

The Chant

In the early summer of 1970 I was somewhere I never should have been, listening to something I never should have heard. St. Boniface, a fortress of a church, was my family's usual Sunday morning destination, but instead I was at St. Hedwig's, a cream-colored sanctuary with mesmerizing chocolate-colored beams which crisscrossed a lofty ceiling. My father took me there, true to my Grandma's brutal second-generation Irish heritage. He went to church every Sunday with me, his offspring, to escape the certain fires of hell.

That morning was when a simple song began to contort my life.

This Mass was not only at a different place, but at a different time of the morning. At St. Boniface, the 9:00 AM Mass (which my mother liked) had an adult choir, oily with warbling sopranos which easily overshadowed the unpretentious voices of the men. The 11:00 AM Mass (which my father preferred) had a folk group with four guitars, a tambourine, and an auburn-haired girl at the microphone with a rabbit nose, tiny hands, and wandering gaze that made me sit up.

To arrive on time for drag racing in Fontana, my dad woke me far earlier than usual, and took me to a 6:30 AM Mass. After I ran a first-timer's assessment of the sanctuary, I lowered my guard, and slid into the sleepy automated routines of the faithful.

The musicians were not an adult choir, nor were they a folk-style group, exactly. A finger-picked guitar, woodwinds and bongo drums accompanied a tight knot of singers to the right of the altar. The loft organ supported the group in an unlikely, yet intimate combination. As I listened, it seemed like the most logical instrumental mix a composer could ever use.

The singers did the chant during the presentation of the gifts. They were strong and clear, and still managed to blend so well that I could not distinguish any dominant voice, like carefully kneaded bread. They all watched the guitarist as he waved the neck of his instrument to lead. Each verse was in unison, and then a slight man, memorable for his hanging moustache, sang a short refrain by himself with a voice bravely imperfect, yet still competent. The choir repeated the refrain, splitting into dramatic, four-part harmony.

I had heard chants before, like in sixth grade religion class. Mr. Tanner, who gave out prayer cards and candy if we could memorize prayers like the "Hail Mary," played us some Gregorian chant on his cassette recorder one evening. Haunting, composed exclusively of men's monotone voices and entirely in Latin, the melody meandered like a small creek through a dark canyon. Gentle, and free of tempo or any discernable pattern, it was easy to listen to, and even easier to forget.

The chant at St. Hedwig's had a pull that the Gregorian chant did not have, with the easy sway of a slow waltz. Instead of Latin, the lyrics were in English. Phrases like "...body of Christ..." and "...refresh our souls..." pierced my early-morning, somnolent stupor. The organ, guitar, flute, and light bongos interweaved with the chant, and gave it other-worldly variation and life.

Listening to the chant felt like gazing at the ocean on a deserted beach; it was desolate, yet entrancing. The refrain ended with two beats of silence, and the lingering reverberation tossed me from one verse to the next. I glided with the memory of their resonating harmonies. As the chant entered my sleepy ears, it drifted straight into a secret place of mine that I hardly knew—a world of clear music, beautiful people, shining stars, and stories with glorious endings.

My dad nudged me to me feet. The celebrant had resumed. His hands were raised, and his eyes were focused on the lectionary in front of him. "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation..."

I was at this Mass because my dad had done something entirely unexpected. After years of tinkering with big block engines, doofing up countless opportunities at the starting tree, and blowing his ears out with unmuffled engines (He would be stone deaf by age 60), he had done well in Fontana's drag races. He had just survived five single elimination rounds, and was paired off with old Carl Bennett that morning.

For as long as I could remember, I had travelled with my dad to drag racing venues across the Southwest: Sonoma, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Tucson, and others. The routine was like a home—setting up the camper with the awning, barbecue, radio, and cooler with beer—making final preps on the car before increasingly intrusive inspections. I had become pretty good at handing Dad the required tool and saying the right thing to prevent him from putting a wrench through the windshield of his Nova. I had spent countless days in the vast culture of pavement, hard music, sun, cigarettes, fumes of all grades of racing fuel, and loud engines—so loud that you did not need ears to hear them. Even after going to the races for years, I could still jump from the shockwave blast of a rev—especially in the morning when it was cool and gray, and the guys would complain about track conditions being too damp.

After Mass, the sunlight and the white courtyard blinded me as we walked out. I put my head down and focused on my dad's fake wallabees. As I slid into the way back of our old station wagon, the chant picked up in my head again. I had been thinking of it all along, really. In the peace of the car's interior, with its fuzzy upholstery that needed to be replaced, and the soothing rumble of the engine, the chant's volume grew in my head.

I did not go with Dad to Fontana. Instead, I stayed home with Mom, miserable with stomach flu. We did not want Mom to be by herself, but no one wanted Dad to miss his big opportunity. She lay on the couch in the living room, a place where nothing moved without her permission. I could relax in the family room and watch TV, but Mom kept the living room formal, even sterile. The grooves from the previous day's vacuuming lay imbedded in the carpet.

Yet Mom lay splayed out on the living room couch as Dad's camper pulled away, with the racer-laden trailer creaking and staggering from the driveway onto the street. I sat on the velvet wicker chair opposite the couch and watched her. Instead of her T-shirt and shorts, she wore a bathrobe only, her right breast peeping out from neglected folds. Her eyes were sunken and appeared as two dark "X"s, like a comic book character that has been knocked out. I took comfort in the rise and fall of her chest as she lay there. I could not discern whether she was awake or asleep. I got a surprise answer to my question.

"What's that?" she asked with her head fixed on the pillow, eyes cracked open in barely roused wonder.

"What's what?"

"That song you are humming. What is it?"

"Oh. It's something I heard at church."

"It's beautiful. Don't stop." She let her hand fall and her jaw drop as she began to snore.

I never went back to that 6:30 AM Mass. I never saw that group again, but the chant remained, like a scar from a long razor cut. I hummed it in the morning when I rode my bike to school. I thought of it during English Literature class when Mrs. Clark spoke about how consumption and other diseases took the Brontës. I let it push other thoughts aside in the evening

when I was supposed to be doing geometry. Late at night, when I had trouble getting to sleep—which was often—I let the chant drive through my head for hours like a car on a remote freeway.

During long summers in our pool I loved to let my body sink to the bottom. I let the air out of my lungs in a gentle rumble and gazed at my mother dog paddling from one side of the shallow end to the other. Besides some muffled splashing and muted voices, it was quiet down there. The depths had reclusiveness, safety and tranquility. The color of hinted blue and the water's perfect clarity spoke of peacefulness, and the chant danced with me like the bubbles laboring to reach the surface.

At fifteen, my parents bought a guitar for me, a blonde-colored Kent with strings that went "thud" when I played them. My dad tried to plink out the notes of "Smoke on the Water," but I had other goals in mind. I played simple three-chord songs like "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." Early on I figured out chords for the chant—D, G, and A minor. About six months and thousands of tries later, I finally mastered F, which was a big help. But the chant had one chord that I could not figure out. It dangled before me, a frustrating mystery located in the middle of the refrain and at the end of the verses. I remembered that the guitarist for the group did not strum the chant—he finger-picked it. I learned to finger pick too, so that I could play it properly.

But that one last chord! My fingers contorted themselves all over the neck, trying to find the right configuration, only leading to more frustration. Sometimes I thought I had it right, but the next morning, I knew I had nothing. Only after I learned to bar my pointer finger did I find the missing chord. The missing puzzle piece!—Ah! B minor! I had the entire chord progression mastered. I played the chant for hours with great satisfaction. I was finishing high school and had arrived as a guitarist.

I decided not to enroll in the drafting program at the Phoenix Institute of Technology. Instead, I accepted an offer of admission to St. Jerome's, a Catholic college in the Midwest. I had no idea what I wanted to study. Although my dad did not show it, I knew that my decision bewildered him to no end. It bewildered me too.

Once at St. Jerome's, I joined the group that sang at the dormitory Masses. I had never sung in any kind of group before, but once I saw them play, I had to give it a try. I sang and played guitar. When walking to the dining hall, the other singers heard me hum the chant. They asked me about it and I told them where I heard it. Like me, they lamented that I did not know what it was called, or where to find it.

On annual school retreats I stayed up late in the common room with my guitar and played the chant. I hoped that someone might be able to tell me something about it. A Catholic college ought to have someone who is familiar with that kind of music, but no one knew that chant.

In April of my senior year I took my guitar to the lake on a day so warm it invited suspicion. The air was moist, sultry and thick—not like California at all. An entire winter's worth of melted snow was making the ground burst with life. I sat on a folded blanket and started playing the chant. A passing shadow and the slap of books dropped to the ground broke me from my reverie. I was about to say "Hey!" when a girl with bare legs and the smell of lavender sat down next to me. The sun shone down on her face, and she looked at me with bright green eyes. She had a large birthmark on her right elbow. I think I had noticed her before on campus, but we had never met.

"What's that song?" she asked, with no introduction.

"I don't know."

"I've been listening to you for the last five minutes—and that's the prettiest, loneliest song I've ever heard. Where's it from?"

I told the story of the chant.

"Play it again."

After graduation I joined a Catholic volunteer group. They sent me to Chicago, bitterly disappointing my mother who wanted me home. The volunteers lived in a large old house with thick sills and peeling blue paint. We lived close to the projects and taught children. After school we tutored them and led them in songs with my guitar.

Once, after dinner, I took out my guitar and played the chant. A guest, a middle-aged man with a white robe and black scapular turned to me. "You know Brother Leonard?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Brother Leonard Roland. He's the one who wrote that chant."

I stopped playing. "You recognize it?" My hands waved around for something to write with.

"His name is Brother Leonard Roland, a Cistercian monk. He lives in an abbey in Iowa. He wrote that, and many others. It's beautiful, isn't it?" I agreed with him.

The following week I looked for anything having to do with Brother Leonard. I called publishing houses, music shops and Catholic bookstores. A few people had heard of Brother Leonard, but no one had any material or recording that they could sell to me. After two hours phoning publishers in Southern California on a Friday afternoon, my hands were shaking.

I found the abbey's number in an old AT&T phone book at the library. I called, and there was no answer. I called again later. Still, nothing.

I could not sleep that night. Insomnia was typical for me, but that evening I was nowhere close to relaxation. At four in the morning I left a note for our director, saying that I was taking a bus to an abbey and would return by that Sunday evening.

I arrived at the Chicago bus station at 4:45 AM. I got lucky. A bus would be leaving for Dubuque at 6:30 that morning.

I breathed in the openness of Iowa, so unlike California or Chicago. People in the town knew about the abbey, and they told me how to get there. No buses were going, however, so I walked on a strip of pavement where farmland was the prevailing mark of humanity's presence.

A sweaty old Chicago Cubs baseball cap is not very presentable in most places, but perfect for a hiking trip when cultivation is your only companion. The sky was laced with a thin veneer of clouds, diffusing the sunlight, and making an already bright day blinding. Clouds of gnats danced in random locations. I focused my eyes on the gentle greens of the corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. The chant rang in my head, this time overlaid with men's monastic voices.

I got a ride in the back of a pickup for the last part of the journey. When I arrived I saw men in white and black robes making their way like bees to a long building with mortared stones and a high roof. A couple of them glanced at me, a stranger, standing alone in the parking lot. I walked in, sat towards the back and listened. I was disappointed to hear chants which sounded more perfunctory than beautiful, but what could I have expected?—recorded Hollywood music?

After the prayer service (I learned it was called "none") and all the monks had left, I walked to the gift shop. The monastery did not have many places for unexpected guests. Another man in robes, who looked experienced, but not ancient, was reading behind the counter. His graying hair was cut close to his head. His nose was sloping and his dark eyes were gentle, but piercing. Thin bony wrists, flecked with black hair, stuck out from loose sleeves.

"May I help you?" he asked. He had figured out that I was not there for anything coming from their organic garden.

"I hope so," I said. "Is Brother Leonard here?"

His eyes looked past me. "Oh," he said. "I'm sorry, but he died some time ago."

"Oh. I see." I looked around the shop. Somehow, in spite of the desperation that had brought me there, I was ready to accept anything at that moment.

I turned back to the monk. "When did he die?"

His voice did not have pity or sorrow—either for his fellow monk or for me in failing to find him. "About five years ago."

I mimicked the monk's dispassionate approach to death and took a deep breath. "I came here because of his music. This is the Brother Leonard who composed, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the monk. His eyes took on a new energy. "We do have his sheet music over here. We also have recordings." I watched the monk's sandals flop below his robe as I followed him to the far wall.

"What's the piece called?" the monk asked. He passed his fingers across folders organized on a folding table.

"I don't know. But I seem to remember the refrain went 'O body of Christ, O blood of the Lord'."

"Hmm," said the monk, sifting through papers in a battered milk crate. He pulled out some music. "Was it this one?"

The page had no title anywhere. The words were typed, but the music, notes, and chords were all hand-written. Even the ledger lines showed signs of being made with a ruler and T-square, with stray marks poking out at the ends. This composition had gone through no

publishing house. I inspected the notes and lyrics and recognized it instantly. It was the one. Then I bought all of Brother Leonard's works.

Finally having the music in my hands pulled a plug, took out a tension and put me back on the earth. An ache was gone, a mystery resolved. I felt like I had just landed after a long journey floating over a strange country in a hot air balloon. I had seen things I could never have anticipated in a marvelous adventure, but I was glad it was over. An ending, unexpected, had arrived, and I was not ready. My feet were getting used to the feel of a new world which lay before me. With the discovery of the divine offices, I was curious for more, but I was in no hurry. I had only recently graduated. I had time.

"How long are you thinking of staying?" asked the monk.

"I don't know," I said. "I came only for the music. I don't have to be back until Sunday evening."

"It's getting late and I don't seem to remember you in a car. You could stay with us tonight, if you like." His invitation felt as casual as overnighting with a best friend.

"Thanks. Maybe I'll come back sometime, but I think I should go home now." I shook the monk's hand, walked out of the gift shop and across the abbey grounds to the highway.

I had never felt so free, so detached. I held the sheet music with my hands in front of me, and for the first time in my life, I sang the words of the chant as I walked the empty road.