

THE COFFIN MAKER

**By
Kate Schwartz**

Inspired by Anton Chekhov's Rothschild's Fiddle

THE COFFIN MAKER

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THE COFFIN MAKER

*To: Michael Kinghorn
Thank you for encouraging me to write this beautiful story.*

THE COFFIN MAKER

CHARACTERS:

BRONZE: An emotionally detached man in HIS late 50s; He is a strong, sturdy, and rigid man who makes coffins for a living; He plays the fiddle beautifully

MARFA: Bronze's wife; A sensitive, expressive, woman in HER mid to late 50s

ROTHSCHILD: A Jewish man in HIS forties; He is a man of strong faith; He plays the flute beautifully; Bronze despises HIM

THE COFFIN MAKER

Lights up on ROTHSCILD. He holds the fiddle awkwardly at first. HE doesn't know what to do with the bow. He plays 'The Coffin Maker.' When HE is finished, he gently places the fiddle into a coffin then exits. Lights up on the inside of an outdoor shed owned by BRONZE and his wife MARFA. There is an easel in the shed. Bronze is almost finished making his newest wooden coffin. Marfa enters and watches Bronze. Marfa sighs, approaches him

MARFA. I woke up today knowing I could no longer deny the truth.

BRONZE. Can't you see that I'm busy Marfa?

MARFA. Will you please accompany me to the river today? I ask you every year on this day, and the answer is always-

BRONZE. No. We made a pact ... an agreement ...

MARFA. It's the anniversary today, can we at least *talk* about it?

BRONZE. We don't talk about that, Marfa.

MARFA. (*traces HER hands over the coffin*) It's a beautiful coffin, Bronze. I see it's made to fit a person of your size. Who died?

BRONZE. Are you kidding? Nobody died. People have the audacity to die annoyingly slow in this small town.

MARFA. You're misdirecting your anger ...

BRONZE. So, now you're a doctor?

MARFA. No, but don't you find it ironic that you are the town coffin-maker, and you clearly fear death?

BRONZE. Stop talking such nonsense!

MARFA. I *know* what you're about to say. "A man's life means loss and ..."

BRONZE. Death means gain.

MARFA. So, if nobody died, who is this coffin for?

BRONZE. It's for me, Marfa.

MARFA. Please tell me you're not sick.

THE COFFIN MAKER

BRONZE. No, nothing like that.

MARFA. Do you have a tumor? Do you have Cancer?

BRONZE. No.

MARFA. How's your blood pressure and heart? That's right. You don't have a heart.

BRONZE. What if I told you that maybe I feel *too* much.

MARFA. I wouldn't believe you.

BRONZE. I'd like my own wife to believe me.

MARFA. Well, I've been hurting for five years. And, you just informed me you are making your own coffin.

BRONZE. I like to plan. God forbid something happen to me. I don't want to give you the gloomy burden of choosing a coffin.
(Marfa reaches into her pocket and retrieves her prayer beads. She nervously plays with them before draping them around her wrist.)

MARFA. Bronze. I've written a poem for you.

BRONZE. Marfa, I'm working ...

MARFA. Please, let me read it to you.

BRONZE. I'm not in the mood right now ...

MARFA. It's extremely important. *(pause)* "The bed we share feels entirely too big."

BRONZE. Our bed is the perfect size, Marfa.

MARFA. "I try to have conversations with you, but all you want is another swig."

BRONZE. What is this? A Country Western song? *(Marfa goes right next to him.)*

MARFA. "My friends ask me about you all the time."

BRONZE. Your friends are entirely too nosy.

MARFA. "I feel distant from you so I tell them the same old rhyme."

BRONZE. I'm busy. I simply can't spend every minute with you.

MARFA. "My heart breaks because we used to be so close."

BRONZE. Pick a night this week, and I'll take you to dinner. But, not some fancy, expensive restaurant ...

MARFA. *(places his hand on her heart)* "Feel the lonely beat of my heart. We spend too much time apart."

THE COFFIN MAKER

BRONZE. If I'm not too tired, maybe we can watch a movie tonight?

MARFA. "Why don't you bring me flowers?"

BRONZE. They cost too much.

MARFA. "You used to hug me and hold my hand."

BRONZE. That was a long time ago.

MARFA. "This distance has me daydreaming about moving to another land."

BRONZE. Will you stop?

MARFA. "Take me to a party. Maybe we can dance?"

BRONZE. We never dance.

MARFA. "If something doesn't change soon, I'll give another man a glance."

BRONZE. Now, you're just being heartless. Will you please be quiet?

MARFA. I refuse to be quiet until you decide to really listen to me.

BRONZE. If you refuse to give me some peace, I'll go to my very own quiet space. (*Places himself in the coffin. Silence.*)

MARFA. Bronze, remove yourself from the coffin immediately. We need to talk.

BRONZE. (*from inside the coffin*) No!

MARFA. I need to have a serious conversation with you. Now.

BRONZE. (*from coffin*) I said no.

MARFA. Then when? We're not getting any younger.

BRONZE. (*from coffin*) I know.

MARFA. Same old routine day in and day out ...

BRONZE. (*from coffin*) So?

MARFA. Same old routine to hide from the pain ... (*Silence.*) I feel invisible. (*No answer.*) We don't spend enough time together, Bronze. (*No answer.*) Bronze, I'm lonely.

BRONZE. Then, get a dog. Or, don't. Dogs are costly.

MARFA. Do you *want* me to leave you for another man? (*Bronze opens the coffin and sits up.*)

BRONZE. Do I want you to leave me? The answer is no.

THE COFFIN MAKER

MARFA. Because sometimes I feel so lonely that I contemplate leaving you.

BRONZE. So you want a man who buys you flowers, sings you love songs, and holds your hand?

MARFA. It would be nice to feel loved and appreciated.

BRONZE. I'm simply not that kind of man.

MARFA. You *used* to be that kind of man.

BRONZE. Oh, no. I know where this is headed ...*(He enters the coffin.)*

MARFA. Remember the river? *(She grabs her easel, and paints passionately, with abandon.)*

BRONZE. Don't go there.

MARFA. The three of us had picnics by the river during the summer ...

BRONZE. I'm warning you.

MARFA. Those summers were so hot. The sun blazed ...

BRONZE. I don't want to hear this.

MARFA. The sun's rays looked just like glitter on the water.

BRONZE. I'm begging you to stop.

MARFA. I can still picture that gorgeous, old oak tree ...

BRONZE. Enough. I'm getting out. *(Bronze removes himself from the coffin. She shows him the painting. HE looks away. He glares at her and begins to slowly sand the coffin. He, then, smooths a section of it with a staining rag.)*

MARFA. If you're not ill, then why are you making your own coffin?

BRONZE. I'm healthy now, but I could get sick ...

MARFA. You're as fit as a fiddle.

BRONZE. Are you trying to get a rise out of me?

MARFA. No.

BRONZE. Are you trying to stir up bad memories of Rothschild? If he hadn't provoked me, I'd still be playing in the Orchestra-

MARFA. Bronze. No. It just came out of my mouth. It's an expression.

BRONZE. It's a stupid expression if you ask me.

THE COFFIN MAKER

MARFA. You're getting so defensive. Take a break from your work.

BRONZE. It's not even lunchtime. I don't want to take a break.

MARFA. Take a small break for me. For us.

BRONZE. You're annoyingly persistent.

MARFA. Play me a song.

BRONZE. Now?

MARFA. It brings me such joy to hear you play. *(Silence.)* You can play anything. You were first violinist.

BRONZE. Concert master ... leader of the Orchestra. I no longer have an Orchestra to lead.

MARFA. Compose a song on the spot.

BRONZE. I don't know if I could do that ...

MARFA. Of course you can.

BRONZE. That painting you painted?

MARFA. Yes?

BRONZE. You, um ... you didn't paint her picture, right?

MARFA. No. I painted the river ... the sun ... the glitter on the water ... I was just starting to paint the outline of the oak tree.

(Retrieves painting for Bronze to see)

BRONZE. It's a pretty painting. Maybe I could play a song about the river?

MARFA. I would love that more than anything, Bronze. *(goes to the coffin to retrieve the fiddle)* Perhaps we could find a better home for it? *(Hands HIM the fiddle. Bronze takes in the painting, closes his eyes, and plays 'River Song.' He and Marfa become lost in the music. He stops playing.)* You play and I see the man I fell in love with ...

BRONZE. Don't get all schmaltzy on me.

MARFA. But I hear you in the middle of the night.

BRONZE. Hear me? What on Earth are you hearing?

MARFA. Every night. You touch one fiddle string.

BRONZE. Nonsense. You're a sound sleeper. You don't hear anything.

THE COFFIN MAKER

MARFA. I think it helps you sleep. (*Bronze shrugs.*) Why only one string?

BRONZE. I never realized you heard me.

MARFA. I hear it almost every single night. Why do you do it?
(*Silence.*)

BRONZE. I touch one fiddle string because that's all I need to feel better.

MARFA. You mean what happened five years ago today?

BRONZE. No! Not *that!* (*gets up to return the fiddle to its case*)
I'm talking about financial loss.

MARFA. I don't know what you mean.

BRONZE. You know it's a sin to work Sundays, and Mondays are unlucky.

MARFA. Unlucky?

BRONZE. Yes. It's an age-old superstition. I was brought up to believe Mondays are unlucky. I learned it from my father who learned it from his father who learned it from-

MARFA. I get the picture.

BRONZE. I've been waiting impatiently for that old superintendent of the prison to die. I have full-sized coffins just waiting to be used! But, the SOB decided to work at the Harrisburg Prison and had the *nerve* to die there.

MARFA. What happened to you? Impatiently waiting for a man to *die?*

BRONZE. I make coffins for a *living*.

MARFA. It's a *job*. It's what you *do*.

BRONZE. Of course it's a job. It gives us a little thing called income.

MARFA. This job has stripped you of decency ... humanity ...

BRONZE. I don't need to hear this.

MARFA. You're not the Bronze I once knew.

BRONZE. Things change. People change.

MARFA. But, the old Bronze re-emerges when you make music.

THE COFFIN MAKER

(She hugs him, and he allows it.) You pour *all* your heart and soul into that fiddle. I need your heart and soul, too. Otherwise, what's the point of being in this marriage?

BRONZE. I can only give you what I can give you.

MARFA. You're as rigid as your coffins.

BRONZE. I'm a strong man. I hardly see that as a flaw.

MARFA. You're infuriating. Just when I thought we were making a connection you retreat.

BRONZE. I took a break and played you a song. What more do you want from me?

MARFA. I want more of the man I fell in love with ... *(Bronze goes to the coffin and starts sanding it. She studies Bronze for a moment)* So, now I'm getting the silent treatment. *(Bronze sands his coffin more vigorously.)*

BRONZE. I know I'm not the best husband to you, but I wouldn't want to live life without you.

MARFA. Then, act like you want to be with me. *(close to tears)*

BRONZE. Don't cry. *(pause)* I'm sorry, Marfa.

MARFA. *(quickly dries HER tears)* Play for me while I cook?

BRONZE. What's the use?

MARFA. Your music relaxes me. *(They walk to their living room. He brings his fiddle with him and sits down while she begins preparing lunch at the stove.)*

BRONZE. They kicked me out of the Orchestra.

MARFA. You should have been decent to Rothschild.

BRONZE. But, he threatened me ...

MARFA... Only because you were so cruel to him.

BRONZE. He's arrogant.

MARFA. He seems well mannered to me.

BRONZE. He has money.

MARFA. Having money is not a crime, Bronze. It's not a competition.

BRONZE. But, he's so ostentatious about it.

THE COFFIN MAKER

MARFA. You've been performing in the Orchestra for years. I've seen countless concerts. He just doesn't seem snobby or pretentious to me.

BRONZE. He took away the *one* thing I am good at, and the *one* thing that brought us a little more income.

MARFA. So what if you don't play at the Orchestra anymore? Play for me.

BRONZE. Rothschild is the flute section leader. I was the first violinist. Do you know what an *honor* it is to be first violinist? Out of everyone in the Orchestra, Rothschild was the *only* person trying to outshine me.

MARFA. You're both talented musicians.

BRONZE. It makes me think of my two nephews.

MARFA. Not this again.

BRONZE. Both boys were straight A students ... ranked #1 in their class ...

MARFA. I know where this is heading, and I don't like it-

BRONZE. They were accepted into the best Universities. But, the Jewish students always did better on their exams ... It was always the Jewish students who were the valedictorians.

MARFA. Those students were obviously very smart and worked hard. Their academics had nothing to do with their faith-

BRONZE. They said those Jews walked around the campus as if they *owned* it.

MARFA. I highly doubt that. Don't you know that you and Rothschild can both shine as musicians? (*Bronze lets out a snort.*) Well, your music always moves me. (*She begins cooking at the stove, and he plays 'In Love. 'Lights up on the opposite side of the stage. Rothschild, with his flute, is sitting on a chair with a music stand in front of him.*)

BRONZE. (*stops playing*) You're playing too loud, Garlic.

ROTHSCHILD. Stop calling me "Garlic." My name is *Rothschild*.

BRONZE. But, you have hideous breath, *Rothschild*.

THE COFFIN MAKER

ROTHSCHILD. Stop behaving like a child. (*They both play 'Orchestra Rivals.'*)

BRONZE. Fine. I'll be a polite adult. Why don't you and your wife come over some night for dinner? Marfa makes an *excellent* pork and sauerkraut.

ROTHSCHILD. Very funny. You think you're so clever, don't you?

BRONZE. What's wrong? You don't like pork?

ROTHSCHILD. Don't. I'm warning you.

BRONZE. Settle down, Jew Boy.

ROTHSCHILD. The conductor and I have been talking, and we are *not* tolerating your bigotry anymore.

BRONZE. (*stops playing*) Don't threaten me, Garlic.

ROTHSCHILD. You are nothing but an *uneducated* bigot.

BRONZE. So what if I don't have a swanky degree? I won't be threatened by the likes of you.

ROTHSCHILD. (*stands up*) I'm not putting up with this anymore. If you don't quit the Orchestra, I will.

BRONZE. (*Approaches Rothschild as if he's going to hit him*) I cannot afford another financial loss. I'm not wealthy like you.

ROTHSCHILD. You wouldn't have the nerve to hit me. (*Bronze punches Rothschild in the face, then returns to the here and now with Marfa. Lights dim on Rothschild.*)

BRONZE. The Orchestra will suffer without me.

MARFA. They had no choice. (*Lights up on Rothschild who is lying on the ground.*)

ROTHSCHILD. (*screaming*) You overgrown bully! What? Are you trying to kill me?

MARFA. You can't go around hitting people ...

ROTHSCHILD. You want me to wind up in one of those coffins you make? Don't be shocked if I press charges against you. (*slowly gets up*) A physical blow deserves a financial blow.

BRONZE. Go to Hell, JEW! (*Lights dim on Rothschild and THE VIOLIN. Bronze, livid, wants to smash HIS fiddle.*)

THE COFFIN MAKER

MARFA. No! Give the fiddle to me! (*She saves fiddle.*) What has become of you?

BRONZE. Rothschild has *everything!* Talent ... money ... a wife ... and ... and ...

MARFA. Just say it.

BRONZE. No.

MARFA. What else does Rothschild have that you don't have?

BRONZE. Leave me alone-

MARFA. Tell me.

BRONZE. (*points to coffin*) I'll stay in there all day if I have to.

MARFA. And, I'll stay in the shed all day if I have to.

BRONZE. What's gotten into you?

MARFA. Rothschild has everything. Talent, money, a wife, *and ...?*

BRONZE. It's in his very *name.* Rothschild. Rothschild. (*pause*) Rothschild.

MARFA. Oh, Bronze ...

BRONZE. Rothschild has talent, money, a wife, and *children.* (*Blackout, except for a spotlight on Bronze. He plays 'Bronze's Lament' while Marfa gets ready for bed. When He's finished, Bronze and Marfa go to their bed with one bedside lamp on.*)

MARFA. We are calling your doctor in the morning.

BRONZE. I'm fine.

MARFA. You're not well. You were so furious you almost smashed your fiddle.

BRONZE. I'm thankful you were able to save it, too.

MARFA. You took your medicine?

BRONZE. Yes, Marfa.

MARFA. Hopefully you will be able to get a good night's ...

BRONZE. Life is passing us by without pleasure.

MARFA. Life may not be perfect, but there are still things to be happy about... We have a nice home.

BRONZE. It's too small.

MARFA. You have a good job ...

THE COFFIN MAKER

BRONZE. My business would be more profitable if more people *died* ...

MARFA. You still make me laugh.

BRONZE. I'm just a grumpy old man.

MARFA. You love my cooking.

BRONZE. You're right. There's that.

MARFA. You play your fiddle so beautifully.

BRONZE. Let's not mention my fiddle. I don't want to talk about Rothschild – especially before I go to sleep.

MARFA. I wasn't talking about Rothschild ...

BRONZE. Are you sure? (*Pause.*)

MARFA. I really wanted to go to the river, but you had me so worried today. (*pause*) She would have been almost eight years old ... Would you have passed your "beliefs" onto her, too?

BRONZE. My medicine will be kicking in soon. I can't get into these crazy topics right now.

MARFA. They're human topics.

BRONZE. I don't even know what you mean.

MARFA. Would you have passed your ... way of looking at the world onto our daughter?

BRONZE. Are you calling me a bigot?

MARFA. I'm not calling you any names.

BRONZE. I'm not prejudiced. We live in a small, rural town. Have you not noticed that everyone looks the same, talks the same, worships the same?

MARFA. Not everyone worships the same-

BRONZE. I'm proud of my heritage. What's wrong with wanting to stick to your own kind?

MARFA. You should listen to yourself.

BRONZE. There you go again ... defending Rothschild.

MARFA. I didn't even *mention* Rothschild.

BRONZE. I don't like him because he thinks he's a better musician than me. I don't like him because he provoked me until I hit him. It has *nothing* to do with him being *Jewish*.

THE COFFIN MAKER

MARFA. Alright, alright. Lie down. I can see you're getting emotional. (*yawning*) I'm sorry I brought this up now. Get some sleep.

BRONZE. (*a beat*) Why do people in general hinder each other from living? (*Marfa looks at him.*) If Rothschild had not provoked me, I'd still be playing in the Orchestra. (*Marfa shakes her head.*) And, if I weren't such a curmudgeon, you'd be a lot happier.

MARFA. Yes. Maybe. I don't know. Try to clear your mind, Bronze. Hopefully, the Valium will kick in soon. (*Pause.*)

BRONZE. I would have *tried* to raise our girl to be more like you. I don't know if I would have succeeded, but I would have tried ... (*Marfa kisses him on the cheek. She retrieves her prayer beads from the nightstand and holds them to her heart.*) I would have wanted her to be more like you.

MARFA. I love you. (*holds prayer beads to her heart, and places them on the nightstand. She turns out the light. Marfa falls asleep, and Bronze is wide-awake. He tosses and turns. He retrieves a flashlight from under his pillow and gently pulls the fiddle out from under his bed. He touches one fiddle string. He puts the fiddle under his bed and places the flashlight under the pillow.*)

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