Ukulele in the Snow

A woman kneels in the snow before a broken ukulele. She is crying. The ukulele is lying face up. The hollow body has a long crack in it that runs from the sound hole to a depression further down that could have been caused by something like a fist, or a knee. The neck has been severed from the body and lies in the snow at a ninety-degree angle from it. Only the strings keep the neck and body together. And only two strings. The other two strings have snapped, and splay wildly from the head.

The kneeling woman is wearing a long dark coat that ruffles where it meets the snow. She's sitting on her boots, which we can't see, but can assume are boots. At the same time, her weight is slightly shifted forwards, towards the ukulele. Her two hands are both submerged into the snow on either side of her. It seems like she's leaning on her fists, and we imagine this is so, because if she were leaning on her open palms, then she would have to be leaning further. But she's not really leaning at all, is she? Her back is pretty straight. She's more… melting.

Her crying also lends credence to the idea that her hands are in fists. She is not looking directly at the ukulele. Rather, she is looking a bit to her left, a bit more towards us, as if looking for someone to blame, or someone to tell her that what she's experiencing is not real — just a dream, joke, or hallucination. In that stage of grief called anger, where you reject reality, where you'd rather be told you're going crazy than believe your eyes. This woman found a broken ukulele in the snow, and it has shaken her world. She pounds it with her fists, gets nowhere, and now she's just clenching them, looking for something else, some other reality to latch on to…

The viewer who tries to make sense of the painting asks two questions. The most obvious one is what the ukulele is doing in the snow. Ukuleles

are summer instruments. Hawaiian. A subconscious relative of hookah on the Quad, of youth hostels in Buenos Aires. The other question is why the woman is crying. And the two questions, the viewer who thinks about it long enough will realize, are inextricably linked. If we answer what the broken ukulele is doing in the snow, we can figure out why the woman is crying. And vice versa. But one path, we see, is far clearer than the other — that which starts with the crying woman. Because we've seen a woman cry before. We have a lifetime's worth of clues for why a woman might cry. For a ukulele in the snow, we have only the clues in this painting. Only this woman.

We start with the basics. She looks middle-aged. Mother-aged. She's a daughter herself, yes, possibly someone's sister, too. Sure, yes. But would her elderly mother or father, or her middle-aged sibling, play the ukulele? No. Not very likely. Only a child, a teenager, or a young adult who is young enough to be the woman's child, would play the ukulele. So, as the painting now quite clearly suggests, the ukulele belongs to a child. The woman's child, or a child the woman knows. But likely her own child.

We move on. Having established this important new premise, we can now aim for a new conclusion. What happened to her child? What does the broken ukulele in the snow tell us about what brought his mother to her knees, what horrible thing could have happened to her child? Was he kidnapped, beaten, did he freeze to death, what? Did he use the ukulele in a sword fight, as a weapon in a snowball fight, and now he's in danger, or dead already, or someone else is dead, he killed someone, killed them with the ukulele…

We don't know.

We only know what the mother knows. And clearly she has no idea.