

Caroling for Roskruge

It was easy to endure my big sister's exuberant suggestions while enjoying the ongoing tranquility of Christmas vacation back in 1994. The 9:30 singing group was starting its rehearsal for the Holy Family Mass, and Maureen was riding a wave of inspiration from her high school's version of "A Christmas Carol."

"We should go Christmas caroling. I'll be happy to host. We could carol around my neighborhood."

"Little late," said Donald, a tenor who attended Arizona College.

"Not at all," said Kathleen, who was the oldest of the group. "The Christmas season goes on until January 6, the feast of Epiphany."

Donald cocked his head to one side. The middle of his forehead crinkled, and his nose puckered up. Kathleen went on.

"Ever heard of the 12 days of Christmas?"

My sister pushed. "We could probably do it on the Friday before New Year's. I think anyone would recognize the whole week as still the holiday season."

Lisa, a college student who was always trying to get the group to sing at the local jail, immediately pushed for a go-ahead. Kathleen said she would come. So did Mark, our director. The pianist, Phil, had a gig that evening, but still thought that he would be able to squeeze in some caroling. Even Donald eventually said he would come. The group settled on 7:00.

I thought about Roskruge. I liked the idea of driving the animal nuts but was uneasy that the dog might jump the fence and attack if singing strangers walked onto its yard.

I first met Roskruge at the beginning of that year on a bright winter morning as I walked to my new school. The dog shook with explosive barks as it nosed into a chain link gate. Spit flew from its floppy mouth. He was big, with shoulders almost as high as the school lunch tables I had defaced the week before. Could no one hear this animal at 7:53 in the morning except me? I savored the thrill of having a beast convulsing to rip my throat out. I kept my pace glacial, extending my provocations while taking care to not arrive late for my first period class.

Before Roskruge's interruption, I had been thinking about a song I heard during the New Year's Day Mass.

"What's that music?" I asked my mom.

"It's Bach's *Ave Maria*," she replied.

I looked at my mom for a moment to make certain it was her. I did not really expect she would have such ready knowledge of a piece I had never heard before.

I liked the song so much I decided to learn it on the Yamaha guitar in my closet, the one buried under layers of debris since the fifth grade. At the end of Mass, I went up to the music group to

ask for a copy of it. The pianist, a young man with long hair, gave me a couple of worn sheets and said to keep them.

But on that icy January morning Roskruge had interrupted the *Ave Maria* in my head, and so I began thinking about Wile E. Coyote instead. The two canines had similarities: their hunger, their willingness to kill, and their intelligence. And I, like the roadrunner, would poke my tongue at the beast and disappear.

Since I did not know the dog's real name, I called it Roskruge. It had become such a prominent part of my mornings, and the name seemed to fit.

I should not have been taking that three-block walk at all. I should not have been showering in PE, searching for new classrooms or struggling to make friends in a strange, large junior high. I should have been riding with Mom to St. Athanasius where, as a seventh grader, I would have been near the top of the student hierarchy.

But St. Athanasius had thrown me out. It was a pity, really. I had been able to get away with defacing the bathroom stalls (and smoking in them too), ripping girls' pictures out of the library books and kicking the pew in front of me during the school Mass. The school had been willing to put up with that.

What set them off was how I had failed to stop arguing with Sister Immaculata, failed to stand in the rear of the classroom, and refused to go to the principal's office when told to do so. The principal had to come and get me herself, and so I got a lesson on how small and weak I still was. Sister Josephine did not give me a chance to defend myself. "Defiant behavior" she called it. My expulsion happened so fast, that it was not until I was in my room, listening to Mom registering me by phone to the public junior high, that I began to cry.

Sister Immaculata's saint stories about people dying or getting parts of their bodies ripped out became tiresome for me. My classmates simply ignored the stories, just as they ignored my complaints.

The "defiant behavior" was not even the worst of my offenses. If Sister Josephine had known about some of the other things I was up to, she would have had me excommunicated.

I had been spending time secretly in the church choir loft after school. Nobody ever went there. Even the adult choir had long since abandoned the place. It served only as a storage area for crushed boxes, broken statues, and worn-out robes. Who would have guessed that an area right above the heads of the faithful doubled as a suitable harborage for rats? I easily jimmied the lock and escaped into a separate world where I could look at my *Playboy* magazines, do homework, or just disappear.

Behind a file cabinet, I noticed a square indentation that opened to a gap in the walls. This gap led to vented overhead views of the Lady Chapel, the parish offices, and two of the confessionals.

The parish building traced its beginnings to the 19th century when it was originally supposed to be a fort. But the fort was never used, and the property was bequeathed to the bishop, who thought he could use it as a mission for the local indigenous people. That idea ran aground when he learned that the place was a two-hour walk from where they lived.

So, the building lay on its own for many years. When a middle-class neighborhood sprung up around it, the bishop wanted to raze the ancient structure and build something new. After a wave of protests the diocese produced a church that had the original six-foot-thick walls, a Mexican-style roof and delicate chapels.

That rebuild was back in the sixties. No one knew anything about the gap between the drywalled interior and the ancient fort walls, until I discovered them myself.

I started using the gap to spy on confessions, but it turned out that missed Masses and other grocery list sins were not as interesting as the ongoing parish scandals discussed in the offices. I spent more time listening to the hushed conversations about how no one liked the Religious Education Director, and why the pastor cycled through an ongoing stream of new receptionists.

I got to hear Mr. Hartnett, the business manager, as he faced three determined leaders of the St. Vincent de Paul. They wanted to move a handicapped parking space to make it easier to load supplies. Their proposed space was just as close to the entrance of the church, but they got nowhere with Mr. Hartnett. He ignored their arguments, answered questions they never asked and made statements that had nothing to do with the subject at hand. He did not acknowledge their request and never actually said “no.” The man was a genius. I took careful note of his methods.

Meanwhile, I was practicing the guitar more than anyone had expected, including myself. With all that strumming, my sister suggested I join her singing group. The director, eager for another guitarist, was glad to help with my goal of mastering Bach’s *Ave Maria*.

I liked the folk group. It never failed to play “Take Our Bread” during the bishop’s fundraising campaigns. After an Associate Pastor complained when they did not sing the final verse of an opening song, the group played every note of every song for the next six months, even if it had ten verses. When the Pastor asked the group to wear rose-colored clothes for Laetare Sunday, they blinded the assembly with their hot pink shirts, slacks and skirts. Although previous pastors did not seem bothered, I suspected that Fr. Frank, the most recent one, was less patient.

The group had endured since the sixties. Mark Paisley, the last of the original members, had graying curls reaching down to his neck and a restrained sense of humor that leaked out when he announced song numbers. He played a 12-string guitar that never left his shoulders once Mass began, even when he went to Communion.

Mark lived by himself on a corner lot in the east part of town. If anyone mentioned “that mobile home on the corner of Sixth and Hacienda,” everyone knew the place. Every day Mark bicycled to his programmer’s job at the local electronics firm. For Christmas, Mark gave out cards to the group members which would say “Merry Christmas and keep on keeping on.”

My first attempts at playing with the group were pathetic failures. My fingers would not move fast enough. After a few bars I would get lost, even for the easy songs. But I ramped up my practice time more than ever, to about three or four hours a day. I had never practiced that way for anything before.

During Mass, I was no longer just sitting, standing and kneeling. I was in front of the assembly, so I had to pay attention and avoid putting my fingers in my mouth.

I learned that Lenten music was subdued and lamenting, while Easter was loaded with saccharin hymns. For the first time I noticed how Glorias, Holy-Holies and the Alleluias got switched around or eliminated altogether from Sunday to Sunday. Almost every part of every Mass was planned out of old books, like a McMass.

As we were finishing the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Mark’s “A” string popped. Since Phil was away at a jazz festival, I was suddenly the only instrumentalist left. It was a difficult song, with chord changes every two beats. Nevertheless, I played competently. Afterwards, everyone in the group took turns congratulating me. I could feel the color surging up my neck and into my cheeks.

Ordinary season became an endless summer of conquering new songs and mastering the ability of playing and singing at the same time. I had never noticed Advent music until that year.

Waiting for the coming of the Christ took on a new meaning while I played.

We never saw Fr. Frank or any of the parish staff. Mark never said a word about what anyone with authority may have told him. We never received a request or directive. It was as if the parish hierarchy lived on a different continent. Likewise, through the office vents, I never heard a word about music.

All that changed as Christmas approached. The lector started giving mysterious announcements about the arrival of an unnamed music director. And, safely hidden in the gap one afternoon, I heard Fr. Frank's unmistakable whine. His complaints came out in canine bursts as he spoke to the director of liturgy. "I don't care what happens to the music. I don't have time for it! Just make it happen and stop bothering me!"

For the first time, I wished I had not been in the gap that day.

About a week later, Mark slipped into the Lady Chapel and knelt. My stomach turned to ice. People went there to pray about deaths, lost jobs, or other family crises. Why was Mark there? A few minutes later, he left on the opposite side of the church, the one facing the offices. I squirmed to get to the office gap and waited there until it got stuffy. At last, Fr. Frank, Mark, the liturgy director and a new young woman emerged from the pastor's office. Mark shook their hands and left.

The other three remained. The Pastor was bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"I just love this December weather—frosty in the morning, but it warms up so nicely in the afternoon! Isn't it just great?"

The director of liturgy and the new woman alternated between looking at the floor and at each other.

“Yeah.”

The pastor continued with a voice that filled the office area. “And that crispness in the morning—just perfect for a brisk walk—so healthy and invigorating!”

“Uh huh.”

During the rehearsals that followed, Mark kept forgetting which song to practice next. Even more strange was the way he played entire songs. He usually cut off a song after one verse if everyone knew it.

On caroling night, Kathleen was the first of our group to arrive and Phil was the last. My sister had made a special outfit with a bonnet, muff, and hoop skirt. Mark distributed music in red and green folders. At 7:15 we left the house while my parents waved goodbye from the front door.

We adopted a strategy of standing in front of a house and singing, without knocking. Folks would stand at their doors in pools of astonishment. An Asian family offered us money. In one house a fellow was yelling and cursing before he had finished opening the door. Then he saw us and was transfixed in that dazed astonishment all over again. We kept on singing.

House after house we visited, spreading holiday cheer. I proposed we turn left on Seneca Avenue, but got overruled. We turned right, so we were on a collision course with Roskruge.

The first house on the block was perfect. It was an older couple; they looked like empty nesters, glad to have visitors of any kind. The woman gave out candy canes. Then it was onto Roskruge's.

Christmas music filtered out through lit windows. We took out our sheets and I positioned myself at the far side of the group. As we began to sing “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” a familiar barking emerged from deep in the household. Then it increased to the intensity I heard every school morning. The door bumped and the knocker tapped. Urgent scratches resonated.

The door cracked open and the hem of a peach bathrobe peaked out, accompanied by the remonstrations of a woman’s voice. “No! Jeremy, no!”

I took a step back.

The crack in the door widened, revealing an older woman who did not have to bend down to hold Roskruge’s collar. As soon as the door was open enough, Roskruge charged outside, pulling the woman along.

Like bowling pins, we scattered, even Maureen in her hoop skirt and Kathleen in her old age. I darted across the street with my guitar and stood next to a tree, ready to climb. The girls were all screaming.

The dog’s owner did not let go of Roskruge; I think her hand was caught in its collar. It lunged from one caroler to the next, dragging the woman along from one part of the yard to another. Mark tried to take hold of the animal himself, but that idea did not last long. As the dog hauled the woman under a lamppost by the curb, the light revealed her naked shoulders, scraped and bloodied. Her bathrobe trailed around behind her.

A man emerged from the house. “What the hell?” he yelled. “What the hell are you kids doing? Get out of here! Leave!” He ran up to Roskruge and grabbed the dog’s collar. After a flurry of yelling, barking and struggling, the man managed to get the dog back into the house. He

slammed the door and looked at us. “You kids! I’m calling my lawyer, got that? I’m calling my lawyer!” He bent down to the woman.

We retreated across the street and started walking back to my house at a brisk pace. The breeze was blowing Maureen’s dress around. I took one last glimpse as we rounded the corner. The man was crouched over the woman, who was sitting up, shaking and crying.

My parents asked for the complete story several times, forgetting the hot cocoa and apple cider. I was not thirsty anyway, so I went to the TV room and watched cartoon videos.

I kept watching until I heard Mark’s voice, uninterrupted, back in the living room. Everyone else had fallen silent, so I decided to re-join the group. Mark was sitting by the fire.

“...They didn’t want me to say anything until after the Christmas season is over... but now—” he tossed up his hands and looked at the fire. Then he turned back to everyone. “I’ve had a discussion with Fr. Frank. He’s installing a new director for the 9:30 Mass. I will no longer direct.”

The firelight flickered. The wrinkles by Mark’s left eye looked like cuts in his flesh.

Phil was the first to ask a question. “What does he want us to do? Does he want us to keep singing and playing?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Why the change?”

“He didn’t say that either. He only said he made the change because he felt it was time for a change. A non-answer, really.”

The fire crackled and sputtered. One of the logs collapsed and some sparks rolled out onto the hearth extension.

Lisa's knees were bouncing up and down. "Did you meet the new director?"

"Yes."

"What's he like?"

"She—is in her twenties. Her name is Chelsea. She plays the piano. She studied somewhere in Boston, and she's played at St. Mel's."

Glances shot across the room. Kathleen put her face in her left hand.

"Yea, I know. Teen music central. I guess that's the telling clue of what our Pastor really wants."

Phil put his hands behind his head. "Well—there's only room for one pianist—so I guess I'm out."

The whites of Lisa's eyes flashed. She was on the edge of her seat. "I'm not staying! This is awful what they've done! Especially to you, Mark!"

Mark put his fingers to his temples and looked down. His breath hissed out.

My sister twirled her muff. Her hoop skirt was thrust up into the air exposing her blue jeans.

"When is Chelsea supposed to take over?"

"After the Christmas season," said Mark.

"Well, we can play one last time. January first, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God," said Kathleen.

“Yes,” said Mark. “And that reminds me, I would like to do Bach’s *Ave Maria* again, like last year. But this time I want Todd to play it, on his own.”

My heart began to pound. “I’m not ready,” I said. “I can finger pick the chords no problem—but I’m still working on the melody—no way I can get it ready by January first.”

Mark assumed the role of director. “Then Lisa, I would like for you to use that lovely alto voice. Could you please do a solo one last time?”

Maureen looked at me. Then she turned to our director. “I think you should sing it, Mark.”

I was about to throw up, but everyone else around the room was nodding their heads.

So, after Communion on January first, I played the introduction for the *Ave Marie* entirely on my own. I had played those chords thousands of times. I did not need any sheet music.

Mark looked naked without the 12-string around his shoulders, just him and the microphone. He took a deep breath.

He had done plenty of soloing with his raspy voice through decades of service at St. Athanasius, but this time his sound was full and vibrant. Instead of scooping, he moved from note to note with surgical precision. He led and I followed with ease. I could play with freedom. It was like flying, and my thoughts meandered about, from the spiritual to the sundry.

The singing group seemed to have such power when I got started, almost like magic. It had worked a miracle, turning me into a musician. But we were not invincible. With an attempt of manipulation, the group had vanished, all gone.

I thought about Roskrige and its owners and that rotten night when we tried to do something fun and beneficial for the neighborhood.

And I thought about that cartoon I watched after we went caroling. Wile E. was trying so hard to capture that roadrunner in a series of tricks and schemes, but in the end, the roadrunner would always stick out its tongue and disappear.

And Wile E. would be crushed under a boulder and left with nothing—nothing but the ACME stuff that was supposed to get the job done.