

“If Music Be The Food Of Love, Play On”

Twelfth Night by Wm. Shakespeare

The minute I walked into my parents’ house that afternoon I knew something was wrong. Mother was scowling and got into my face right away.

“That man! Your father! That man!” she shouted, “Er macht mich ganz verruckt! Crazy, he’ll drive me yet!” Her brown eyes, now much magnified by the thick glasses they gave her after her recent cataract operations, glowed with anxiety.

“All week long he’s been sawing away on that cello. . . . You don’t understand. He thinks he’s Arturo Toscanini or some big-shot musician. . . . Hour after hour--day after day! Never leaves it alone. . . . And now today, every twenty minutes, he runs out to the car to see if it will start. Listen, he got all dressed up hours and hours ago And doesn’t even have to be there till seven o’clock! The man thinks he’s maybe 20 years old And here he is going on 70! . . I tell you that father of yours is pushing me over the edge. Ganz verruckt ist Er! Always with this crazy music of his--symphony this and orchestra that! And stubborn! Well, I don’t have to tell you. You know! Like one of those stubborn mules back there on the ranch!”

And that’s exactly when he popped in out of the bathroom--right on cue like in a soap opera. Totally lost in a loose-fitting tuxedo, he’d been in there unsuccessfully trying to tie his bow tie. And raised himself up to his full height--all five feet, two inches--and faced me.

“There, now you see what I have to put up with!”

Then wheeled around to confront his wife of almost 50 years. “I have to check the car to see if it’ll start, don’t I?”

One look at his face and I realized we were in deep trouble. As usual, he’d nicked himself in lots of places--some of them still oozing. And on top of that missed a lot of scruffy white hair under his chin and under both ears. -- Right away I knew what the trouble was. -- that stupid used razor blade sharpener! -- Everything that was wrong with the man’s face was all on

account of that goofy used razor blade sharpener he'd purchased a couple of years ago. Good gravy! It's not as though he didn't have enough money to buy a few razor blades. No, it's just that he wants to prove the junk he buys from all of his crazy catalogues is just the greatest. You see, my father is a gadget junkie--a big-time sucker for any and all manner of crack-pot inventions, contraptions and thingamajigs--like, for example, the pen you always see in his shirt pocket, the one that's supposed to write in four different colors but hardly ever writes in even one--just leaks different colored ink all over his shirts--or the two little lights that you pin on to the frame of your glasses so you can read in bed--as they blind you in the process. But the item that infuriates me the most is that utterly useless used razor blade sharpener. It's only about twelve inches long with a scrawny little metal handle that goes back and forth over a thin honing belt. You put your used razor blade in at one end, push and pull for about five minutes and then, according to the manufacturer, out pops "a brand new surgically sharp razor blade." Bull shit! The truth is that what comes out is duller than what went in. But he'll never admit it! Like all the rest of the garbage he buys, he's convinced those blades are "just wonderful!" So that every time the man shaves, his poor face ends up looking like a bloody battlefield. Mother is right; he can be infuriatingly stubborn about a lot of things--especially about his large array of idiotic thingamabobs.

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Well, I succeeded in dragging him back into the bathroom and straightened out his face. That took about ten minutes. Then tied his bow tie while he constantly kept looking at his dollar watch at the end of cheap chain insisting that he had to leave right away because they were going to be taking pictures of the orchestra before the concert tonight. That was the reason for the tuxedo and the bow tie.

So he grabbed a clean white handkerchief out of their bedroom, stuffed it into the breast pocket of his jacket, gathered up some sheet music from his music stand and rushed out to car, a 1934 Plymouth coupe with a rumble seat in the back, into which he had already loaded the cello. The time was about six.

He climbed in nervously, slammed the door hard, started the motor, waved us good-bye, but let the clutch out too fast which killed the motor. Then for a couple of minutes the car wouldn't start at all--probably because it

was flooded or because it was mad at him. He punched the starter so many times that I was afraid he would run down the battery. But then, finally, it kicked over, and he floored it till it screamed--at which point, he put it in gear with a loud grinding sound, then let out the clutch but still so fast that the car shot forward like a race horse. That got him to take his foot off the gas and onto the brake, and the thing almost stalled again. But, after a lot of starting and stopping, lurching and stalling, hiccupping and coughing, thank God, the little Plymouth finally stuttered down the driveway.

He was so short that he always looked under the steering wheel to see where he was going. When making a turn, he never rotated the steering wheel in a continuous arc, but only moved it a few inches with one hand while holding the wheel steady with the other, then frantically repeated the same motion over and over until he completed the turn. Mother and I watched anxiously as he executed a wide turn on to Arthur Avenue just fast enough to cause the cello in the rumble seat to lose its center of gravity and careen from one side of the rumble seat to the other with a loud bang. Ouch! That hurt! Luckily he carried it in a strong wooden case.

But they were finally off, Jacob Hugo, his cello and his music, off to Roosevelt High School here in town to perform with the newly formed Fresno Philharmonic under the leadership of its energetic conductor Haig Yakjian.

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About an hour later I drove Mother over.

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I must have been around four or five when I first heard classical music, and it came from right inside of our own apartment back in the old country, Germany, way before the advent of radio or television. Two live men on violins, another on the viola, and my own father on the cello playing chamber music right there in the middle of our own living room. Real people creating wonderful live music! It filled our apartment with amazing sounds, harmonies and rhythms. The music was exciting, animated and reverberated through every room, even out front and into the back yard. "When I grow up," I thought, "I'd to be a part of that."

They usually played on Sunday afternoons, but on this one Sunday, about half-way through the Haydn, the Fricks who lived right above us in our apartment building hung out a large Nazi flag from their front window which was right above ours. Not on a flag pole, but from two strings tied to either

end of their window so that the thing dangled right next to the outside of the building. Then lowered it from both sides so much that it completely covered our whole front window. The sun shining through it left our living room an eerie crimson.

And as soon as Father realized what was going on, he slammed his cello down on the floor. Furious, he bolted around the room pointing his bow up at the ceiling. "It's Frick! Frick, upstairs! -- It's because we're Jewish. He doesn't want you men to play music with a Jew! And here I am a decorated war veteran--nearly lost my life fighting for the Kaiser!" he shouted. "And he's never even been in! Just runs around town in that shit-colored uniform."

"Shhh, Jacob," one of the men put his finger in front of his lips. "Not so loud-- they'll hear you."

"Look, we've never done anything to that man," Mother cut in. "Nothing! Never!" she exclaimed. "So how can one live like this? What can one do? Where can one go?"

Of course, Frick's message wasn't only for us. It was for the others as well--telling them that in the Third Reich, Christians do not play chamber music with Jews--which they never did again. And soon Jacob, along with several other Jewish musicians, was dropped from the local musical scene--symphony orchestra, chamber music--everything. The year was 1934.

A few months later, it all came to a head for him when, just by coincidence, he came across his long-time buddy Theo. The two of them had known each other for at least fifteen years, ever since they served in the army together. And so now, how could Jacob not notice the large round swastika pin that Theo was wearing on the front of his jacket?

"So, Theo, I see you've taken to wearing a swastika in your lapel, eh?" he asked him.

"Oh, it's down at work, Jacob. You know, they insist I join the party," Theo replied, "Look, if I don't join and go along with all this," he pointed to the pin, "I'm sure I'll lose my job."

"And I suppose soon you'll be putting on a brown shirt and pants and running through the streets with the rest of these hoodlums?"

"Hey, look, a man has to do what a man has to do to survive, right? Surely you know that, Jacob?"

“I only know one thing a man has to do,” Father scorned, “and that is to act like a decent human being.”

The argument grew louder and more heated, one word led to another--until in the end Theo thundered, “Damn it, Jacob, get this through your thick head because I’m only going to tell you once--Adolf Hitler is more important to Germany than Martin Luther!”

That did it! That was the limit! And that very night the two of them, Father and Mother agreed that, as far as our family was concerned, there was no hope left in Germany. We had to get the hell out of there! They considered many possibilities--France, Portugal, Holland, England, Palestine, Spain--but decided on America! Yes, they would try to get to America--he 55, she 45. And so, the following week he got on a train to Stuttgart and applied for visas for the four of us at the American Consulate.

Month after month, they waited for some word from the consulate, but nothing. And as each day passed, their environment became more hostile and intimidating. First, we children brought home notes from school telling our parents that Jewish children were no longer allowed in public schools. In the meantime, all the stores in town posted signs in their windows “Jews Not Allowed,” and throughout the city, on almost every corner, you saw large hate posters with images of fat, piggish-looking men with prominent hook noses and piercing eyes wearing skull caps with a large caption at the bottom “Juden Raus!” “Jews Out!”

Finally, in May of 1935, a little over a year since we had applied, we received our visas and immediately started packing, gathering up two centuries of roots into all that was allowed for the four of us, one steamer trunk and three suitcases, and off we went by rail to Cherbourg in France. Once there, we boarded a tiny ferry out to the huge four smoke-stacked Cunard White Star Liner, SS Aquitania anchored in deep water. They extended a narrow gangplank so that we and a few others could climb aboard, and I can still see him struggling to carry on a heavy suitcase in one hand and his priceless Czechoslovakian cello in the other.

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After the war, we learned that just about one-third of German Jews like us were able to escape; the other two-thirds remained trapped. The world witnessed their desperate decline--their social isolation, economic ruin, the destruction of their property, personal injury, and unbelievable humiliation.

And in 1942, the “Endlösung der Judenfrage,” “the final solution!” -- They were crammed into box cars and sent to concentration camps where they were either starved, shot, or gassed to death!

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In Brooklyn, we settled into a third floor walk-up in a crowded tenement building. He barely scraped by by selling California wines to some of his erstwhile European customers. Still, without fail, several evenings a week, he tuned up the old Czech and sawed away--Dvorak, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven--and always ended up with his tour de force, a well known war horse from the old days--Luigi Boccherini’s cello concerto in B flat. Though only moderately tuneful, it features monumental jumps and leaps, prodigious fingering, fierce scales and acrobatic cadenzas. Like so many cellists, he worked his jaw back and forth as he charged ahead, bowing furiously.

You’d suppose most neighbors might well object to that kind of treatment, but since the lady of the house in the apartment next door, a recent immigrant from Scotland, still harbored grand ambitions of becoming an opera star, we were treated to mighty scales from her as well just about every night. So that in effect, the two musical geniuses of the third floor in that tenement building on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn canceled each other out, while the rest of us just shook our heads, smiled, and bore our musical fate in silence.

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Since New York was still in the crush of its greatest depression and since he was relying on making a living from only the commissions on his sales, he jumped at the chance of getting a full-time bookkeeper’s job on a big ranch owned by the California wine company whose products he had been trying to sell overseas--all for the promise of \$80.00 a month and a free house for his family to live in.

Which meant that once again we carefully gathered up our belongings, packed them into the same steamer trunk and suitcases which had accompanied us across the Atlantic, and watched them, along with the cello disappear into the belly of a rumbling Greyhound that took three and a half days to bring us all the way across America to rural Madera in the heart of the grape and raisin country of Central California.

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The ranch was huge and contained several thousand acres of grapes.

In every direction, as far as you could see, there were Thompson seedless that dried into sweet, sticky raisins as well as deep red Zinfandels and Muscats that the winery processed into sweet dessert wines. And on many of those balmy evenings after a real scorcher of a summer's day, with all the windows wide open hoping for a merciful north breeze, you could hear the farm hands strumming their guitars and singing prideful, spirited Mexican harmonies on the porch of the bunkhouse--*paso dobles, valzas, huapangos*.

But, if you listened carefully That's right--Boccherini! Jacob found that by sitting on a large, upside down packing crate they call a "sweatbox," normally used to store raisins, he could amplify the sound of his cello, envelope and totally lose himself in the music he loved so much.

And that's the way it went for many years until the owner of the ranch, the man who had originally hired him in New York, died, and the ranch came under new ownership, and everybody was let go. Luckily the two of them were able to piece together the tiny reparations they received from Germany with their social security and with some help from us kids, managed to move to nearby Fresno and squeeze by.

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He sat in the very last row of the cello section of the orchestra, and from where we were sitting, he was mostly hidden from view. But though we couldn't see him, I knew he was there. I could feel his spirit--the cockeyed optimist who tried to forget all that had happened to him and his family but still believed you can sharpen dull razor blades. All you have to do is tune up your instrument, practice a little and let yourself go, involve yourself in the mystery of music, and give birth to those magic tones and rhythms that prove our lives are still worth living.

"If music be the food of love, play on!"

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The last piece the orchestra played that night was Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, "The Pathetique," a wrenching work from the mind of a guilt-ridden, tortured genius. "While composing it," read the program, "he would often burst out into tears."

There was so much applause after they finished, the conductor asked them all to stand and take a bow. Hey, what do you know? There he was. Now you could see him, the little bald-headed guy holding his cello and smiling, and Mother leaned over my shoulder. "He did it pretty good tonight,

the old man,” she said. “He’s a little dotty, you know, but he’s all I got . . .
And after all, he did get us out of that Schweinerei--that pig sty!”

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When he got to be in his late-eighties, he lost the upper body strength to tune his cello properly--couldn’t turn and push the pegs in hard enough to make them stick. So without telling a single soul, he traded the wonderful Czech for a real cheapo which used metal tuning gears like you see on guitars. We all knew he got snookered a ton on that deal, but just like with all his other goofy gadgets, he insisted that his new cello played “Just wonderful!”

“Can’t you hear it?” he would ask you as he played away. “Doesn’t it have a beautiful tone?”

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No matter. Jacob died at 96.

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And if there is a heaven for musicians, surely he’s up there now sitting on an overturned sweatbox sawing away at the Boccherini with a dollar watch hanging from his music stand so he should know exactly how long he’d been practicing.

And you know what? Every once in a while, the maestro himself comes over and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Come on now, Jake,” he tells him, “pick up the tempo a little, eh.” And looks him straight in the face--
“And another thing, when you gonna get a decent shave?”

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