

*Hi friends. Every December my good pals at the Vermont Stage Company perform “Winter Tales” – a unique theater event with songs and tales for the season. The theme is always about warmth, hope and the return of the light. Somehow I developed the habit of writing stories for their show, which they invariably have a professional actor read aloud far better than I ever could.*

*This year I decided the time had come to share those seasonal stories with a larger audience, so you’ll find one below. Feel free to read it, share it, download it, use it for lighting a fire under your yule log.*

*The story does come with a brief commercial message: On May 11, St. Martin’s Press will be publishing my new book, Authentic Patriotism. This book tells the stories of inspirational people doing amazing things to restore this country and its founding principles. Please keep an eye out for it, less for my sake than for the possibility of renewing America and enriching your life.*

*Meanwhile, since I have a few of these holiday stories on hand, I imagine this could be the start of a new December tradition. I hope you enjoy this one, and hope to see you back again next year.*

*Peace.*

*Stephen*

## ALL TUCKED IN

Sometimes I think there ought to be a museum for certain things that have gone out of our lives and will not be coming back. There wouldn’t be any great things in my museum, no mastodon bones, no landscape paintings. Instead I imagine a collection of artifacts of the personal – the yelp of your

boyhood beagle, the image of your big brother pulling and pulling the cord of a lawnmower that refuses to start, the chair you were sitting in when they told you your grandmother had died.

A few things you think are vanished forever actually sometimes echo. I poked my head into a barn on a roasting hot day last summer, and it smelled like my father's 1962 Chrysler Imperial. Two winters ago I went to the symphony and someone in the row ahead was wearing my mother's perfume. Both my parents have been gone for decades, but there I was in my own little museum of old feelings.

The best museums, though, are stories. This story, for example, is about an emotion that only a few people ever knew, and now no one experiences anymore.

I discovered this feeling while doing cop checks. That's newsroom jargon for the last thing you do each night. You call every police department in the state and ask if they have any news. That's 21 state police barracks and 19 city or town police departments, a 40 item speed-dial on the city desk phone. Occasionally they'll tell you about a DWI, an important person who's died or a barn that's on fire, but since you already have stories written about all the day's real news, most nights there's nothing to report. The dispatchers are ready, they receive these calls night after night, so the whole

state takes five minutes. Then you tell the copy desk that cop checks are clear, and while they fidget with last-minute page changes there is an emotion you experience, very distinct, extremely pleasant.

If I had to name it, I would call this feeling “all tucked in.” Now that may seem presumptuous, since my first cop checks were at a tiny, family-owned paper in central Iowa, and I was a rookie typing obits. How could I presume to feel that I was capable of tucking anyone in? I was no more the paternalistic protector of that town than I was a reporter superhero in mild-mannered disguise. Journalistically, I was about as naïve as a sugar cookie. Yet the feeling happened anyway, each time after cop checks. No, there’s no crime, the copy desk has been informed, and in a moment I will feel under my chair the familiar thrum of the presses starting. My community is all tucked in.

This emotion now lives only in the past. Today’s dispatchers are on an email distribution list. Receiving a two word note – “any news?” they reply with identical brevity: “all quiet.” I imagine expressing this procedural change with a mathematical equation, in which the efficiency gained is precisely equal to the human connection lost.

Besides, despite a run of several centuries, the idea of a newspaper may now be over. The Internet stole nearly all the advertising revenue.

Google and YouTube and Facebook were all invented by people not preoccupied with putting out a daily local report. Papers dwindle while newsrooms shrink. Pretty soon no one is sitting through that interminable city council meeting or board of education retreat, preparing to distill it into 500 words in 30 minutes' time. Thus, thread by thread, the fabric of a place unravels. If there's a moment of "all tucked in" for journalists today, I cannot imagine how it would happen.

But I remember the last time I felt it. I was working at a mid-sized paper then, a scrappy one, sharing the city editor desk with two other men. This was before I had kids, which the others had by the minivan-load, so I volunteered to work Christmas day. The paper readers receive on Dec. 26 is preplanned, of course, so the staff is light: one reporter to file a story about people who have to work on the holiday, three people on the copy desk to scan the wires and design pages, a photographer on call, an editorial assistant for phone inquiries, and me. The reporter finished her story by noon, but the press didn't start till 12:10 a.m. There was half a day to kill.

At about two we had a surprise visit from the food writer, Alice. Sometimes I wished Alice had been my mother. Every Monday through Thursday she baked something for the newsroom – cakes, cookies, pies, sticky buns – and on Friday chocolate brownies. Often after trying a recipe

for an upcoming story, she would bring the results to my desk. For my bachelor self, these bestowals of beef and bacon stew or vidalia onion soup or latkes with chives were the best I'd eat all week. My job was to return the containers clean and without fanfare, but sometimes I couldn't help myself and I just gushed.

This Christmas day Alice had outdone herself. She'd felt badly for us all having to work, she declared as she wheeled a cooler up to the newsroom meeting table. Opening the cooler as Santa would his sack, she produced a turkey, gravy, stuffing, mashed potatoes, green beans almondine, stewed tomatoes, sparkling cider and a pumpkin pie.

Well, it wasn't like we'd been doing any work anyway. We had a grand time, telling holiday horror stories about crazy aunts, uncles who drank too much, silly gifts and sillier traditions. Often in the news business you experience a sense of otherness, of being an observer of life as opposed to a participant in it, but for a working Christmas, Alice's dinner made it feel like the real thing.

She didn't stay, though, she had her own family to feed. Alice returned at 4, just when we needed to get busy with the wire copy. With our thanks like a chorus, she packed up her cooler and wheeled it out with a parting "Ho ho ho."

By 5:30 the work was finished, we were all pleasantly stuffed, and there was nothing left but to commit a newsroom sacrilege. Ever since the first Gulf War, which CNN covered so well the president said that was where he received his notions of how things were going, every newsroom in America had a big TV tuned to that channel at all times. But on that night, satisfied and full, we committed a high crime, and changed the channel. Then, with feet on the desks and hands folded on our bellies, we watched Casablanca as contentedly as if it were visions of sugarplums.

An hour into the movie, who should wheel into the newsroom at his accustomed clip but the managing editor, Claude. A black-bearded genius who managed his stress by swimming three or four miles every day, little good that it did him, Claude reminded many people of an overwound clock. We leapt into appropriate positions at our desks, restored CNN before he noticed, and only then did we realize he had barely registered our existence. Claude was a whirlwind, doing something over by the meeting table.

His wife Penny waddled in behind him. To my bachelor self, she seemed 100 months pregnant. She balanced a large basket on her belly as though she had a built-in table. "Right here, honey," Claude called, and we saw that he was unwrapping aluminum foil over a large brown object.

Yes, it was another turkey. And it was bigger than the first one. From Penny's basket, Claude produced baked yams with marshmallows melted on top, stuffing with sausage, biscuits, gravy, cranberry sauce, artichoke hearts, creamed onions, bottles of soda and two – two, I tell you – pumpkin pies.

There are times when a workplace can only function effectively if the people therein pledge themselves to frank and open communication. This was not one of those times. No one said a word. No one even looked at anyone else.

“We just felt that since this was our last Christmas without a child,” Penny was explaining, “well, you people are like our family sometimes, so we thought ...”

She was wringing her hands. As the editor in charge, I knew my duty. I cleared my throat and said, “You are too generous, and we are so touched that you thought of us.” And then I revealed the depth of my depravity in the face of generosity – as well as my desire not to think of myself ever as ungrateful. “I, for one,” I said, “am starving.”

“Oh I'm so happy,” Penny said. And then she eased herself into a chair and propped up her feet while Claude passed around plates. Then he sat too. At once I understood the unintended calling of my bluff and the seriousness of our plight. Unlike Alice, they were going to stay.

Now, some people like a bull fight, they like to see the gore and the pain and the tragedy. Others prefer not to look, they cover their eyes in scary movies, they look away from car accidents. Count me in this second category. Despite my news profession, or maybe as a result of what it often compels me to examine, I have no appetite for the ghoulish.

In that spirit, I will spare you the details of that meal. Suffice it to say that it was ugly, that Penny insisted I take seconds, that Claude was incapable of slicing a small piece of pie, and that cranberry sauce, after a certain point, is much more filling than you might think.

Let us leap mercifully forward, then, to evening. Claude and Penny gathered their basket and waddled off into the long dark of deep December. Calling thanks after them on everyone's behalf, I felt surrounded by corpses. We labored through remaining tasks: the weather page, sports results and a short piece on an ATV accident up north. I sent the reporter home, and the editorial assistant. By 10, everything was finished. The copy chief lay on a couch moaning, but his team lowered their heads to their desks, like so many kindergarteners at nap time. Eleven o'clock came, then midnight, and at 12:10 precisely the building shuddered and hummed.

By then I was the only one awake. I hoisted my carcass out of the chair and took the stairway to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, to the door leading outside.

Tucking an advertising supplement in the hinges so I wouldn't get locked out, I wandered onto the flat roof and looked at the city.

Smoke rose from chimneys in the homes up the hill. The lightest of flurries was falling. The lake lay black and calm to my right, its fringes laced with ice. I heard a car's wheels spinning, then the driver rocked it, and finally the engine eased and I knew the tires had taken hold and pulled free.

I wasn't lonely up there. I saw the lights on in houses near and far, like friends scattered around a softball diamond. I took a deep breath, and the sharp air cleared my head. There are so many kinds of gifts that people can give. And really, no one leaves this life having received too much kindness. How many times can we honestly say we were filled with it to our very brim?

Below me the car I'd heard drove past, its tail-lights brightening as it slowed to turn left, up the hill. In a moment I would go back downstairs to send the remaining staff home, and head off myself a little later. On the Christmases in future years I would have children too, my magnificent sons, and would want to spend every minute of the day with them. Eventually I would even leave the news business, giving up the bustle and chaos and front row seat to history, in exchange for something I hoped would be slower but deeper. Yet for now on that Christmas night, I simply watched

the flakes fall, each of them as quiet as a prayer. One touched my cheek,  
brilliantly cold. The town was silent. All tucked in.