

The Foolish Wife

By Bertolt Brecht

A man had a wife who was like the sea. The sea changes in response to every breath of wind, but it does not grow larger or smaller, nor does it change colour, nor taste, neither does it grow harder, nor softer; but when the wind has passed then the sea lies still again and has grown no different. And the man had to go on a journey.

When he went away, he gave his wife everything that he had, his house and his workshop and the garden round his house and the money he had earned. "All of this is my property and it also belongs to you. Take good care of it." Then she threw her arms around his neck and wept and said to him: "How shall I do that? For I am a foolish woman." But he looked at her and said: "If you me, you can do it." Then he took leave of her.

Now that the wife was left alone, she began to fear for everything that had been entrusted to her poor hands, and she was very much afraid. And she turned to her brother, who was a dishonest man, and he deceived her. Thus her possessions dwindled, and when she noticed it she was in despair and resolved to stop eating lest they decrease still more, and she did not sleep at night and as a result fell ill.

Then she lay in her chamber and could no longer take care of the house and it fell into ruin, and her brother sold the gardens and the workshop and did not tell the wife. The wife lay on her cushions, said nothing and thought: if I say nothing, I shall not say anything foolish, and if I eat nothing, then our possessions will not decrease.

And so it came about that one day the house had to be auctioned. Many people came from all around for it was a beautiful house. And the wife lay in her chamber and heard the people and how the hammer fell and how they laughed and said: "The roof leaks and the walls are falling in." And then she felt weak and fell asleep.

When she awoke she was lying in a wooden chamber on a hard bed. There was only a very small window high up, and a cold wind was blowing through everything. An old woman came in and snapped at her viciously, telling her that her house had been sold but her debts were not yet met, that she was feeding on pity, although it was her husband who deserved it. For he had nothing left at all now. When she heard this the wife became confused and her mind was slightly touched and she got up and began to work in the house and the fields from that day on. She went around in poor clothes and ate almost nothing, yet earned nothing either, for she demanded nothing. And then one day she heard her husband had come back.

Then she was seized by a great fear. She went indoors quickly and tousled her hair and looked for a clean shift but there wasn't one there. To cover up she ran her hand over her chest and found her breasts had shrivelled. And went out through a small backdoor and set off, blindly.

After she had been walking for a while it occurred to her that he was her husband and they had been joined together and now she was running away from him. She turned round at once and walked

back, not thinking any longer of the house and the workshop and the shift, and saw him from afar and ran towards him and clung to him.

But the man was standing in the middle of the road and from their doorsteps the people laughed at him. And he was very angry. His wife was clinging to him and would not lift her head from his chest nor take her arms from around his neck. And he felt her trembling and thought it was from fear because she had lost everything. But then she finally raised her face and looked at him, and he saw it was not fear but joy, she was trembling because she was so glad. Then he realised something and he too faltered and put his arm around her, felt unmistakably that her shoulders had grown thin, and kissed her on the middle of her mouth.