

THE Fiddler on the Roof

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A STORY IN TWO ACTS

PROLOGUE

Father and son are standing, side by side, in one of the galleries in Amsterdam's modern art gallery, Stedilijk, looking at Marc Chagall's painting 'The Fiddler'. Father wishes his son would take more interest in art, and the son wishes he could fake more interest in art.

'Why is the fiddler on the roof?' the son asks.

'That's a profound and challenging question, son . . .'

'Oh no, what a dumbo I am,' the boy says shamelessly.

' . . . in fact there's at least two questions, so it's just as well there are two stories to answer them with. The first question might be: 'Why is the Fiddler ON THE ROOF? Would you like me to tell you a story, son?'

'I can't really be arsed, Dad, to be honest.'

'Son! How dare you use language like that, there's no need. And I don't give a toss, I'm going to tell you one any way. Once upon a time, a painter called Chagall . . .'

'Dad, can we sit down? Don't you think I'm a bit old for stories?'

'So long as you don't start fiddling. Let's sit over there against the wall where we can still view the painting; and, no, I don't think you're a bit old - when you're too old for a story, you're too old for life, or so they say.

STORY THE FIRST

'Once upon a time, there was a young boy Marc - a lot younger than you, he was at a sweet age - and he lived with his poor Jewish family in a poor house in a poor village somewhere in poor Eastern Europe. His father scraped a living by doing handy man jobs around the village. Often he would work for other members of the synagogue and be paid in produce or material or other goods. His mother would sew and darn and make clothes - she needed to make a lot for she had eight children, including Marc. Then there was his uncle. Everyone knew he was simple or mad or both, no-one cared. When he walked through the village, which he often did without reason, in his dirty white hat and his strange coat . . .'

'What, like the one in the painting, Daddy?'

'Yes, son, I'm so pleased you're taking an interest in art at last.'

'Why is the tree blue?'

'Shut up. Sit still, and for Jehovah's sake, stop bloody fiddling. Once upon a time . . .'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'Well, stop interrupting then. When the mad uncle walked through the village, which he often did without reason, in his dirty white hat and his strange coat, the children would dance by his side, and the adults would gather in small huddles and say wicked things about him being a devil in disguise, or a practiser of black arts. At home, his family was no better. Politeness was the rule during meals, but the rest of the time, the simple man was the butt of jokes and merciless teasing.'

'Like me at home.'

'Like ME at home. Shut up and keep fiddling, I mean STOP fiddling. As Marc grew older he became more conscious of a strange musical noise in the distance, not outside, but not inside. And, as he grew older still, he began to realise this noise only ever occurred when his uncle was not around. And, when he was old enough to ask questions, he found out that his uncle had moods, would disappear into the attic, and was never to be disturbed. It was also explained that, in these moods, he would sometimes take to his scratchy old fiddle. Marc found himself beginning to like the funny old man, and to feel sorry that everyone made fun of him. Once or twice, when the two of them were alone, the uncle would say strange things about wanting to float on the music, and fly far away. Marc would talk about the tins of old pigments he found in his father's woodshed, and how he loved to mix them and paint the bark of trees deep in the woods. Maybe he even painted the leaves, which might be an answer to your query about the blue tree. Most of the time, though, he would still join in with his brothers and sisters when they goaded and teased the queer man.'

'Dad, this is rivetting stuff. Is it all true, or are you making it up as you go along. That's a rhetorical question.'

'So witty, and such big words for a pettifogging under-strapper. May I continue. One sabbath, Marc, who was recovering from measles, was left alone in the house while all the family, except his uncle who never did what other people did, went to the synagogue. He heard the familiar sound of the fiddle, and decided, for the first time, to find out the secret place where his uncle went to play. He had only ever been in the attic once, and that was only for a second before his older brother had pulled him out, and his father had warned him never, ever to go in there again. But he was older now, and braver. He crept into the small box room, which served as his uncle's bed room, and climbed up the creaky wooden ladder that stood permanently against the wall. With his hands poised to push on the square wooden panel in the ceiling, he paused.'

'Fairy tales, suspense, social comment, psychological intrigue - this story's got it all Dad, and now even some alliteration - poised and paused. Where, or rather, when will it all end?'

'It's times like these, I think we should get back on our feet and stand in front of the painting in silence and absolutely still, for, what, two hours, to fully appreciate its beauty . . . I don't expect any more interruptions.'

'What none?'

'That's it, I've had enough, on your feet . . .'

'No, Dad - I'll be good, see how good I can be.'

'One last chance then.'

'Yes sir. Anything you say sir. When you're too old for a story, you're too old for life, or so they say.'

'Stop fiddling. So, where was I? Oh yes, the boy, with some foreboding but more excitement, eases the panel up and to one side. As he does so, the fiddle music suddenly rushes out at him, so much louder and clearer than he has ever heard it before. He climbs and wiggles his way into the attic, which is full of crates, and piles upon piles of old material and sacking. Surprisingly, he can see quite well. When he looks around, he notices, in the far corner, an opening through which daylight is spilling. He manoeuvres himself from beam to beam - there are no floorboards - and around the various piles towards the light, with his uncle's tunes becoming ever louder. He did not know there was a window in the attic, and has never seen one from outside. He clammers out onto a thin corrugated iron platform, which runs like a little valley between two roof slopes. At the end, he can see his uncle. He is sitting down with his legs swinging freely over the edge of the guttering and the house, and his arms moving wildly with his fiddle playing.'

Marc edges up behind his uncle and taps him on the shoulder. He turns round and smiles, but does not stop playing. Marc looks out over his uncle's head to the village far below. He is not frightened at the sight, but amazed. Everything seems so small, yet so real, like in a picture. Some houses are big and near, and some are small and far away. He can recognise people walking in the street below, but some children in the distance are no bigger than the ants he squashes between his fingers. Over to the right, he sees the synagogue with its tower and cross on top. He imagines his family praying inside. And over there, he spies his favourite tree, the one he can climb, but the light is playing tricks, for it looks so blue (which might be another answer to your query about the blue tree).'

'This is such an amazing place, uncle,' Marc says. 'I don't know why they all say you are mad, when you've found the nicest place in the whole wide world.' The uncle says nothing, but his tune becomes more lively, so lively in fact that he cannot stay seated. He stands up, prompting Marc to retreat a little, and starts dancing, his crooked legs going this way and that, and his knees pointing out from under that funny great coat. Marc too starts dancing, and now they are both laughing, laughing and dancing, laughing and dancing. . . '

INTERMISSION

'That was an, er, interesting story Dad,' the son says with such a winning smile, and appealing eyes, that the father decides it is time for a break, for a cup of tea and cake.

'Let's go to the canteen,' he says 'and on the way I'll tell you a bit more about Chagall, and about Sholem Aleichem.'

'Who's he when he's at home?'

'Well, I'm about to tell you, if you'll hold your horses, by way of an intermission between stories.'

'Chagall was born in 1887 in a Russian town called Vitebsk, which is now in the independent state of Belarus, between Russia and Ukraine, and lived for nearly 100 years. Although his family was devoutly Jewish and there were eight children, his father was not a handy man, but worked in a herring warehouse; and his mother ran a shop selling fish and groceries. He spent most of his life in France, however, where he became one of the 20th century's most celebrated painters. His paintings are said to combine . . .'

'Dad, I thought this was a holiday not a school trip.'

'Stop moaning. Actually, I thought this was a short story not a school trip (but you wouldn't understand). You get the drinks and I'll get a table.' The father continues talking, to himself, as if he knows his son will be listening any way - he doesn't seem to mind about the strange looks of others in the room.

'As I was saying, Chagall's paintings are said to combine images from personal experience with formal symbolic and aesthetic elements by virtue of their inner poetic force, rather than by rules of pictorial logic. His earliest works, in fact, came before surrealism and were among the very first

expressions of psychic reality in modern art.' The son returns with drinks and some biscuits.

'Now then, who on earth is Sholem Aleichem, when he's at home and holding his horses? Well, I'll tell you. He was also a Jew, and he was also born in the eastern part of Europe, in Ukraine, but lived mostly in the US. He was about 30 when Chagall was born, and he died before Chagall reached 30. But even today, he is considered to be one of the great Yiddish writers, a kind of Jewish Dickens if you like, although unlike Dickens he wrote mostly short stories, many of them comic, about the life of simple Russian Jews in small towns.'

'OK Dad, I accepted an art lesson with reluctance and a great deal of patience, but things are getting out of hand here.'

'No, listen, I'm coming to the good bit - you'll like this. I should tell you, firstly, that I had never heard of the writer before. I found out about him in the Encyclopedia Encarta. It told me that the well-known musical 'Fiddler on the Roof' was based on Aleichem's short stories such as Modern Children, Hodel, Chava, Get Thee Out and the Bubble Burst. Words taken directly from Bubble Burst were used to create the song 'If I Were a Rich Man'.

It also said, and you're going to love this, I quote: [Aleichem's] best known characters are Menachem Mendel, the typical small-town Jew; the eternal dreamer and schemer (Luftmensch); and the best loved, Tobias the Dairyman (Tevye der Milchiger), an indestructible optimist. Now Tevye might be the best loved, but Mendel is the first mentioned, and clearly, absolutely without doubt, NOT a minor character.* What is so clever about this story, son, is that you won't know if I'm making this up or not unless you go and check out in Encarta the entry for Aleichem, and you might as well look up Chagall as well.'

'Dad, you're sad.'

'Can't you see, I'm trying to get you in the front row.*'

'Dad, you're bad.'

' Ah, but I haven't finished yet. There's another story to go. We need to go back to Chagall's painting, though.' Father and son retrace their steps, and sit down again by the wall near The Fiddler.

Footnote

** To any characters who are reading this but are not themselves mentioned in the story, the references marked with an asterisk may seem a little wayward. By way of a brief explanation, then, the son in the story had recently taken part in a production of 'Fiddler on the Roof' and had bemoaned the slightness of his role as Mendel.*

Any other readers bemused by additional odd references in this story will find no further explanatory footnotes. This is because, firstly, there would be too many and they would weigh down the story, and secondly the author does not believe there will be 'any other readers'.

'But why then have THIS footnote?' the son asks.

'Get out, you're not allowed in the footnotes,' the father screeches.

STORY THE SECOND

'So we come to the second question, which, I think, is the more existential and interesting of the two: Why IS the Fiddler on the Roof? In other words, why does the musical The Fiddler on the Roof exist at all?'

'That's not what I meant?'

'Stop fiddling. The short answer, the very short answer . . .

'Existentially excellent.'

' . . . is this painting, The Fiddler, or perhaps a similar one called The Green Violinist, or maybe even another one called The Dead Man, all of which feature violin players standing or sitting on a roof.' The father leaves an alliterative pause to let his cynical son, his offish offspring, his churlish child, his heinous heir, his belligerent boy take in this remarkable fact. But is it a fact or a fake, a truth or a story? The son is now looking again at the painting with a more appreciative eye. The father continues with his story.

'Let me go on with the slightly longer answer . . .'

'Existentially unexcellent.'

'Several times in his early life, Chagall designed costumes for plays written by Aleichem, so when, many years after the writer's death, the American librettist Joseph Stein, another jew who was fluent in Yiddish, wrote the words for Fiddler on the Roof from Aleichem's stories, he turned to Chagall for inspiration. Indeed, the title and the whole decor (the costumes and set) of the original production were Chagall-inspired. What is not so generally known, however (and here I have reached beyond the normal methods of research and gone straight to the source of all good narrative), is how Mendel, far from being a minor character in Fiddler on the Roof, is the lynchpin upon which the whole

plot is structured. Ask yourself this question: Why is Mendel on stage so often even though he doesn't have much to say? The answer is obvious: if he had much more to say or do, and was more prominent, the audience might begin to suspect his real, and - this is the important point - his offstage role. As Aleichem's favourite character, he naturally became Stein's favourite character also.'

'Dad, what's going on here?'

'Can't you feel Mendel muscling his way into the front row already?'

'No.'

'Therefore, you see, Stein was careful to write the perfect part for Mendel, on stage, in the limelight, always around, not much to do, but pivotal, absolutely pivotal to the plot. Let me ask you another question: Who (not why) is the fiddler on the roof?'

'Chagall's uncle?'

'Excellent. There's hope for you yet. But wrong. I mean in the play itself who is he? Which character?'

'The fiddler.'

'Wrong. He's Mendel. That's Mendel up there on the stage roof.'

'Not in our production.'

'That's because it's not in the stage instructions - it's Stein's secret. At scene changes, Mendel escapes from the clutches of his indecisive yet sternly religious father, changes costume, and climbs onto the wobbly plywood structure to find peace and happiness in playing high above the cast and audience. Who notices that Mendel is absent from the crowd or chorus? And have you noticed how quickly romance

blossoms between Fyedka and Chava? That's because Mendel, when not on the roof, plays a go-between behind the scenes, carrying messages and love letters. He even tries to intercede on their behalf with Tevye, but fails. And have you never wondered how Tzeitel persuades her father to accept Motel rather than Lazar Wolf as her husband? You don't think Tevye could come up with that idea of the dream do you? No, that was Mendel's idea. Off-stage, Tzeitel asks for the help of the Rabbi, who refuses, but Mendel overhears the conversation and come to the rescue. Stein originally wrote a scene - I know this for a fact - in which Tzeitel comes to Mendel and is so full thanks and admiration that she actually calls him super-Mendel. But Mendel's biggest, greatest role is in his self-sacrifice (a truly religious gesture) in giving up Hodel to Perchik. One minute Mendel is known to have the hots for Hodel, and then it's never mentioned again. Why? Here are the scenes you don't see - all of them take place in the wings: Mendel seeks a private meeting with Hodel, and finds out she's torn between him and Perchik. Mendel goes to Perchik, who, hearing of Mendel's love, offers to disappear in the night and never return. Touched by this display of generosity, Mendel returns to Hodel and tells her he must give his life to god and that she must marry Perchik. She hugs him, and tells him she'll never forget. But he has to rush, because the fiddler is due on the roof. There are other more minor interventions by Mendel, but it would be tedious to list them all.

But now the play has come to an end. The curtain rises on a small stage and a huge cast pressed into several rows - with the actors in the second and third rows hidden. Tevye, Tzeitel, Hodel and others are all in the front row, but there is no sign of Mendel who is buried in row two. The audience claps politely but not riotously. The curtain descends. The audience continues to clap just long enough for a second curtain call.

But now, can you see? centre stage in the front row Tzeitel and Hodel are looking behind and creating a gap, what are they doing? They seem to be trying to persuade someone to come forward - its Mendel. He's reluctant, he doesn't want

the limelight, but the two daughters persevere; and yes, here he comes, pulled, dragged and kicking, but now they have him between them in the front row. Now, he's bowing, the audience erupts with tumultuous applause, a standing ovation no less - even Tevye has turned round to face Mendel, and is clapping . . .'

'Dad.'

'Yes, son.'

'I think the story's finished now.'

'Has it? Has it really?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, that's a pity, I was having such fun.'

EPILOGUE

Father and son rise to their feet and face Chagall's painting.

'Son.'

'Yes, Dad.'

'Let's clap.'

'Why?' There's a bemused expression on his face.

'Let's clap the fiddler. Go on, just for me. We can think about why later.'

The father walks up a bit closer to the painting and starts to clap, lightly at first, but then louder. Warily, the son looks around and, to his relief, finds there is no-one else in the gallery. He sidles up to his father, and takes one last long look at The Fiddler. Then, almost without realising it, he too finds himself clapping, clapping and smiling, clapping and smiling . . .

For Adam on his 14th birthday

Paul K. Lyons
August 2001



The Green Violinist - Marc Chagall - 1923

Front cover: *The Fiddler - Marc Chagall - 1912*