

The YOUNG WIDOW and the FIDDLE

IT'S BEEN NEARLY THREE WEEKS, SHE THOUGHT.

**AND THE TIME FOR GRIEVING IS OVER
OR AT LEAST THE TIME FOR THE TEARS AND SIGHS.
THE HEART I KNOW WILL STAY BROKEN.
ONE DAY WHEN THE CHILDREN WERE AT SCHOOL
SHE WENT DOWN INTO THE BASEMENT
TO "HIS SIDE", WHERE SHE HAD RARELY SET FOOT
IN ALL THE FIFTEEN YEARS THEY HAD LIVED THERE.
SHE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SAY
WHY SHE WENT TO THAT DARK DISORDERED PLACE
WHERE HE KEPT HIS TOOLS AND PAINT, AND THOSE ODD THINGS
SO DEVOID OF MEANING TO MOST WOMEN
BUT SO READY TO BE CHERISHED AT THIS SAD TIME
AS PART OF HIM, A MYSTERY PERHAPS
THAT SHE WOULD NEVER HAVE A CHANCE NOW
TO COMPREHEND.**

**ONE OF THE TWO BULBS HAD BURNED OUT.
IN THE DIM LIGHT FROM OUTSIDE
SHE SAW HIS FIDDLE HANGING FROM A NAIL.
THE SIGHT OF IT STARTLED HER; SHE NEVER AFTERWARDS
COULD SAY EXACTLY WHY: MAYBE IT WAS THE MUTENESS OF IT
UNACCUSTOMED, SILENT, SHADOWED, LIKE WHATEVER IT IS
THAT GOES ON IN A GRAVE. MAYBE
IT WAS THE OLD JEALOUSY:
SOMETIMES, ESPECIALLY EARLY IN THEIR MARRIAGE,
SHE WOULD HATE THE WAY HE HELD THE FIDDLE,
THE WAY HE CARESSED IT AS HE PLAYED IT
LIKE ANOTHER WOMAN'S BODY.**

**SHE THOUGHT: NO THING OF WOOD AND GUT
SHOULD MEAN SO MUCH TO HIM.**

**SHE CALLED IT ENEMY, WHORE, BITCH
AND LAUGHED SILENTLY IN TRIUMPH
ANY TIME HE BROKE A STRING.**

**BUT AS TIME PASSED, AND SHE WAS SURER OF HIS FEELINGS,
SHE GREW, IF NOT TO LOVE THE FIDDLE,
AT LEAST TO BE LESS SUSPICIOUS OF IT.**

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AND WHEN THE CHILDREN CAME, A BOY AND GIRL
TOM WOULD PUT THEM PATIENTLY TO SLEEP
WITH MUTED JIGS AND REELS
THEY WOULD CRY FOR MUSIC
THE NIGHTS HE WAS AWAY ON THE BOAT
BUT SHE COULD ONLY HUM OR SING ODD PIECES
OF SONGS SHE NEVER REALLY KNEW...
AT LAST, TIRED OF CRYING, THEY WOULD FALL ASLEEP
AND SOMETIMES SHE WOULD SIT FOR HOURS IN THE DARKNESS
AND FEEL THE LITTLE FEAR AGAIN.

SHE STOOD NOW ON THE BASEMENT STAIRS
AND WONDERED AS SHE ALWAYS DID
WHAT IT WAS THAT HAD MEANT SO MUCH TO HER HUSBAND
THE CHILDREN TOO ... SHE SMILED THOUGH TEARS
TO THINK OF LITTLE MICHAEL'S BRAVE STRUGGLES
WITH AN ACCORDION NEARLY HIS OWN SIZE
AND EILEEN'S INNOCENT GRACE
WHEN SHE DANCED "THE THREE CAPTAINS".

SHE THOUGHT: I ALONE OF THIS LITTLE FAMILY
HAVE NO GIFT, NO UNDERSTANDING.

AND SHE RECALLED THE NIGHT SHE HAD COME HOME
AFTER SOME PARISH FUNCTION, TO BE GREETED AT THE DOOR
BY A BEAMING PAIR OF MUSICIANS, TOM AND LITTLE MICHAEL,
WHO WAS BABBLING AS HE ALWAYS DID WHEN EXCITED.
SHE COULD BARELY UNDERSTAND HIM. FINALLY
HE CAUGHT HIS BREATH: I CAN PLAY A TUNE WITH DADDY!
AND STILL IN WET COAT AND HAT AND BOOTS
SHE HAD TO SIT IN FRONT OF THE FIRE
AND LISTEN TO A LOT OF WHEEZING AND SQUEAKING
AND THE OCCASIONAL THREE OR FOUR RECOGNIZABLE NOTES
THAT MICHAEL ANNOUNCED PROUDLY WAS "THE CUCKOO'S NEST".
THEN TOM ON BEHALF OF BOTH OF THEM
ASKED HER WHAT DID SHE THINK.

- *IT WAS BEAUTIFUL, REALLY BEAUTIFUL*, SHE REPLIED,
AND NEVER IN HER LIFE MEANT ANYTHING MORE SINCERELY.
BUT THE LITTLE FEAR NEVER WENT AWAY.

LATER THERE WOULD BE SESSIONS AT THE HOUSE

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AND THE OTHERS WOULD ALWAYS ASK
TOM AND MICHAEL (MICK NOW) TO PLAY SOMETHING TOGETHER.
SHE WOULD WATCH WITH LOVE AND PRIDE
THE SWIFT CAPABLE MOVEMENTS OF THEIR FINGERS
AND LISTEN TO THE CASCADE OF NOTES
AND TRY AS ALWAYS TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING.

SHE SAW THE TWO MEN SHE LOVED BEYOND HER ABILITY TO SAY IT
EXCHANGE SMILES AND NODS WITH ONE ANOTHER AS THEY PLAYED
AND SOMETIMES SHE FELT A CHILL.
THEY COULD PLAY FOR HOURS AT A TIME
NEVER SAYING A WORD TO ONE ANOTHER OR ANYONE ELSE.
BUT THE LAST TUNE WAS ALWAYS FOR HER:
"THE CUCKOO'S NEST".

... AND NOW IN THE LIGHTLESS BASEMENT
SHE STOPPED IN FRONT OF THE FIDDLE
AND MADE A LONG STRANGE SOUND WITH HER MOUTH
TO SEE IF ALL THE STRINGS AND DARK DEAD WOOD
WOULD SHATTER WITH ENVY AND SORROW AND DESPAIR.

THE ECHO OF HER SCREAM WOKE HER, AND SHE SHUDDERED.

SHE HAD NOT REMEMBERED THE HAMMER IN HER HAND.

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