Much More Must Flow

by Charles Hansmann

Outside the window of the Clevelands' drawing room, the view was unmistakably that of a late afternoon in December. For though the trees had been bare for more than a month, a few of the doors that lined Banbury Road had wreaths, and the wreaths were still green.

'Isn't it a bit early?' Margaret said as she placed the tea and the Ovaltine in front of Francis. He had lately taken to drinking them both together, instead of saving the comfort of warm malted milk until bedtime.

After sixty years of marriage, a husband was entitled to his eccentricities, even if they seemed to be increasing with almost alarming frequency. We are old, Margaret thought, in our dotage, though of course she wouldn't say this to Francis. It seemed better somehow to keep these notions to herself; and better yet, she decided, to dismiss them altogether.

She said again, 'Isn't it a bit early, don't you think?'

Francis had been warming his hands over the steam that rose from the two cups. He looked at her with that peevish expression she had never quite managed to grow fond of. 'I don't know why you always say that,' he said. 'Can't I have my Ovaltine whenever I want?'

Margaret had meant the wreaths. Advent had hardly begun, and while these few green wreaths were certainly welcome, the great risk was that the yew and holly, so beautifully entwined, would already be turning brown by Boxing Day.

Francis sipped his tea and Ovaltine by turns. The steam had subsided but he could still feel the warmth rising into the air as he brought the liquid to his lips. He tried but failed to see his reflection in his cups. That phrase—'in his cups'—made him smile.

'Did you think of something funny?' Margaret asked.

'Didn't *you* think it funny?'

'But you didn't say anything.'

This was happening more and more—Francis merely thinking something and believing it carried the same weight as if he had said it. But dons have always had their privilege, and husbands too. Perhaps his years of expounding on Donne and Milton and Marvell had convinced Francis that the outer world conformed to his thoughts, whether he spoke them or not.

'Not so near the edge, dear,' Margaret said when Francis put his cup back on the table, 'we don't want to spill.'

Margaret was the same plump wife she had been in her fifties, and 'plump' made Francis think of plums. The thought of plums reminded him that he had come to resent the stewed prunes Margaret now insisted on serving with every meal. What had happened to the healthy digestion of the tall distinguished Oxford don in his handsome fifties, whose adoring female students had delighted in his lectures on the poets of the seventeenth century?

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow.

Francis could not remember the lines that came before those words nor the lines that came after them. He suspected that it might be more in keeping with his mood to forget the context altogether, for although the quote had a rousing quality, it seemed to come from Donne's Holy Sonnets and not his Erotic Elegies.

Francis repeated the quote, but again only mentally. As he listened to the words in his mind he could allow then whatever special meaning he desired, for Margaret would be none the wiser. This silence was a kind of safety. He would soon be eighty-six; he kept his thoughts to himself because he knew he could not trust them.

Francis could accept his age, and he could also accept that Margaret, who had always been two years older than him—some things never change—would soon be eighty-eight. What he couldn't accept was that Barbara Bird would soon be fifty-four, the very age that Margaret had been when twenty-year-old Barbara had entered his life.

So much water under the Magdalen Bridge! So much flow since Francis first heard Barbara's footsteps on the stairs to his study. But how could he have heard them? The stairs were at the other end of the hall and the steps were carpeted. Perhaps Barbara had mysteriously engaged those steps to signal her approach, some skill derived from the metaphysical poetry she was studying. Perhaps, presciently, Francis had listened with extra attention, seeing her name next on the list of students he was consulting that day. Despite the carpet he had heard her. Of course, the carpet was worn and really quite thin, so perhaps it was only that.

One little room an everywhere!

She had read that line with such monotone and utter lack of feeling that it had startled him into a thrilled recognition, his first inkling of the passion that must lie deep within her, which she had to struggle to suppress in his presence. She seemed to want to tend to him, which of course Margaret had always been quite good at. But Margaret was motherly, and he didn't want to be made to feel like a little boy. What he wanted was to be made to feel young, and that's what Barbara had done.

The problem this evening was that Francis had seen her again.

Barbara Bird had given up her academic ambitions in favor of writing novels. She had extraordinary output. Each year a new book was published on the same date in late summer, as if she were commemorating a significant anniversary of some sort. Francis had long ago erased that disastrous date from his mind, but

now it had reappeared, like a pencil impression in a mystery novel, visible again when the paper is held to the light.

'What a funny room.'

Those had been Barbara's last words to him at the Druid Hotel in Dover before she ran off while he was in the bath. Their entire flirtation now felt to him as if it were, like the line from Donne's poem,

One short sleep past…

And indeed the long years since then had been a kind of slumber. But the sight of her this afternoon awakened him. Three writers had been scheduled to discuss the 'revelatory moment' that set them on the path of their careers. The event was held in a kind of cafeteria, such an unlikely venue for a literary talk, and far too spacious for the number of people who attended.

One writer was a middle-aged poet, introduced as 'still famous for his beauty.' Another was a tall and rather ungainly female author whom Francis took to be some kind of nature writer, for she was introduced as having spent years in the wilderness.

The third speaker was Barbara Bird, and to Francis's great disappointment, she had aged. Her smoldering eyes were now more smoke-squinted than soulful, and the demure tones of her voice had a cigarette harshness, her words punctuated by the semi-colon of a hacking cough. It sounded like the bark of a fox, and indeed she was wearing an orangish fur cape that looked as if a pack of hounds might have consummated a long chase by sinking their teeth into it.

'Escape,' Barbara said at some point during her talk, 'I knew I had to get out of there, and when I left the hotel I felt free. I had always been at heart rather prudish, and it was then that I knew I would never marry. I would be like a nun, except that my devotion would be to literature. I have a man to thank for that, though it was not his intention to help me in quite this way.' A murmur of humorous appreciation—laughter, actually—passed through the audience with this comment, and Francis felt himself redden.

During the question-and-answer period, Francis fumbled about in his mind for something to ask Miss Bird—for that's how he would address her—something that would lay claim to his role in her development. But she seemed to be rather hard of hearing, for each person who asked her a question was told, rather rudely, to speak louder, and Francis was afraid that he might not be able to replicate the careful wry phrasing of his question if he had to say it twice.

As the discussion was coming to a close, there was no activity of food or drink advancing from the cafeteria's service station. The crowd had hesitated, but once it was obvious that there would be no refreshments, everyone made their way to the door. Francis, as was now his habit, had held back so as not to be trampled. But Barbara pushed forward rather aggressively to the head of the group, and Francis thought it might have been her elbow that brushed against his own as she walked past him. The cane he carried so that people would not crowd him did not seem to have any effect on her.

On the sidewalk he watched Barbara get into a taxi; a lonely figure, one might have thought, except that somehow she seemed quite content in the company of her solitude. Somehow, in the years since he had known her, she seemed to have become some *other* Barbara Bird, and he wasn't quite sure how that had happened.

When Francis came home, Margaret was mending his socks. She had picked them up again after serving him his tea and Ovaltine, and now that he had finished both drinks she set her mending down and handed him his cane. Apparently it was time for the evening walk.

'You'll want your scarf,' Margaret said as Francis stood by the door and let himself be swaddled in it. When he stepped through the door he held out his hand and hoped to feel rain. Margaret would not risk pneumonia; it would take only a few drops to send them back inside.

Francis reached out further, but his hand remained dry. Margaret, mistaking his gesture, took his extended hand in hers, and Francis saw her blush with delight. A gallantry overtook him, and he held up his elbow so that they might walk arm-in-arm.

In the dim light, as the evening closed in, the wreaths on the doors looked ghostly, as if they were just the aura of something that had happened long ago. The house in front of them once belonged to Aidan Linkhorn, Francis's postgraduate mentor. How often he had handled that tarnished brass knocker!

And how patiently Professor Linkhorn had awaited progress on Francis's stalled thesis! His distant ancestor, John Cleveland, was only a minor poet, even in his own century, the seventeenth, and Francis had found it hard to sustain any enthusiasm for his project. He felt his own pedigree to be somewhat diminished by the patrilineage. Professor Linkhorn had come up to Oxford in '77, *eighteen*-seventy-seven, and that was now a hundred years ago! He had known Tennyson, who had known Wordsworth, though of course *they* were both Cambridge men. But then again, so were Milton and that rascal Marlowe.

As Francis and Margaret walked on, they saw more wreaths than they had seen from the limited view of their window. But they saw only the shapes of the wreaths; the spritely green color had disappeared in the dark.

'They're early,' Margaret said, 'but I do delight in seeing them.'

'But do they make any difference?' Francis asked.

'About what?'

Francis seemed subdued and spoke quietly. 'With or without wreaths we are old.'

Margaret looked up at him. His face, always lean, was now gaunt. He seemed to be waiting for something. Margaret said, ‘Yes, but we are walking. I’d rather be old with wreaths than old without them.’

She thought of those exciting days when they were both undergraduates and spent happy hours reading Donne to each other. They had held a kind of disbelief back then that time would ever pass so monumentally as to make Donne’s lines on mortality one day apply to themselves. Now seeing some urgent need in Francis’s face, a quote came back to her:

Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery…

These words were not exactly what either of them would find consoling at the moment, and Margaret didn’t quote the line aloud. Instead she waited patiently for her mind to develop another thought. When it came she was certain it would be one she could share with Francis.

But it was Francis who spoke first.

‘*Much more must flow*,’ he quoted, with a mix of hope and doubt.

Though he walked somewhat haltingly, Francis kept their pace steady, and the pressure on their linked arms remained the same. There was no *discernable* squeeze at the elbow to reassure her, but Margaret felt encouraged.