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# Playing from memory: Essays on music in life

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**Playing from Memory:**

Essays on Music in Life

by

**Tamara Ghattas**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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at DePaul University

June 2010

Strange Bellows  
*or,*  
A Case for Accordions in America

I.

A 1986 *Far Side* cartoon shows a split screen that straddles the realms of the afterlife. In the upper panel, Saint Peter stands among the clouds, shepherding the recently departed into heaven. To each person he hands a stringed instrument and says, “Welcome to heaven ... here’s your harp.”

In the box below, it’s the devil himself facing a line of sinners on their way into hell, but he has a different gift to pass out. The caption in the bottom panel is, “Welcome to hell ... here’s your accordion.”

I’m intrigued by this cartoon because of all it leaves out. The implication, of course, is that the most heinous auditory punishment imaginable is the sound of accordions for all eternity, in saecula saeculorum. But I wonder: if residents of heaven are expected to make beautiful music on their harps right away, does that mean that in the fires of hell, the bottom dwellers would instantly acquire accordion skills too? Part of the punch line, I suppose, is that it would hardly matter.

In any case, it’s clear that public opinion on the instrument—to the extent that there *is* a public opinion of the accordion—is skewed toward hostility. Even my cats know this. The sound

of my accordions makes them cower and their hair stand on end. One of them, the smart one, knows the instruments by sight, and when she sees me get near one, streaks out of the room and under the bed until the whole ordeal is over.<sup>1</sup>

In the early twentieth century, Ambrose Bierce listed “ACCORDION” in his *Devil’s Dictionary* as “n.: An instrument in harmony with the sentiments of an assassin.” Mark Twain called it the “stomach Steinway.” And just recently, Jed Babbin, an undersecretary in the first Bush administration, was quoted in the dailies for taking a dig at France by way of one of that country’s favorite instruments—he told the host of *Hardball*, “Going to war without France is like going deer hunting without an accordion. You just leave a lot of useless noisy baggage behind.”<sup>2</sup>

Just the word “accordion” can conjure images of leiderhosen and farcical polka dances, caricatures of bumbling drunks or effeminate, wax-mustachioed beret wearers. The modern accordionist Guy Klucevsek, in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, has recalled that in the late twentieth century, the accordion “was the most unhip instrument you could possibly be playing.” For years, despite his great skill, his only professional engagements were for advertisers who featured his instrument as a punch line: “When they needed something that sounded really square, they would use an accordion. I once did a commercial for Polly-O

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, when my sister-in-law was pregnant, she swore that the baby loved the sound, citing a noticeable increase in kicking when I played for them. It occurs to me, though, that this interpretation is probably unfair in ascribing intention to the fetus, who might as easily have been banging a tiny fist on her little womb-ceiling to get us to knock off the infernal racket.

<sup>2</sup> In a rather nice bit of irony, this quotation has been frequently misattributed on the Internet to the far more quotable General Norman Schwarzkopf, which, while I’m sure it hasn’t ruffled Mr. Babbin’s feathers one bit, ought to show him a thing or two about being overlooked.

mozzarella cheese: they used me to do the music for their competitor’s cheese, which was hard and dry and tasted bad.”

And it’s not just cheap jingle writers—even such a luminary as Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Proulx has drawn on the idea of the accordion as an emblem for everything awful in the world. In her novel *Accordion Crimes*, all the characters through whose hands a certain accordion passes end up in lives of desperation and rottenness—lives that surely end in hell, where, perhaps, more accordions wait.

All this negativity has certainly been for some time the prevalent narrative surrounding accordionists in America. But I do owe its perpetuators a debt: the popular perception of the instrument is largely what attracted me to it in the first place.

I was the kind of teenager who wore a propeller beanie to school because it was so aggressively weird that it seemed cool.<sup>3</sup> I had different instincts than most of my classmates. When kids turned sixteen in our well-to-do Boston suburb, they often wanted cars for their birthdays. I didn’t know how to drive, so I wasn’t in the running for one, even if my parents had not been the sort of people whose own cars were as old as their teenage daughter. What I longed for, instead, was an accordion.

I don’t know what my parents made of this request at the time, but bless their hearts for indulging it. The week before my birthday, we took the old Volvo way up north into the forests of New Hampshire, a hundred miles from home, where a specialty store in a tiny town could offer what I wanted: a beautiful, full-sized Italian accordion. It was used, but its ivory-colored lacquer

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, so was my husband—a common bond we joyously discovered several years into our relationship—which goes to show that while most kids in high school will flick your propeller with their finger and then sneer at you, the weirdos do eventually find each other.

gleamed like mother-of-pearl, and its 72 buttons and 34 piano-style keys seemed to move up and down by themselves, promising, *Someday, you will learn to play us, and it will be amazing.*

## II.

Accordions are in some ways easy and in some ways quite difficult to play. They come in many sizes,<sup>4</sup> but the most common one in the United States, the 72-button piano accordion, is a heavy instrument. For a diminutive person like me, the size and bulk are the first hurdles to navigate in learning to play. My main accordion—the one I got when I turned 16—weighs 27 pounds, about the same as a small toddler, which may not seem like much until it’s dangling from your shoulders while you try to simultaneously pump it with your arms and perform dextrous acts with your fingertips. I couldn’t play it at all until I purchased a set of thick, wide shoulder straps that provided good weight distribution, as well as a buckle that ran between them across my back, turning the whole apparatus into a kind of harness.

Playing the accordion uses the whole body. The technical component of playing takes place in the fingers, but accordion keys and buttons are not touch sensitive; that is, the pressure with which they are pushed does not affect the sound produced. They are essentially binary

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<sup>4</sup> The smallest accordion I ever saw fit in a shoe. I was watching a Russian folk trio who played a host of different instruments and who were dressed in lavish traditional costume, with flowing silk, gold embroidery, and fabulous bright red boots. Throughout one song, the accordionist amused us by repeatedly switching to smaller and smaller accordions, all without missing a beat of music. Finally, when we could see no more instruments for him to play, he whipped off one of his red boots and played it. Improbably, it seemed to contain a tiny accordion.

switches, either on or off. All the expression in accordion playing is made by the arms and the torso in varying the motion of the opening and closing bellows. A light squeeze; a muscular squeeze; a slow, drawn-out squeeze all lead to different shades of volume and timbre.

The accordion is played blind: you cannot see your hands, not even a little bit, while you play. Like those on a computer keyboard, a few of the buttons are dimpled as reference points, but from there your hands are on their own. Every single time I play in public, before I start, I have a transient sense of panic while my left hand flails around the buttons, feeling for a dimple. I can't play until I find it, and the silent, expectant audience has no notion of why I'm just standing there. But then I land safely on the marker button, and I'm home.

Because of this hands-first technique, the accordion, more than any other instrument I know, relies on muscle memory. The hands must know—*know*—what each interval feels like, what shape every melody takes under the fingertips. I don't find it surprising, then, that the instrument is so popular in folk music, which in all cultures tells people's stories without pretense or artifice. What better instrument to do this than one on which the chest, the shoulders, and the whole core of the musician provide the details? And what better instrument than one where every repetition of an old song makes the music more and more ingrained in the body itself?

Of the various styles of accordion, the folkier instruments, the ones used almost exclusively by people native to a traditional culture, are usually the easiest and most intuitive to play. Many of them are diatonic, meaning they are equipped to play in only one key. Dispensing with all the extra buttons needed to play chromatic notes simplifies the instrument considerably and makes it smaller and easier to manage.

Indeed, from its inception, the accordion was intended to be easy for anyone to play. The man usually credited as having built the first true accordion, and giving it that name, was the Austrian Cyrill Demian. In a manuscript that accompanied his original invention, he wrote, “Even an amateur of music can play the loveliest and most moving chords of 3, 4 and 5 voices with very little practice.” It is as though he intended his creation to be a folk instrument—an instrument of the people, one that wouldn’t be studied in conservatories or taught to young students but learned in quiet moments while sitting on a doorstep and practiced at impromptu social gatherings. It was an instrument that relied on technique, yes, but also on the performer’s ability to translate subtle movements of the body into songs and stories.

Some of these details can be lost in the narrative of accordion as a novelty instrument, as an old-fashioned, unfashionable sort of toy, but they shouldn’t be. They are intrinsic to the playing technique, which offers a unique experience to the player as well as the listener. The action of accordion playing lends itself easily to metaphor. The in-and-out motion recalls ocean waves, sex, a rocking cradle. The accordion is attached to the body, held close over the heart like a baby. Playing the accordion is like engaging in a long, repetitive hug.

### III.

It would not, I think, have surprised my early classmates that I would one day become an accordion player. Like the accordion itself, I had a hard time making people like me as a kid. School was always easy for me, and I was endlessly raising my hand and inserting my opinion



about everything. And I was odd looking—hefty, with too much hair and no fashion sense whatsoever. My favorite things to wear were oversized sweatshirts emblazoned with office-wall one-liners like “I Have Enough Money to Last Me the Rest of My Life (If I Don’t Buy Anything)” and “If Your Feet Smell and Your Nose Runs, You’re Upside Down!,” which simply cracked me up.

I had friends, but they were all in the same off-kilter boat with me. We were in the band, the choirs, and the drama club and hung out in the classrooms of our favorite teachers at lunch to avoid the roiling anarchy of the cafeteria.

One day in eighth grade I came home from a school event in tears because some cute boys had laughed and thrown popcorn at me, totally unprovoked, while I was trying to play a video game. I genuinely didn't understand why someone would do that. If I had been acting like a jerk it would have been one thing, but undeserved snack-food abuse was beyond my thirteen-year-old ken.

My mother gently explained to me that being smarter and more interesting than other kids was actually a good thing but that other people might not see it that way for a while.

“When? When will they?” I blubbered.

She bit her lip. “Well, for me, it wasn’t really until college.”

I wailed. High school was going be hell.

## IV.

Cyrril Demian was an instrument maker of Armenian descent who lived in Vienna and gained a patent for his invention in Paris in 1829. So just as soon as it had come into being, the accordion already had an eclectic and international parentage. And it was not long before European emigrants, sailors, and colonists would carry it to every continent.

The instrument established itself in cultures as far-flung as those of Ireland, Mexico, Argentina, Madagascar, and Korea. There is even a tradition of accordion playing in some Inuit villages of Arctic Canada: nineteenth-century British and American whaling crews that docked in the far-northern harbors played music at local dances when the work day ended, and their accordions became a traded commodity.

The accordion is not, relatively speaking, an old instrument; yet it is integral to many much older folk traditions around the world. In all these places, folk musicians embraced the accordion when they encountered it and assimilated it into their existing musical traditions, often adapting the instrument to suit their needs. They must have loved it for its portability and versatility—outside of the piano, it is unique in its ability to produce chords and a melodic line at the same time,<sup>5</sup> and you can take it anywhere.

So why has the instrument been so reviled of late in our own culture? Perhaps it is too complex a physical object to capture the public imagination. An accordion consists of two heavy boxes containing sets of metal reeds, the boxes joined by pleated bellows. Each box has several rows of buttons or a piano-style keyboard on its surface, which control valves inside. When the

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<sup>5</sup> Well, okay, the harp probably qualifies too—it's not heaven's official instrument for nothing. But just try carrying that thing around your neck for one minute.

bellows are squeezed and buttons are pressed simultaneously, the valves open to let air flow over the reeds, vibrating them and producing sound.

Compare this with the instruments we hear on the radio. The guitar, classic instrument of American folk, is simplicity itself: pluck a string, and you have a note. There are only six strings to manage—or, for the truly uncomplicated, four, on the bass guitar. With drums, the maneuvers may be intricate, but the basic concept of hitting things with sticks hasn't changed since the earliest humans started making music. And the piano? Yes, it has 88 keys, but at least they are all lined up in a proper row and you can see from one end to the other, with no swarming ranks of tiny buttons to discomfit the senses.

When it comes to guitars and drums, we go to fantasy camps and learn to be rock stars, but with accordions, it's "Welcome to hell." There is something about the accordion that demands too much from us to understand. Like my teenaged self, it doesn't wear fashionable clothes or act cool. It always gets picked last for gym class, even though it would tell you a great story if you just let it.

## V.

When I got my first accordion at 16, I was fairly private about it. I took enough flak at school for being in the marching band and playing flute—*flute*, a svelte, ethereally tuneful instrument well loved by history. I wasn't going to push my luck. But I did dream that once I got

good on accordion, really good, all kinds of people would be knocking down my door, begging me to play.<sup>6</sup>

I was excited at the time about the band They Might Be Giants, a duo of men both named John, whose main instruments were guitar and accordion. They were a couple of guys from Massachusetts, like I was, who wrote bizarre, cryptic songs about animals and mythology and sticking it to the Man—nothing like the typical Top-40 fare. And they looked like regular people, without the *de rigueur* frosted hair tips or matching high-style outfits of the 90s. I was in love with the way this band embraced their offbeat identities and, through the power of their storytelling, translated their intellectual lyrics and this totally unfashionable instrument they played into quite accessible pop music. Every fall in high school, my friends and I would see them play in a sprawling park along the Charles River in Boston, and watching the accordionist play to crowds of cheering fans made me wonder if I could do that too.

In truth, high school wasn't exactly hell, accordion or no, but I still looked forward to college as a place where I hoped I would find more people who were interested in the kind of things I was interested in. And I attempted to use the accordion to get there.

At my competitive high school, it was considered a big deal to show off all your extracurricular talents in your college applications. So to display my well-rounded spectrum of talent, I made a tape of myself playing my serious instruments, flute and piano. My instruments were far from unique—everyone and their sister played them. How could I set myself apart from all the other musical students? I needed one more piece.

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<sup>6</sup> This sentiment calls to mind my favorite accordion joke, which I like especially because it dates itself to the pre-cell phone era:

*Q. What's the definition of an optimist?*

*A. An accordionist with a pager.*

I had already sent application materials to the University of Chicago that fall, during the early-acceptance round, so my tape wasn't ready by their deadline. But three other prestigious institutions that winter were treated to my accordion rendition of "Particle Man," by They Might Be Giants. You may remember this little gem as a song acted out by a cartoon duck on *Tiny Toon Adventures*<sup>7</sup> that subsequently inspired a generation of nerdy teenagers to buy a record for lyrics like

*Is he a dot or is he a speck?*

*When he's underwater, does he get wet?*

*Or does the water get him instead?*

*Nobody knows—Particle Man.*

I didn't sing along, but I figured the irony of pairing the song with my other pieces would come across. I was pretty sure I would be the only person to put something like this on her tape after music of Mozart, Debussy, and Chopin.

But when I first hit "Record" and tried to work out the notes, I quickly realized I had overestimated my technical ability on the instrument. After all, "Particle Man" is inspired by polka music, and it contains some fast, virtuosic passages. I wasn't quite ready to play to those cheering fans yet.

I settled for using two tracks of a four-track recorder to lay down the parts for my left and right hands separately. It was cheating, and even with the cheat it took many attempts, but at last

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<sup>7</sup> "Particle Man" has also been regularly featured on the L.A. novelty radio program *The Dr. Demento Show*, whose other staple numbers include Adam Sandler fart-fests, the parodies of Weird Al, and that "Fish Heads" song. The online *All Music Guide*, which is in general quite laudatory of They Might Be Giants, calls "Particle Man" "one of those songs whose fame outweighs its musical merits," which strikes me as a fair assessment.

I was pleased with the result. I was playing accordion! I slapped the recording onto the end of my tape as a grand finale and sent the whole mess out to the Ivy League.

## VI.

In the end, after all my work on my application tape, Chicago—the only place where no one had heard me play accordion—was the only school to offer me admission. Whether academia was not ready for accordion (assuming that my tape was even listened to at the Ivies) or there were other more pertinent reasons for my rejections didn't trouble me much. Chicago turned out to be a good fit for me. It was a place where, as my mother had promised, you could be sure your peers would be more interested in your ideas than in your manner of personal presentation.

At Chicago, I joined an ensemble that sang Russian folk songs. I liked the other singers in the group, and for the first time, I dared to pick up the accordion in front of people. *Mirabile dictu*, it actually seemed to *raise* their opinion of me. From then on, being an accordionist was part of who I was.

I traveled with the choir to Russia one summer to study the songs with local musicians, and it was there that I encountered my first true folk accordion. One leisurely afternoon, a few of my friends and I sat on a rickety wooden dock, dipping our toes into Lake Baikal as we chain-smoked<sup>8</sup> some cheap cigarettes with Sergey, one of our hosts. He had with him a small diatonic

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<sup>8</sup> I'm not normally a smoker, but in Russia, cigarettes choose you.

folk accordion they called *garmoshka*, and with what little English he had, he showed me how to play it. It has buttons on both sides, which is less friendly than the piano-key layout of the most popular Western accordions, but it wasn't built for Western music. The chords available in the left-hand buttons were just the ones used in the common structures of most Russian songs; everything else was dispensed with, allowing a much smaller and easily managed instrument. I appreciated the direct correlation of form and function, as though a process of evolution that had begun with the first accordion-like instruments had taken place, leading to this thing I was holding that was exactly suited to its job and, unlike its Western cousins, fit right into the culture surrounding it.

Before we left Russia, Sergey sold our choir that very instrument, and it's sitting in my home office right now. I play it often with the choir, which I now direct.

In a way, the accordion and I have grown up together; neither of us are what we were when I was a teenager. I don't listen to my old favorite band, They Might Be Giants, that much anymore. I wouldn't say that they don't respect the accordion, but the jokey way they use it, playing it with tongue in cheek in songs like "Particle Man," seems to contribute to its being pigeonholed as a novelty instrument rather than the versatile, beautiful musical tool that it is. I was attracted to this inside joke as a teenager because it seemed subversive in its deliberate oddness, like my bright, silly propeller hats.

But I do continue to listen to a number of bands that feature accordion—today, the instrument is finally seeing a resurgence in popular music. The Internet, globalization, and the ease with which we can now travel around the earth seem to have led arts lovers toward greater interest in international culture, and ethnic music and folk traditions in general are enjoying

unusual fashion. The musicians leading the accordion's return to the popular stage are steeped in the adoptive folk traditions where the accordion is at home. Bands like the Arcade Fire, Gogol Bordello, Beirut, Flogging Molly, and many others play the instrument with a fully straight face, without a hint of "Look! An accordion!" And when they adopt this attitude, so do listeners—all these bands get radio play and sell a lot of records.

As for me, I play my accordions regularly with the Russian folk choir. I'm still no expert at it, but most people can't tell the difference.<sup>9</sup> The awed interest I sometimes get from audience members at concerts and new people I meet continues to surprise me. And strangely, I've noticed that when you play one accordion, other ones begin to come out of the woodwork. Once I began playing in public, there were suddenly broken accordions everywhere that people wanted me to examine or have, old family items no one wanted to throw out or spontaneous rummage-sale purchases that had been languishing in attics since God knows when. At one point, in addition to my two good accordions, I had access to another four instruments in varying states of dysfunction. I'd wager that there are more unplayable accordions in our country at this moment than there are working ones. But they are emerging from those dusty nooks under a different kind of cultural gaze than when they were stowed there, and they are ready to be tuned up and returned to the hands of storytellers. Something of that long-dormant spark that caught our imagination a hundred years ago is igniting again.

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<sup>9</sup> I was once asked, after a performance in which I had played just one simple song, whether I was available to give accordion lessons. I said, "Honey, I need those lessons myself." As Jay Presson Allen wrote in the stage version of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, "I am like Balzac's dancing dog ... it isn't the dance that's so wondrous, but that it's done by a dog." So it is with anyone who can manage to wreak the slightest tune from the still inscrutable instrument.



Today, the accordion has the opportunity to be part of a much less confining narrative than that of its past. Soon, I hope school children will be encouraged to study it as much as violin, piano, or guitar and that they will do so without fearing to end up on the receiving end of popcorn flinging. And when they play it, I think they'll learn something about navigating a culture that draws stark lines between what it likes and what it doesn't—fashionable and unfashionable, cool kids and nerds, heaven and hell.



## Love at 100 Watts

We had never spoken before, but one afternoon at the end of a linguistics class at the University of Chicago, a pugnacious-looking student named Stefan followed me out the door and asked me to tea. I was momentarily taken aback—first, I wasn't used to attention from near-strangers; and then: tea, really?—but in my bewilderment, I said yes.

I had noticed him in class already. He had an elfin look about him, being barely taller than I was, with pale Slavic skin and a cloud of white-blond hair, a babyish face with an upturned nose and slender lips. But his explosive, aggressive voice gave him a big presence, as did his posture, which seemed constantly ready to spring, like a nervous animal.

Still, there was something peculiarly unthreatening, if not gentle, about him—coffee was too strong for his constitution, and after 5:00 p.m. he took only herbal tea. Our first encounters were an hour in a café; later, a movie; nothing more. I was surprised to find he did not make me nervous, despite his disparaging opinions about everything, which he took great relish in pronouncing with the total confidence of a narcissist. His forehead was constantly furrowed in examining something, and at times I got bogged down by his negativity. But his orthogonal alignment to the world made the fact that he did seem to like me all the more flattering and astonishing.

We met after classes to drink tea and talk about music, of which he was a voracious consumer, as well as a habitual collector. He favored the tangibility of CDs and vinyl over

digitized music, and when we'd go back to his dorm room in the evenings, I would page through his collection, which filled four enormous drawer-sized CD notebooks, while he'd put something on that I just had to hear.

Before long, we were together constantly. I didn't agree with everything he had to say, but he made for an interesting intellectual opponent. And I was attracted to his self-assurance, which made all his strong opinions seem, on the surface, unassailable. His authority on music, for one, trumped mine by the sheer scope and force of it. He and most of his friends were on the staff of the campus radio station, a group of students who aimed to set the standards for taste in music and style. They all exuded the same kind of reserved cool: the guys had mussed haircuts that begged you to smooth them with your hands, and they paid just enough attention to you when you spoke; the girls were waifish, quirkily attractive, and well dressed. And everyone seemed to understand critical theory. To me, those were good qualifications for taking a person's advice on what bands were interesting and what I should listen to only in secret.

I'll admit it: every major change in my musical tastes has been directly precipitated by some boy. It's embarrassing and unfeminist, but it's true. I acquired Radiohead's entire catalog in one furious weekend at college because my boyfriend liked them and I had pretended to know who they were. When I finally heard them, their textured guitar sound rocked my world, and for months I listened to nothing else. In time the boyfriend stopped calling, but *OK Computer* is still in my heavy rotation.

It was the same with the sexily effeminate goth guy who took me dancing at an industrial club, and the moony philosophy student who loved ambient electronic music. Nick Hornby wrote in *High Fidelity* that between two people, "what really matters is what you like, not what

you *are* like,” and believe me, I wanted this to be true. Experience, however, has testified otherwise to me. None of these affairs lasted long, despite my assimilation of my companions’ musical interests, and sometimes theirs of mine. But I wouldn’t erase them if I had the chance, especially not the few dysfunctional months with Stefan that opened my eyes to the world of independent music and radio.

Stefan’s generosity with his collection and his time was partly from wanting to give me things and partly meant as a corrective measure, to rehabilitate my tastes. He didn’t think much of the music I was into then, which was mostly major-label artists targeted at brainy people, like Elvis Costello, Ben Folds, and Modest Mouse—although we shared the Radiohead obsession I had picked up earlier. The first time we kissed was to Radiohead’s first album, which I argued was underrated by critics in light of their subsequent work. He disagreed, of course, but I could tell he appreciated the boldness of the claim.

I wasn’t about to give up the music I already enjoyed, but I wanted to like what he gave me so that *he* would like *me*. He burned me whole spools of CDs, which I took months to work through, putting on one after another late at night in my room while I did my homework. Some of it didn’t grab me. But oh, the stuff that did—angular post-punk and dreamy ’80s pop, yelping Japanese girls and soaring, swelling fuzzed-out guitars. There were whole genres of rock that I had never conceived of. And music had always been fundamental to my life! It was like walking into your own home and realizing that all the rooms you had lived in were just parts of a bigger room inside a giant house you’d never noticed there before.

And he didn’t just give me the music. It was a “teach a man to fish” kind of situation—he also showed me the tools he used to learn about new bands. They were his constant connections

to the outside world. Sometimes when I woke in the morning, I would find him already up at my computer in undershirt and briefs, following links through the online music listings in the *Chicago Reader* and cross-checking their reviews on Pitchfork Music.

But his first and best source of music was local: the record library at the radio station where he was a DJ. Once a week, he got to go on air at the tiny studio on campus for two hours to play records and then talk about them—sort of a summary of his perfect activity, really. One of his shows fell on Valentine’s Day the winter we met, and at the end he played three different songs for three different girls. Two were his exes (whom he had described to me at length), and one was me, and he said my name on the air, the actual syllables of it, shyly; I listened as it tumbled off his small lips, through the microphone, and out into the world. The song was “True Love” by X: *True love, true love is the devil’s crowbar / and it pulls apart your wishbone, but you get to wish.* I was a goner.

Before I knew Stefan, I had hardly been aware that the university had its own radio station, WHPK 88.5 FM, staffed and managed entirely by students and a few other community members. It intrigued me immediately. I liked listening to Stefan’s voice over the airwaves—it gave me a feeling of secret celebrity, to have a personal relation to a public voice. He sounded different on the radio. His voice was subdued and languid, nothing like his usual face-to-face brassiness, but more like the way he mumbled at night when we were falling asleep. His radio voice, and the side of him I knew it to reveal, was a private thrill.

I started listening when he wasn’t on, too. The station’s programming was sometimes experimental, and on occasion I would turn it on to hear unrecognizable noise or abstract,

monotonous drones that made me check that the tuner was working right. But other times, I heard a lot of the cool independent music I had been listening to for the past months, bands that I suddenly recognized and new ones that I made notes to find out more about.

It seemed to me that radio was like an anonymous romance between the DJ and the listener, but one that cut straight to the music sharing, without any awkward courtship rituals. In the middle of the night, if you were all alone, from either end of the airwaves you could find some human connection across space. I started wondering, as I listened to the DJs with all their various cadences, what it would feel like if that were my voice. I wanted to experience this connection from the other side, to be for once the person spreading the word instead of hearing it. My music collection was in the midst of exponential growth, so I was well prepared to helm my own radio show.

I thought Stefan might be dismissive of the idea, as though I was merely imitating him, but he seemed in fact to approve of my taking a step into the world he inhabited. Late on a Monday night that spring, he took me to his regular show to look around and learn to use the equipment.

The offices and studio of WHPK are hidden away in the tower of the university's student center, a gray Gothic building patterned after halls at Oxford and Cambridge. The station sits just below some storage lockers and a small bell chamber that houses a few rusty change-ringing bells. During the day, a bell ringer or two would occasionally make their way down the narrow hallway that passes by the air studio, but when Stefan and I slipped in that night, it was two in the morning. Once the previous DJ had left, we were all alone, preparing to play music in the darkest hour of night.

The air studio was smaller than I had expected—just big enough for a couple of rolling task chairs surrounded by three walls of shelving and machinery. The equipment looked dauntingly complex. The mixer board that stretched across the entire front wall resembled the console of an airplane cockpit, bearing an unsettling number of sliders, knobs, buttons, and dials, variously lit and unlit. The whole thing was made of a grimy beige plastic that called to mind computer equipment from the 1980s.

Left of the board, there was a tower of CD players and tape decks stacked up to the ceiling, and three turntables lined up side by side. A small bookshelf held several brittle-looking three-ring binders and a pile of cassettes, each the size of a brick, of a format I had never seen before.

And through the glass window of the studio was the heart of everything: the music library, a 360° panorama of floor-to-ceiling vinyl records. There was a rolling ladder for reaching the top shelves, and several large padlocked cabinets in the middle of the room were filled with CDs. Every inch of the walls and tables was covered with stickers and graffiti, so layered and worn that it all blended into an illegible patina. Most of the records had stickers on them filled with comments on the albums from DJs past and present. When Stefan's first song finished and he announced that we were listening to WHPK 88.5 FM, the Pride of the South Side, it gave me a thrill to see all around me the evidence of so much dedication to what I was about to learn.

WHPK's programming mission is simple and has been the same since the station's inception: to expose listeners to music that's outside of the mainstream. It was reputedly the first station of any kind in Chicago to give serious attention to rap music. In the 1980s, when rap was generally absent from the dial, several south-side DJs at WHPK devoted regular shows to the



emerging genre, to tremendous response. The *Chicago Tribune* has written of these rap broadcasts, “You'd be hard-pressed to find any current South Side MCs, producers or deejays who didn't grow up obsessively taping WHPK's weekly shows.” The rapper Common even gives the station a shout-out in his song “Nuthin’ to Do”: “Then, ’HPK was the only station that would fuck with rap.”

Whether or not this influence has been inflated in the retelling, it’s the sort of accomplishment that hung in the air at the station and inspired the crew to offer music that listeners wouldn’t have heard before. At times, the result of this philosophy was that obscurity became the primary measure by which Stefan and many of the other DJs judged the worth of songs—a rubric that sometimes defied common sense but certainly provided for some interesting programming.

Once Stefan had settled into the show, he turned his attention to my instruction. The large number of controls and the thick stacks of paper logs spread out before us in the studio suggested a steep learning curve to becoming a DJ, but Stefan was relaxed, executing all the tasks smoothly while talking to me at the same time. He paid close attention to the by-the-book details imposed by the FCC, of which there were many. You had to keep meticulous records every hour to demonstrate that you had delivered the requisite public service announcements, which must be read without a trace of irony, no matter how hilarious the name of the debilitating disease you were describing. And curiously, you could play songs containing all the filthy words you wanted (hey—it’s art), but not one obscenity must ever cross your own lips, not even to name that nasty track you just played. To prove he was serious, Stefan went on the air and announced the band Fucking Champs as the “Copulating Prizewinners,” a better name in the first place.

He also knew little tricks that made me feel immediately that I, too, knew what I was doing: how to cue the beginning of a vinyl record by spinning it backward under the needle until the sound stopped; how you should turn on the microphone with the volume at zero so the click of the “on” button wouldn’t go out over the airwaves.

When we had covered the procedures, I wandered around the library, pulling out records here and there that looked interesting. I had also brought some music from my own collection, which I insisted Stefan let me play, despite his protests that my too-mainstream stuff wouldn’t pass muster with the other DJs. On the play log where we kept a record of what we aired, he wrote “NOT ME! GIRL!!!” in big letters beside my tracks, and in spite of the insult, I was sort of charmed that he wanted to advertise my presence in that way.

After a while we put our feet up on the counter and just listened to the music. The speakers that hung above our heads were powerful and made the textures rich and present as the music filled up the tiny room. Stefan brought a fifth of rum out of his messenger bag, and we drank it straight from the bottle while the throbbing, wall-of-sound guitars of My Bloody Valentine surrounded us.

Maybe it was the rum, but I suddenly had an acute sense of the simultaneously public and private nature of what we were doing. What went over the airwaves was accessible to anyone with an antenna, but we, the people controlling it, were in secret. When we were outside again, in public, Stefan would shrug me off if I tried to hold his hand. But inside the tiny studio, being together made me part of it, this project of radio that encompassed so much: a role of authority, affiliation with a club of smart and stylish people, a vast repository of knowledge, and the very sound of music itself.

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I had to properly apply to the station to become a DJ, but under Stefan's tutelage, I had gotten a good idea of what music the station liked, and my proposal for a show was quickly accepted. By the summer, right after I had graduated college, I was doing my own show weekly.

I loved being live on air, although the technical bits of the process stymied me on occasion. It was pretty easy to make a mistake that would interrupt the broadcast—the equipment provided few fail-safes against one's own ineptitude. A couple of times I pressed a button on the wrong player and ejected the currently playing CD; other weeks, I managed to broadcast whole segments of music with the volume at zero.

Stefan would have laughed at my clumsiness, but we never did another show together after that one night. He left at the beginning of summer to study in France, and that was more or less the end of our relationship. He stayed in Europe for months longer than he had planned, and when he finally came back to Chicago he was different—distant, and edgier than ever, like he was keeping a secret. He was in town three weeks before he called me, and when we saw each other, he recoiled from my timid hug. I gathered, after the few fragmented conversations he could manage, that it all had to do with one of those other girls he'd played a song for on the radio.

In the year after I graduated, I was terribly lonely. Most of my friends had moved away, and I hadn't had time to make new ones. I liked to play songs on my show that I had gotten from Stefan; it made me recall the feeling of first discovering them, of being liked enough that someone would care to share them with me. I wanted to be that person for someone else, someone anonymous on the other end of the airwaves.

The trouble was, it always seemed dubious whether anyone was listening at all. When the *Chicago Reader* named WHPK the best college station in the city in 2008, they got in a jab, snickering that “it ‘broadcasts’ on 100 watts of sheer willpower.” Harsh, but only a slight exaggeration. The station is sort of a shoestring operation. An average commercial radio station has 50,000 to 100,000 watts of transmitting power; by comparison, WHPK’s handful of watts give the station the broadcast radius of a sneeze. When the wind blows the right way past the antenna, which does its mighty best from its post atop a student dormitory, you can pick up the station three or four miles away.

Consequently, the available listening audience more or less coincides with the university campus—and even given the nocturnal habits of college students, it didn’t seem like a sure bet that anyone would be tuned in at 2:00 a.m. Sometimes I would plead on the air with listeners to call in, but they rarely did. And after all, it had taken me four years on campus before I heard the station even once; many other residents must have been similarly ignorant.

It seemed to me that the element of human interaction, from DJ to listener, was the thing that set radio, as a *show*, apart from a random shuffle on your MP3 player. There were commercial stations that had started to dispense with DJs and left the song selection to a computer, but to me, that took the magic out of a broadcast. I thought of a radio show like a good mix tape (and, like the romantic narrator in *High Fidelity*, I had made many a mix tape), with each song informing the next, creating a musical conversation. Without an audience, who was I talking to? It made me think of Stefan’s useless collection of seven-inch vinyl singles, which just sat as trophies on the shelf because he didn’t own a record player. I hated to think there was no one on the other end of my airwaves.

Stefan didn't return to the station when he was back in Chicago, and we certainly never picked up where we had left off. He was putting different parts of his life behind him, and with some of the opportunities he had shown me, so was I. After a while, we barely talked anymore.

One evening about a year after I had started at WHPK, I arrived a bit early for a morning show, and the DJ on air before me was Stefan's roommate, Tim. We knew each other a little bit from the station, but our main point of conversation had always been Stefan himself. We greeted each other shyly in the record library.

"Oh, hey," he said.

"Hey." I gave a little wave.

He was sorting a large pile of vinyl records. "Uh, so you know Stefan's moving back to New York?" he said, without lifting his eyes from his work.

I had not known it.

"No kidding."

It was only then that I noticed something was wrong in the studio: there was no music playing. In the many times I had come up here, I had never heard it this way. The space seemed different without the life blood of sound running through it; it was just a sort of run-down, dusty room that needed a coat of paint.

"Oh yeah, it looks like the transmitter's broken," Tim said when I commented on the silence. "I mean, you can play whatever you want, but nothing's going out on the air." The station was dead.

Tim began to pack up his music, yanking on the zipper of a ratty canvas backpack to stretch it over the square corners of the record sleeves. “You should probably hang around here for the next person, but, I don’t know, you can just do some homework or whatever,” he offered.

I was a careful planner of my shows, and I’d brought a number of recordings with me, with notes on how I wanted to arrange the program. I could have saved it for a future week, but as long as I had to stay, I felt like playing the show I had come to play.

When Tim left, I spread my materials out on the studio counter. I switched off the lights, and for the next two hours, I sat back in my chair, cued up the songs I had brought, and listened to them pump through the powerful speakers. It was calming to sit there in the dark, working by the fluorescent light that filtered in from the record library. I didn’t keep a log of what I played. It was a damn good show I had put together, but it would never go up for the scrutiny of my peers, those beautiful boys and girls into whom I had not suddenly morphed when I joined the station. I would never have to answer for the music to Stefan or anyone else in my own head. No one was listening. And for once, I belonged exactly where I was.

When my two hours were nearly through, I glanced up to see through the window to the record library that the next DJ, a young professor of music, had showed up and was gathering materials. He didn’t know yet that the transmitter was broken, and he was preparing for his show as usual. I didn’t get up to tell him right away because he seemed to be enjoying himself, whistling along to my song and thrusting his hips side to side in rhythm. Well, one person was listening, anyway.

The truth was, it didn’t matter. Radio is a lovely social institution and I always had a good time creating it, but being a DJ never made me less lonely, whether anyone was listening or

not. Being an expert on obscure bands didn't make me a new group of friends. That club I was clamoring to join didn't exist. You can't, it seems, change who you are by what you like—even if, in the end, you're quite glad to like it.

And a song, or two, or a hundred, shared between two people, is a thing I'd never give back. But it can't propel a relationship that hums at just 100 watts, no matter how much you're counting on it to. Music isn't a commodity that you can cash in for love: all songs can do is attach themselves unyieldingly to memories, reminding you years later of the people who made them important to you in the first place.





### In Blue Seclusion

To go to Siberia from the United States, you have to forfeit a day. If it is Wednesday in Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles when you ride your cab to the airport, you will sleep once along the way, and it will be Friday when you arrive in a small village in the Transbaikal called Tarbagatay.

Since your destination is approximately halfway around the earth, you have two reasonable ways of getting there: you can fly east through Europe, stopping over in St. Petersburg or Moscow, or you can fly west over the Pacific, via Tokyo or Beijing. Traveling east is perhaps more chronologically sensible—you never have to cross the International Date Line, hurtling yourself twenty-three hours ahead into a bright day on which you will later see the sun *rise* as you continue toward your destination—but no matter which way you do it, you lose a day. The hours of three days fold themselves around two sunrises and sunsets. It would be pleasingly symmetrical to get that missing day back upon your return, but you don't. Siberia keeps it, tucked among its lonely mountain peaks, as a reminder that you were there.

When we first arrived in Tarbagatay, we tumbled, squinting, out of the van our Russian hosts had sent and into a valley filled with light. I was reeling from the trip—we had come from Chicago through New York, Moscow, and Irkutsk on a plane, another plane, a third plane, a train,

and now a van—and in my sleep-deprived state, I could form only one conclusion: the Russians had brought us to Siberian heaven.

There were only three colors in this new world: blue, green, and brown in every direction forever, all shimmering under the late-summer sunrise and becoming softly hazy in the distance as the mountains disappeared on the horizon. Apart from the small road we had come in on, there was nothing man-made in sight. Only wild grass ran up the slopes of the formidable hills and out to the banks of the glassy Selenga River.

We had come for the songs. Our hosts, a professional choir from a village on the southeast shore of Lake Baikal, were some of the last living members of a traditional culture whose unusual songs are sung almost nowhere else on earth. My eight friends and I were not from this place and had not grown up with its music, but in Chicago we were part of an ensemble that studied and performed the kind of songs we had come to learn more about. Part of our job in Siberia was to make connections with the singers there and to do whatever we could to help preserve the unique musical heritage of an area long shielded from the influences of traditional Russian culture.

It was a good time for me to travel. I was two years out of college, and most of my friends had left Chicago to carry out their dreams. Now my boyfriend was leaving, too, having let me know that I wasn't a part of any dream. When I had left for this trip across the world, we had said goodbye, and by the time I returned, he would be gone, having transported his life from Chicago to San Francisco. As for me, I would still be living with a tabby cat in a one-bedroom apartment whose dimly lit living area I had painted bright red for warmth. The solitude of this

arrangement had seemed romantic after the frenzied beehive of campus life, but a couple of years later it was starting to lose its appeal.

I had joined the choir just after graduating to fulfill my constant urge to sing, as well as to make new friends, but it had come to mean much more to me—there was something so forcefully compelling about the songs that singing them felt like a new mode of being, a wailing catharsis of syllables. Even though I didn't understand the Russian words as my mouth shaped them, I felt instantly connected to the music and, through it, to the other singers. It seemed inevitable that I would travel to meet the people who did understand the words and who knew, truly, what these songs meant.

We had come into a city near Tarbagatay by train, a small portion of the Trans-Siberian railroad that dipped south around the tail of Lake Baikal. At the train station, the Russians had loaded us into a dingy van with Korean writing on the doors and had brought us to this pristine valley almost before we could tell what was happening. It felt a little surreal, as though at any moment the backdrop might fall away and expose something gray and empty.

We stood at the base of a hill that they called Sleeping Lion because at the top was a rocky outcrop that looked like an animal reposed in slumber. As we cast our groggy eyes about, it swiftly became apparent that the Russians expected us to ascend this peak. "*Poidyom*," they said encouragingly. My knees wobbled as our eyes followed their gestures up the hill. And although the last thing we wanted, in our exhaustion, was to go off on some wild Siberian mountain hike, our new friends were already on their way up, racing the sun to the apex, and so we did the only thing we could: we put one foot out in front of us, again and again, and we climbed.

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Our hosts were a people who knew about walking. Their ancestors were Old Believers, members of an orthodox Christian sect severely persecuted by the Russian government in the mid-eighteenth century. Many of them took refuge in neighboring commonwealths in the areas now called Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine, but Russia regularly repossessed these lands, putting the Old Believers in a continual state of jeopardy. Eventually, the crafty empress Catherine the Great, who recognized the potential use of a people known for industriousness and vigor, offered them a deal: they could settle permanently in the fertile lands around Lake Baikal, raising crops for the Cossack border guards who were stationed there to defend Siberia from Mongolian invasion. In exchange, they would be granted the privilege of not being put to death.

To reach their new home entailed a foot journey of more than 3,000 miles over taiga and steppe. I imagine sometimes what this passage must have been like—days of endless walking, without any assurance that you were even heading the right way, but now and then a song to keep you moving and remind you that you still had, at least, people to sing with. The songs would have started as plain melodies, but as other people walking with you added their own lines—for what else could they do?—the melodies would develop into a new, truly polyphonic style of song, unusual among folk styles in that all its vocal parts had melodic weight, with none subordinate to any other.

As the history goes, the pilgrims made this long journey in family groups, with hardly any material possessions and only their strange, beautiful songs to trade for food and lodging. Their families were so close that the Russian word for “family,” *semya*, gives us their name: *Semeiskie*.

Our Russian hosts were direct descendents of those pilgrims, and the people of the village had the same hard-working farmer's sensibilities as their ancestors. Their lives involved a great deal of daily physical labor to provide themselves with basic needs like heat and water, and their inland location made for fierce temperature extremes and savage winters.

By the time of our visit, the West was beginning to make its way to the Transbaikal. Although some of our hosts had to draw water from wells and heat it on their stoves for laundry and bathing, they wore jeans and t-shirts like us, reserving the jewel-toned Semeiskie folk costume for their choir performances. And they were performances; singing the traditional songs wasn't as much a part of domestic life there as it had once been, especially for those who weren't involved with the choir. Some people in Tarbagatay and other local villages were still farmers by profession, and no doubt they sometimes sang while they worked, but others drove to the city each morning to sit quietly at office desks. The Semeiskie choir was supported by a local foundation with the explicit mission of preserving their culture's heritage—the old songs were threatened by the terrifying possibilities of the open world, and the prospect of losing this music to history alarmed them as it did us.

But the community looked after itself. Even villagers who did not have families were embraced as kin by neighbors. In a literal sense, the village was a family: generations of geographic insularity had resulted in quite a bit of inbreeding, and a large proportion of the residents even shared a name: Chebunin. Like their ancestors, who had walked hand in hand across a continent to their exile, they were a people who had experienced both isolation and intimacy in large measures.

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When we reached the summit of Sleeping Lion, we found the rest of our host choir waiting for us at the top. They were a wonderfully varied group: old and young, reserved and exuberant. Sergey was the group's director and also the spiritual leader of the movement to preserve the musical culture. In his early forties, he was handsome in a craggy sort of way, while Galina, the manager, had the face of a bulldog. Her voice was like an air-raid siren and could reach any note, no matter how high. There were two men named Yuri, one a stocky blond and the other a dark, short fellow with a round face who reminded me strongly of the Spanish butler from *Fawlty Towers*. We would call them "Big Yuri" and "Small Yuri." There was Tolya, an inexplicably unmarried tenor with a singing voice as clear and pure as his blue eyes; he, Sergey, and Small Yuri were brothers. Sasha was the choir's accordionist, a tall man with a bushy mustache who did not sing and rarely spoke. Tatyana was a lewd old lady with unnaturally red hair, who would soon have her eye on our friend Nick; her hilarious come-ons would become increasingly bold and explicit over the course of our stay, despite the fact that Nick was far more interested in Tolya. Finally, there was Sveta, a young woman whose name meant "light," and whose radiance the Siberian winters had not managed to extinguish.

They had set an abundant breakfast for us there on the grass: thick brown bread, meats and cheeses, smoked fish, hard-boiled eggs, glistening slices of cucumber and tomato sprinkled with coarse salt, sweet pickles, wine, vodka. We sat and ate gratefully, and as the sun rose over our heads and glanced off the river below, the Russians stood together and sang us a song.

Like many Semeiskie folk songs, this one was about unrequited love. It was called "The Rowan Tree," and in it, a girl says to her lover, "My dearest, I have given myself to you, and now

you must marry me.” But the cad replies, “Stand tall, my little rowan tree. Stay at home with your family and think of me no more.”

The themes of Semeiskie songs can be cheerless. Subjects like war and death, family strife, and general loss and loneliness—the common stuff of life in those early years of exile, I can only imagine—dominate the texts.

But as is also common in this repertoire, although the lyrics of “The Rowan Tree” were melancholy, the melody was built around impenetrably sunny major chords, which rang out in perfect tune in the valley beneath us. There is meaning in that choice, a defiance that recognizes the pain described but refuses to pay it any heed. As the Russians sang our greeting that morning, there was a jubilation in their voices and a generosity in the way they looked at each other during the verses, and I could see clearly that in joining to acknowledge the emptiness their words described, they were defending each other against it.

As I knelt on the ground sipping my wine and listening to a friend translate the words, I couldn’t help but remember the man who had moved away to California from Chicago, moved there without me. I had been ready to make my own cross-country pilgrimage, to embrace the exile of the open West and leave behind the friends with whom I would climb this mountain, leave this music and all that it meant to me. But the man had said: Stand tall. Stay at home and think of me no more.

Well, I hadn’t moved to San Francisco, but I hadn’t exactly stayed at home either. But I was with people who were starting to feel like a family. My own choir in Chicago would later adopt “The Rowan Tree.” Years on, we would sing the song with a kind of tenderness that I would always imagine was born atop Sleeping Lion Mountain out of a feeling of being as close

to each other, and as far removed from the tightly coiled insides of our own lives, as we had ever been.

A distinctive characteristic of Semeiskie songs is a rich polyphony that includes dissonant harmonies with tight clusters of adjacent notes, as though you'd taken your hand to a piano and flung it down on the keys without looking. Sometimes these clashing intervals are momentary and pass by as the various vocal lines snake around each other; other times, they are deliberate and elongated, relished for their peculiarly brilliant sound.

Because these songs come out of an oral folk tradition, they have rarely been written down and have always been subject to modification. When Semeiskie villagers got together to sing, each singer had a general idea of what part they sang on any song, but two people who sang the same part might have had slightly different notions of how that part went. The small variations in their lines created the startling harmonies that have become integral to this musical tradition.

Nowadays, the singers in our hosts' choir do write down their music for reference, but they often improvise and embellish their parts anew each time they sing, settling on whatever notes feel good to them. They call this "finding your path," or in Russian, your *put'*. Each singer takes their own *put'* through a song, creating gloriously multilayered chords that rise and fall as they tell their stories. But in most of these songs, at the end of each verse, all the divergent paths turn toward a single note, coalescing into a ferocious unison that the singers may hold together for as long as they have breath.

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Our sunrise breakfast over the river was only a momentary pause to give us strength for the day's real agenda: partying. I would quickly learn that celebrations in Tarbagatay were not conducted on ordinary scales. We packed up the scant remains of the meal and returned to the van still waiting at the bottom of the hill. Our hosts were about to take us to the beach for twelve hours of—in order of importance—drinking, eating, singing, and, for the bold, swimming in the icy river. We did not stop to leave off our luggage at the houses where we were to stay; apparently, there wasn't time.

We made camp on a grassy beach on the Selenga, not far from the watershed where the river feeds the massive Lake Baikal, a body so deep that you could pour all five Great Lakes into its mouth and still have room to fill. The scraggly, untamed land was as different as could be from the sandy shores on the picture-book beaches of our imaginations. The small clearing was surrounded by squat trees whose leaves grew together into a curtain, and the ground was a patchwork of dirt and tall grass. Like the rest of the landscape, the beach was perfectly wild.

The capacity of our hosts for merriment is unrivaled in my experience. They had brought their own party stage to the beach, rigged up with a stereo and microphone set to high volume. Sergey tested the setup by intoning American ad jingles in spirited English.

“Mentos—zeh freshmaker!” he cried. I wondered if this ad played in English on Siberian television or if he had learned it from one of us.

Nearby, Small Yuri was already stripped down to his swimming trunks and was kneeling in a cleared-out area of the scrubby grass. He had kindled a fire, beside which he was setting whole fish on rocks to smoke, fish that he said Tolya had caught from the river earlier that day.

A cauldron of hot tea swung over the fire. We took long drinks from it and refilled our teacups with vodka.

When everything else was set up, the Russians rolled out lunch. Like our earlier meal, it was a spread of communal dishes—mostly the same dishes as breakfast, and the same ones we would eat at many meals during the next two weeks—laid side by side on a long plastic tarp on the scrub grass.

We sat on the ground alongside the tarp, across from each other. The Russians ate with such gusto, and the food looked so tempting, with every ingredient fresh, that I ate too, although I could still feel breakfast in my belly.

Beside me sat my American friend Kelly, a six-foot-tall blonde who looked like a model and drank like a Cossack. She was perhaps the only one of us who had kept pace with the Russians drinkwise, and so far she appeared to have suffered no ill effects. But now when I glanced over at her, she seemed far away; her sky-blue eyes were glazed and her mouth hung slightly slack. Suddenly she began to lean forward. I watched, not knowing what to do, as the upper half of her body tipped—still gracefully—toward the tarp, her face finally settling gently on a plate of tomato slices, where she seemed content to rest it.

I let several seconds pass. I couldn't tell if she was joking or if she might be in real trouble. Eventually, I reached out and prodded her shoulder. Her eyes snapped open like window shades, and in an exact reversal of her previous motion, she slowly righted herself without saying anything. A few slimy tomato seeds clung to the ruffle of her peasant blouse.

The Russians were delighted. They whooped and cheered and fussed over Kelly for a few minutes, offering her both water and more vodka. It is true that far too many people in that

culture suffer from alcoholism, that it kills men and women at young ages and depletes whole families; and perhaps it was strange for us to be so cavalier about how easily we fell into that pattern. But as with all the hardships in their lives, our friends accepted it and cared for each other through it. I had the sense that for them, Kelly had truly joined the family.

The Semeiskie sing in a vocal style that feels unnatural at first to someone trained in Western music. Their voices are not warm, round, or full; they are not delicate or sweet. They are brassy, piercing needles of sound, with a timbre that resonates in the sinuses. When a few people sing like this together, it is loud enough to blow open shutters.

It's no surprise to me that this way of singing developed in a land of so much open space. Our Russian hosts were loud folk by necessity, even in their regular speaking voices. When they yelled for you (I was called "TO-MA," a rearrangement of my name that was simple to decline like a Russian noun and also took great advantage of the dark, bellow-worthy Russian vowels), you felt you could hear them from miles away. Considering there might be a mountain between each of their houses, such abilities of projection were handy. They did what they had to, in speaking and singing, to be heard.

Some of the Chicago singers and I had learned to sing in the bright, nasal style of the Semeiskie. It's not easy to do; you have to overcome the feeling that you are shouting or that you will hurt your voice. But once you can trust yourself to sing that loudly, it feels like power. It feels like a steel rod running through you from bottom to top and out your mouth, a support that will not break or bend as long as you keep making that sound.

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By midafternoon the Russians had initiated a miniature Olympiad and were handily defeating the American crew at a series of events such as Stilts-Walking with Mask On and Relay Race with Girls on Shoulders. I only watched. I couldn't help but feel a bit of glum envy, observing how smoothly some of my compatriots had integrated themselves with our new friends. Most of us, including me, knew about five words of Russian altogether, and none of the Russians really spoke English. Still, this didn't appear to be hindering the party. The other Americans, it seemed to me, were uniformly gregarious and fetching, and who wouldn't be charmed by them? Kelly had passed out in a plate of vegetables and *still* seemed as vivacious as ever. What was wrong with me?

The combination of my hours without sleep and the day's stimuli were beginning to have a real effect, and I hadn't done myself any good with the continual stream of alcohol that the Russians more or less insisted we drip into our veins. I decided to take a break from the party and stretch my legs on a walk.

I wandered off toward the twiggy grove of brush and trees that bordered our site. The land sloped downward there, so that as I descended I found myself separated from the beach by a hill. I gaped out at the unexpected landscape beyond the trees. At the other edge of the woods was a vast, open field, so wide I could hardly see across it. At the edge of the field, far off, were the mountains, bearing themselves up under their snowy tops like primeval skyscrapers, and at the edge of the mountains was the sky, nothing but the immeasurable purple sky between me and the fullness of the universe. I burst into tears.

All I could feel was that the world was so full of empty space. Like an atom, its matter was clustered into small parcels, and the rest of it was only cold. The spaces between things—

between one mountain and the next; between the two ends of a march across a continent; between San Francisco and Chicago—they were all infinite.

I thought of the Siberians carousing on the beach, carrying each other on their backs, sheltering each other from the cold stone mountains and the wide sky. They knew how to cross those spaces. The evidence was in their songs, in the way that harmonies emerged out of dissonance and voices took forking paths that always met back in the end. And it was in their faces when they sang, and when they heard us sing this music that was of them but was now also somehow, marvelously, ours. They were not afraid of the empty space but instead confronted it, wrote songs about it, obstinately celebrated it. They upended its very nature when they sang, forming a circle around it and attaching to it an impenetrable array of sound with a throbbing knot of hot white light at the center. When they came together, they robbed the emptiness of its power through song. That much, perhaps, I could do.

It was dark out when the Russians were finally ready to leave the beach. The van was still parked on the grass, waiting to take us home. Fitting the last few of us into it was a squeeze, for not only was all of our luggage still heaped beneath, around, and on top of us, but a couple of the Russians had also piled in for good measure, including Sasha, who held his accordion in his lap. I made for the very back.

No roads led to the beach, so we had to make our way through the untamed fields. The ground was rutted with hills and pits, and in the back seat, each mogul that we hit launched us into the air, making my stomach lurch.

As we bumped along, Sasha began playing a tune up front, his arms moving perpendicular to the bounce of the vehicle. Soon Galina was crooning a melody, and the other Russians added their own parts. My friends and I looked around at each other tentatively. We didn't know the words, but we could catch the harmonies, and after a few verses we joined in, finding our *put'* as best we could.

Our hosts seemed to reflect their country's topography in being unusually open. They invited us into their songs as easily as into their homes, and they loved it when we botched the words but kept wailing as loud as them. When the song tapered off, Galina turned around in her seat and announced that after that long day, we were all *Russky extryom*—"extreme Russian." We cheered.

The van struck a particularly deep ditch just then, and I sailed up above my seat, bumping my head on the roof. As I rubbed the top of my skull, I thought how strange it was to have so little room to myself when on the other side of the car door, there was as much room as you could ever want. And yet, there we all were inside, meeting each other in song, gesture, and a few mangled words; assuring ourselves of the seams between us; letting the music say what we did not know how to.

For the rest of the drive, we sang and listened and watched the dark landscape go by. And at last, I found it was impossible to be sad, because I was in midair in a roiling bus with twelve people on the far side of the world, hollering like joyful animals under the ink-purple Siberian sky, and that was all that mattered.

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Two weeks later, our friends sent us off with sacks of gifts—vodka, fresh honey, pine nuts—as if that were the thing that would make us remember where we had been. They wrote us a silly song and sang it to us on our last night in Russia. Small Yuri had learned a few words of English for the occasion, which he repeated as much as possible. “Hello!” he said proudly, with a hard, hissing *h*. “Thank you verrry much!”

At dinner that night, the Russians asked each of us to offer a toast. Mine was suitably lugubrious and formed an impromptu quatrain: “Your country is stunningly beautiful, so much so that it has brought me to tears. Your songs are equally beautiful, and I’m sure I’ll be crying over them soon enough.”

“Very Russian,” they said, and it was true.

You don’t get back the day you lost when you fly home from Siberia because your first flight leaves early in the morning, and your extra-long, weary day of travel begins with a far-eastern sunrise and ends, as days end, in darkness in your home city. The ability to cut across the globe into its most remote parts exacts a price: one turn of the sun that you will never behold. And so, too, you know that to travel to such places has its own price for the people you visit; if the world were still so closed, there would be no need to preserve the old cultures, for they would live on as they had lived in the past, secluded inside their mountainous walls. But it is not that way, and so you do what you can: you go there, and you sing, and you return home and sing some more.

In the end, it wouldn’t have mattered whether I had followed my boyfriend to California or stayed in Chicago—we would have lost each other either way. We didn’t fit: we each had our own *put’*, and they did not meet back in a unison. But a few months after I returned from Siberia, I met the person who would become my husband. Today he sings these songs too, and we are

planning a return trip to Siberia with the choir. We still don't speak Russian, he and I, but the songs are one of the many languages we use to bridge those tiny, infinite spaces between us.



## From a Tower

“Almost mad with the joy of the titanic instrument, he seated himself again at the keys, and plunged into a tempest of clanging harmony. From the resounding cone of bells overhead he no longer heard their tones proceed, but saw level-winged forms of light speeding off with a message to the nations.”  
—George MacDonald, *Robert Falconer*

The door to the bell tower had a sturdy iron ring for a handle, which was not only aesthetically fitting, amid the great chapel’s Romanesque sweeps of limestone, but also very necessary. The heavy door yielded only when I grasped the ring with both hands and leaned back with the weight of my whole body. Jim stepped inside first, and I followed. The door fell shut with a cool whoosh of air and a massive thud that resounded around the otherwise silent hall.

Inside the chamber at the base of the stairs, one feeble little window, partially overgrown with ivy, let in a few last rays of autumn sunset. Dim electric lights helped to bring the visibility above “none,” but mostly, it was dark as we began the steep ascent.

The spiral staircase was narrow enough that two people could not walk up it side by side. I watched Jim’s sneakers skip over the irregular stone. He made this climb several times a week and had worked up a pretty steady pace. I figured I would be lucky to make it to the top without a rest.

After about a minute, we came to a landing where windows on three sides let in light, but they were so dusty I couldn’t see through them well. I guessed it wasn’t often that anyone came up here to clean. I was only a little bit out of breath.

“Wow,” I said. “Actually, that wasn’t so long.”

Jim chuckled. “Oh, we’re not quite there yet.” He unlocked another door and then a latch on that door, then jammed his shoulder against it to force it open.

When he flipped on the light in the next room, I found myself looking down a long wooden catwalk with rails on either side that stretched across what I recognized as the top side of the chapel’s domed ceiling, now below us. A network of beams and pipes ran around the walls and ceiling of this long room, dipping low enough above the catwalk that layers of thick foam and yellow-and-black alert tape had been wrapped around them for the sake of our foreheads.

Jim slapped the first pipe with his hand as he ducked below it.

“Watch out for these guys—they smart pretty good.”

The bridge, frankly, didn’t look like the sort of structure I’d want to entrust with my life, but as I stepped onto it timidly, it did not swing and felt solid enough. On the worn handrail at the end of the catwalk, written in jaggy capital letters in old Sharpie, were the words *PINK FLOYD*. It tickled me to think that although the figures of Mozart and Bach were memorialized in the carved stone of the chapel below us, a psychedelic rock band were perhaps the only musicians to be thus honored in the bell tower.

In the next room, we reached another enclosed stairway. I took a deep breath and began the slow march up the tight spiral again, but this time, the climb didn’t end. Every twelve stairs, a small rose window appeared in the brick wall, as though we were not walking up but only around the same circle over and over. Jim was soon well ahead. I didn’t want to reveal my weakness by stopping to rest, but my thigh muscles were about to stop responding to my will.

As I lurched past the ninth rose window, I felt like my lungs were filled with sand and would drag me down in another moment. But just then, light appeared around the last turn, and we were there.

The carillon, a collection of bells mechanically controlled by wooden keys and pedals, is the largest of all musical instruments, and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Carillon at the University of Chicago is one of the two largest in the world. Its 72 bells, all cast in solid bronze, are hung throughout the tower whose twelve or so stories of twisting stairs I had just climbed. Together their mass totals more than a hundred tons. I had heard the melodies of these bells every day of my life in Chicago, in pieces performed by musicians, in the quarter-hour chime, and simply in the deep, comforting tolling of the hours.

Until my first trip up the tower, I had no concept of how the instrument was played. I had a vague mental image of a piano keyboard, perhaps something like an organ, but probably more like an electronic synthesizer. I had considered my piano repertoire, what I might play for my first sit-down at the mammoth instrument. A Chopin waltz? Something impressionistic by Debussy? Jazz?

As soon as Jim and I stepped into the small room atop the tower where the carillon console waited, I was disabused of this idea. My hope to bring pieces for piano straight to the instrument was laughable: carillon keys are not played with the fingers but with the fists and the feet. The carved wood housing that held the rows of keys was much wider than a piano. Each of the wooden handles was about eight inches long and had the girth of a candlestick, and each had a wire at the back that ran straight up through the ceiling to the clapper of a bell in the chamber

above. A row of foot pedals lined the bottom of the console, the lowest ones connected to thick, rope-like wires reaching down through the floor to the giant bells below us.

Jim handed me a pair of foam earplugs, which he commanded me never to play without. I sat down at the leather bench and laid my hands on the wooden handles. He showed me how to strike the handles with a loosely clenched fist, giving a light flick of the wrist that made each bell clapper just touch the bell and then fall away. I could play two notes at once with an open, flat hand, or alternate my hands to play rapid, virtuosic scales.

Before we went any further, Jim said, I ought to know what it felt like to ring the largest, deepest bell of all, the 18.5-ton bourdon. There were only a handful of bells this size in the world.

I had to strain my left leg just to reach the farthest foot pedal while still sitting on the bench. With some reverence, I gently pressed my foot down on the worn pad. Nothing happened.

I glanced back at Jim, but he just smiled. I stood up to be right next to the pedal and leaned on it a bit harder, which made the lever give up an inch or so but did not produce any sound. Finally, I planted both feet on the slab of wood, jumped, and landed straight down on it with my whole body. The rumble spread up from the chamber beneath us like the mushroom cloud of a hydrogen bomb. You have to earn the sound of that bell.

For the rest of our session, I worked out a few simple melodies that used only the fists, without foot pedals or any complex harmonies. To my surprise, I managed to elicit actual music from the instrument. Jim congratulated me and left me with the enticement, “You’re now one of the five hundred best carillonneurs in the world.”

I came to bell ringing more or less by chance. I had heard from a music professor that the university carillonneurs sought some fresh hands to instruct in their art. Knowing very little of the enormous instrument housed in the highest point on campus, two hundred feet in the air above the university chapel, I had thought I would just check it out, maybe play it a time or two.

I was attracted to the romantic mystique of the carillon bells. Bells and towers feature so prominently as symbols in literature and myth that it seems impossible to engage in the art without metaphors and allusions sticking to you all over. Everything about the sound of a bell—its mournful harmonics, its forceful metallic tone, the way the ringing lingers and lingers before finally fading away—conjures powerful impressions of fate. But a joyful peal also connotes festive occasions: weddings, holidays, celebrations. It's a lot of symbolism to contend with.

And it is an instrument with unique advantages and drawbacks. To have control over a hundred tons of metal in your hands and feet, and the whole neighborhood as captive audience, is exhilarating. But achieving that thrill means spending a great deal of time sequestered in a high tower, where no one on the ground will ever know it is you who fills their ears with sound. It means having your every musical gesture open to scrutiny, but your name and face concealed. A carillonneur's artistic life is uniquely public, yet solitary.

The invisibility of the bell ringer is powerful. Many visitors to the chapel, Jim told me, have never recognized that there is a person behind the music at all, rather imagining the bells to be controlled exclusively by automatic gears and reels, a hundred-ton music box. On the ground, the building itself, in all its architectural majesty, seems to radiate music, to play the bells of its own accord.

When I made my first trip up the chapel tower, I had no intention of becoming a serious carillon performer, but Jim had other ideas. By day a cancer researcher at the university hospital, he was also a virtuoso carillonneur, and, after that first day, my new teacher. As soon as I had rung the biggest bell, I was hooked on learning to play.

At first, the hardest thing to do was to control the feet independently of the hands. It was very much like trying to rub your belly in circles while patting your head—sometimes my wires would just get crossed and I'd find my feet or hands moving in the opposite direction from my intent. Another challenge was learning to prepare the handles by depressing them partway a split second before actually striking them; by varying the distance from which you strike the handle, you can achieve contrasts in volume and timbre. The subtleties to this art were so much greater than I had imagined when I thought the bells were controlled by some kind of electronic piano.

When I had been playing for about two years, Jim started talking big. He and most of the players I had met since I had started on the instrument had certifications from the Guild of Carillonneurs in North America, which is the main professional credential for American carillonneurs, one that allows anyone to identify players who have reached a certain level of competence.

Jim seemed sure that I could pass the exam, which was a rigorous process involving judging on two levels: I would have to submit a recording of myself performing some difficult pieces, and later, if I passed the first stage, play a live recital at the Guild's annual conference. Myself, I was unsure about the whole thing. Taking the exam after only two years of playing seemed a little reckless, and I wondered if Jim put more confidence in me than I merited. We had

become good friends, and he seemed paternalistically inclined to push me toward greater success. Moreover, he was a pretty big name in the national carillon community, and having a student advance would reflect well on his professional standing. If the exam was the metric that would mean success to him, then after all he the help he had given me, I felt I owed it to him to try.

I made the required half-hour recording in the first weeks of a gray December, spending long, chilly evenings sequestered in the tower pounding out pieces over and over until I got perfect takes. Normally, I was careful not to play the same pieces too frequently, but I figured the neighborhood could take one for the team this once. The windows of the playing cabin have to stay open when you play to let the sound of the bells from their chamber into the room, so I always had the heater on at full blast. I took short breaks to eat sandwiches, stuffing my cheeks hurriedly like a squirrel and dashing back to the console to lay down another take. I never brought any drinks with me, though, because as soon as I had to use the bathroom, it was down the 237 stairs to the chapel again, and my work was done for the night.

In a few months, my recording came back from the judges with very high marks and an invitation to perform at the conference in June. I had passed what Jim said was the most difficult step; in theory, if I didn't totally screw up at the conference, I was as good as in.

But the conference location posed a hurdle. The carillon I would have to play, at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, had only 48 bells and a different layout than I was used to, one that had the handles offset from the foot pedals by nearly an octave relative to Chicago's carillon. It would be difficult to perform on that instrument without adjusting my body to the different layout, so I spent the next few months commuting to smaller carillons and

practice instruments around Chicago that were closer in design to the one in Tennessee. I hadn't worked this intensely on a project since—well, I probably never had. In the weeks running up to the conference, I could think about little else.

When June finally came, I still felt nervous, but I knew that I couldn't have prepared any better. My husband and I made a road trip to the conference, taking our time winding through the corn fields of southern Illinois and stopping in Nashville at Music Row.

In Sewanee, I had a few days to practice on the instrument and enjoy the conference as much as possible before my exam recital was scheduled. The carillonneurs were an interesting bunch—almost exclusively white, but ranging over the entire age spectrum and coming from all parts of the country, with different philosophical, political, and musical ideologies.

There was an extra layer of secrecy at the conference—the recitals were meant to be anonymous to assure impartial judging, so to keep word from getting around, I had to keep my identity as an exam candidate private. It was an odd position to be in, meeting new friends and sharing our carillon lives, but being unable to reveal any of what was consuming my mind. In fact, I was surrounded by people almost constantly, up until my exam.

The university's carillon was in the tower of a gorgeous neo-Gothic chapel, which was dark and empty when I slipped inside at the scheduled time. Suddenly, the fate of a carillonneur was upon me again—I was alone. I headed up the tower. It was as high as ours at home, but the climb was far more vertiginous: halfway up, the stone steps gave way to an open spiral of stairs made of metal grates, I could see right through down to the dizzying chasm below. I gripped the handrail tightly.



When I reached the playing cabin, the afternoon sun was streaming in through the open windows, but I was too high to hear any sounds from the ground, where the judges and the other conference attendees sat listening. My watch turned to the appointed minute.

I set into my program with a sense of finality: whatever happened would happen, no changing it now. And soon, I felt a kind of control that I hadn't experienced before—I could consistently make the instrument do exactly what I wanted. I flew through the fast passages with grace, and in the quiet parts I just touched each note so that it barely, but definitively, sounded. At the end of one piece I actually let out a whoop of joy.

When I touched the last note, I sat still at the bench for several minutes, relieved beyond imagining to have the whole thing behind me, all the worry and nerves over with. I knew without a doubt that I had played the best recital of my life.

Fifteen minutes later, I emerged again in the darkened chapel. The exam coordinator was waiting for me, holding a fat envelope full of the judges' scoring sheets. I was hungry to see them. She directed me to sit with her in the pews, and with no preamble, she told me plainly, "The judges have decided that you shouldn't pass."

I froze when I heard this, and after a moment I flooded her with possible answers to the question in my head: "It's because the repertoire wasn't hard enough. Is that it? Should I have played longer works?" She didn't know—she wasn't allowed to see the comments, just to report the decision.

I grabbed the envelope and slunk out of the chapel, stunned. There was no applause because as the performer, I was still anonymous. But Jim was there, and when I caught his eye he gave me a big wink and a sly thumbs-up.

“Knocked it out of the park!” he whispered as I approached.

“You think?” I replied, hopefully. If Jim agreed with my own assessment, could there have been some mistake? I didn’t know how to break the news to him, certainly not in the midst of the crowd that had gathered to hear the recitals.

He looked eagerly at the envelope in my hands.

“Let’s take a walk,” I said.

It turned out that I had essentially been ruled out on a technicality. Each recital program contained two required pieces of the judges’ selection, rounded out by my own choice of repertoire. The required pieces carried more weight, and if more than one judge failed me on either of them, I would fail the entire recital. As it happened, two of the judges thought my choice of tempo for one of those pieces was inappropriate. As a result, despite high marks on the rest of the program, and all the work I had done, I didn’t pass.

Jim and I hid in the stone archway of a building near the chapel and hashed over the judges’ comments remorsefully. Characteristically, he took all the blame, repeating over and over that he had pushed me to take the one piece too slow. I mostly cursed at the judges. When we couldn’t think of anything else to say, he returned to the conference and my husband and I drove in silence back to our motel room, where I cried for an hour on our hard bed while he held me and stroked my hair. We didn’t return to the events scheduled for the evening but instead ordered a huge pizza, which I ate too much of, watched a bad movie, and fell asleep in our clothes.

The next morning, I had calmed down and felt ready to show my face at the conference again. I put on my cutest summer dress and prepared to forget about the whole thing for the next few days. But when I arrived, I found that in my absence there had been a bit of a stir. The guild

membership was apparently as baffled as I had been about the outcome of my recital, which had been made public, and a major debate about the standards of the exam was brewing. It was also immediately evident that my anonymity had gone out the window. I caught sympathetic glances everywhere, and several people came right up to me to offer their support and commiseration.

It was a strange day, where I felt both the sting of failure and the warmth of praise. I kept thinking—what is it, in the end, that we want as music makers? Is it recognition, for people to know our names? A shared appreciation of what we do? I think, perhaps, that while having an audience is an artistically fulfilling social construct for both performer and audience, it should not be conflated with or held above the personal triumph of creating music, a project in which we ourselves are the only judges.

I started to feel pretty good as the day went on. I had worked hard for the opportunity to play there and had done it well. And I'd had the unusual experience, for a carillonneur, of being able to see and be seen by the people who heard me and to know that my music meant something to them. Even if I wasn't going to take home a piece of paper symbolizing my achievement, I'd been given a lot to think about.

Now, a few years later, I am one of the weekly recitalists at Rockefeller Chapel, a place where the carillon can be heard almost every morning and evening. Recently, the invisibility of bell ringers there has lessened. The playing cabin in the tower now has a video camera that sends a live visual feed to a large TV screen in the chapel below, so that visitors can see the recitalists while we play.

After all my stewing about the meaning of being unseen, I find that given the choice, I pick anonymity. I almost never turn the camera on when I play. Something about my image being visible on the ground seems to interrupt that romantic mystery that first drew me in, the idea of bells as mythical harbingers of fate and the tower as a place of solitude. And moreover, seeing the video monitor localizes the performance in an odd way, as something that is happening inside the chapel and for the chapel, as opposed to out in the world. But I have never thought of the music that way. The carillon is a populist instrument, one that is meant to provide music for everyone, regardless of whether you belong to a church or a university, whether you know anything about music or even know that there is a performance scheduled when you happen to be passing by.

Many carillons are affiliated with and/or physically attached to churches, but by and large, their function is not tied to religious life. Carillonneurs do often participate in church services, but most of what's performed is original carillon compositions or arrangements of secular classical works. Ezra Pound once wrote, "The act of bell ringing is symbolic of all proselytizing religions. It implies the pointless interference with the quiet of other people." Though I don't sympathize with the general thrust of his attitude, there may be a bit of truth in his contention. Bell ringing in our culture doesn't proselytize for any particular religion or even for religion in general, but I do think it proselytizes for music. Playing the carillon is a subversive and political act, one that stakes the claim of music as an essential element of civilization. Bells that are played regularly insert themselves into the culture of the surrounding neighborhood, folding music into the mix of daily life.

In the Low Countries of Europe, where the carillon originated, most large cities have several of the instruments, as well as city officers whose only jobs are to play them. Bells are part of the fabric of these places. In the United States, in an age when the arts face being relegated to the status of hobbies, with funding and education at risk, it is a heroic act to create music in the already noisy life of a city. To ring bells, uninvited and unannounced, is to insist that music is a necessary part of the soundtrack of humanity.

And so it has been a necessary part of my life, one that has taught me a great deal. To me, the sound of bells is wrapped up with the solitude of the winding stairs and catwalks, the dusty bell chambers and the stone parapets, equally as it is with the poems, legends, and characters that represent bell ringing as a performative act. As much as music is, so often, a performance that invites an audience, it does not have to be an experience that reflects back on the performer; it can simply *be*, and in being, enrich everything around it in small ways. We cannot always know, from a tower, who our music touches, but on an instrument like the carillon, we can be sure that it reaches someone.



## In Stride

Ah: a parade. What is a more American experience than this, a perfect summer confluence of ice cream, silver balloons, and the strains of a marching band playing “The Thunderer” and “Seventy-Six Trombones”? There must be twenty bands in the lineup, but this one passing by is different. A lone sousaphone brings up the rear of a patchwork of musicians holding not just trumpets and clarinets but bassoons, French horns, even a violin. Some of them dutifully raise their knees high with each measured step, while others amble along at their own pace as their heads bob up and down in rhythm.

They look older than some of the musicians further ahead, and from the sound of it, it's their accumulated years of experience more than any long hours of practice that's holding them together. Unlike their sportier brethren, these marchers wear no jaunty feathered hats; they have no flag-bearing dancers to herald their approach. In fact, they don't seem to have much of anything besides strong lungs, a moderately proficient sense of intonation, and the love of a good military march.

Now a solo trumpeter is showing off, sounding the melody an octave above the others, holding out brazen high notes. The other players giggle at this insouciance, knowing he is performing for them—the families waving flags along the sidewalk are busy with their hot dogs and rocket pops and will hardly notice the difference.

Still, his notes are not the highest pitched among the ensemble. Those belong to a serious-looking girl in the first row staring straight ahead and playing a tiny flute. In less diligent hands, the stratospheric tones of this instrument might induce you to plug your ears, but she would die of embarrassment before allowing a shrill note to escape.

In the summer of 1999, I was as good a flutist as I would ever be. I had just spent my last year of high school studying with one of the better-known instructors at New England Conservatory, but I was not ambitious enough to really aspire to the professional level as a soloist. An old joke goes, *What's the difference between a flutist and a flautist? About a hundred bucks an hour.* I was undoubtedly a flutist.

And yet I can't deny I thought a great deal of myself. I loved to perform, adored the accolades—and the ample self-congratulation—that it brought me. So in what I envisioned would be my last summer of freedom before college, I wished to throw myself full-force into a musical project that would demand all I had to offer.

Which is how, on a breezy July evening, I found myself in a public park in Lexington, Massachusetts, dodging jabs in the side from a sixty-year-old man named Ed who leaned so far to his right when he held his flute that it looked like a strong east wind was blowing him over.

Ed was a section leader in the Boston Band, a semiprofessional community marching band that performed throughout the summer. Boston takes the summer season, and its attendant opportunities for patriotic celebration, quite seriously. It's not uncommon, for example, to see folks race through the streets of Charlestown at any hour dressed as Paul Revere or Sam Adams, and Independence Day festivities routinely feature the spectacle of live cannons and twenty



thousand pounds of explosives. So a military-style marching band can be gainfully employed there for several months in the service of summer picnics and parades, like the one we were rehearsing for as we tromped around the park.

The tune was Henry Fillmore's "Americans We." Although marches were designed for regiments of soldiers, this type of music is peculiarly populist. A steady oom-pah beat and a lively horn chorus seem to tap into our natural instinct for delight. A march demands little sophistication of a listener, and yet, in its crisp perfection, it emphasizes precision and unity—things I liked about music, things that were quantifiable.

Precision, however, was not our strong point that evening. Our band leader placed little premium on moving in unison, and our steps, with their varying lengths and elevations, were collectively better described as "shuffling" than "marching." Scattered gravel on the ground crunched under our feet in nearly indiscernible rhythm as we played. When we rounded a bend in the park path, our rows often went into brief disarray, until the marchers on the outside of the turn caught up with those on the inside. Sometimes Ed, from his uncustomary viewpoint, did not see the turns approach and needed players on his two sides to shepherd him through.

I don't think I had given much thought to the historical or political significance of the military band, but something about the season, as we marched through a field not a mile from where the first shots of the Revolution had flown, gave our playing a sense of purpose. It felt good to be in New England, and in America, in the summer.

I lurched again to give Ed his personal space, and, relishing the feel of the warm wind on my hands and cheeks, I guided my piccolo through the trills of the tune's final strain as the light began to fade.

If the Boston Band was not exactly the ensemble I had imagined for myself, it was at least in the same genre. I had first set out to join a quite different band, one I had seen in a brochure. A selective marching band for young adults, it announced, performed for outdoor festivals around the state all summer long. And it paid money! I was used to ensembles that charged money to be in them, but this band gave it out, and for doing what was already—in my admittedly limited realm of experience—essentially my favorite thing.

The opportunity to learn proper marching intrigued me. My ambulatory band experience thus far had been a poor representation of the art. Each fall, the symphonic band at my small high school had been pressed into emergency service as pep and marching band. With no more instruction than a bare “Left, right, left, right,” we had taken our fight songs upright, becoming a ragged-looking group who sounded even worse staggering around the circumference of a football field than we did with our backsides on the bleachers.

But the band in the brochure was of a different variety. In the pictures, the young musicians looked like some kind of cherubic scouting troop, lined up in row upon row, with matching clean smiles and bright, spiffy uniforms. I could hear them in my mind, in perfect tune. and I determined to join them.

I had an advantage among flute players in that I was proficient on the piccolo, a more potent grade of flute distilled into a vessel one-third the size. Piccolo is a useful instrument for marches because its brilliant tone soars over the dominating timbres of brass and drums, while the more demure flute can get obscured in the texture.

Most flutists dabble in piccolo at one time or another, but I fancied myself a specialist. For one thing, I have indelicate but small hands. My fingers are short and rather stubby; their widest span from thumb to pinky is barely eight inches. This fact of my anatomy, which had long hindered me from being a serious pianist, was a boon for navigating the piccolo's tiny keys. Longer fingers and palms can bunch up around the slender tube like a claw, but my natural grip was sized to provide leverage and agility.

For my audition on piccolo, I chose a set of variations on "The Carnival of Venice," a piece that begins with the simplest of melodies and gradually becomes more elaborate and virtuosic, ending in a long ascending flourish. There is nothing compositionally interesting about this piece, but it is excellent for showing off. At the tryout, I felt confident as I played, flying through the fast notes and drawing out the slow ones. I had the perfect skill set for marches. I was so good I was almost embarrassed for myself.

The band leader seemed to agree. "You're a player," he remarked after my performance, nodding with approval. On the spot, he explained the band's schedule and uniforms and reminded me of the first day of practice. As he shook my hand firmly, I felt sure I had secured the perfect summer job. But two weeks later, I received a thin envelope informing me that the band would be unable to utilize my considerable talents.

What I did then was perhaps ill advised: I phoned the band leader at his home. I feigned nonchalance as I inquired about his seemingly contradictory behavior, hoping to uncover some administrative error.

“Hmm, yes,” he said, as though trying to recall me. “I sure am sorry about that. I would have liked to take you, but we had three girls on piccolo coming back from last summer, and that’s all the spots there are.”

It was a frustrating answer. I never did know whether he really thought I was good enough to be in his band. And if he did, then the rules had apparently changed in a disturbing way: talent simply wasn’t enough anymore. Was this the professional world I had sought?

I still wanted to play that summer, and so it happened that my father, through his network of musician friends, got me invited to join the Boston Band. It paid a little too, even though the members didn’t rehearse every day. Its director, Gordon, seemed pleased to hear from me when I called and told me he’d ask me to a gig soon. I was enraptured with this new process of attaining ensemble membership through a simple verbal agreement. This, I assumed, was how real professionals functioned; in circles where everyone was at the highest level, auditions must surely be superfluous.

After an hour seated under a rickety gazebo in Lexington, however, that notion was seriously coming into question. To be fair, the band members exhibited a range of abilities, and a few were as good as anyone I had played with. Most of the players, though, were hobbyists, practicing or retired from nonmusical professions. Some of them, if I had closed my eyes, could have been the young, raw players I had sat beside all through high school. We weren’t making anything like the clean and unified ensemble sound I had hoped for. I sighed as we put another piece of music away, wondering wistfully what the band from the brochure was playing at that moment.

In one respect, my new bandmates weren't like the half-interested teenagers of my high school experience. The musicians of the Boston Band were, if anything, exceedingly earnest. They fixed their constant attention on Gordon, who gave his instruction in the most serene, amicable way, as though he were requesting items to be passed to him over dinner.

“Would the trombones kindly hold onto that whole note for its full value? Thank you so very much.”

Gordon had a sensitive musical ear and a distinct vision for how the music was supposed to sound, but no matter what we did seemed to thrill him anyway, even when, as a group, we outright ignored the direction he had given just moments before. He always beamed as he conducted, as though the sounds of the horns and reeds were tapped right into the pleasure center of his brain. And on the podium, his broad frame was commanding, but when we practiced marching, he scurried back and forth alongside us like an eager puppy, beating time in the air with his fist. Sometimes he chirped in rhythm: “Hup! Hup! Hup!”

For all his encouragement, he was no military man, and he lacked the gravitas to intimidate us into looking good on the field—if that were even possible. There are many pitfalls that marching ensembles are likely encounter, and we seemed to hit all of them in both rehearsal and performance. The first thing I learned during our marching drills—and I don't know why this should be; perhaps because of the way we learn to read from left to right—was that the left foot must always lead off the march in order to prevent befuddlement of the limbs. Hence, “Left, right, left, right,” and never vice versa. Usually there was someone in the band who couldn't reliably discern his directions—we simply buried that person in the middle of the pack, where his aberrant stride would be at least partly hidden from view.

Matching our stride lengths also posed difficulties, ones that I was not immune to myself. Quite often, in our excitement, the first few rows of light-footed woodwinds found that our feet had an irrepressible urge to take us flying down the road like bandits from a bank heist, never slowing until we had left our posterior bandmates plodding away yards behind.

And all this was aside from the problem of actually making music. For a piccolo player, there were advantages and disadvantages. Carrying the pint-size instrument over long stretches of road was easy and seemed unlikely to incur permanent back injury. Carrying printed music to read from, however, was another matter. The trumpet and similarly shaped devices have a convenient perching place where a miniature music stand may be clipped, holding tiny pages before the player's face no matter which way he points himself. But a piccolo, which, packed into its case could slip inside my windbreaker pocket with only a corner peeking out, has no such contours. There is no kind of music stand that can be fastened to the diminutive neck of the little flute. Gordon, always sympathetic, offered me an array of doodads apparently designed to serve this function, but I gave up after they each left me flailing as they slid, buckled, and spilled my precious scraps of paper into the summer wind. For a marching piccoloist, I offer this advice: commit your parts to memory, every toot and tweet.

That isn't, after all, as difficult as it sounds. This music tends to stick with us whether or not we want it to. Like my old piece, "The Carnival of Venice," marching tunes demand little musical sophistication. You need not be familiar with a particular march to understand, on a visceral level, the order and dignity it conveys. I saw how listeners at our performances responded to these tunes, and it didn't matter what other music they liked, how old they were, or

what they thought about politics or the military that we emulated. I've come to believe this music is inside us, that it is a birthright.

And that, in the end, is what made my experience with this crazy band worthwhile. Playing marches made me feel proud, notwithstanding my thrown-together uniform that was rapidly getting mussed in the dust and heat, or the fact that my band wasn't the star of the parade. I felt proud anyway. And if that's not an American sentiment, I don't know what is.

Late that summer, I happened to see the band I had first tried out for. They were outstanding: the tightness of their rhythms and harmonies and the sharpness of their uniforms were every bit as I had imagined. Their steps were clean and synchronized; their neat ranks seemed to glide effortlessly forward. They sparkled with youth.

In contrast, our group skewed toward the septuagenarian and included a few players who now and then needed a gentle reminder in the small of the back from a trombone slide to bring them back into rank. But where the other band had made no room for me, we made room for each other. Since that summer, I haven't marched in another band, but I can still play those tunes from memory.

So here again is this parade, which encompasses such a spectrum of ideals in an odd, outdated, quintessentially American pastime. Improvising trumpets and out-of-tune reeds, strictly regimented corps, and huddles of children make up a familiar pastiche that leads all the way down the block until it grows fuzzy in the summer haze.

And our band here, the one with the plain outfits, has made some order from its disarray. The musicians are still nodding their heads assiduously in time, but they've locked their step into

a pattern and made it stick. It turns out, a marcher or two out of place may not sink a performance, and a nervy youngster with a barrel full of notes to unleash doesn't transfigure it into perfection, either.

For now, that ragtag band seems to have found its stride. And if its players should lose the beat or find themselves scattering again, the remnants of their ranks and files apparent only to a vivid imagination, it's for sure that they will play on, with heart—the old trumpeter, the girl, and all.