

The PIPER

**YOU COULD SAY IT ALL STARTED
WITH AN OLD SET OF PIPES LEFT IN THE HOUSE
BY HIS LATE UNCLE DENNIS.**

**MOSTLY THEY SAT GATHERING DUST
IN A CARDBOARD BOX IN A CORNER OF THE BASEMENT
BUT ONCE IN A WHILE HE WOULD TAKE THEM OUT
AND TRY TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO HOLD THEM
WHILE WONDERING AT THE STRANGE LOOK AND SMELL
OF THE ANCIENT INSTRUMENT
AWKWARD AND MYSTERIOUS AT THE SAME TIME.**

**FINALLY HE SAID "WHAT THE HELL"
(THE BROOKLYN VERSION OF "THE UNEXAMINED LIFE
IS NOT WORTH LIVING")
AND DECIDED TO TAKE A FEW LESSONS
FROM A YOUNG COP NAMED TOMMY, NEW TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD
WHO BELONGED TO THE POLICE EMERALD SOCIETY BAND.**

**THE FIRST LESSONS WERE A REALITY CHECK:
IT WOULDN'T BE (HE HOPED) AS HARD AS IT LOOKED
TO GET AT LEAST SOME NOISES OUT OF THE PIPES.
MUSIC, RECOGNIZABLE BY OTHERS AS SUCH,
WOULD BE ANOTHER MATTER.**

**BUT TOMMY QUINN WAS A PATIENT TEACHER,
AND HIS STUDENT WORKED HARD, UNTIL AT LAST
HE WAS ALMOST ABLE TO CALL HIMSELF A PIPER.
SLOWLY HE CAME TO RECOGNIZE
THAT MOST PEOPLE COULDN'T TELL
A GOOD PIPER FROM A BAD ONE.
BUT IT MADE NO DIFFERENCE TO HIM:
HE KNEW A GOOD PIPER WHEN HE HEARD ONE
AND HE WANTED TO BE LIKE TOMMY.**

**BUT JUST WHEN THE PIPER WAS FINALLY READY
TO JOIN ONE OF THE BETTER BANDS
HIS COMPANY MOVED, AND HE HAD TO TAKE A JOB
IN OREGON FOR A FEW YEARS. LUCKILY
THERE WAS A DECENT PIPE BAND A FEW TOWNS FROM WHERE HE LIVED
AND HE PLAYED WITH THEM VERY CHANCE HE GOT.
HIS SKILLS INCREASED, HIS FINGERS GREW MORE CONFIDENT.**

The PIPER

**TOMMY WOULD BE PROUD OF ME, HE THOUGHT
AS HE BECAME SOMETHING OF A CELEBRITY IN THE LOCAL PIPING WORLD.
BUT FOR ALL HIS FAME, THE PIPER'S HEART
WAS NEVER FAR FROM BROOKLYN.**

**AT LAST, IN EARLY SEPTEMBER,
HE MADE IT HOME FOR THE LONG-PROMISED VISIT.
HIS MOTHER, WHO HAD NOT BEEN WELL, WAS GLAD TO SEE HIM.
HE PLAYED A FEW TUNES FOR HER
AND THEY TALKED ABOUT CRAZY UNCLE DENNIS
AND IT SEEMED TO CHEER HER UP.
THEN THERE WERE VISITS TO BROTHERS AND SISTERS
AND NEPHEWS AND NIECES HE HAD NOT SEEN BEFORE.**

**BEFORE HE WENT CALLING, HE ALWAYS ASKED
IF HE SHOULD BRING HIS PIPES.
MOST OF THE ONES WHOSE "YEAH, SURE"
HAD AT FIRST BEEN LACKING A LITTLE IN SINCERITY
FINISHED BY BEING GENUINELY SURPRISED
AT HIS TALENT AND DEVOTION,
AND HE WOUND UP BECOMING "THE FAMILY PIPER".**

**SEVERAL TIMES DURING HIS STAY
HE HAD HEADED TO THE PHONE
TO CALL TOMMY QUINN; SOMETHING ALWAYS CAME UP,
BUT HE'D MAKE SURE THEY GOT TOGETHER
BEFORE HE WENT BACK WEST.**

**THE NEXT DAY WAS SEPTEMBER ELEVENTH.
HE COULD NOT TOUCH THE PIPES THAT DAY
OR FOR SEVERAL DAYS THEREAFTER;
MUSIC SEEMED LIKE A TRIVIAL THING,
A RUDE SELF-INDULGENCE. HE AND HIS MOTHER
SAT TRANSFIXED IN FRONT OF THE TELEVISION.
CALLS CAME; NO CLOSE RELATIVES WERE INVOLVED
(THANKS BE TO GOD)
BUT FRIENDS, AND FRIENDS OF FRIENDS,
AND RELATIVES OF FRIENDS
WERE AMONG THE MISSING.
HIS MOTHER'S ROSARY NEVER LEFT HER TREMBLING HANDS.**

THEN THERE WAS ONE CALL HIS MOTHER ANSWERED;

The PIPER

**ALL HE COULD HEAR WAS HER SAYING *CERTAINLY, FATHER,*
AND TAKING A LONG TIME
TO HANG UP THE PHONE.**

A COLD FEAR CLUTCHED HIS HEART.

**- *FATHER JIM WANTS TO KNOW
IF YOU'LL PLAY AT A FUNERAL TOMORROW, SHE SAID.
THE MASS IS AT ELEVEN ...
HER VOICE TRAILED OFF; SHE WAS CRYING
FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE DISASTER.***

**- *IS IT TOMMY? HE ASKED QUIETLY.
-YES, HIS MOTHER REPLIED.
THEY FOUND HIS BODY YESTERDAY.***

THERE WAS A LONG PAUSE.

**- *FATHER SAID HE HAD DIED IN ONE OF THE BUILDINGS
TRYING TO SAVE A FIREMAN WHO HAD BROKEN HIS LEG.
NEITHER OF THEM MADE IT.
HE LEFT A WIFE AND TWO KIDS.***

**... HE DID NOT TELL HIS MOTHER
HOW HE KNEW THE ANSWER TO HIS QUESTION
BEFORE HE ASKED IT:
SHE WOULD NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD.**

**AS HE LAY IN BED THAT NIGHT PRAYING FOR SLEEP
HE REMEMBERED SITTING ONCE WITH TOMMY
IN SOME PUB ON MCLEAN AVENUE
DRINKING PINTS AND TALKING ABOUT PIPES.
NOW, IN THE DARKENED ROOM,
HE HEARD AS DISTINCTLY AS IN THE PUB
TOMMY'S VOICE TELLING HIM:**

**- *THE WAY FOR A PIPER TO GET THROUGH A FUNERAL
IS NEVER TO LOOK AT THE COFFIN.
CLOSE YOUR EYES, THINK OF THE MUSIC,
BUT NEVER LOOK AT THE COFFIN.***

**- *THANKS, TOMMY, THE PIPER MURMURED, AND AT LAST
FINALLY, MERCIFULLY,***

The PIPER

FELL INTO A DREAMLESS SLEEP
UNTIL THE ALARM DRAGGED HIM BACK LIKE A BEAST
INTO A HATEFUL POISONED WORLD
HE DID NOT RECOGNIZE.
STILL LESS AWAKE THAN DREAMING
HE TOOK THE PIPES OUT OF THEIR CASE
VAGUELY RECALLING A NEED
TO RECTIFY SOME PROBLEM WITH THE DRONES
AND THEN SAT STARING AT THEM
FOR WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN AN HOUR.

HE CAME TO WHEN HIS MOTHER BOUGHT HIM COFFEE;
WHEN HE LOOKED UP AT HER
HE WAS SURPRISED TO FIND
HIS FACE WET AND HIS EYES BURNING.

HIS MOTHER, HEARTBROKEN,
HAD BEEN LISTENING FROM HER ROOM:
SHE HAD NEVER HEARD HER SON CRY LIKE THAT,
NOT EVEN WHEN HIS FATHER PASSED AWAY.

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF COURAGE:
SOME WE EXPECT, ALMOST TAKE FOR GRANTED,
SOME SURPRISE US.

THE PIPER NEVER PLAYED "AMAZING GRACE" AS WELL
AS HE DID THE DAY THE WORLD SAID GOODBYE
TO SERGEANT THOMAS QUINN, NYPD.

AND NEVER ONCE DID HE LOOK AT THE COFFIN.

- *SEPTEMBER 2001*