

In Unison

There I was, slouched into a plastic stadium seat, the target of seemingly ceaseless laughter and humiliating stares- the kind of stares that traumatize a kid for life. I was nine years old, and at that moment, the last place I wanted to be was in that seat looking down in embarrassment at a red-dirt diamond field. The Georgia heat boiled on my bronzed skin, but the redness of my cheeks could not be blamed on the hostile summer sun. I peered over the blue railing that stretched to encircle a neatly-manicured baseball field, and through teary eyes, made out the faces of my proud classmates. It began as an ordinary day in my safe, suburban neighborhood. I eagerly hopped off of my school bus at 4:30 P.M., as usual. I skipped down the Capers Crossing road that led to my red-brick home, as usual, and once inside, discovered a snack of evenly-sliced Granny Smith apples waiting for me on the kitchen counter, as usual. I opened my backpack, and sheet music spilled and danced from the unzipped pocket. The pages of the music read "Star-Spangled Banner", the all too familiar tune that I had been preparing for months to sing at an Atlanta Braves baseball game. This was not an ordinary day. In my eyes, being in the "Simpson Singers", Simpson elementary school's choral group, established me as a high-ranking elite as far as the fifth-grade social order went, and singing the national anthem at the Brave's game was a rite-of-passage for any "Simpson Superstar."

I tugged at my mom's starched blouse, and she glanced down to be greeted by my nearly-toothless smile and the pages of music puckering between my little fingers. If I was going to wow the viewers of professional baseball across the country, I needed to practice. I confidently cleared my throat, with the palms of my hands, carefully pressed down the disarranged ruffles of my skirt, and began to mouth the first word. As I attempted to force out the sound, more air was escaping from my rounded lips, but I hardly stuttered the first verse before starting again. After several false starts, I finally belted the entire National Anthem without a hitch. I looked toward my mom for some sign of approval, as my eyes lit up with new-found assurance. I was ready. I hopped up the polished hardwood staircase, ran my hand across the smooth banister, and reached my bedroom. I positioned myself squarely in the mirror, and my reflection was familiar, but I sensed a certain pre-performance glow. I artfully swept half of my shiny blonde hair back and secured the locks with a rhinestone-studded clip, that, as far as I was concerned, was the epitome of sophistication. From the drawer of an antique dresser, folded neatly underneath floral-printed turtlenecks and pink cardigans, I pulled a tragic navy polo shirt with "Simpson Singers" embroidered in the top-right corner. That ugly shirt was the most glorious of uniforms as I carefully stretched the collar over my head and smoothed it against my body.

My best friend and neighbor, Brooke Brenizer, was also a part of the choral group, and we made arrangements to venture to Turner Field together. In more realistic terms, our parents worked out a way to conveniently get us there. My mom and dad dragged behind as I ran to Brooke's tudor-style house across the street, and shot me a look of displeasure as I impolitely rang the doorbell several times consecutively. Mrs. Brenizer warmly answered and let my parents and me into their home. Brooke's house was different than mine. My mom was never a fan of clutter or tchotchkes, but Sandra Brenizer scoured flea markets and antiques stores for cute, country decorations to place around the house. Being a young girl still enamored by bright colors and glitter, I was a huge fan of Sandra's decorating style. As I walked through the threshold of the wooden front doors, I was confronted with easter-themed trinkets with every

step. Brooke excitedly ran to my side, and it was comforting to see that someone shared my enthusiasm. After scarfing down some fruit gummies, we jumped into the Brenizer's van to head toward the MARTA station. MARTA is an underground subway system in Atlanta, and attracts many sketchy and a few unsavory characters. Naturally, my parents were hesitant to expose us to this mode of transportation, but after some deliberation, they figured the train ride was worth avoiding downtown traffic. Once our van swung into a vacant parking space at the station, Bruce Brenizer began searching his pockets. He had forgotten the tickets. The tickets that would admit us into the baseball game that we had been anticipating for months. The disappointment in our young faces prompted my mom to remain optimistic, "We can still make it to the game. The Brenizers will hurry back for the tickets, and your father and I will ride to the stadium with you girls." She pointed at Brooke and me. As Brooke's parents drove away, I skeptically boarded the smelly train. I wasn't sure how to feel. The disappointment became overwhelming as I tried to quell it with positive affirmations. Mid-way through the ride, I became excited once again. A large black man sitting next to me must have noticed that Brooke and I were both wearing those tacky polo shirts because he asked where we were headed. Almost in a venting session, I explained the entire debacle. A smile stretched across the stranger's dark face, and after a few seconds he asked Brooke and me to perform for him. Of course, the train was filled with commuters, and our singing would cause a scene, so we politely declined. My mom seemed concerned by this man's interest in us, but became less anxious as the conversation went on. He finally seemed to understand that we were not going to perform the National Anthem on the MARTA, when the train began to resonate with a soulful bellow. The plastic seats began to vibrate, and I turned to see the friendly stranger performing the Star-Spangled Banner. With a quick glance to Brooke, on the opposite side of me, I hesitantly joined, in a near whisper. "...Oh, say can you.." Brooke began with the same soft stutter as I had a few measures earlier. We began to discover more confidence with every lyric, with every verse. Before I realized what was happening, the three of us were practically shouting this song for the entire train to hear. I was so immersed in the entire experience, I almost didn't notice the rows of travelers singing in unison.

Men, women, and children of all shapes, sizes, and varieties began to proudly belt this song that we all knew. I found my voice, and shortly thereafter, the thirty or so others did, too. The scene could have been straight out of some corny Disney channel movie, and the overtly patriotic mood was enough to make anyone sick. Despite the cliché nature of the entire scenario, it was one of the most moving and surrealistic of my life thus far. I knew hardly any of the people on the train that day, I didn't know where they were off to, I didn't know how they were feeling, but something so basic united us all that evening. Once we all sang the final note, and allowed it to ring for a few seconds, the train had a stillness about it. I broke the silence with a giggle and turned to my mother whose eyes were welling up. She brushed a tear from her cheek with a purple sleeve, and began to clap with the rest of the makeshift chorus. We quietly slipped out at our stop, and hurried toward the baseball field. We didn't speak about what had transpired just moments earlier, as we waited at the stadium entrance for the Brenizers to arrive with the tickets. Finally, we spotted Sandra and Bruce rushing toward us at the gates, and we shuffled through the entryway, tickets in tow. Brooke and I threw each other a knowing look and shot off toward the field, losing our parents who did not seem to understand the urgency of the situation. It was not very difficult to recognize the "Simpson Singers" as the group consisted of forty fifth-

graders in those distinctive shirts. They were already staggered on the field in the specific way I had rehearsed so many times before. I felt my heart sink to my gummie-filled stomach, as I began to realize that I would not be performing that night. My music teacher and choral director confirmed my fears as she told us that we were too late, and that we could not even access the fields. And there I was, slouched into a plastic stadium seat, the target of seemingly ceaseless laughter and humiliating stares- the kind of stares that traumatize a kid for life. I was nine years old, and at that moment, the last place I wanted to be was in that seat looking down in embarrassment at a red-dirt diamond field. That's when I recalled my first MARTA experience. I sang the Star-Spangled Banner with complete strangers, which was so much cooler than singing it with my fifth-grade friends. I thought about where I'd be standing on the baseball field, next to Hal Glick, who definitely didn't shower often enough. On the train I was sitting beside my best friend and the friendly bald black man, who seemed much cleaner. I was on the verge of tears over the situation, but recovered after realizing that even though I missed my minute of fame at the Brave's baseball game, I experienced something so much more substantial in a dirty underground train. Sometimes the old proverb rings true, the journey is more important than the destination.