



View from the Porch - [a Christmas Story]

At midnight, Anna stood at the ramparts in fervent prayer, still looking expectantly to the East. She was certain the signs would continue, as they had for weeks. Last night was so close...

All morning, a heavy cloud had sorrowed on the Temple Mount, shrouding Solomon's Porch in mist. Anna had waited all day for the weather to break before stepping across the Women's Court to the covered path high above the Kidron Valley. 500 of them. Stunted, slow steps, nearly the entire furlong across Herod's Court. She had served 70 years as the Asher Priestess, half of them in this very place. Even as her eyes began to fail, she had witnessed the daily progress as Herod's artisans raised the New Temple. Stone by stone, planted over Zerubbabel's rubble. The last distinct thing she remembered seeing with her earthly eyes was the flash of gilding being soldered in place atop the columns of Herod's vanity. Doubly gold in the last light of a Fall day. Anna's eyes had been dark for almost 20 years now, even as her ears followed the constant and furious progress on the Temple and the great pavements beyond. She heard the scraping of metal on stone as the altar was moved into the Courts. She heard the hiss of heavy velvet as the veil was hoisted to seal the Holy of Holies. Her mind painted the blue, purple and scarlet yarns on the back of her eyelids. She swayed her hand, dreaming of sewing in the golden thread that embossed the cherubim to the color-shifting fabric. She knew this Temple to be a sham, at least compared to the Temple of Solomon. Yet the design was grand. She had heard rumors that Herod's men had even been compelled to manufacture an imposter ark to complete the fiction.

And yet... There were 'stirrings.' By the time the Temple was dedicated, strange things had begun behind that veil. At least that was the word from the priests who had entered there on the Day of Atonement. Blood transformed to perfume. A mist of incense pressing the air, before the censers were even fired. A vibration emanating from the place where the true Bema Seat should stand. More than echoes, these new rumblings were bringing equal measures of dread and excitement to the priests called into service of God's new throne. Anna's ears saw it all as she cours ed through the Women's Court day after day, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and blessing any soul that should step into her path with a greeting or supplication.

From her prophetic revelations she also knew this Temple of Stone to be the Final - the Last. And not for long...

Phanuel looked over Anna's shoulder at the baby in her lap. The boy was only five days old, and even then had such an intense stare. The child was staring intently past his mother into his own face. What a startling child! What grace! Such unnerving clarity of focus. You could see constellations in those blazing eyes, in a deep sapphire blue that would shift to smoky onyx with the fading light. This was truly a young Josiah, thought his grandfather. "*What is it I see in him that so disturbs and inspires me?*"

"He is your spitting image, father," said Anna, not looking up from the son now reaching toward her... no, *beyond* her, to the man casting shadow on baby and mother.

"Oh, well, you must give *some* credit to his father, I suppose," Phanuel said as gently as he could. It was a very risky thing to invoke the young man who had left his daughter a widow so young.

Anna could not have flattered her father more. And she meant it. As much as she pined for and adored the weathered, sly ruggedness of her husband, she regarded Phanuel as the finest face she had ever known. Her father was a man brimming the things of God. His eyes were the gateway to a soul in full. He truly lived up to the meaning of his name - 'The Face of God.' "*If God should become a man,*" Anna thought, "*He could not possibly be more stern, gentle, humble and proud, serious and joyful than this man.*"

Phanuel watched a tear he had not shed land between the boy's uplifted fingers. The child puzzled at the sensation, staring at his own hand.

"I do not deserve to hold such beauty, Father."

"Oh, Anna. No one deserves it more." Phanuel choked out the last few words. He passed a kiss with his fingers to the boy's forehead, then kissed the crown of his daughter's head. The color and part of her hair looked just like her mother's. Phanuel did not know if he could stand such pride in his child and sorrow at their mutual loss. At least not in the same moment. He withdrew quietly as the child began to root around for his next meal.

Anna held firmly to the rail at the edge of Solomon's porch, remembering her father. She also remembered the horrors that brought her here almost 70 years earlier, and the first true vision from God that rode on those sorrows. The Promise that kept her alive and breathing when she felt she could breathe no more. "No sorrow can be greater than this," Anna told her father as they buried what was left of her husband. She was wrong.

Even at the end of a lifetime of pacing the pavement, no steps had been heavier than the ones she had plodded long ago up from the City of David. She remembered the shock of it all and how everything turned in a split second. Up those same steps she had carried her little Samuel, following

her father. It was the day of consecration and circumcision. This one would be dedicated to the Lord Himself, just as Hannah had dedicated her Samuel.

Then the confrontation with the centurion - the soldier who recognized her as the wife of that putrid zealot they'd caught sabotaging the garrison. He'd received exactly what he deserved. Now this little punk being carried up to the Temple like some 'treasure.' Just another zealot in the making.

The centurion pushed past the old man ahead of Anna and grabbed the sling holding the baby. Anna screamed. The old man turned in shock and seized the child back, pulling the soldier forward and almost off the steps to the rocks below.

Enough! The soldier grabbed for his cudgel to brain the fool and came up with his dagger instead. Without a second thought he drove the weapon through the bundle and into the old man's neck. Both fell away from the dagger in a heap on the stairs. In disgust the commander wiped his dagger on the man's cloak and stowed it, storming off, embarrassed for allowing the idiot to get him off-balance.

As it happened, Anna was frozen by the shock. The soldier's shadow flew by and she fell on her remaining loves. The sobs would not stop. All the way to Ramah, never had such a wailing been heard.

None of the other pilgrims could dislodge Anna from the shards of her life. Her soul hemorrhaged with her family. She clawed the air after the departing souls, and clutched the rags too heavy to lift. After an eternity, two young men attempted to remove the obstacle, lifting all three at once. Anna finally fell away, unable to resist. Other women cradled her and attempted to wipe away the blood. They lifted Anna to her feet and continued up through the Triple Gate to the Temple Mount. She slipped on the blood slick and twisted her ankle, wailing for everything but the pain in her foot.

Somehow, Anna found herself at the stoop of the ramshackle collection of buildings that lodged the priests and prophets. It was treacherous ground with construction and potholes all around. The women lowered their burden gently to the steps as others crowded around to investigate. A young man in plain tunic of camel's hair pushed through and knelt down next to Anna. Without embarrassment he took her hand in his and lifted her chin with the other. Their eyes met briefly, and in a flash Simeon knew what tragedy he was facing. In his vision he saw a face very much like another he'd seen in another vision. Two babies, one alive, the other... not.

Simeon wept with Anna. Anna never left the Temple.

For many weeks, Anna was literally blinded by her grief. Throughout, Simeon prayed for her that her vision would return. As the great stone of sorrow slowly began to roll away, Anna's vision slowly returned. And with it, something more. She would ask Simeon about the visitors to the Temple Mount with whom he spoke. She would speak frankly of secrets whispered to Simeon in confession.

"How would you know such things, Anna? I was told these secrets had never been confessed before!"

"I... I don't know. I just saw it," Anna would reply.

This went on for some months, Simeon trusting her inner sight as well as her gentleness of soul - Especially with the mothers. Simeon learned to turn over the babies for an additional blessing from the young woman being called 'the Prophetess of Asher.' The first child placed in Anna's hands brought a wave of prophetic utterances and electricity that frightened the other priests and amazed the family. Anna's renown began to grow.

Anna never forgot her vow to dedicate her son to the Lord. She never understood why it had to be a blood sacrifice. She faithfully mourned the Father who laid down his life for her son. She never abandoned her covenant to her husband, even when others hinted that his death at Roman hands was a stain on her family's honor.

Over the decades, Simeon and Anna became the heart and soul of the Temple that was missing. Even as Herod began his magnum opus, none could dislodge the Seers of the Mount. Only when the final pavers were laid before the dedication of the new Temple were the shelters of Simeon and Anna relocated to the new priestly Quarter. As they were removed, Simeon and Anna laid hands on each of the old Temple's stones. The inner eye revealed the ghosts of glories and abominations past. The new stones around them appeared in vision as a mere vapor. A narrative emerged of One coming Who would build a new Temple with living stones.

Anna couldn't remember the last time she had cried a tear. Sometime before the light went out and her eyes dried up for good, she was certain. At 84 her ears and other senses still tingled with heightened perception. She could smell tears and hear the stutter of a heart burdened under great grief. And, she learned, eyes of the Spirit Himself would paint the truest colors on her mind when He had something to reveal. Sometimes it was an unspoken sin of a proud ruler, other times a truly offensive offering about to be made without a repentant heart. The visions came with regularity and with such specificity that most others didn't realize Anna was blind. Only Simeon knew, and kept her secret.

Now Anna stood at the railing, her heart leaning eagerly to the East. For weeks the same dream had come. As solid as today, the face of her child. A boy – dedicated to the Lord, borne in the arms of another young girl and her husband. Drawing ever closer. The night before last, Anna had smelled the perfume of the young girl – a mixture of ashes, straw and tallow scrubbed over young, pink skin to remove the grime; a drop of some precious essence placed on the ribbon holding back her long hair; swaddling cloths dried in the sun and warmed by a fire of pine and cedar. Anna heard the soft footsteps of the young family making their way up from the City of David.

Anna willed her eyes to see them from a distance and imagined following them up the long flights of stairs as they approached. She could see the light preceding them, lighting their path to the Temple Mount...

"Anna!"

Simeon felt for her along the rail, following the sound of her tapping on the rail through the midnight darkness and the chill of fog. As he drew close he had heard her dancing in her slippers and suck in a breath of wonder.

"Anna! It is so cold – you must come inside!"

Anna ignored the plea.

"Do you not sense it, Simeon? The One draws close! So very, very close..."

"Yes, Anna. But He will come to us. The only thing you will draw tonight is your death, if you're not careful. Then I will have to bless Him alone. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not! You've been promised – I have not. I won't miss a minute of it, however many I have!"

"Others are out looking for stars tonight – you're out looking for babies. Neither are likely in this soup. Come, I'll fix you a nice broth and fetch you at first light. You can begin your search then."

Anna kept her peace and danced at the railing as Simeon's frustration grew. She was - IS - such a stubborn girl, he thought. He knew they were both going nowhere until she decided she was through waiting. That might require an all-night watch. Simeon wasn't sure how long his ankles would last. He also knew he wouldn't leave her side. They both stared with their hearts into the void.

In the small hours, something stirred. Simeon roused from a waking sleep, still on his feet, still holding the rail next to Anna. The air was moving. Down. A wave of mist retreated from the railing drawing the damp chill with it. Simeon looked out over a sea of silver blue filling the valley below. Above, a multitude of heavenly lights in crystal air. The luminosity was greater than a full moon, yet the moon was nowhere to be seen. In Simeon's mind, nothing had ever been so steady, clear and still. Perhaps it was a vision. He rubbed his eyes and looked round slowly, deliberately. His eyes had not betrayed him, and this was no internal vision. He could see the strange light dancing on Anna's face as her eyes danced behind closed eyelids.

"Anna," Simeon whispered. "Are you seeing this?"

She seemed to pay him no mind. Her blind eyes dashed back and forth under those lids. She was smiling. Simeon envied her her ecstasies, but was just as enthralled with the scene in front of him. He looked up and right into the sky, following Anna's face. The trail of one great star shown across the constellation.

"I see them, Simeon."

"The child and his mother?"

"No – the Heralds. They come!"

Anna's smile widened. Then a sudden gasp, and Simeon wondered if she might fall. He reached to catch his charge, steadying them both against the stone of the rail, Anna's arms lifted straight to the sky.

Anna was taken up. An angel with three stars for a belt crossed her at great velocity. She was swept into his wake, and drawn up to the strong physique made of light itself. His eyes became hers as they beamed into the air above Bethlehem. Together they alighted on the great rock where David once sat. Anna could hear the music of his voice and lyre mixing with the Angel's voice as it approached David's place, and roaring as it landed. Herds and herdsmen surrounded them in all directions. The

voice of the angel came forth with such force that Anna could not make out the words for how close she stood, within the train of his light. The shepherds were prostrate, fingertips to the ground pointing their direction.

Suddenly, a great host was surrounding them all, echoing a phrase of JOY and terrible weight. The great messenger lifted his eyes to the heavens and leapt, drawing Anna along. As he rose, he arced to the right inclining his face to the scene a ways off at the edge of the city. With the angel's clear eye, Anna saw the young girl lifting the child for the first time, a weathered man gathering up a sheet to catch the boy. The eyes of the baby looked straight at Anna. She could feel the wonder and mystery stirring in the center of the great angel as he rushed back to the stars. They rose over the Temple and Anna let out a forever-long sigh. She was standing at the rail, Simeon's hand at her back with the familiarity of a brother... or husband.

"I must see Him, Simeon!" Anna bounded away, toward the Triple Gate and the long courses of stairs down to the City to David. Joy completely engulfed her, drowning out the vow to never again proceed from the House of God. Simeon, shocked, turned in time to see Anna's star shadow follow her glowing veil across the courtyard. He pursued her. It was the best he could do. Chasing was out of the question, his heart pounding as he crossed the threshold through the wall and onto the flagstones at the head of the stairs. He saw Anna moving swiftly down the steps. Too swiftly.

Anna didn't perceive the boundary of her vow, and she rolled her ankle, again, on the altar of her son's sacrifice. She fell with a bone-rattling roll and skidded to a stop after two more steps. She didn't move.

"NO!" cried Simeon as he moved his lame leg as fast as it would drop to the next step. He was all wheezes and sobs by the time he reached Anna's side, prayers of desperation dripping from his lips. Anna's head and right arm hung over the far side of the steps, hidden in shadow. Simeon couldn't calm his pulse enough to find hers.

"Must I do this alone, Abba? Will there be no one with me to welcome the Prince to His Temple? Must she go now?? All she longed for was You and the child." Simeon cried into the back of Anna's shoulder with great sobs. He shed the tears of the humble and the holy. As one who knows how God cries.

A moan vibrated below the weight of Simeon's robes. He threw himself back to listen. He felt the slow intake of Anna's breath. He realized his bad leg was laying heavily upon her side. He struggled to retreat and lift Anna up at the same time.

"Let me go, Simeon."

Simeon fell back with an exclamation of great relief.

"How badly are you hurt?"

"I can't move my ankle."

"Oh, my dear one. I will carry you!" Simon spoke with compassion and joy.

"You old fool, we'll both be dust by the time you accomplish that. Just help me up and I'll help you."

"Anna, why? Why would you run off so rashly?" It was a scolding born of deep love.

"I saw him, Simeon! I could not wait. I understand my mistake. Yes, yes, I know. He will come to us. If we make it that far..." Anna smiled briefly and winced as she tried to move her leg.

It was first light of day before the two reached the top of the stairs. They rested, panting in the

archway as the sun rose to the left of Bethlehem in a perfectly blue morning sky. Somehow, both Simeon and Anna saw it, and much, much more. They helped each other to their place of waiting. Eight more days, as they understood clearly from the vision.

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