

“No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.”  
Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

## **The Snowflake Avalanche**

a modern fable

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Dedication: for Mark, the accordion bandit

Characters:

Russell: An attorney.

Tim: Russell's son, 10.

Polly: A translator. Russell's wife, Tim's mother.

Janet: A former activist.

Thomas: A fisherman. Janet's husband.

Sandy: A spirit who dances. Played by a girl or young woman. It could be a puppet.

Russell, Tim, and Polly are African Americans; Thomas and Janet are Native American Indians.

Places: A house, a prison, a municipal building, a coastline.

Note: The action of the play is continuous between scenes; no blackouts except at the end of the acts.  
Happily, none of these characters smoke or end statements with up inflections.

(Act I, scene 1. A living room in a house on a lot in a town in a country on a continent in the world. Russell is alone, then Tim enters with a painting. He places the painting on an easel in front of Russell.)

TIM: There. I finished it. It took a long time. Really long. I started it yesterday.

RUSSELL: (Trying to be supportive) My, yesterday.

TIM: Yeah. And I worked on it all day after school. And then today, I came home and worked on it all day until now.

RUSSELL: A two-day project.

TIM: Yeah, a long time, because, you know, you said maybe I didn't spend enough time on them. I spent a lotta time on this.

RUSSELL: Well, time's not the only part.

TIM: Dad. Dad. I know time's not the only part, but you said I didn't spend enough time on them. You said I should take more time. I spent a lot of time on this.

(Brief pause.)

RUSSELL: I don't know what you want me to say, Tim.

TIM: Well, Dad, you should say something. It took two days.

RUSSELL: ...I'm glad you're devoting more time to your paintings.

(Tim takes the painting from the easel. Polly enters.)

POLLY: I'm taking the car...look at all that blue! Tim, that's great.

TIM: (Tearing painting) Two days! (Exits)

POLLY: Don't tear it...Timmy— What? What did I do?

RUSSELL: You shouldn't say things you don't mean.

POLLY: I meant it.

RUSSELL: Polly, you tell him it's great and the rest of the world ignores it. What's he supposed to think then?

POLLY: What did you say to him?

RUSSELL: Nothing bad. (Playfully) Nothing to destroy the budding artist lurking within his frail bones.

POLLY: ...He's just a little boy.

RUSSELL: So we should lie to him because he's a little boy?

POLLY: It wasn't a lie.

RUSSELL: There are people standing in line out there, all waiting to lie to him. We shouldn't lie to him.

POLLY: Russell. It wasn't a lie.

RUSSELL: Okay, Polly. It was a great picture. Now he'll paint a better one. (Brief pause) Where are you going?

POLLY: To the library. Did you need the car?

RUSSELL: (For the 10th time) We're the only family on Long Island with one car.

POLLY: The old man across the street has one car.

RUSSELL: Yeah, but he doesn't drive.

POLLY: We don't need two cars.

RUSSELL: If you want the car and I want the car we need two cars.

POLLY: That doesn't happen.

RUSSELL: It's happening now.

POLLY: No it isn't, I can go to the library tomorrow. ...Russell, take the car. Take it.

RUSSELL: ...I was going to visit Thomas.

POLLY: Oh. Janet already left.

RUSSELL: Left where? Where did she go?

POLLY: To visit Thomas. She took the baby.

RUSSELL: Why didn't she wait for me?

POLLY: She didn't know you were going.

RUSSELL: Why didn't she ask me? Oh, great. Now I've got to worry about her, too. What did she say? What did she say exactly.

POLLY: Exactly I don't remember. She took extra diapers, she thought she'd be gone all day.

RUSSELL: What is she going to do, hitchhike? Oh, great, great!

POLLY: Well, I guess we could issue an all-points bulletin.

RUSSELL: I'm just worried, Polly.

POLLY: Russell, she went with you yesterday. She can figure it out.

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Scene 2. A jail. Russell and Thomas. A newspaper.

THOMAS: How did my wife get to New York?

RUSSELL: She flew.

THOMAS: Janet flying. That's funny.

RUSSELL: Doesn't she like flying?

THOMAS: I was gonna ask, I forgot; talking on that telephone with the window between us made me stupid. ...Did it cost a lot, the airplane?

RUSSELL: Yeah.

THOMAS: Who paid?

RUSSELL: There's a fund, a defense fund. Money's coming in from all over the world. People want you to get off.

THOMAS: I wouldn't let me off.

RUSSELL: It doesn't help if you talk like that. Who brought you the paper?

THOMAS: It's from a program; everybody gets a newspaper. So we stay current.

RUSSELL: I haven't seen a paper in weeks.

THOMAS: Then you aren't as current as me. ...I want to see my daughter.

RUSSELL: You saw her yesterday.

THOMAS: From behind a window.

RUSSELL: It's not possible.

THOMAS: They let me see you.

RUSSELL: I convinced them I could handle you.

THOMAS: They think I'm going to hurt my baby?

RUSSELL: They don't want to risk it.

THOMAS: Seeing Janet and the baby, but not touching them, it's not real. In my cell, I can touch all the walls at once. It's not human.

RUSSELL: What did you expect?

THOMAS: I didn't expect.

RUSSELL: Thomas. I need you to tell me what happened.

THOMAS: I told you.

RUSSELL: I need you to tell me again.

THOMAS: Let me hold my daughter, and I'll tell you again.

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(Scene 3. Another part of Jail. Russell, Janet, holding baby.

JANET: (Explains) I walked from your house to the train, took a train to Pennsylvania Station, got a subway, got a bus, crossed a bridge, here I am.

RUSSELL: Maybe I should try that.

JANET: It cost seventeen dollars, and you have to walk a lot, but, I think it's faster than the car.

RUSSELL: Are you going in?

JANET: Thomas got too sad yesterday.

RUSSELL: You're not going to visit him?

JANET: No, it makes him sad.

RUSSELL: You took a train and a subway and a bus and you're not going in?

JANET: Yeah, I'm not.

RUSSELL: ...Can I take you home?

JANET: We want to be near for a while.

RUSSELL: Well, I'll wait until you're done...being near, and then I'll take you back.

JANET: I got a round trip.

RUSSELL: You can use the ticket some other time. (Brief pause) Did you like flying?

JANET: No. It's very terrible. Thomas wouldn't like it.

RUSSELL: Why?

JANET: The first thing they say is what to do if the plane crashes. That's a terrible thing to say to a person right off. My father wouldn't fly. He could walk steel beams 50 stories up, but he wouldn't get in an airplane. He told me an old Indian proverb: Birds fly, human beings drive cars. I must take after my Indian side—I found it very terrible. Over the Rockies the plane bounced. The passengers became very quiet. The pilot said we were experiencing turbulence. We were experiencing terror.

RUSSELL: It sounds very terrible.

JANET: Yes, it was very terrible. At one point the plane dropped, it just dropped. The pilot came on the loud speaker and said he was buying us a round of drinks. There was a lot of laughing then.

RUSSELL: At least you got a drink.

JANET: I don't drink, Russell, what are you thinking of?

RUSSELL: Um, I'm sorry, uh...

JANET: Oh! Oh, no, sorry, I'm sorry. You don't know— drinking, it's not something that we do casually. We either "drink" or we "don't drink." And if we "don't drink" we tend to be kind of fussy about it. Of course, if we do drink we tend to be kind of fussy about that, too. Me and Thomas, we don't.

RUSSELL: Well, I won't forget.

JANET: (Laughs) Yeah, I guess you won't.

RUSSELL: You should tell Thomas about the flying.

JANET: I saw the spill. You can still see it from high up. Black beaches.

RUSSELL: ...How's the baby?

JANET: She's quiet. She doesn't cry, but she also doesn't laugh. Do you want to hold her?

RUSSELL: I...

JANET: Take her; she's sick of just me.

(Janet puts the baby into Russell's arms. Russell awkwardly holds her.)

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(Scene 4. The house. Tim talks to Sandy.)

TIM: They always come into my room, check up on me, make sure I'm in bed.

SANDY: They do this every night?

TIM: Every single night.

SANDY: Every night at the same time?

TIM: Yeah, before they go to sleep. They check on me.

SANDY: Wait until after they check on you.

TIM: After they check on me?

SANDY: Wait in bed, keep your eyes shut. When you hear the door close, open your eyes again. They'll think you're asleep, plus you'll be able to see in the dark.

TIM: I can see in the blackest dark.

SANDY: Me too.

TIM: The floor creaks here, loud.

SANDY: Step over it; walk silently; climb. Climb from ground to tree limb, to tree top, swing to vent cover! Yank vent cover from wall! Quietly. Slip into the vents.

TIM: The vents are really dirty.

SANDY: Get a towel so you don't spot up the walls.

TIM: It feels good in the vents.

SANDY: The heartbeat of the house is in the vents.

TIM: And it's really dark. It feels dark. I wish I could paint in the dark.

SANDY: Yeah, paint the special night messages!

TIM: But there's no way.

SANDY: Hold onto the messages until it's light.

TIM: They're too big.

SANDY: Keep them in your mind, you can do it.

POLLY: (Off) Tim?

(Sandy disappears. Polly enters.)

POLLY: Who you talking to?

TIM: Just, you know, talking.

POLLY: ...Were you painting?

TIM: No. I was talking.

POLLY: Okay. Don't forget to wash before dinner.

TIM: I won't.

(Polly exits.)

TIM: (Quietly, at the vent) Sandy? Sandy? Aw.

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(Scene 5. The house. Polly, Janet, baby in a cradle, cleaning products, bucket, mop.)

POLLY: (for the 10th time) Janet, you don't have to do this.

JANET: No, it's a good idea. It'll give me something to do. I won't feel like a...what's the word for somebody who just takes?

POLLY: You don't do that—

JANET: What's the word, anyway?

POLLY: I don't know, uh, suppliant?

JANET: I don't think that's the one I'm thinking of.

POLLY: You're not taking anything away from anybody.

JANET: You give me a room, you give me your cradle, you ride me around in the car.

POLLY: It's an extra room, nobody is using the cradle, and I take you in the car when I'm going anyway.

JANET: What you do for me isn't small, it's big. There's money, you know. The defense fund. We could stay in a motel on Eleventh Avenue.

POLLY: That doesn't mean you have to clean up after us.

JANET: I want to do this. I have nothing to do. My mind drifts when I read, I don't like TV, you're at the UN, Russell's at the court, Tim's in school, there's nobody to talk to, any kind of job somebody gives me, they're not going to let me keep the baby; this way I'll get to know you better through your mess.

POLLY: Okay, okay. Do you want this? (A cleaning product.)

JANET: Nah, I just use hot water, so when I'm done, I can dump it down the drain.

POLLY: What else would you do with it?

(Polly exits with bucket and mop. Janet looks toward the sink.)

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(Scene 6. The house, Tim, baby, cradle, Sandy.)

TIM: Look, Sandy. She's really little. Look at her hands. They're really little.

SANDY: Everybody starts out like that.

TIM: Not Dad.

SANDY: Yes, Dad, too.

TIM: That hand is pretty small.

SANDY: See if she'll take your finger.

TIM: Look! She's holding my finger.

SANDY: She's smiling. She likes you.

TIM: I think she likes me, too.

SANDY: Say something to her.

TIM: I don't know what to say.

SANDY: It won't matter; she can't understand you.

TIM: Okay. (Thinks it up) Don't worry about how little you are; it's normal. She's smiling bigger!

SANDY: Your information was a big relief.

TIM: Look at her kick.

SANDY: Her feet are hot.

TIM: What should I do?

SANDY: Take her socks off.

(Tim takes socks off baby.)

TIM: Yeah! Now she's really smiling. I hope her face doesn't crack. I'm going to have a baby like this one, teach her stuff.

SANDY: Yes. Show her things.

TIM: Take her climbing in the vents. Adventures. I'll teach her how to swim.

SANDY: You don't know how to swim.

TIM: I'll learn and then I'll teach her.

JANET: (Off) Tim?

(Sandy disappears. Janet knocks and enters.)

JANET: (Looks around, she heard talking) Hello. How's the baby?

TIM: Her socks came off.

JANET: That happens. She's sleeping?

TIM: No, she's just quiet.

JANET: I'm glad you like to watch her.

TIM: It's easy.

JANET: She's a good baby. She misses her father.

TIM: How come he's in jail?

JANET: Didn't your parents tell you?

TIM: No, but they probably just forgot.

JANET: He killed someone. Someone bad.

TIM: Oh man, oh man. They don't want me to know that.

JANET: Are you sorry I told you?

TIM: Yeah, I am. I don't want to know that.

JANET: Don't worry. Your father is helping.

TIM: Yeah, but killing somebody, I don't know if Dad can do anything about that.

JANET: He'll try. He'll try his best. I'm sure of it.

TIM: Oh yeah, he'll do his best, but killing somebody; that's really big.

JANET: ...What were you teaching my daughter?

TIM: What would I teach her? I wasn't teaching.

JANET: This is a person with no knowledge. Anything would be helpful.

TIM: ...Really?

JANET: Sure. Teach her she doesn't have to be scared when the sun goes down because it comes back again tomorrow.

TIM: ...I can't teach her that.

JANET: Why not?

TIM: Because I don't know it.

JANET: Sure you do, I just told you. (Picks up baby) Can you show me the drain?

TIM: What drain?

JANET: Where the water goes out. I want to see where the water goes.

TIM: ...Outside?

JANET: Yes.

TIM: We can try.

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(Scene 7. The Jail. Janet, Russell, Thomas, baby. Some discarded newspapers. Thomas tries to explain things to Russell. This is an explanation, not a memory.)

THOMAS: I was fishing when the oil came. I knew something was wrong; the gulls, they were making terrible sounds, worse than usual. Suddenly, the boat was surrounded by black water. I leaned over the side and stuck a board in it, pulled it up. We knew what it was; the details we found out later. Janet was waiting at the dock; everybody was there. We didn't fish again. Everybody sat around and read the paper and drank beers— me too. We read their promises. "We will clean the mess. We will restore the coast." I got a job to clean the beach, but I didn't get a machine — a machine to suck oil. They gave me towels. Take these towels and wipe the rocks, they said. I thought they were special towels. I wiped a rock with a towel. The towel filled with oil and dirt and sand. I used another one. My towels didn't work. I took towels from one of the other guys; they didn't work either. It took me two hours and fifty towels to wipe a rock, and still, there was oil in the cracks. The rock wasn't clean. And there were thousands of rocks on the beach. I heard peeping; I looked around and saw a big gull flopping in the sand. I don't

like gulls; they eat garbage and steal fish. Still, they're a part of the day. I went to it; it waddled in a circle, its wings covered with thick oil, peeping this little peep. I expected it to go away, they don't let you near. It didn't go away; it looked at me. I knelt down and peeped his peep at him. He came to me! I couldn't believe it. He came to me. "I can't help you, friend. I can't even clean a rock." ...I couldn't even clean a rock.

RUSSELL: ...How did you get to New York?

THOMAS: I hitchhiked and walked.

RUSSELL: And you had your gun?

THOMAS: Yeah.

RUSSELL: (To Janet) Did you know?

JANET: I suspected.

RUSSELL: What do you mean?

JANET: When the contract came we had a meeting.

RUSSELL: What contract?

JANET: Every town got a contract.

RUSSELL: From the oil company?

JANET: (nods) The contract said we'd get money for lost fishing for three years.

RUSSELL: That doesn't sound so bad.

JANET: We would become subcontractors— so we couldn't say anything against the company. We couldn't talk to the government scientists, even to tell where the oil was beached.

THOMAS: They kept saying "the beaches are clean, the beaches are clean."

JANET: If we signed, there would be nobody to tell the truth.

RUSSELL: Could I see the contract?

JANET: (Proudly) We burned it.

THOMAS: (Sarcastic) That's right, Russell. We mustered our courage and set fire to the contract.

JANET: It showed we were united, Thomas.

THOMAS: United to do what? To burn a piece of paper? To haul dead seals to the dump?

JANET: To stand together.

THOMAS: To stand together while we died? While we were poisoned?

JANET: Some towns weren't united. At least we were.

THOMAS: I didn't think it was enough, Russell. Somehow, burning their contract was not enough for me. I wanted, oh, I don't know, a less symbolic act.

RUSSELL: ... Did you discuss it? Your act, at the meeting?

THOMAS: It wasn't even on TV anymore. Oil was still everywhere, and it wasn't on TV.

JANET: Thomas said his plan at the meeting. It was voted down.

RUSSELL: But nobody tried to stop you.

JANET: It was voted down.

THOMAS: It was impossible somebody would disobey.

RUSSELL: What was it supposed to accomplish?

THOMAS: It would be so violent that people would have to learn the reason for it. They would have to see where I come from—the TV people. They would have to show the beaches. At first, I thought I would kill myself like the monks in Viet Nam. But nobody cared about them. They wouldn't care about me, either.

RUSSELL: You could have killed the captain of the tanker. Why did you walk all the way across the country and kill the chairman of the board of directors?

THOMAS: (Simply) He told the most lies.

RUSSELL: ...How did you know he'd be in New York?

THOMAS: He's there sometimes. It just worked out.

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