

The Joy that Kills

Part of the stage, in front of the instrumentalists or to one side of them, is set up to suggest a Victorian interior: an armchair, a small side table with a small framed picture, and perhaps a potted plant. At the start, this acting area is empty. After a moment, LOUISE MALLARD enters and sinks to the chair in a paroxysm of silent weeping. She is dressed simply but well, in a house dress of late Victorian style.

When we come to see her in calmer circumstances, we shall notice that LOUISE is still quite a young woman, in her early thirties at most, beautiful in a classical restrained way, not readily given to overt displays of emotion. As we see her struggling to regain her normal control, it should be clear that the circumstances which have caused her present outburst are highly exceptional. Her first words are spoken almost without emotion, as if trying to sort out the information she has just received.

LOUISE [*quasi-parlando*]

A railroad accident... near Braintree...
unspeakable disaster... dozens injured...
and Brently, my own husband, dead among them.

[*with a slight trace of irony*]

I knew it from the moment Doctor Richards came:
his measured words, his bedside manner,
coddling his patient with the fragile heart!
But even he could not disguise the facts:
A railroad accident... dozens injured...
and Brently, my own husband, dead.

LOUISE begins to weep again, more quietly than before, more in exhaustion than passion. She picks up the portrait from the table, looks at it for a moment, then sets it down.

LOUISE

I feel... what do I feel? Nothing.
Not grief, not wild despair, only exhaustion.
Tired, so tired in body and in soul...
as though he lives still, and it was I who had died.
[*with a bitter laugh*] A widow! At thirty-two,
after fourteen years of marriage,
a widow... dead.

LOUISE gets up, and walks towards an imaginary window.

LOUISE [*in a dead voice, describing the view*]

Even the Spring means nothing.
Dark clouds... a pale blue sky...
the smell of rain.... A fitful breeze
shivers the tender leaves.
The shouts of children in the square;

a distant peddler; someone singing...
Sounds of joy in which I find no meaning.
A joy that only kills...
kills feelings long since dead.

LOUISE seems about to return to the chair – but something stops her. She remains still, poised, quivering, as though waiting for something to happen, but uncertain what it might be.

LOUISE [*with growing apprehension*]

And yet I do feel something...
something distant, coming closer,
creeping from the sky, the trees, the rain...
reaching to me, soul and body...
Some other message in those sounds,
those scents, those colors...
A word, a thought, a fearful wonder...
[*fighting it off with sudden recognition*]
No! No! Not life! I cannot bear it!
I am a wife... his wife... a woman only...
A woman... woman only...?
[*spoken, with sudden realization*]
No!
I am a woman – free!

Her whole being becoming joyous and alive, LOUISE turns once more to the window.

LOUISE [*with wonder turning to exultation*]

I am free... free... free...!
What joy! Between the clouds,
the sky shines brilliant blue!
The breeze is fresh; the treetops quiver;
the green leaves dance with light and color!
The delicious breath of rain
scents the air with hope and life.
The happy cries of children in the square;
twittering of sparrows in the eaves;
a distant peddler; someone singing...
Sounds of a joy that thrills the spirit.
A joy that kills all memory of a life half-lived.

Suddenly LOUISE catches herself, and recoils from the window in horror. She rushes to the table and clutches the picture like a talisman to ward off evil thoughts.

LOUISE

Joy? Am I such a monster,
to laugh when I should weep?
My husband died but hours ago;
how can I rejoice?
[*she becomes calmer*]
Perhaps the tears will flow when he comes home,
his tender hands folded in death,
his hands that never touched me but with love.
I lived for him; for he willed it so;

and I was but the creature of his will.
He loved me, yes;
I loved him too... sometimes.
[becoming excited once more]
But what is love, compared to *life*,
compared to all the years ahead
when I can be *myself*— and free?
Body and soul, free!

LOUISE has put down the picture, and now moves confidently around the acting area. There is a sound as though somebody is knocking on a door. LOUISE turns towards it in impatience, and for the next few moments carries on a dialogue with the person outside the door. As she is doing this, she busies herself with some of the other things on the little table, perhaps opening the neck of her dress, putting on a colored scarf or brooch, changing her hair.

LOUISE *[calling through the door]*
Doctor Richards? Go away!
I am *not* making myself ill!
A draft? I have the window open;
The light and air are flooding in!
[mostly to herself, with feverishly mounting excitement]
The light of day, the fresh Spring air,
today, tomorrow, May and June,
Spring days, Summer days,
and years and years of life to follow!
[a fervent outcry]
Pray God that life be long!

LOUISE is now ready, and drawing herself erect, radiant and victorious, she turns in the direction of the knock.

LOUISE *[with radiant dignity]*
I am ready, Doctor.
Not beaten, as you see.
You may escort me down.

LOUISE takes a proud step forward, savoring the moment. Suddenly, she becomes rigid, as though hearing something, seeing something that turns her world upside down. Her eyes widen in horror.

LOUISE *[thunderstruck]*
Brently! It's you?
You were not in the accident...?
[with a desperate cry of realization]
No! No! Not life! I cannot... No—!

LOUISE staggers back and drops to the chair, clutching at her heart. She has just the strength to murmur a few last words.

LOUISE *[at the end of her strength]*
Tell him... it was the joy...
the joy that kills...

LOUISE falls back dead.

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Concert chamber opera
for soprano and piano quartet

Music by Thomas Benjamin

Text by Roger Brunyate,
after *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin

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