

FIFTY

written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. PARK PAVILION - DAY

An old-timey fiddle band plays their version of "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." The park around them is the deep green of late summer fading to autumn. This is a practice, so the park is nearly empty except for the tight group.

We see each player in turn--fiddles, mandolin, banjo, tub bass, guitar. They are a mix of young and old, men and women who enjoy this music and love this art.

An older woman in her late 60's, NELLIE, warbles the words to the tune.

As she sings, she watches the guitar player, JACK, a few years older than her. He works through a new strumming pattern for the tune.

Nellie's look is a mystery, but intent enough to be filled with a deep and long love.

As the verse ends, the band moves into the next verse while Nellie yodels into the bridge. She doesn't notice, and the music falters to a stop.

Nellie comes to herself and falls sheepishly silent amid their laughter. Jack checks her music.

JACK

Next verse, Nel.

NELLIE

Sorry, sweetheart.

The laughter grows and everyone regroups. Nellie shuffles her pages and the rest position their instruments.

FIDDLE PLAYER

Light and easy, everyone.

The music begins again, fading into Nellie gently humming the same tune as the picture transitions to:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

In a small, comfortably cluttered but tidy kitchen, Nellie pours another cup of coffee from a well-used coffee maker. She is still dressed in her morning robe.

She sits at the kitchen table. With a slow sip of coffee, Nellie looks toward a passageway leading out of the kitchen and into the sitting room.

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

Jack sits in an armchair reading a newspaper spread across his lap. A cup of coffee sits on a table next to him. He's dressed in jeans and a plaid work-shirt made by Nellie.

The room is as cozy as the kitchen, full of decades-old furniture. A small woodstove sits nearby. A fire started awhile ago is just burning out.

Jack folds the paper closed and leaves the chair slowly, grabbing his coffee cup as he rises.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Jack comes in and sets his cup in the sink.

Nellie lifts her cheek just slightly as Jack gives her a small kiss.

Jack slips on his boots and heads outside, the screen door rattling behind him. Nellie watches him go and takes another slow sip of coffee.

EXT. FARMSTEAD - DAY

Miles of sagebrush on one side stretch to distant mountains. On the other, the desert prairie drops into a steep canyon just beyond Jack and Nellie's small farm.

Jack has picked up Nellie's tune and hums it as he moves through his small piece of land. Every building and fence has been put in place by his own hands.

He takes a moment to breathe deep and look out toward the mountains before he opens a gate and sets to the morning chores. His cows low a greeting.

MONTAGE - MORNING CHORES

Jack feeds and waters cows, opens and shuts pens, shifts equipment, does the diligent work of a farmer rancher with just enough work for one man to accomplish.

END MONTAGE

EXT. FARMSTEAD - DAY

As the sun rises toward mid-morning, Jack finishes his tasks and heads back inside. A slower version of the Sweetheart tune plays him home, the background music of a western farmer on his land.

He reaches the final gate and notices one of the bolts is loose. He stops to adjust it, supporting the hinge with strong hands. In the quiet--and in time with the music--he hears the distant chopping of wood.

Jack is surprised and looks up. He releases his grip on the fence and the bolt falls into the scrub.

JACK

What in...

His words cut off as he bends to find the bolt. It's long gone in the weeds, so he leans the gate as closed as possible and keeps on toward the house.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Jack is still a distance from the house when he catches a glimpse of Nellie, in her robe, chopping firewood. He pauses and watches in confusion as she lays down the axe, gathers an armful of wood and goes back inside.

JACK

What is she...?

He moves forward a little faster, crunching through the brush.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Jack comes into the kitchen and stops to remove his mucky boots. Nellie is nowhere in sight.

NELLIE (O.S.)

I'll be back.

Jack hurries with his boots, calling out to stop her.

JACK

Nel, wait...

His boot pops off and he hurries to catch her. He's not accustomed to moving so fast.

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

Nellie is at the front door, changed out of her robe and in her jacket and cap. She holds her keys and is opening the front door.

NELLIE

You need anything?

Jack blinks. He stares at their tiny wood stove, or rather at the tall pile of wood stacked next to it. It's a ridiculous amount of firewood threatening to topple into the middle of the floor.

NELLIE

Jack, you need anything while I'm out?

Jack looks up and answers in a daze.

JACK

A 1/2 inch bolt for the gate.

NELLIE

2 inch length?

Jack nods and Nellie is gone.

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

A small fire crackles in the wood stove. The day has grown just too warm for a fire, so Jack sweats a little as he sits near, playing the Sweetheart song on his guitar.

He is deep in thought, working the strumming and picking pattern from earlier, while he gazes from the fire to the stack of firewood, which is now missing a few pieces.

He pauses, stares for a moment deep into the fire, then sets his guitar on its stand.

Jack pulls a chunky smart-phone from his pocket and with a few clumsy jabs navigates to a search browser.

He enters "d-i-m-e-n-t-i-a."

The browser is just returning a search for "Did you mean *dementia*?" when the front door starts to creak open.

Jack turns his phone off and shoves it back into his pocket before Nellie and her packages burst into the room.

NELLIE

Here, take these, quick.

Jack jumps to grab a plastic sack from her. She bustles away with the rest of her bags as he looks in consternation at the sack.

Quadruple-bagged, it is full of dozens of 1/2" x 2" bolts.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Jack comes hesitantly into the kitchen, the bag hanging heavily from his hand.

Nellie bustles in good cheer around the kitchen, humming the Sweetheart tune while she puts away groceries and pulls out lunch fixings. She slaps a pot on the stove and a can of soup on the counter. She is oblivious of Jack's gaze.

JACK

Nel, I...

Nellie plops two styrofoam bowls on the table, some plastic spoons and a bag of plastic cups.

NELLIE

Soup for lunch?

Jack barely shrugs. He moves forward a step, raises a hand as if to stop her ceaseless movement, but she's back to the stove.

Nellie pauses long enough to open the can of soup and slop it into the pan.

Jack takes the opportunity and comes to her side. He looks down at her, places a hand on her shoulder.

JACK

Nel, maybe you could sit down...

Nellie places the pot under the sink faucet and with a quick jerk of the handle splashes some water into the soup.

She throws it back onto the stove burner and at nearly the same time spins away from Jack.

He follows her a few steps as she pulls a big water pitcher from the refrigerator.

JACK

I think you're not feeling...

Nellie passes Jack and carries the pitcher to the table.

NELLIE

Oh, Jack, I feel fine. Water?

Jack doesn't respond, but Nellie picks up the bag of cups and opens it. Jack fiddles with the bag of bolts, his hands twisting the straps until they are mangled.

JACK

Nel, I'm worried about you.

Nellie turns and gives him her smile, along with a look of reassurance. He drinks it in hopefully, but she turns back and starts setting cup after cup on the table.

Jack's face falls. He drops the bag of bolts on a counter, then tries to stop Nellie.

JACK

Nellie, no. You're not thinking right.

Nellie plops down three cups, then pats his cheek.

NELLIE

You need to drink water, Jack. You never do drink enough water.

Jack tries to get the cups from her hand, but she's a hurricane of cup-setting.

JACK

We don't need a hundred cups of water. You don't see what you're doing.

Nellie stops and surveys the table. The bag is empty in her hands. She says, with a slow look at him:

NELLIE

It looks more like fifty, Jack.

She places the bag on the counter and picks up the water pitcher. She intends to fill the cups. Jack shakes his head. Nellie reaches toward the cups. Jack steps forward.

NELLIE

You need to drink water, Jack. You never drink enough water.

Jack is frozen. His hands fidget, strumming an invisible guitar, the motion of his soul trying to calm itself.

Nellie blinks at him.

NELLIE

The soup's boiling.

Jack turns to see the soup boiling furiously, and Nellie begins pouring, humming again the Sweetheart tune.

It's too much for Jack. He rushes to the door, shoves on his boots, and escapes the house.

EXT. FARMSTEAD - DAY

Jack reaches the broken gate, which falls over as he opens it. He pulls it aside and it hangs helplessly as he rushes through.

Past the pens, past the cow stalls, past the final fence, Jack rushes through his farm.

He strides recklessly toward the canyon, struggling against panic.

EXT. CANYON EDGE - DAY

Jack careens to a stop a few feet away from the edge of the canyon.

Deep below, a river winds its way through the canyon bed, graced by verdant stands of trees and the occasional farm field or spreading lawn.

The canyon walls hem the deep valley as silent, strong guardians. They are timeless caretakers, holding out the strong winds that blow Jack's sparse hair and push him toward the canyon edge.

Shakily, Jack finds a perch on a nearby rocky outcropping left behind by an ancient volcanic eruption. The rocks are still now, their fire long extinguished.

Jack follows the trail of the river with his gaze. It goes on and on, disappearing behind a bend of the canyon.

Without realizing, Jack is again humming the Sweetheart song. His hands move slightly in the strumming pattern--his soul plays the music without even needing his conscious mind.

JACK'S FACE

Jack stares out at the canyon, letting his worries wash over him. He looks and his mind catches the tune, the Sweetheart melody that...

QUICK FLASHBACK

A girl in white swings on the arms of a young man wearing a cowboy hat and dressed in his finest. She is the happiest girl in the world, and he is the happiest boy. The Sweetheart song plays joyously around them.

BACK TO SCENE

JACK'S FACE

His worry has been replaced by a sudden, astonished realization.

EXT. CANYON EDGE - DAY

Jack drops his gaze from the canyon to his hands, still strumming silently. It seems like maybe they knew all along.

With no time to spare, Jack hurries back to the house.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Jack nearly runs across the yard.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Nellie sips her soup, surrounded by fifty plastic cups of water. She's filled every last one.

The door opens and Jack walks in. He steps across the kitchen in his mucky boots, but Nellie pays no mind, just looks up and waits.

JACK

Fifty years ago I married the prettiest girl in Idaho.

Nellie gives him her smile again. She is the same young girl, the happiest girl in the world.

Jack takes a few more steps.

JACK

I guess I don't have anything to give you.

Nellie rises to meet him.

NELLIE

I guess we gave each other fifty years.

Jack and Nellie move forward into each other's arms. They've hugged so many times, the fit is perfect.

Jack pulls back slightly.

10.

JACK

I guess I could give you fifty of these.

And he plants a big, wet, smacking kiss on her cheek.

Nellie giggles and pulls back, but Jack is too quick and gets another on her other cheek.

The fifty cups of water jostle and spill as they chase each other around the kitchen.

FADE OUT.