THE NEXT TIME YOU SEE A SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA AT WORK, LOOK TWICE AT THE THREE MEN, SECOND ROW CENTER, WHO ARE GETTING PLAINTIVE NOTES FROM WHAT LOOK LIKE UNDERNOURISHED CLARINETs. THE INSTRUMENTS ARE OBOES, AND YOU ARE LOOKING ON HAUNTED, HAGRIDDEN, BEDEVILED MEN. THE PUBLIC LIKES TO BELIEVE THAT ALL OBOE PLAYERS ARE CRAZY; THE WHOLE VIOLIN SECTION HATES THEM BITTERLY; THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN REJOICE WHEN THEY ARE NOT HOME; AND A SNAKE CHARMER WITH A SULKY COBRA ON HIS HANDS DOESN’T HAVE AS MUCH TROUBLE AS AN OBOE GIVES AN OBOIST. FURTHERMORE, THESE MEN ARE SORc AT THEMSELVES FOR TAKING UP THE OBOE—THE REALLY GOOD ONES CURSE IN THEIR SLEEP WHEN DREAMING OF THE EASY LIVES OF OTHER INSTRUMENTALISTS. BUT THEY CAN’T GET ANGRY, FOR IF THEY DO, THEY’LL SHARP. FRIEND, HAVE YOU GOT TROUBLES? THEN YOU’D ENJOY KNOWING AN OBOIST. OR AN OBOIST’S FAMILY.

I KNOW, BECAUSE I AM THE SON OF ONE OF THE BEST OBOISTS IN THE COUNTRY. LAST WINTER WHILE OUT IN THE ROCKIES I TRAVELED ABOUT SIX MILES ON SKIS EVERY TUESDAY NIGHT TO A MOUNTAIN INN TO HEAR THE WEEKLY BROADCAST OF THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, IN WHICH MY FATHER PLAYS. MY DEFINITELY BEATEN APPEARANCE ON THE SCENE AFTER BUCKING THE MOUNTAIN TRAILS IN THE DARK USUALLY AROUSED SOME CURIOSITY. WHEN QUESTIONED, I WOULD SAY I HAD COME TO HEAR MY FATHER PLAY. “WHAT DOES HE PLAY?” THEY ASKED WITH REAL INTEREST. “OBOE,” I SAID. “OH,” THEY SAID POLITELY. AS ALWAYS, I DREW INQUIRING AND VAGUely SUSPICIOUS LOOKS.

TEll PEOPLE YOUR FATHER PRACTICES MEDICINE, AND THEY WONDER WHERE; SAY HE PRACTICES LAW, AND THEY WONDER WHAT KIND; SAY HE PLAYS THE OBOE, AND THEY JUST WONDER. I’D LIKE TO TESTIFY, AS AN OBOIST’S SON, THAT OBOISTS ARE NOT NECESSARILY CRAZY, BUT HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO BE. FURTHERMORE, IF IT IS TRUE AN OBOIST IN CANADA USED TO KICK HIS WIFE OUT OF BED AND GIVE HER PLACE TO THE OBOE IN COLD WEATHER, IT IS BECAUSE OBOES ARE EVEN HARDER TO KEEP IN TUNE THAN THE MOST TEMPERAMENTAL OF WIVES. THE GUY HAD A CASE, I MEAN. LOTS OF MEN HAVE WIVES. ONLY A LUCKLESS FEW HAVE OBOES.

AND A MAN WITH AN OBOE SHOULDN’T GET MARRIED ANYWAY; IT’S A FORM OF BIGNAMY. IF HE IS SADDLED WITH AN OBOE HE’S GOT ALL THE WIFE AND CHILD ANY MAN NEEDS; AND HE DOESN’T NEED A MOTHER-IN-LAW EITHER. AS A GREAT CONDUCTOR SAYS, WHEN TRYING TO EXPRESS THE TOTALLY UNSUITE, “IT DON’T GO, MY FRIEND; IT DON’T GO.” TAKE MORNING IN OUR HOUSE. FATHER HAD A STORMY EVENING BATTING THAT OBOE, AND NOW HE WANTS TO MAKE AMENDS BY BEING EXTREMELY PLEASANT. ONLY AT BREAKFAST DOES HE SEE HIS FAMILY ASSEMBLED, AND HE REGARDS US LOVINGLY. HE SIPS HIS COFFEE. WE ARE A PICTURE OF
perfect peace. Suddenly father lets out a roar of anguish, as if he had just found carbolic acid in the bottom of his cup. He leaps to his feet. “Who knocked my best reed to the floor?” he bleats. Now we are getting back to normal.

You see, the kitchen table was covered, when mother began preparing breakfast, with small screw drivers, enough wicked little knives to perform all the surgery in the Mayo Clinic, and reeds. To an oboe player, his soul is not so important as his reed, nor does it give him so much trouble. He can never get it right. It starts out as a sturdy stalk of cane growing in the south of France and ends up as two fragile wisps, paper thin and about an inch long, bound tightly to a tiny copper tube ending in a cork tip. The secret of a successful reed lies in shaving it. This requires practice, a delicate sureness with the knife, and the patience of a saint. It also involves howls of exasperation, cursing, gnashing of teeth and agony of soul. Father is one of the few oboists with any hair left, but he started out with a luxuriant crop, and it is dwindling fast.

Just getting ready to play is a tough job in itself—a job any craftsman would watch with admiration. As for playing the darned thing, that is a remarkable physical feat approaching self-torture. Roughly, what you do is this: you hold your breath for a full half minute at a time, letting it escape very, very gently through this fragile mouthpiece, which looks like the big brother of a trout fly; meanwhile you run your fingers ragged performing lovely arpeggios, all staccato, probably, and written in six flats.

An oboe player’s home is full of little glasses of water in which reeds are soaking. You see, the poor beset man is trying to get one exactly soft enough for what he is sure they are going to play today. He is an expert at this—he has to be—and sure enough, he gets one into exactly the state that produces the round, soft, sweet tone he wants.

So what happens? They change the program on him, opening with music that requires a strong reed with a loud, brilliant tone, and he’s cooked. He’s always cooked. The reed that sounded so fine at home is sickly and weak in the concert hall or splits just when he needs it, or if none of this happens, then a key sticks and ruins a solo.

When the French National Orchestra was here recently, the same kind of accident befell the first oboe, but he was a fighter. Without losing a sixty-fourth note he snatched the instrument out of the hands of the astonished second oboe and played the solo perfectly. Without sharpening, too, which was luck indeed, in his excited frame of mind. We try not to get father nervous for that very reason, and we have to try to keep him happy—or as happy as an oboe player ever can be—because a sad oboist plays flat. And if he’s flat, everybody’s flat. The orchestra, as you may know, tunes to the oboe. He is a frustrated perfectionist, and when he sounds his A, nothing under heaven will make him change it. The string players all hate his guts. They always want to sneak up a little sharper, for brilliance, and he never lets them. They never miss a chance at revenge. The great Jascha Heifetz paused during rehearsal to ask the oboe to sound another A. The A could hardly
be heard. In a loud whisper, Heifetz asked the concertmaster, “Is your first oboe a Scot?”

A thousand devils of fear beset the oboist. Heat will crack his oboe from top to bottom; so will cold. Let it get damp and it may split; let it get a sudden jar and it may crack like a melon. On top of all this, he has to practice a great deal—the oboe is probably the most difficult of instruments and plays difficult music. In the Tomb of Couperin, by Maurice Ravel, the oboe solo is so tough that musicians in France have changed the name to the Tomb of the Oboist.

Furthermore, he knows every minute of his practicing that he has the unified hatred of the neighbors. It isn’t mere suspicion. Shortly after an oboe player moves anyplace he can expect to find the first letter signed, “Indignant Neighbor.” If it is an apartment, he has to smuggle the oboe in as you would smuggle a pet tiger. What really burns him is the letters passed along by his landlord which refer to “that damned piccolo player.” He has to practice his trade as if it were a mild vice of some kind.

Father has worked out a system you have to admit is fairness itself. He practices one half hour in one part of the house and then moves to another room, until he has made a complete circuit. On the hottest day he keeps the windows tightly closed, and he has figured out scientifically just how much each neighbor can take. If somebody on the west is a little more sensitive than the others, then he, or she, doesn’t get a full half hour. Our whole family keeps on the move, keeping one room ahead of father. Along the way he leaves a trail of reeds, screw drivers, corks and pieces of cane which no one dares to touch, much less move. One of the best cleaning women we lost swept an array of reeds into a desk drawer. Only by great self-control did father keep from strangling her. In turn, she said he was touched, and pointed out that it is hard to clean a house where every flat-topped piece of furniture is likely to have a glass of water with cane soaking in it. Father soaks many species of cane overnight, and some for a couple of days, before he makes reeds out of them. And there is no way in the world of telling what reed may be the good, the trouble-saving, the blessed one.

The cleaning woman had been suspicious of our family from the start; she may have thought we were involved in some form of voodoo. That’s because the house is full of turkey feathers. My father gets gloomy every Thanksgiving, full of fear that turkeys will be eaten into extinction. He has to have turkey feathers; they are as important to an oboist as wax to a skier. He uses them to clean the oboe and to get its innards dry. No other feather will do it. But he’s in good shape; he has a pupil whose mother runs a turkey farm. This pupil never arrives for a lesson without bringing another bundle. As a result, we have feathers enough to outfit a good-sized Indian tribe. It is a ten-year supply, my father believes happily. There are feathers in most of the bureau drawers; I find feathers mixed with my shirts and socks; mother finds feathers in the linen closet. Take a book from the bookcase and out spill more turkey feathers, and there are beautiful sprays of
feathers in the flower vases. In moments of preoccupation mother has sometimes watered them.

Every time I hear my father take one of his oboes—every symphony oboist has several—and get sweet music out of it, instead of breaking it to pieces on the piano, my respect for his character increases. What a life! An oboist’s career is in two neat movements; he takes up the oboe, he spends the rest of his life regretting it. A fiddle player who had to raise his own cats to get a reliable E string wouldn’t have half the trouble an oboe player has on his quietest Monday.

Even in summer, when he doesn’t have to worry about cold weather, an oboist watches the thermometer as anxiously as if he had his life savings tied up in a bed of orchids. Let an oboe get chilled, and if it doesn’t crack it goes sour, and when warm again it sheds keys. Wherever we find an oboe in our house, there it stays. Nobody touches it; I just tiptoe around and make sure no smallest breeze is blowing on this mean-tempered chronic invalid. The other musicians think that story of the oboist who made his wife sleep on the floor in zero weather is funny. In our family we know how he felt. It was a choice between having trouble with his wife or trouble with his oboe, and he chose the lesser of two evils.

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