THE PRICE

BY DON ZOLIDIS

ADAPTED FROM THE FAIRY TALE
"THE STORY OF A MOTHER"
BY HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE MOTHER, a young mother

DEATH, a traveler

NIGHT, an elegant woman

THORNBUSH, a bush full of thorns

THE LAKE, a very large lake

OLD WOMAN, a caretaker, tending the flowers in Death's garden

TOMAS, a young man

ELENA, a young woman

ENSEMBLE, any number of actors who portray STARS, FIR TREES, WAVES, FLOWERS, and PEOPLE.

Double-casting: All roles except Death and the Mother should also play parts in the ensemble.

Gender of the characters: The Thornbush, Lake, and Ensemble members may be played by actors of any gender. Feel free to adjust pronouns accordingly. It's recommended for Death to be played by a male-identifying actor, but not compulsory.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The speaking role for ENSEMBLE and FIR TREE should be shared amongst multiple actors. Feel free to distribute the lines as necessary to all of the players. Where noted, I have suggested some parts where doubled or tripled voices might be quite strong, but feel free to discover where that works best in your own production. Multiple voices simultaneously can give an otherworldly effect to the dialogue, which can be powerful.

If ENSEMBLE or FIR TREE has multiple consecutive lines, that means that different members of those roles should speak the lines.

The ensemble should also create all the transitions and scenery for the various locations. The group can be as large or as small as necessary, but it seems like a minimum of eight actors would be necessary for the ensemble.

THE PRICE

Night.
A fire crackles in a hearth in a small home.
A mother tends to her small child in a cradle, singing softly.

ENSEMBLE. Once upon a time a young mother sat up late at night with her small daughter—

ENSEMBLE. The Mother was very tired and very sad—

ENSEMBLE. For the child was sick—

ENSEMBLE. And she feared it would die this night.

MOTHER. *(Singing softly.)*
Greensleeves was all my joy
Greensleeves was my delight
Greensleeves was my heart of gold and—

One loud knock on the door.
She stops.

Is someone there?

Another knock.
She leaves the child and heads for the door.
We hear the cold winds of the night and the sound of something distinctly magical.
A traveler is there, wrapped in heavy clothes.

TRAVELER. I hate to bother you miss, but I am very cold and I am weary from my journey. Might I ask to warm myself by your fire?

MOTHER. Of course. I have very little, but you are welcome to rest a while.

TRAVELER. You are very kind.

The Traveler enters, shivering.

The wind has teeth tonight.

MOTHER. Have you been traveling far?

TRAVELER. Quite a distance. And I have many miles yet to go.

MOTHER. Perhaps you would like some tea?

The Traveler is touched.

TRAVELER. I would like that very much.

MOTHER. I'll warm some over the fire. Please—make yourself comfortable.

The Traveler walks by the cradle as the Mother readies some tea.

TRAVELER. Your child is beautiful. How old?

MOTHER. She's just one year.

The Traveler sits by the cradle and rocks it gently.

I am afraid for her life. She has been so ill and she is so small.

TRAVELER. Hm.

MOTHER. For three days I haven't slept—I've barely closed my eyes for fear death would take her.

The Traveler reaches into the cradle to stroke the child's hair.

I would give anything to see her live a long and happy life.

TRAVELER. It is the rare life that is both long and happy.

MOTHER. Perhaps she will be one of the rare ones.

TRAVELER. Perhaps.

MOTHER. You don't suppose, do you, that God will let me keep her? In His mercy?

Pause.

The Traveler gives her a long look—smiles.

I see.

Forgive me I am so tired.

She sits back in a chair.

TRAVELER. Rest. I will take care of your daughter.

MOTHER. Thank you.

ENSEMBLE. And the Mother had barely spoken the words when her eyes closed—

ENSEMBLE. Her head drooped—

ENSEMBLE. And she fell

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* Asleep

ENSEMBLE. She dreamt of a bright and golden place, filled with tall flowers of all sorts—a summer day—

ENSEMBLE. Her child was laughing and running through a field thick with butterflies—

A bright, summerly light shines.
We hear the sounds of children playing.
One member of the Ensemble strikes a clock.
All sounds stop.
It's quiet and dark again.
The Mother wakes.

MOTHER. I'm sorry—I fell asleep I—

She looks around.

Sir? Sir are you there?!

ENSEMBLE. But the man was gone—

ENSEMBLE. And so was her daughter.

The Mother searches frantically as the Ensemble changes the scene.

MOTHER. Come back! You cannot take her! Come back!

ENSEMBLE. She rushed out into the frigid air without stopping to grab a coat—

The Ensemble creates the darkened street.
Stars hang from the sky.

ENSEMBLE. But there was no sign of the traveler or her child.

ENSEMBLE. Only the cold, starlit night.

A sound effect.
Night enters, dressed in a rich black dress, like a queen.
She perches and observes the Mother.

MOTHER. You there! Did you see a man pass by with a young child in his arms?

NIGHT. I see everything. But that was no man. That was Death. He is faster than the wind, and what he takes he never returns.

MOTHER. Then I shall be faster still. Tell me where he went.

Night is amused.

NIGHT. *(Chuckling.)* You hope to chase down Death?

MOTHER. I will. Tell me where he went and I will be faster than the wind.

NIGHT. And what price will you pay for such knowledge?

MOTHER. I have no money, I am poor, and—

NIGHT. *(Cutting her off.)* I have no need of your money. I am Night, and I have no care for your sorrow either. I ask again, what price will you pay for my knowledge?

MOTHER. What does the Night want from me?

NIGHT. I am vast and I see the whole world, but I have never felt a mother's love. I am feared, child. I am dreaded, but never cared for. Sing me the songs you sing to your daughter and I will tell you what I know.

MOTHER. Oh. Of course—any song or…?

NIGHT. All of them.

MOTHER. All my songs?

NIGHT. Every song you sing for your daughter. I want them all.

MOTHER. But that will take hours. Even now Death is hastening away—

NIGHT. You have heard my price.
Sing.

MOTHER. Of course.

She begins, quietly—
The stars sway gently as she sings—

Alas my love you do me wrong
To cast me off discourteously
And I have loved you so long
Delighting in your company

Greensleeves was all my joy
Greensleeves was my delight
Greensleeves was my heart of gold
And

ENSEMBLE. And so the Mother sang every song she knew—

The stars and the Mother hum the tune underneath the next lines.

And if anyone in the little village had looked at the sky that night—

ENSEMBLE. They would've seen the very stars shine brighter, draw nearer in curiosity and wonder—

NIGHT. More.

ENSEMBLE. And though the Night was cold and dark—

ENSEMBLE. She felt loved—

NIGHT. More.

ENSEMBLE. And the Mother sang until her voice cracked and her fingers burned from the frost—

NIGHT. More.

The Mother's voice falters and breaks.

MOTHER. I have sung every song I know. Surely the Night has heard enough.

NIGHT. Has your daughter? Has anyone ever heard enough so that they need hear no more? Has anyone ever felt enough love so that they never need feel it again?

MOTHER. It has been hours and I have paid your price! Where is Death taking my child?!

NIGHT. Where he takes everyone. To the other shore.

MOTHER. And where is that?!

NIGHT. Follow the road out of town until you reach a dark forest of fir trees. He passes that way.

MOTHER. But he is so far ahead now, I will never catch him.

NIGHT. Death will reach the other shore at dawn. But I will keep the dawn at bay for you as long as I can. Even the Night is bound by natural law, but you have warmed my cold heart and I will help you as I may.

MOTHER. Thank you.

NIGHT. Thank you.

ENSEMBLE. And the Mother hastened away as quickly as she could—

ENSEMBLE. While the stars refused to take their normal course across the sky, and time stood still.

The Stars hum "Greensleeves" as they change the scene.

A forest of tall, dark trees.
The ensemble becomes trees.

ENSEMBLE. She came at last to an ancient forest of fir trees, draped with snow and icicles.

Mother enters, looks around.

ENSEMBLE. But Death's tracks were everywhere in the snow.

ENSEMBLE. Everywhere the Mother looked she saw his passing.

MOTHER. He has been everywhere. Where does he go now?

She follows the tracks until she comes to a thornbush, skeletal.

Has anyone seen Death?

All the Trees rotate slowly to face her.

FIR TREE. All that live have seen Death.

FIR TREE. But we are untouched by his passing. Even in deepest winter, we are green and strong.

THORNBUSH. Speak for yourself.

FIR TREE. Don't listen to him, he's a mere thornbush.

FIR TREE. Tiny. Food for deer.

FIR TREE. I have seen them snack on him. Shameful.

MOTHER. Thornbush, have you seen Death? Did he pass by this way?

THORNBUSH. I did see him! I know where he went!

MOTHER. Tell me.

THORNBUSH. Of course. But I have a price!

FIR TREE. Here we go.

MOTHER. *(To the tree.)* Will you tell me where Death went?

FIR TREE. I don't care where Death went. I look at the sky. I am tall and mighty.

FIR TREE. I am tall and mighty as well.

THORNBUSH. I saw him with your child, I'll tell you. Just pay my price.

MOTHER. *(To the Thornbush.)* What is your price?

THORNBUSH. In the warm summer, I am green and beautiful and everyone loves me. My flowers are adored by lovers and butterflies alike, my leaves are tender and sweet—

FIR TREE. For the deer.

THORNBUSH. But in the winter I am alone and shorn of all my beauty—

The Fir Trees snort in derision.

FIR TREE. I keep telling him that he needs to be strong. Hold on to his leaves.

THORNBUSH. I can't do it!

FIR TREE. Because he is weak—

FIR TREE. He spends so much time growing and flowering that he forgets to protect himself—

FIR TREE. We keep trying to help him, but he won't listen.

FIR TREE. He's not a very good fir tree, to be honest.

THORNBUSH. I'm not a fir tree at all.

FIR TREE. That's simply because you're not trying hard enough.

MOTHER. Thornbush, what do you ask of me?

THORNBUSH. The winter has been darker and colder than any I have seen. The soil beneath me is frozen and my roots are not deep enough. I fear that I will not endure to see the spring again. But if you embrace me, the warmth of your love might give me some small measure of strength.

FIR TREE. Don't do it.

FIR TREE. He's full of thorns. You can see them.

MOTHER. You simply want me…to hold you?

THORNBUSH. Yes.

MOTHER. But your thorns will prick me and I will bleed.

THORNBUSH. They will, yes.

ENSEMBLE. But a mother is used to suffering for her love.

ENSEMBLE. And she embraced the thornbush.

The Mother hugs the Thornbush.

ENSEMBLE. His thorns pierced her skin—

ENSEMBLE. And great drops of her blood fell upon the snow.

ENSEMBLE. And though it pained her and cut her, she held the thornbush tightly.

THORNBUSH. A little longer please

ENSEMBLE. And she held

ENSEMBLE. And she held

ENSEMBLE. And where her warm blood fell upon the cold earth

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* The ground

ENSEMBLE. *(x3.)* Thawed.

A magical sound.
The Mother releases the Thornbush.

THORNBUSH. The ground has thawed. My roots can reach the water again.

The Thornbush shudders with happiness.

ENSEMBLE. And even though it was the darkest night of winter

The Thornbush blooms.
Light seems to come from inside of it.

MOTHER. You're beautiful.

THORNBUSH. Thank you.

The Thornbush hands one of his flowers to the Mother.

Take this. So that it might light your way.

MOTHER. Where did Death take my child?

THORNBUSH. If you head that way, you will come to a vast lake. Death will take your child to its other shore.

MOTHER. Thank you.

She heads off as the Ensemble changes the scene.

ENSEMBLE. Her voice was sore from singing, the scrapes on her skin burned where the night air kissed her—

ENSEMBLE. But she walked on.

ENSEMBLE. And came at length to a great, dark lake which held neither ship nor boat.

The Ensemble creates the lake.
Some of them become waves.
The lake shimmers in the starlight.

ENSEMBLE. Even in deepest winter the water had not frozen—

ENSEMBLE. And the other shore was so distant the Mother could scarcely perceive it—

ENSEMBLE. There was no way

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* Across

The Mother considers this.

MOTHER. It must be near dawn. There must be a way.

ENSEMBLE. So she knelt and

ENSEMBLE. Began

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* To drink.

The Mother kneels and begins drinking the lake.

ENSEMBLE. Hoping perhaps

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* For a miracle

She drinks.
And drinks.
No miracle.

The Lake rises out of the water, lifted by her waves. She is haughty and dangerous.

LAKE. Foolish woman, what are you doing?

MOTHER. I am trying to reach my child.

LAKE. Is it lost beneath my waters? I have claimed many children. They sink so easily.

MOTHER. No. Death takes her to your other shore.

LAKE. Ah.

MOTHER. And I must get across.

LAKE. And you thought to drink me?

MOTHER. I have no boat and cannot swim. Your waters are not frozen enough to walk across. This is the only way.

The Lake laughs.

LAKE. You are tiny. You are like the merest water bug to me. You might as well try to eat the sun. You will not drink me. Do you know how many of your kind I have swallowed? Slip beneath my waters and I will show them to you.

ENSEMBLE. But the Mother kept drinking

ENSEMBLE. And drinking

ENSEMBLE. As the Lake watched.

The Lake comes in a bit closer.

LAKE. I want you to consider how large your stomach is and how great and immense I am.

The Waves concur.

Gaze upon me. I am vast.

The Waves try to show how vast she is.
The Mother does not look up.

MOTHER. I have drunk larger lakes in the past.

LAKE. What? Where? You lie.

MOTHER. Believe what you will.

LAKE. Which lakes?

MOTHER. They don't exist any more. You are a mere puddle in comparison.

LAKE. A puddle?! Look at me! LOOK!

The Waves rumble threateningly.
They show how huge they are.
The Mother does not look.

MOTHER. Sorry, I'm busy.

She keeps drinking.

LAKE. Stop that.

She keeps drinking.

I said stop that.

MOTHER. I must tell you that you are the finest lake I've ever drunk. Your water is quite fresh.

LAKE. I know it's fresh! My mother was a glacier!

MOTHER. I feel that I could drink all night.

LAKE. Woman, you must stop. This will kill you.

MOTHER. Then it will kill me.

LAKE. Have it your way.

MOTHER. My body shall rest here upon your shore. And your waters will never be pure again.

The Lake groans in frustration.
All her Waves shudder with her.

LAKE. Very well. I will take you across. I cannot bear to see you die senselessly.

MOTHER. Thank you.

LAKE. But there is a price.

MOTHER. Name it.

LAKE. I am a great collector of pearls.

MOTHER. I have no pearls.

LAKE. But you do. Your eyes are the finest pearls I've ever seen.

MOTHER. You want my eyes?

LAKE. Weep them away into my waters and I will take you to the other shore, where Death keeps his garden. There you may find your child and prevail on Death—but I warn you, none have ever returned this way.

MOTHER. I need my eyes.

LAKE. That is the price.

MOTHER. Perhaps I will continue drinking and—

LAKE. Woman, look to the east. Do you not see that light? Dawn is breaking. It would take you a thousand years to drink my waters, and Death will be here soon with your child.

ENSEMBLE. The Lake spoke the truth—

ENSEMBLE. For even though Night had held back the dawn as long as she could

ENSEMBLE. Her strength was waning—

ENSEMBLE. And the sun was on its way.

Light begins to glow in the east.

MOTHER. If I give you my eyes, I will never behold my daughter's face again.

LAKE. Never.

ENSEMBLE. And with that thought, the Mother knelt and

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* Wept

ENSEMBLE. *(x3.)* And wept

ENSEMBLE. *(x4.)* And wept

ENSEMBLE. And her eyes, two pearls, dropped into the lake and were lost within its waters

The Mother wraps a cloth over her eyes.
The Waves gather around the Mother and lift her up.

ENSEMBLE. But the lake was true to its word, and gathered the woman in its waves—

ENSEMBLE. And lifted her as a child might lift a toy—

The Waves carry her across the Lake.
Music, perhaps?

ENSEMBLE. Soon she was on the other shore where Death kept his garden.

The waves set her down as the Ensemble changes the scene.
The Mother stands, blind.

ENSEMBLE. And there stood the most beautiful building imaginable, a greenhouse many miles in length—

ENSEMBLE. And within that house stood a flower or plant for every living person

ENSEMBLE. And if she could have seen it she would have wept at its beauty.

ENSEMBLE. All that

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* life

ENSEMBLE. In the house of

ENSEMBLE. *(x2.)* Death.

An old woman enters with a watering can. She is stooped and ancient. Dressed in a heavy coat.

MOTHER. Is someone there?

OLD WOMAN. Hmph.

MOTHER. I said is there someone there?

OLD WOMAN. I'm right here, can't you see me?

MOTHER. I have wept my eyes into the lake.

OLD WOMAN. I see.

MOTHER. Are you—an angel?

OLD WOMAN. No.

MOTHER. What are you then?

OLD WOMAN. Lot of questions.

MOTHER. I'm sorry, I'm looking for my child—Death has carried her away and was bringing her back here.

OLD WOMAN. He does that.

MOTHER. I need to stop him.

The Old Woman laughs.

OLD WOMAN. Oh I see. You're going to stop Death from taking your child, are you? Good luck.

MOTHER. Can you help me?

OLD WOMAN. Do you know how many mothers have tried to stop Death from taking their babies?
Do you?
All of them.

MOTHER. Have any made it here?

OLD WOMAN. I'll give you that. You're the first.

MOTHER. So there might be a way.

OLD WOMAN. Perhaps.

MOTHER. *(Hopeful.)* Perhaps?!

OLD WOMAN. Inside that greenhouse is a flower for every living person. Inside each flower beats a heart; though you are blind you may recognize your daughter's heartbeat. Find that flower and there may be way to stop Death.

MOTHER. How?

OLD WOMAN. I have told you much because I like your face. But if I am to tell you more, I require a price.

MOTHER. Of course. Though I have given nearly everything I have tonight.

OLD WOMAN. Not everything.

MOTHER. What is the price?

OLD WOMAN. Your youth.

MOTHER. …Is that all?

She takes a moment.

Take it.

OLD WOMAN. It has been so very long since I was young. I did not appreciate it the first time.

MOTHER. Go ahead, take it.

ENSEMBLE. And the Old Woman grasped the Mother's hands—

The Old Woman takes the Mother's hands.
Magic.
Both the Old Woman and the Mother transform.
The Old Woman casts off her overcoat and white hair. She is young and beautiful now.
The Mother is now stooped and old—she wraps the coat around her.

The Old Woman rejoices in her youth.

OLD WOMAN. Oh this is amazing! Ha!

She dances about. Looks at her arms and hands.

MOTHER. …Please. Show me the way.

OLD WOMAN. Of course!

She continues to look at her skin.

I need a mirror.

MOTHER. You said you would…help me.

A dangerous moment.

OLD WOMAN. I did. And I am true to my word.
Come with me.

The Old Woman offers the Mother her arm and escorts her into the greenhouse.
The Ensemble becomes flowers.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!



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