

The Naked Orchestra

I

Today, we're rehearsing the Beethoven sixth, the "Pastoral". How lovely! It was my mother's favourite piece of music and the first piece I practised, oh all of sixty years ago now, on that century-worn violin she bought me for my birthday. How she clapped her hands together when she recognised the fragments I played. "My little Ludwig B.", she said, "my wonderful little boy!" All of sixty years ago now, and I wonder how many times I've stroked my bow across the same pattern of notes, to eke music out of my tireless instrument. The music of course is beautiful, but I've never liked it... Today, for the first time, face to face with the sadness and despair of a wasted lifetime, I am ready to admit that.

I don't remember much before music. There was a house, in one of the better-off districts of the city, that glowed dully with subdued wealth. There was my father's voice booming out of existence near my fourth birthday with the hollow resounding aftermath of some crushed wave dying in a submerged cave. There was my mother's voice like some tinkling chandelier, liting limply over an acquired accent as if she she was dancing flatly on glass. She was not to the manner born but had tried to live up to my father's reputation, tried not to let him down in front of family and friends. On my sixth birthday she bought me the violin "in memory of your father, who loved music so!" And I, the little prodigy, was able to copy the sweeping music of the record on the gramophone, without even trying. My mother cried tears of joy when she heard. What mother wouldn't?

Now, if I remember correctly, no school could hold on to me. By the age of thirteen my entire education was music and there was talk of sending me to Vienna to learn with the greats. My childhood had passed away quietly and without resistance, suffocated by a plethora of musical notes, the most beautiful sounds humankind has yet produced. It did not die a natural death, my childhood. It was suffocated, as I sometimes felt I was suffocating in my mother's tightest embraces when she told me that she loved me more than everything in the entire world, and could not bear to lose me... And so, and so, I never got to Vienna. Thank God! What would I have become if I had: my emptiness would have been double, treble what it is!

I was the youngest member the orchestra had ever had. Young William they called me, because my name was William, William Dunloe, and I was a member of the second violins. Even at that age they said my talent was wasted, but I did not know what talent was... Facility yes, I had that alright. I could play anything. I was encouraged during rehearsals to show off. "Just look at what William can do!" As I prepared to dazzle with a display of flamboyance. But I quickly tired of that. I burned out quickly. I began to see my talent for what it was. Empty! The truth was I had never enjoyed it. I had never learned to love music. I had simply learned to play the notes. Was that talent? If it was, then it was a sort of death to me! I don't think I ever really recovered from being born talented.

Like most sensitive young men, and I was one, I had a crisis when I reached the age of twenty-one or thereabouts. There was no young lady involved, no affaire du coeur, just a slight case of nervous collapse as Doctor Fitzsimons, my mother's personal doctor, called it. Six months of my mother's nervous attentions cured me and drove me straight back into the arms of my orchestra and straight into the arms of Maria, metaphorically that is. Because, though Maria had arms, I was never in

them, not in any real sense at any rate. As with music, I could play Maria, but I could never really call her mine. She belonged to another realm. And she should have stayed there. She was never meant to waste her life on me...

Maria, fittingly enough, was a first violin, with golden hair and brown eyes splintered with diamond. She had skin like satin and when she moved it was like light moving. Sometimes I thought I was dreaming her... On the heels of my total nervous exhaustion anything was possible to my febrile imagination. But Maria was no dream, and her smiles tore at my heart like little plucking fingers tearing at strings. When we finally did talk I learned that she liked me for all the wrong reasons: I was timid, I was aloof, I was odd... And I was already half-dead: there was a hole in me music had made, and I had fallen through it, like a child falling into an uncovered well, a long, long time before. But I was glad to be liked by someone, for any reason, and I was, in a way, in love with Maria. I asked her to marry me and she said, "yes". I still can't believe it. I mean, why would anyone in their right mind want to marry me? Life will never make any sense, will it? My mother, when she heard the news had a stroke and so she missed the wedding.

Maria left the orchestra when we married. The intention was that we would start a family without delay. Maria thought she was born to be a mother, but the children never came. Of course, she took all the blame on herself. She was so accepting of everything. She never even threatened to leave me, though I knew our childlessness was really my fault. I had such a feeling of impotence, of real impotence. I'd had it since I was a child, I realised. I'd had it every time I played my music, I'd had it before, during and after my nervous collapse. I'd had it the day I got married. Good God, I'd always had it. But when Maria started to announce, at regular monthly intervals, that she was not pregnant, I really began to have it. In the orchestra my head sank beneath the curved angle of my violin, I avoided meeting the eyes of my colleagues, and I prayed for tranquility. Maria, at home, was wasting away. I could hardly bear to see her. I knew she was dying. She was already, poor thing, a species of ghost.

Do you know what it's like to be able to see through someone? To see them naked in a sense, not in the sense of having no clothes and of seeing their naked body, but in a much deeper sense as if you can see right inside their flesh, the movement of their soul, the ebb and flow, the light and shade of their inner self. Looking at Maria was like looking into a glass cage at a trapped animal. She wanted to have children so much, and she did not know how to leave me. Not that she loved me too much to leave me, no, she never loved me... She married me because I was an oddity, like a novelty item she might acquire because it made her smile for some unknown reason. I was her toy and now she was stuck with me, a sad, useless, pathetic plaything. She could not leave because it was simply not done in our world. It was not even imaginable. The rule said "stay with your husband until you die" and Maria took that route as the one least likely to offend. And she was right. When she died nobody at all felt in the least bit offended. She had died a "decent" death.

She died on the same day as my mother, as if they were going hand in hand out of life together. I went to one funeral and then another and then to the concert hall where Beethoven's sixth symphony, the "Pastoral" was being played. I played my part in the second violins and tears ran abundantly on my cheeks. My greying beard was soaking wet and I had to wring it out at the interval with a handkerchief. I could not wring my eyes out. They flooded my life for days, for weeks. That grief now has the mysterious, incomprehensible air of some forgotten melody that drifts back. I don't understand it. I can't even begin to... Have you ever heard a piece of music like that, that wraps you in a dream? The last look Maria gave before she died was not a

look of love, but of despair. Perhaps that is why I cried so much, for the utter despair I had given her, for ruining her life, for not even being able to talk to her. I was never one for talking. Sweet Maria, sweet my love. If I ever loved, it was Maria I loved. Maria, who when she moved was like light moving across the face of the earth. Like the fragile light of dreams. My Maria... Enough of her.

II

The orchestra, the orchestra is hell. You begin by loving it, or thinking you love it, and then you hate it. It becomes your work. You blame it for everything that's wrong in your life. It becomes everything that's wrong in your life. After Maria died, it was all I had left in the world. I was thirty with my nose pressed to Ludwig's grinding grindstone, and I've stayed that way ever since. Fiddling while my life fades away. Looking round me at the others in the orchestra, wondering, are they any better off? I don't think so. When I look at them I see through them. I see them naked. No smiles can disguise the emptiness strewn round them like some great enveloping grief, like some horrendous dirge of a symphony... What keeps them going? What keeps me going? What keeps any of us going? I've been dead for the last thirty five years, maybe longer, and I'm still going, with bow in hand weaving Ludwig B's funereal enchantment out of my violin. The emptiness, the grief, is like a wheel going round and round that never stops. I guess it must be habit.

To the older orchestra member, and I am one, the orchestra is work, family, home, life. There's not much else. You look back over time and there you are, always in the same mournful black garb, polished bright with wear, the same old piece of curved timber strung with catgut, held to your neck like a surreal blade. Tapping your life away with your shiny black shoes to the same old glorious tunes. Hallelujah! The real horror is when you stop hearing what the orchestra is playing and can only hear your own grating, whingeing, solo voice. The derision of the greats descends on you, the laughter of the Gods. I sigh with relief when it's all over and shut up the music-sheets in their folder, while the audience applaud, applaud, applaud... Apprentice inquisitioners! I sometimes want to yell: shut up! But I value my work, value my torment. Their applause reminds me that I have achieved the perfect pitch of despair. Despair should be beautiful, should be mellifluous. Ludwig B. understood that, when deaf at his table, he prepared to poison us with his heartbreak.

I sometimes wonder what he was grieving for, Ludwig, that he made me, through his music, so captive to grief. He was the one with the real emptiness I reckon, the one with the really big hole through his heart going right down to hell. When he shed tears, falling as musical notes, clear and fragile as glass, who were they for? What were they for? Beethoeven, answer me! Answer me! Heartless Inquisitor, answer me! Stop this torture!

Ludwig the Inquisitor, Yes! Ludwig the Tormentor! What a work of torment a symphony is! Real torture... I see Beethoven scratching away at his masterpieces, digging his agonising notes into the soft flesh of the music sheet, cursing a posterity filled with black-suited orchestra players! From this nightmare I wake up screaming sometimes. Only the ones who fool themselves escape it. The ones who pretend the music really is beautiful. "There is no such thing as beauty, real beauty - it's all pretend!" I once told a newcomer to my orchestra hell, giving him my very special, empty, resigned, and bitter smile. "You sad old bastard!" he spat at me. "Sad?" I asked, amused and angry at the same time. "Sad? Why would I be sad? Because my wife died? Because my life has been wasted? Because I hate my work? Because I hate that earwig, Ludwig?" That shut him up! I can see through people like him. They think they're smart, but once you're in the maw of the music you're finished.

Slave to the grind, as they say on pop television, slave to the grind... Can you live without being sad, even in this, the most beautiful of all worlds? You don't know! Well, try it! Just try it sometimes and see... Live without sadness - and I will be the first to applaud you and cry out at the top of my voice: "Music, Maestro!".

I who was once greying am now totally greyed, not a shred of dark youthfulness anywhere to be seen, in my mane of aged lion. But I am not the only aged and greyed warrior in the tribe. The orchestra is host to a round half-dozen of us, "the relics of old decency" as we are known to the youngbloods, who gather the music between their teeth and snarl with it... The young are cruel with us and laugh at our age, make fun of our sabled locks, knowing we're on the way out. Savages! They belong with Beethoven, the Torturer, they are his minions. The few of us who are too old to care any longer put up with their tomfoolery and generally ignore it, except to once in a while pass a wry and furtive glance from one to the other, as if to say what can you expect from the young? We were once young, and we hated it, didn't we? Or did we, I forget. I wonder sometimes if I was ever young. When I look in the mirror I hiccup with bemusement. "Who is that sad old fool?" I ask myself and ask the purblind mirror. "Who is he?" And where did that hole in his heart come from? The hole that allows you see right through him? That makes him look naked to the naked eye? That makes him look naked as the day he was born? That makes him look like a sad old grieving fool out of something by Shakespeare?

Anyway, I want out now. I'm sixty-five and though I could go on playing till I'm ninety, I want to finish now. I want to go home, put my feet up, open a can of beer and watch a good game of soccer. Now, there's talent, there's originality! Not a fiddle player anywhere to be seen on the naked green of a soccer pitch. I love soccer. The freedom they have: they are freedom! I try to balance my emptied beer can on the end of my shoe and then to launch it at the artificial flowers on the mantelpiece. If I hit them it's a goal and I cheer my head off. I could have been a great footballer I think... no I couldn't! I shouldn't tell myself things like that. I could never have been anything that demanded originality. I was born to imitate. That's the naked truth! Sometimes I flick the telly off with disgust. Those footballers are so extravagantly talented it's not fair. That's real beauty, that is... That's the truth, the naked truth! Musicians are pointless - footballers are beautiful!

The naked truth is this. When you take away the surface, the trappings, the outer shell, sometimes there's nothing left. Take the orchestra for instance. Once I overheard a member of the audience confess that she liked to imagine the orchestra members without their clothes on, the entire orchestra sitting naked with just their fiddles, so to speak. That made her giggle. It made me giggle too. But it took some little practice to be able to do it, to be able to strip my colleagues bare, to reduce them to their essentials. But it was fun, I enjoyed myself. Ludwig seemed less grand then somehow. He seemed quite ridiculous. I had him where I wanted him. He didn't seem so frightening then. I imagined him old and naked, cowering naked in the substandard orchestra pit of some darkened theatre, a skeletal ruinous figure, trying to conduct us, shuddering at the sight of so much ugly flesh spread out before him. He was a howl! The whole orchestra was a howl! The naked orchestra. Every note they played seemed twisted and out of tune. And I could see what I think I've always known, or at least since Maria died I've known it: there was nothing there. The Emperor has no clothes. When you come to think of it: how could a deaf man ever make music?

Yesterday, someone said I was a cynic, that I was a pessimist and a cynic. I think he meant to say that I was a sad, old bastard but wanted to be kind. I don't think I'm that bad. After all I like children... Well, I don't really know any children but there's one next door. His mother thinks I'm wonderful: "because Mr. Dunloe is a member of the orchestra, don't you know?" So she bought the boy a violin, a cheap, squeaky thing with hardly a note anywhere in it, and she makes him play it. I love listening to him in the evenings. It's beautiful... He's terrible at it. No gift for imitation, the child is destined to be original. So many mistakes, but each one is uniquely his own. I encourage him and encourage his mother to encourage him. "If he ever joins the orchestra, he'll be a sensation," I bellow from my sitting-room window. Then I go back to my footballers. I think I'll buy him a football. I hate to see so much originality wasted. I'd hate him to end up like me. Sometimes I cry when I see his mother marching him off to his music teacher. She reminds me of my mother. She's so proud! As I wipe my tears away with a tangled handkerchief, I pray to God that her son will disappoint her. It's not malice. It's him I'm thinking of... Life is too precious. You don't want to spend it being someone else's hired musician. It's not interesting, it's just not interesting!

I have a picture of Maria in a picture-frame by my bed and a picture of my mother too. I light a candle sometimes on the bedside table as if it was some kind of altar decorated with images, and I stand a vase with some artificial flowers up in the middle of it. I stay perfectly still and silent. I suppose it's a sort of prayer... I loved Maria. I love her still. I loved my mother. I love her still. When the candle-flame is glowing golden between the two of them like that I feel at peace. I feel life wasn't all bad, it wasn't all Ludwig B., there was bright Maria, who when she moved was like light moving... The fragile light of dreams moving through my life. I'm thankful. Two women loved me. Two women... You couldn't put that into music, you never could. And I lost them. The naked truth is that when I lost them I lost everything. I lost everything, love, music, self, everything... I understand the naked truth now. Without love, you have no music, you have nothing. Two women loved me in my life, that's all, and that's the naked truth. And since they died, I've had, I've been nothing other than a black bundle of grief holding my emptiness to myself. Good God, was I lucky? Or was I the unluckiest man who ever lived? If only my mother had never bought me that violin for my sixth birthday... If only I'd never heard the name Ludwig... I would have escaped a life in music.

After thirty-six years of grieving and hating myself perhaps it's time to stop. You get tired, even of the most intense grief, you want to let it go. If only life had been bigger and brighter for me... But why wonder? You take your place in the ranks of the orchestra and play on. Life goes on always. You play your fiddle even if Rome burns. In the summer you get to go on holiday. You get to laze by the Mediterranean if you're lucky. You come back with a sun tan. And you play on... You play on. No matter how hurt you feel, you play on. And you try not to even think, for a second, that the orchestra is naked. If you can help it...

Always, before a rehearsal or a performance I inspect myself in the dressing room mirror. I have to make sure that I am immaculate in every way. I straighten my jacket over the stiff white of my shirt and waistcoat and adjust the black bow-tie which is my only concession to style. My face I can do nothing about, the wrinkles persist and deepen, my eyebrows frown greyly, my colorless eyes and lips address the world in a lacklustre, bloodless manner. "William Dunloe," I say my name like a schoolmaster recalling a dead child from the mists of time, and see myself approaching, black-clad, sad but dignified looking, ready to take my place in the naked orchestra. Ready to expose my grief at the funeral.

In our mourning black we parade on stage like guests at an undertakers' ball. The crowd gasps with fear, or so it seems to me, when they see us, as if we were ghosts emerging from an open grave. "Like a convention of widows and widowers," someone jokes. "Beethoven's widows and widowers," I say quite seriously. We take our seats and wait for the conductor to arrive. Before he comes we peddle a few fretful notes to fill the anxious waiting. Over my taut bow I eye, with an apparently distracted eye, my colleagues sitting in their black folds like so many crows in a field. We punish the ten minutes waiting for the conductor with some woefully discordant tuning of instruments. Then he comes, floating to the podium, rubbing his hands in a businesslike way. He holds his hands aloft over the score of the "Pastoral". There comes the most delicate of pauses. I breathe deeply waiting for the guillotine of his hand to fall. And then it falls! And then I play! I play! My life, after all, is music!

The End