**Willa Cather – My Antonia – Book 5 – Cuzak’s Boys**

This is from an American novel that tells the stories of an orphaned boy from Virginia, Jim Burden, and the elder daughter in a family of Bohemian immigrants, Ántonia Shimerda, who are come to live in Nebraska at the end of the 19th century. In this extract, Jim decides to return to visit Antonia many years after he left Nebraska.

20th Century prose-fiction

An extract from a novel written in 1918.

I TOLD ANTONIA I would come back, but life intervened, and it was twenty years before I kept my promise. I heard of her from time to time; that she married, very soon after I last saw her, a young Bohemian, a cousin of Anton Jelinek; that they were poor, and had a large family. Once when I was abroad I went into Bohemia, and from Prague I sent Antonia some photographs of her native village. Months afterward came a letter from her, telling me the names and ages of her many children, but little else; signed, ‘Your old friend, Antonia Cuzak.’ When I met Tiny Soderball in Salt Lake, she told me that Antonia had not ‘done very well’; that her husband was not a man of much force, and she had had a hard life. Perhaps it was cowardice that kept me away so long. My business took me West several times every year, and it was always in the back of my mind that I would stop in Nebraska some day and go to see Antonia. But I kept putting it off until the next trip. I did not want to find her aged and broken; I really dreaded it. In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again.

I owe it to Lena Lingard that I went to see Antonia at last. I was in San Francisco two summers ago when both Lena and Tiny Soderball were in town. Tiny lives in a house of her own, and Lena’s shop is in an apartment house just around the corner. It interested me, after so many years, to see the two women together. Tiny audits Lena’s accounts occasionally, and invests her money for her; and Lena, apparently, takes care that Tiny doesn’t grow too miserly. ‘If there’s anything I can’t stand,’ she said to me in Tiny’s presence, ‘it’s a shabby rich woman.’ Tiny smiled grimly and assured me that Lena would never be either shabby or rich. ‘And I don’t want to be,’ the other agreed complacently.

Lena gave me a cheerful account of Antonia and urged me to make her a visit.

‘You really ought to go, Jim. It would be such a satisfaction to her. Never mind what Tiny says. There’s nothing the matter with Cuzak. You’d like him. He isn’t a hustler, but a rough man would never have suited Tony. Tony has nice children—ten or eleven of them by this time, I guess. I shouldn’t care for a family of that size myself, but somehow it’s just right for Tony. She’d love to show them to you.’

On my way East I broke my journey at Hastings, in Nebraska, and set off with an open buggy and a fairly good livery team to find the Cuzak farm. At a little past midday, I knew I must be nearing my destination. Set back on a swell of land at my right, I saw a wide farm-house, with a red barn and an ash grove, and cattle-yards in front that sloped down to the highroad. I drew up my horses and was wondering whether I should drive in here, when I heard low voices. Ahead of me, in a plum thicket beside the road, I saw two boys bending over a dead dog. The little one, not more than four or five, was on his knees, his hands folded, and his close-clipped, bare head drooping forward in deep dejection. The other stood beside him, a hand on his shoulder, and was comforting him in a language I had not heard for a long while. When I stopped my horses opposite them, the older boy took his brother by the hand and came toward me. He, too, looked grave. This was evidently a sad afternoon for them.

‘Are you Mrs. Cuzak’s boys?’ I asked.

The younger one did not look up; he was submerged in his own feelings, but his brother met me with intelligent grey eyes. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Does she live up there on the hill? I am going to see her. Get in and ride up with me.’

He glanced at his reluctant little brother. ‘I guess we’d better walk. But we’ll open the gate for you.’

I drove along the side-road and they followed slowly behind. When I pulled up at the windmill, another boy, barefooted and curly-headed, ran out of the barn to tie my team for me. He was a handsome one, this chap, fair-skinned and freckled, with red cheeks and a ruddy pelt as thick as a lamb’s wool, growing down on his neck in little tufts. He tied my team with two flourishes of his hands, and nodded when I asked him if his mother was at home. As he glanced at me, his face dimpled with a seizure of irrelevant merriment, and he shot up the windmill tower with a lightness that struck me as disdainful. I knew he was peering down at me as I walked toward the house.

Ducks and geese ran quacking across my path. White cats were sunning themselves among yellow pumpkins on the porch steps. I looked through the wire screen into a big, light kitchen with a white floor. I saw a long table, rows of wooden chairs against the wall, and a shining range in one corner. Two girls were washing dishes at the sink, laughing and chattering, and a little one, in a short pinafore, sat on a stool playing with a rag baby. When I asked for their mother, one of the girls dropped her towel, ran across the floor with noiseless bare feet, and disappeared. The older one, who wore shoes and stockings, came to the door to admit me. She was a buxom girl with dark hair and eyes, calm and self-possessed.

‘Won’t you come in? Mother will be here in a minute.’

Before I could sit down in the chair she offered me, the miracle happened; one of those quiet moments that clutch the heart, and take more courage than the noisy, excited passages in life. Antonia came in and stood before me; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled. It was a shock, of course. It always is, to meet people after long years, especially if they have lived as much and as hard as this woman had. We stood looking at each other. The eyes that peered anxiously at me were—simply Antonia’s eyes. I had seen no others like them since I looked into them last, though I had looked at so many thousands of human faces. As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well.

‘My husband’s not at home, sir. Can I do anything?’

‘Don’t you remember me, Antonia? Have I changed so much?’

She frowned into the slanting sunlight that made her brown hair look redder than it was. Suddenly her eyes widened, her whole face seemed to grow broader. She caught her breath and put out two hard-worked hands.