, everyone out in the parking lot, up the road, then the bus didn’t come to bring them back. Miss Rapportia wore high heels, got them all mud, you should have seen Mr. Craig’s hair when it got wet!

Addie doesn’t repeat her command. They’re too involved with their father. She takes a deep breath to try and rid herself of the tension. She can see how tight Bag’s eyebrows are, she can feel the tension radiate from him, and she has enough of her own to bounce back.

Addie turns quickly to scoop out the rice and steps on the little dog. Pup shrieks as she steps back quickly, and the youngest girl, Cappie, yells, “Mom, whatcha do?!”

In a snappy voice Addie says, “Get her outta here,” sighs, and then in a more even tone, “Someone set the table.”

Mindy goes to the drawer for napkins and silverware. She puts them on the table in a haphazard fashion, napkins and silverware in the general area of where people should sit.

“Glasses,” says Addie.

Mindy gets glasses of water, half filled, and puts them near the place settings but more toward the center of the table.

At last plates are ready and placed on the table. Bags emerges from the bedroom in his sweats but heads straight for the bathroom.

“Let’s eat,” yells Addie.

Joey gets there first, Mindy and Cappie have disappeared into their room.

Joey eats. Addie sits down with him and eats slowly to extend dinner and the relative calmness it brings. Addie and Joey talk about small stuff. Cappie appears and eats, but by then Joey is done and starts to play a video game.

“Joe, did you get Gram’s trash?” asks Addie.

Joey drops the game controller and runs next door.

Addie shakes her head and says to no one, “No coat. No gloves. No boots.” Mindy sits down and says, “I don’t like this. Are there mushrooms in this?”

“Of course there are. Mom always puts mushrooms in it,” says Cappie, scooping an extra large forkful into her mouth.

Addie lets the girls bicker. Mindy dramatically picks out her mushrooms and finally Bags appears.

They talk very little. Suddenly Addie can barely pick up her fork she is so tired. Bags finally speaks. His car is acting up, tomorrow he has to take it in the shop right away so he has to be to work an hour early. He has to train the new guy all week, this guy doesn't know anything, and he's a chain smoker. "Plus, there's a team meeting Thursday, too. Do you have class tomorrow night?" Addie nods gravely.

When it's only Bags and Addie left at the table, she says, "I have to take a letter for Mo tonight. He called."

Bags nods. "When?"

"I said by eight." They both glance at the clock.

Bags says, "I gotta lie down," and with that dinner is over.

Joey returns from Gram's eating a cookie. "Where's mine?" asks Addie. Joey holds up his prize, "Last one." But Joey rips it in half and tosses it on Addie's plate.

To Joey Addie says "Tell Mindy it's her turn to do dishes."

Addie wipes off the table. She shuffles to her desk to recharge her notebook computer. She gets out an extra disk and some paper and wraps up her cords for the printer and the computer.

Addie heads for the bathroom but someone is in there. She knocks, "Hurry up." Mindy is not at the kitchen sink but watching TV. "Mindy, dishes." The bathroom is finally free. Addie cleans up after dinner, and puts on a clean shirt and jeans. She'll have to wear the big, green, rubber boots because Mo's driveway is muddy and his dogs might be outside and jump on her.

Addie packs up her computer into her briefcase and says, "I'll be back." Mindy is still watching TV. "Don't wake up your father," she says as she goes out the door.

It's very dark, very cold, and still wet, much like a drizzle but it stings as it hits her face.

She drives down the road meeting only one other vehicle. At *dohdee* corner is *Woman-With-Two-Cars* driving her husband's truck. Addie waves in the dark, as if someone could see her hand. Addie smiles thinking how Barb has two cars of her own and yet has to borrow Mike's truck. "Kids probably took 'em," she whispers to herself. She slows down at the bridge because a couple rez dogs are strolling across. They're both black, some kind of lab mix.

She blows the horn and the dogs eye her but continue at the same pace with confidence, strutting across, their tails swaying from side to side.

Mo's driveway isn't so bad after all, not too muddy. One old shepherd mix comes out and barks at her, but in a lazy I'm-just-doing-my-job way that makes Addie smile. The black dog on the porch regards her smugly.

Addie picks her path through the mud and rocks and climbs the stairs carefully. She's fallen here before; the steps can get very slippery. The shepherd mix has stopped barking and the black dog on the porch is wagging his tail in greeting.

She knocks.

"*Dahju*," she hears and enters. It is stifling hot inside. Mo's lamps give off a warm, orange hue. He's in the living room. The television is on. He's alone.

Addie takes off her coat and throws it on a chair, slips out of her boots and says, "Cold out."

"Yes," Mo says clearly. "I can feel it through my bones so cold." Then he grins at her, "It *is* still winter."

"I knew that," she says with a smile.

While she unpacks her computer the cat rubs up against her leg. Addie steals quick peeks around his small cabin, what's clean, what's dirty, what needs to be done. One of his kids must have been around today. It's very clean. Addie has always marveled at how the elderly seem to be able to control clutter and paper. Some of their homes are so plain she thinks again.

"Tea?" he offers.

"Sure," she says, and helps herself.

Mo opens up a formal letter. "Veterans sent me this." He hands it to Addie in a shaky hand. "This came yesterday."

Addie reads it leaning over to get better light from the lamp. She sighs. She hates legalese. The letter is simply to tell Mo about the change in the location of his veteran's medical benefits and to notify him about confidentiality policies, but written in such a cumbersome manner, she has to read it twice. She explains it to Mo.

Mo nods. "My eyes aren't what they used to be," he says, rubbing his eyes, kind of embarrassed that he had to ask her to read it. Then he talks about the eagles that used to fly over his mother's house. "When we went for wood, we'd see them flying so high, just a speck in the sky." Addie listens to the whole story even though she's heard it 100 times.

Addie allows some silence.

“Did you have a letter you need to write?” she finally asks.

“Right here,” Mo pulls out another envelope. “I have to reply to this here letter.”

Addie reads it then opens up her computer and says, “Fire away.”

Mo dictates, slowly, precisely, his diction clear as a bell, but the voice worn and raspy. Addie types right along with him, the cat rubbing up against her. She begins to sweat from the 80 degrees Mo must be keeping his home. Addie notes that he has a blanket on his lap in this heat. He dictates with hardly a pause:

*Congratulations on your recent reunion. You must be proud.*

*I also commend you on your efforts to compile a book of stories from those of us who attended Northern Indian School. I do believe the story must be told; but I am not the one to tell it.*

*My dear sirs, it has taken me a lifetime to blot that part of my life from my memory and to relearn who I am, and how I have value. It has taken me a lifetime to stop hating those who put me there, those who didn't come get me, and myself for not seeing the truth.*

*I hug every one of my children and grandchildren every time I see them to make up for those years. We were just children when we left our homes. Just children. I cannot get those years back.*

*Write your book. Tell the stories. It is long overdue. I am 85. I hope you can find alumni who are still alive and willing to talk. I will not go there.*

*Dahnayto.*

Finished, Mo says, “Read it back.”

Addie reads. She hadn't known this about him, but should have.

She asks, “Okay?”

“If you say so. You're the expert.” He says.

Addie puts paper in her printer and prints off the letter.

Mo tells a story about where to find sassafras root. Addie is unsure of the location, and they discuss this at length. Addie's face is now bright red, and she has to wipe sweat from her upper lip several times. The hot tea made her more uncomfortable.

“Do you have an envelope?” she asks.

“Ah, no.”

“That’s okay, I have some. Here, sign it and I’ll drop off a copy next time.” She puts the clipboard on his lap and hands him the letter. He places old black eyeglasses on his large nose and reads the letter one more time. He grabs a pen from the table next to his chair and signs the letter. As he hands it back he says, motioning toward the refrigerator, “There’s stamps on the fridge.”

Addie knows this, but looks at the fridge and makes sure he sees her locating the stamps, and then says, “Okay.”

The entire process has taken an hour, and Addie desperately wants to go home. She controls herself as they talk about little things. She asks if any of his children had been by and as she suspected, a granddaughter came after school to clean and make dinner.

“Harvey will come after work tonight. He doesn’t want me home alone anymore.” Addie agrees. “I’m not trouble here. I need help with some things but I don’t need someone here all the time.” Addie agrees to this, too.

“Everybody’s worried I’m gonna fall down.”

To this Addie says, “I fell down your steps last spring!” They laugh.

“I thought it was thunder!”

“Naw. Just me bouncing down your steps!” They chuckle some more. “Well, I don’t wantcha falling down either,” Addie says with affection.

Addie starts to pack up, petting the cat, doing so precisely not to rush. Mo continues to talk in his slow, precise, raspy way.

“Well, I gotta go, Mo. Gotta work tomorrow. Kids got school, another day, another dollar.”

Mo says, “I used to work for \$1.25 a day.”

“So did my dad,” says Addie. “But I think at the end of the week you had more to spend back then.” Mo agrees, the cat now on his lap.

Addie gets her coat.

“There’s a package for you on the table.” Addie sees it wrapped in a plastic grocery bag. “You take that to your family.” She picks it up and feels its heft. She weighs it up and down in her hand and looks at Mo questioningly.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Ahh” says Addie, “*nya wenha.*” She gets her bag and goes to the door, “Good night, Moses. Call me if you need anything.”

Outside the air is crisp and clean. She breathes deeply after being trapped in the heat for so long. Her cheeks are red, and she shivers, the cold shocking the sweat on her neck and face.

Both of Mo's dogs look asleep. The shepherd mix simply thumps his tail recognizing that she's leaving, the other sighs heavily. Addie says, "Later, pups. You watch Mo."

In the car Addie opens the bag. Corn bread. Mo gave her corn bread. She wonders who made it. Who had the time to clean the corn, and in this cold, she wonders to herself. She no longer tries to refuse his payment. It's important to him. She faintly wonders if he has saved any corn bread for his own, but knows he can take care of himself.

The road is pitch black, the dark night eats up her headlights. The clouds are clearing, there are stars twinkling in the dark sky, and the sky no longer spits at her. The dogs are absent from the bridge, but she looks for them anyway, slowing down just in case. ☞