

See You Sunday?

“Do you think we’ll survive this evening?”

Denise lets slip a half chuckle and smiles as she asks. It is an ironic smile, conveying disgust and disillusionment. Happiness has little to do with her smile, except, perhaps, for the prospect of relief. The demise of their group would be sad, certainly. Yet, at this point, Denise would welcome an end to its tailspin.

The members of the adult choir never saw the new director. They left after the pastor ignored their top-three choices—the product of two months of reviewing resumes, interviewing candidates, and debating amongst themselves. Likewise, when the Spanish-speaking choir learned that Derrick was taking the helm at their own Mass, they quit without notice, and he had to do all the music by himself, in a language that was, literally, foreign to him.

Fr. Willis has told Denise personally, in his office, that Derrick would be taking over at piano. The ostensible reason for the change was that “he needs the piano to direct,” which is what Helen has been doing. Fr. Willis has given no reason for the either change. Nor has he said anything regarding his new expectations for the two of them, except for what they will not be doing. Denise wanted to quit, like everyone else in the

other groups, but Helen talked her out of it. So, after more than ten years, Denise no longer plays the piano, and Helen no longer directs.

The two meet in the rear section of the parking lot before going in together for rehearsal. Yellow agapanthus wither along the curb. Oleanders, huge as elephants, grow wild along the neighboring fences.

The campus of St. Catherine's of Alexandria, otherwise known as St. Kate's, provides a wide open space in an otherwise suburban area. The sky's grandeur draws the eyes here. The pinks that dominated the western sky in what has been an invigorating October evening have settled into a withering lilac. To the east, growing puffs of dull gray prepare a final assault on the lingering traces of sun's radiance. It is that moment of day when, if you pay attention, you can see bats marking brief streaks in the air, as fleeting as shooting stars, only a dozen feet above head level. Any earlier, and they are not out at all; any later and the cloak of night seamlessly conceals their movements.

Denise steps out of her car first after opening with her sardonic joke. Any outsider would think this is not much of a greeting. But the two know they have little to say, and they are busy bracing for their first personal experience with their new director, Derrick Knowles, the pastor-appointed man.

Helen opens the sliding door of her minivan, pulls out her bag of music and lets it fall to the pavement. It gives a broad "thunk" like a small tree cut down. She bends over, picks out a baton and holds it up between her face and Denise's.

"Do you remember?"

Does Denise remember? How could she not remember? She remembers the baton from the earliest days of the group in the hands of Nick Giametti, the first director. In practice, he rarely took it out, unless he wanted to be "Zee Maestro." He

used it during rehearsal as he led the group in Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus," which they sang for the parish's 50th anniversary. He waved the baton like a dizzy semaphore flag, and swung his body like an incensor on a short chain.

"Zee Maestro only deesires zee pairfect sound! Look at zee Maestro pleeze!"

Denise remembers how the whites of his eyes flashed and his eyebrows stuck up like exclamation points. Margaret Mitchel laughed so hard she had to excuse herself and go to the ladies' room. The group had a dozen members back then, two men who could sing tenor, three guitarists, and a flautist.

Denise remembers how Nick's divorce put an end to it all. He resigned and went back to San Diego to live with his parents. She remembers the farewell "party" at Paul O'Reily's house. She does not remember how much wine she had, but she had a headache afterwards. Everyone was holding themselves together pretty well, until Nick took out his baton and handed it over to Paul, the new leader of the group. Margaret Mitchel sobbed openly.

Denise remembers how Paul led the group until his company moved him to Texas. He never used the baton. Nor did he ever act out "Zee Maestro." Nevertheless, before he left, he took it out and passed it over to Helen in the sacristy after his last Mass. Denise was the only one who saw. Margaret Mitchel had left the group long before, and Denise had replaced the paid pianist. Helen would be the only guitarist.

"Yes," says Denise. "I remember."

Helen twirls the baton in her fingers. "I was thinking I should give this to Derrick."

Denise guffaws. “Do you think Derrick is even here yet? The youth choir says he is always twenty minutes late.” Denise talks regularly with one of the mothers involved with the group.

Helen flicks the baton back into the bag. “If he’s late, I want you back on the piano. Everybody knows we don’t need him.”

The two are in no rush to go inside. They have arrived early, as they always do. Denise reaches into her car and picks up her music issue book. “I didn’t bring my accompaniment book. But I suppose I could pull out the old one in the cabinet if I need to.”

Helen scans the parking lot. The damaged blinds behind the school windows look like a freeway after an earthquake, and give the impression of life in chaotic fullness. It is an illusion only. The school has been closed for more than five years. A few cars are positioned in random spots on worn pavement, as if uncertain they belong there at all. “I wonder what kind of car Derrick has,” she says.

They walk across the parking lot and up the rear stairs to a broad hallway. The second door on the right is their destination. The sounds of a piano’s pounding skitter across the walls and huddle in the shadows like mice, and Denise knows she will not play piano this evening after all. Derrick has already arrived and is waiting for them. But how? She is confident in her information that this man is always late for youth group rehearsals.

They open the door to the rehearsal room, a very different place from the school classrooms where the group used to rehearse. Back then, the members sat in desks that were tight for their adult bodies. They occupied themselves with the students’ artwork

on the walls while the director ironed out harmonies with the altos. A tiled floor reverberated all noise and clanged as they practiced.

Helen and Denise have never seen their pastor in the rehearsal room. In fact, neither of them can remember ever discussing music with Father Willis at all. They do remember one time when Rebecca, the office manager, relayed a message from him after Mass.

“I have a request from the pastor. This has nothing to do with me.”

Helen was kneeling on the floor, putting her guitar into its case. “Well, why can’t he tell us?”

“I don’t know. This has nothing to do with me.”

“What is it?”

“The pastor asked me to ask you to please play more upbeat music.”

Helen took the capo off of her guitar and placed it in a compartment in her case. “Uh, okay. What does that mean? If I strum faster, would that be up-beat enough?”

Rebecca’s eyes bounced between Helen and Denise. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I think he meant that, since we are in ordinary time, he wants more upbeat themes in the music.”

“Is that what is said?”

“Well, kind of. Look, I’m only the messenger. This has nothing to do with me.”

Denise and Helen looked at each other. Helen finally spoke. “Did anyone listen to the readings from today? God was about to do to awful things his vineyard in the first reading. Jesus was saying the kingdom of God would be taken away from those in charge. And we’re supposed to be upbeat?”

“I don’t know. Don’t look at me. I’m only the messenger. This has nothing to do with me.”

Helen straightened up. “Well. We’re more confused than ever. If Fr. Willis wants us to do something, he’s going to have to explain it himself. But I don’t think anyone is going to tell him that, are they?”

“No.”

Helen pushed her hand through her hair and tugged at it. Then she dropped her arm again. Her hand slapped against her thigh.

“Okay, Rebecca, you did your job.”

“Sorry.”

That exchange was not typical. Denise and Helen have always gotten along well with the office manager. Rebecca appreciates their competence, and for that reason asks Denise and Helen to play at special parochial events like first communions and quinceañeras.

In the new rehearsal room, a carpet which is the color of day-old succotash lies mostly barren across an expansive floor. The emptiness speaks of a room that struggles to justify its existence. A studio piano sits on the far side of the room. Nested stacks of yellow plastic chairs line up against the right wall. Sturdy black music stands loiter at random locations, waiting for someone to give them something to do.

Derrick is playing, wedged between the piano and the back wall. Denise and Helen have heard Derrick play before. He does not play the way Denise plays. She “plays the ink.” She plays whatever is on the page, or she plays the melody and the suggested guitar chords. Derrick does not “play the ink.” He extemporizes, and usually, but not reliably, plays the chord corresponding to that particular place in the music.

Derrick is young. He has recently “finished” at a conservatory out east. No one in the parish has said he “graduated.” He drives over from somewhere in east L. A. County.

Denise and Helen are both married and have children that are high school age. After 17 years of playing music together they know each other well. They still organize Super Bowl gatherings, in which their spouses and children come along. They attend occasional seminars for liturgical musicians. They have watched each other's children grow.

Helen is an office manager for a mid-sized company that sells generic drugs. Her build is sturdy and athletic; she was a pitcher for her high school softball team. Her chocolate-brown hair lies flat against her skull, as if she has just stepped out of the shower. When she walks, she plants her feet in a way that draws her knees inward with every step. Her cheeks are round, freckled and puffy. They crease when she bursts out in mischievous laughter, which happens often when she and Denise rehearse. Her eyelashes are short but well-marked, giving the initial impression she is using makeup, when in fact she never uses any. Denise admires Helen's willingness to take charge, and her unchanging devotion to church music.

Denise is an English teacher at a public high school in Long Beach. She has professionally-cut, honey-blond hair that tends to get frizzy as the day wears on. She is attentive to her looks in a way that is as practical as her Toyota minivan. Whether she is writing on a white board, playing the piano, or dancing with her husband, her touch is as light as a sparrow's wing.

Denise abhors management and confrontations. Helen can't blame her. She has made plenty of enemies in her capacity as director of the 9:00 AM singing group.

Denise, however, has always remained at Helen's side. Helen admires Denise's

knowledge of language, and her ability to quote well-known passages. Once, when Helen was having a quick bite of some leftover casserole before rehearsal, she said. "This is better the second time around." Denise responded with no hesitation. "Some like it in the pot nine days old." Helen burst out laughing.

Derrick sits up straight to see across the top of the piano. "Hi," he says, stretching his face into a smile so tight it makes his eyes squint. He is taller than the two women, but not so tall as to impress. Since he is sitting at the piano, his height makes little difference. His sandy-blond hair is combed out and parted in the middle, with curls flying off in diverse directions like distracted children. He wears a green button-down shirt with a plaid-like pattern. It hangs loose, except for the bottom which shows tightness and a bulge. His lower back is straight, but his neck swoops forward, downward, while his eyes focus on the sheet music. His ample cheeks pucker up with his frequent smiles that look like grimaces.

"Hi," say Denise and Helen. They give a flash of teeth as they position their chairs across from him.

Denise pulls up a music stand and sits down. Her piano book has all her handwritten notes, but that does not matter anymore. Instead she has brought a small music issue book, as anyone in the congregation might use. She also brings a pencil and sticky notes to mark the pages like the cantors do. She can only see the top of Derrick's head behind the piano, and she positions herself to keep it that way. She sits with her legs folded under the chair, which is contoured to give support. As soon as she sits, however, she is tired. This chair does not feel like the open piano bench.

For the first time ever during rehearsal, Helen also sits down. She opens her guitar case. Like an egg, she lifts out a concert size Guild which she has played since high

school. She has worn out countless strings on it, and broken quite a few as well. She rests the valley of the guitar's body on her left knee as she takes out her tuner and turns it on. Playing in a seated position feels awkward. Her right arm is stuck out to get around the guitar while she plucks her high E string. It rings out a single clear note as bead-shaped lights jump across the tuner box, indicating the quality of the guitar's pitch, and that of other noises in the room.

"Derrick—Helen is trying to tune," says Denise. Her voice is authoritative and clear.

"Oh," says Derrick. He stops playing and hunches over some more.

Helen plays her E string again in a room freshly shorn of noise. Her left hand adjusts the guitar's pitch until the tuner is satisfied with what it senses, and gives an assuring green light on its panel. Then Helen tunes each of her six strings in turn, while everyone remains quiet.

"Okay," says Helen, finishing with the low E. Her right hand muffles her strings.

"Right," says Derrick. He sits back away from the keys, but still cannot resist reaching out and playing a quick D major arpeggio. He rests his hands on his knees, tilts his head back and closes his eyes. Then he opens his eyes, stands up, and stares out straight ahead for a moment. He nearly knocks down the piano bench, but bends over and catches it before it falls. He straightens up once more and breathes through his nose. "Okay. This first time is going to be awkward. There is going to be an adjustment phase, but I'm sure that with time we will get accustomed to the new roles. Uh, now, if we could get started..." He pages through his binder. "Um. I guess we can begin with 'Gather All People'."

Helen and Denise already have their books open to the first song for this Sunday's Mass. They look at him.

"Right," says Derrick. "Uh, Helen. Could you count us off and get things started?"

Helen and Denise look at each other. Denise nods. Helen huffs and sits up straight on the edge of her chair. The fingers of her left hand stretch out across the end of the guitar's neck to their designated positions. She takes a breath, and counts. "One-two-three..."

Boom! The glorious noise of the guitar and piano fill the room with the opening song's introduction. Denise puzzles at how anything can sound so glorious at this moment.

If Denise had still been playing piano, they would have played the old introduction, reaching back from the time Nick Giametti had been director. The old music accompaniment book shows a long, dramatic eight-measure introduction, set off by itself at the top of the page. The introduction in the new book has only four measures, and it is designated with special marks within a section of the song. Denise figures the publishers save page space this way. Helen does not ask Derrick about the old introduction. He would know nothing about it.

Derrick stops playing at the seventh measure. Silence takes the rehearsal room.

"Okay," he says. "For the second 'Lord,' I want a slight crescendo." He looks out over the top of the piano. Denise keeps her eyes on the music stand in front of her, even though her music is not even on the stand. It is in her hands. She can't help but think Derrick's face matches the pleading sound of his voice. Helen also stays focused on her music stand.

Denise and Helen say "okay."

At Derrick's request, Helen again counts out the start and they play the introduction again.

Derrick stops the music and asks Helen to play "a tad" faster.

Helen says "okay."

Derrick asks Helen to count out the start of the music and Helen counts the beginning. They start again. Denise cannot detect any change in Helen's tempo.

At the end of the refrain Derrick stops the music "Okay. Could we have a bigger ritardando here? Just a tad slower, please."

Denise notices that Derrick says "ritardando," rather than simply using the word "ritard" like her piano teacher did when she was a girl, or her orchestra teacher did in high school, or like she and Helen do when they are rehearsing on their own. She wonders why it is up to Helen to set the tempo. Why can't the director set the tempo? Is that not why he is the appointed director? Is that not why he took her place at the piano? Should she say something?

Denise and Helen say "okay." Helen counts out the beginning of the song. They play through the refrain for the first time. Denise wonders if Helen is playing at the tempo that Derrick wants. She wonders if they are getting loud enough and slowing down enough in the places where Derrick asked for crescendos and "ritardandos." She thinks she forgot one of the crescendos, but is not sure.

The congregation likes this song. They sing it with enthusiasm. They first played it back in the '90s, when the parish still had a strong music community. It is one of many gospel-style songs that Catholic churches have put in their repertoire. Denise wonders if anyone in the congregation will follow these detailed directives from Derrick.

They finish the song. Derrick asks everyone to pull out the Gloria. Denise and Helen do not usually rehearse the Gloria, since it is a song they do every week, but this is the first time Derrick has played with them. Denise takes a little longer to find the right page since she is not used to using the assembly's music issue book. She marks the page with a sticky note.

Derrick asks Helen to count out the start of the Gloria, and Denise thinks back to when they first started playing. Fr. Leahy was the pastor back then. Denise and Helen have long agreed they will not do a count-out for the Gloria—Helen will simply do a downward nod when they start. Starting the song that way fits better into the flow of the Mass. So when the priest says, “Let us give Glory to God,” the two start the introduction right away without any awkward counting pauses.

Neither Helen nor Denise say anything about the Gloria, nor Fr. Leahy, nor awkward pauses. Helen counts out the beginning of the song. Everyone starts singing.

During the second verse, the door opens and Tan walks into the room. She is about fifteen minutes late. Tan is a Vietnamese woman in her thirties. She is short and has a round face. She works as a teacher’s aide and lives with her parents. She speaks slowly and complains often about her father. Her shoulders hunch down as if lifting them would risk a personal invasion. Tan has been with the group for about a year. It takes her a while to learn a new song—especially if it has any unusual syncopations or jumps in notation.

Late arrivals have always been a big problem, even back when Nick was the director. Helen and Denise have made spoken and written reminders which cajole and threaten whoever happens to be singing with them. Punctuality improves for a while.

Then it degrades again. But now, with Tan as the only singer in the group, it hardly matters.

Derrick does not say anything about Tan's late arrival as he plays. In fact, he does not address her at all. He stops the music in several places to request crescendos, diminuendos and other dynamics. Denise and Helen say "okay." Tan does not say anything.

They finish the Gloria and Derrick asks everyone to turn to the psalm. Denise and Tan open their missalettes. Helen pulls out her psalm book.

"Helen, could you please start us out?"

Helen counts "One-Two-Three-Four..."

Derrick pounds out chords for the introduction. He does not play the melody line which Denise knows well, but the congregation will not. At the cue for the cantor, no one sings. Derrick stops. Helen stops. Derrick is staring into his music. He does not take his eyes off of it.

"Denise—Taylor could not make it tonight. Could you sing the cantor part?"

Taylor Robbins is one of the new cantors, hired by Derrick. Denise and Helen are accustomed to playing with Dolores, who used to come and rehearse with them. They are uncertain if Dolores is still on the active staff of cantors. They decide not to ask Derrick about Dolores.

Denise lifts up her missalette. "Sorry, Derrick. I don't have my accompanist book. I only have my missalette with me and it gives just the refrain."

Derrick looks at Denise, then Helen, then Tan, and then back at his music. "Okay. I'll sing the cantor part of the psalm myself, then. Helen, could you please start?"

Helen gives another four-count start. Denise thinks Helen is counting faster this time. Derrick sings the refrain in the lilting youth style, swooping from one note to the next like the revs of a manual transmission. The youth style is different from the straight chant style that Dolores used. At the psalm's refrain Denise sings in the old chant style. Tan waits for a couple of measures, and then she starts to sing too. Helen plays the chords, like Derrick, but does not sing. Denise decides to sing the melody, even though she is an alto and usually sings harmony.

They finish the psalm without further comment from Derrick. For the Mass setting songs, Derrick has requested they play one of the youth-oriented Masses. Denise adds a sticky note to her music. Tan ignores her music and simply sings. Derrick makes requests that the music be a "tad" slower, or a "tad" louder as they rehearse through the middle part of the Mass. Regardless of Derrick's directives, Tan sings the same as ever.

"Okay," says Derrick. "I have changed the communion song. Instead of 'Be Still and Know,' we will be doing 'Lord Let Us See'."

Denise knows Helen has been practicing "Be Still and Know" all week. It is a new song.

"Why the change?" Denise asks right away. She does not look at Helen.

Derrick is paging through his binder. "I don't think the parish is ready for it."

Helen pulls her guitar off and lets it clunk on her case. "I did not bring the music for 'Lord, Let Us See,'" she says, enunciating her words with meticulous precision. "I did not know you made this change. Sorry. I'll just look on Denise's hymnal and sing it."

"Oh," says Derrick. "Um, okay. I'll play the intro."

Denise cannot remember all of the following requests for crescendos and diminuendos from Derrick. She does not mark them either. She, like Tan, sings when

asked, and stops when asked. Helen's lips are moving, but Denise cannot hear her voice. The group makes it through two verses and then Derrick says he is satisfied. He asks everyone to turn to the closing song, "Sing for All of the Lord's Greatness."

Helen does not move. "Sorry," she says. "Those five beat measures confuse me. You'll have to play it yourself. I'll just sing it again this time."

Denise knows this is a lie. They have both played "Sing for All of the Lord's Greatness" together many times. Helen's guitar gives the song some spice. Denise laughs whenever she hears an organ playing it, a clash of contrary instruments, styles, and centuries. A rhythm instrument, like a guitar, is needed to play it properly.

Tan sings this song with enthusiasm. Denise sings too, but not in harmony. Again, Denise sees Helen's lips move, but does not hear her voice.

Derrick does not request any crescendos or diminuendos and stops after two verses. "There, that should do it. I don't think we'll need any more verses—especially since Fr. Willis is presiding. His exits are always so quick."

He stands up. "Thanks for coming this evening. I'll see you Sunday." He closes up his music book with a slap and exits the room. Helen puts her guitar and music away. Tan says goodbye and leaves. Denise waits for Helen.

The two leave the rehearsal room together. The door slams as they walk away, vibrating the walls.

They exit out the rear staircase, bypassing the plaza. They are stepping off the curb when Helen halts and drops her guitar case and music bag onto the pavement. She fumbles through her bag, picks out the baton and walks back into the plaza. It is a new plaza. It did not exist when Helen and Denise started playing at St. Kate's. Now the

members of the parish who wish to linger after Mass gather at the plaza, instead of the school lunch tables like they did before.

Helen heads straight into the middle of the plaza. Then she stops and changes course. Denise sees her silhouette against a lamp post. Her head is down and her steps are broad. She walks towards a trash bin, holding the baton in both hands. Before Helen even gets close to the bin, she grips the baton firmly and gives her wrists a firm twist, snapping the baton in two. She raises it with her right hand and flings it at the bin. Both pieces miss the opening. Denise hears hollow plastic tinkle sounds at unknown locations. Helen turns back to Denise. Her pace is brisk. She stoops and grabs her music bag and guitar case without slowing down. Denise walks at her side, struggling to keep up. When Helen gets to her minivan she opens the sliding door and throws in the case and bag, paying no attention to where they land. She slams the sliding door, and climbs into the driver's seat.

Denise stands outside her own minivan. "See you Sunday?"

Helen looks through her steering wheel. "I guess." She slams the driver's door, starts her car and puts it into drive. Then she opens her window.

She does not look up. "Please—Denise. Call me tonight, okay? Please. After ten."

Denise's eyebrows droop. "I will call you."

"Thank you."

Helen pulls out of the parking lot and rolls onto Stanford Avenue. Her car gives no turn signal.

The temperature has dropped since nightfall. The sky has nothing in it—no moon, no stars. The air is bone dry.

Denise climbs into her own minivan. No cars are in the lot now. She is the last one. She tosses her music book to the passenger seat across from her and looks around. Mounted lights, piercing and orange, shine in her face and make her squint.

She starts her car and a classic rock station booms, so she turns it down. “Time to go home” she says aloud, to the empty insides of her car. Her house will be warm when she arrives. Her husband will have already turned on the heat—not because he likes it warm, but because he knows that she does. Denise will grade tests on the kitchen table. Her son will be working on his Branman University application and asking for advice on the essay component. If her daughter is having trouble with her chemistry homework, her husband will turn off the baseball game and help her.

Denise puts her car into drive and turns towards the exit. Her headlights scan across the old school building, a mute sentinel to all that happens outside the church. She turns onto Stanford Avenue. A movement catches her eye—is it an animal? She slows down and looks across the parish campus but sees nothing. The lights underscore the lot’s desolation, its emptiness. She feels like a lost raccoon herself, now. Does she belong in this parish? Did she ever really belong? Is she about to disappear into the night, unappreciated and unacknowledged? She puts the animal, or whatever it was, out of her mind and goes home.