

Blintz Cream

In the center of this country in late spring, when the smell of the earth blots out all others, there are days when the air is still but heat itself seems to move without wind.

As he stepped into the first sun, Magnus could tell that it would be one of those days. He suggested they go to Country Kitchen, the town's best restaurant, with air conditioning, an ample Sunday menu, and a dressy crowd that starts as people come before church and lasts through supper. That way Shirley wouldn't have to roast a turkey and heat up the house. But today, her fortieth wedding anniversary, she didn't want to celebrate at some restaurant.

What she wanted was to prepare dinner herself, mostly, and host all of her immediate family. Mostly. Cameron and his new bride Sage were driving down with dessert. Audrey was bringing herself, both grandchildren, and if anyone asked (and no one did) she could include her live-in, who wouldn't want to come and whom Shirley didn't like.

By mid-morning it was warmer inside the house than out. Magnus puzzled why anyone on God's green earth would set dinner for two p.m., when everybody was too hungry or too full. He slipped on a work shirt and his old cotton pants, intending to finish up the backyard water feature. He'd collected the river rock and set the streambed concrete himself. An electrician had drilled the stone, set the larger pieces, and had run 220 underground for the motor. He alone had laid the pad and the liner. All that remained was the bedding plants. He was eager to show it off, maybe the kids would help. He'd like to look out and know they had planted some flowers. He'd kept track of every penny. Counting the seedlings that now sat in flats wilting in the heat, the project had cost a fraction of what the landscaper bid.

There's a lesson in that, Magnus thought. Shirley always scolded him not to use those words, the grandkids just glaze over, she said. But what the hell. He didn't have many more years, there *was* a lesson, and why shouldn't a grandfather act like one.

Audrey and the kids arrived first. No live-in—Magnus couldn't bring himself to use Audrey's term, significant other. The kitchen windows were open to vent the heat, and with it the conversation. His wife and their first child.

"You needn't have brought anything."

"Happy anniversary, Mom."

"Kids, there's a relish tray in the dining room. Get yourselves a carrot, won't spoil your appetite."

Audrey set two brown bags by the breadbox. "Is this stuff out of the way?" The breadbox was painted tin, scenes of a Dutch farm family, wooden shoes, the mother and father with the pink complexion of boiled shrimp.

"You weren't to bring anything" Shirley, scratching a scab.

"I thought I'd contribute."

"You contribute. Just by being here."

"I thought, something special," Audrey said. "A punch." From one bag she pulled a 1.5 liter bottle of Jim Beam and a tenth of an exotic liqueur. Groceries out of the second. "A light, spring punch. Cranberry, pineapple."

"Well you're not serving that to the kids."

"No Mom. I'm not. Happy anniversary."

"Thank you, dear. Where's Carl?"

Audrey watched her mother for a reaction. "Carl won't be coming."

“That’s too bad,” Shirley said without inflection. “I’ve set a place for him.”

“I saw. I’ll just…”

“No, no.”

“Only take me a minute.”

“No, no. You leave it. Odd’s unlucky. Course, now we’ll be seven and that’s an unlucky number.”

Audrey frowned. “No, Mom. You have it backwards. Seven is good. If you roll seven you crap out. You win.” She pulled the punch bowl from the top cabinet shelf and set the ingredients around it.

“Well just leave it. And you should watch your language.”

Audrey opened the Triple Sec and sniffed its scents of orange and celebration and luxury.

“Carl had to work then? At the store?”

“No, Mom.”

“The kids can’t drink that.”

“Honest, Mom. I’m making a second batch. Non-alcoholic for Sage and the kids.”

“Sage doesn’t drink?”

“You’ve forgotten.” Audrey had also brought a block of ice. She laid it in the sink and with ferocious stabs of the ice pick split off melon-sized pieces. She placed the largest chunk in the bowl and over it poured a measured two cups of whiskey.

“I didn’t know that. I just thought maybe she, they, were trying…”

Audrey eyed the depleted bottle of bourbon. Getting the large size was the right decision.

“I wish Carl had come.”

“Mom. You didn’t invite him.”

“Well, after all he lives with you. So he’s feeling all right?”

“I think so,” it came out with a sigh. “Mom,” Audrey said with finality. “Carl has moved out. We weren’t getting along and he’s moved out. Here today, gone tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? He’s moving out tomorrow?”

“Yesterday.”

Shirley gave a snort. She’d thought to invite Carl, she meant it to say, although she hadn’t. No matter. It wasn’t polite to give no reason for declining an invitation, even an unspoken one, when a place setting has been laid for you and all: the silver, the cloth napkins, having yourself counted in the recipes for stuffing and sweet potato pie, and then not show. Even if you’ve moved out.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Audrey added. She rolled the can of frozen pineapple juice between her hands to warm it and dumped it into the bowl. The concentrate came out with a rude, evacuating sound. She took a fork to it and began to mash it against the glass.

“No need,” Shirley replied.

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Jacob and Brianna found their grandfather in the yard. He stood atop his pile of rocks surveying the neighbors’ yards like Cortez in Panama. He’d memorized that sonnet for the tenth grade declamation contest, could still recite it. Somewhere in his small library, he had it in an anthology, although when once he went back to find it—to do a recitation for the kids— he’d had trouble. It was, he was surprised to find, Wordsworth, not Keats. If he hadn’t happened on the Index of First Lines, he’d still be looking.

He explained his handiwork. The kids were uninterested in the planning, the architecture, his remarkable savings.

“Does it work, Pops?” Jacob asked. “Let’s see it fly.”

“Well it doesn’t fly, it runs. Come to think of it, I’m not even sure it runs. Been waiting to try it out.”

“For what?” they asked, just as he’d hoped.

“Why,” he said, pausing like a practiced showman. “For you. This is the world premier.”

“Do it, do it,” Jason started a rhythm; his sister joined in. Magnus walked down the stream bed—easier on his knees than hopping rock to rock-- to the grounded switch they’d installed by the gatepost.

“Do it, do it,” they chanted.

“How ‘bout a countdown?” They immediately obliged, starting with ten.

“...three, two, one, blast off!”

He flicked the switch. A burble began underground. Soon water was rushing down the cement sluice, dripping over rocks, disappearing under the catch to be pumped again.

They stood thrilled by the sight, all three. The moment was precisely what he’d envisioned. He put his hands on the shoulder of each.

“Listen,” said Brianna. “It sings a song. Three notes.” Magnus listened. In fact he had tested it. several times, but never noticed. Dripping from different heights, onto different surfaces and pools, the water chimed distinct tones. “*Sol, fa, do,*” Brianna sang. “All going at once, like a chord.”

They leaned in.

“Yes, yes. Three notes.” Magnus sang the notes Brianna had sung, not that he heard them. “*So-ol, fa-a, do-o.*”

“Children,” Shirley called through the window. “Stop that racket. You’ll give your

grandfather a headache. Come wash up so's you're ready for dinner. And Pops, you change those horrid pants."

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Audrey served Magnus a cup of punch. The kids got juice glasses and from a cobalt blue pitcher poured the Shirley Temple mix, that's what Magnus called it, a spring color brighter for the absence of bourbon. Strawberries floated about the punch bowl, and he fished out two and put them in their glasses. The yellow of the spiked version was muddled like goldenrod. It reminded him of tests, when he'd peed for dehydration. Or maybe gall stones, he'd had both. But he didn't mention it.

Cameron and Sage arrived, apologizing, describing traffic. Sage carried two pies in a cloth bag lined with foil to keep the chill. The chocolate cream, she explained, would melt in the heat. They gathered in the kitchen for a viewing.

"Raisin pecan," Sage answered Jacob's question. "My momma's recipe."

"Well," Magnus said. "I like raisins, and I like pecans. But I don't know that I like them mixed."

"Magnus," Shirley scolded. "Where are your manners?"

"I turn seventy next month," Magnus said. He grinned at Sage, to enlist her in the conspiracy. "It's time to say what I like."

Sage came over and put her arm around him. Even with age Magnus was a large man. She couldn't reach his shoulder, or around his waist, and so rested her hand between his shoulder blades. He leaned into her, gently so as not to throw her off balance.

"Say what you want, Pops. I agree, seventy is about time."

They settled into the living room, its furniture augmented by two dining chairs. The kids

began to set up the chess board, so together they could take on their grandfather. Audrey assured that everyone had a full cup, and poured her third. It's a short drive home, she explained to no one, and the cups were small. She held hers aloft.

Magnus sat opposite his grandchildren. Brianna offered two fists, Magnus tapped one, and she showed the white pawn. The board was carefully rotated, and the game began. Time for one serious game, which they generally followed with Blintz Cream.

Magnus had been a devout player in his youth. He'd taught the kids with two techniques. One, the way he'd learned: play all out, so that they might see that study of openings and a few simple rules paid results. Control the center, protect an advanced piece, develop your officers. The second way was harder. He lured their pieces into positions of advantage. He'd already taught, or rather let them discover, the gambit and the pin. Today's lesson was revealed threats. He advanced a knight to an unprotected square. Now, he waited for them to realize that by moving a pawn, they would create a double threat: first to his bishop vulnerable to that pawn, second, since the moved pawn opened a path for their own bishop, to the knight itself. A double threat, only one of which could be avoided.

They saw it simultaneously, and nudged each other giggling. With a one-piece advantage they deftly traded down. He soon lifted his king and laid it on its side.

"A lucky win," said Magnus, affecting a growl. He reversed and reset the board. "But I'll tan your hides in Blintz Cream."

Soon they were counting aloud. "One, two, three...." Magnus spoke in even tones, a generous second—perhaps two—for each beat. When it was his move, the kids counted together and speeded up as the time neared forfeit.

In minutes, the game was over. Shouts and groans. White had mated in eleven moves.

To Magnus's delight, they specialized: Brianna picked a move so that if the count went to nine they'd be ready, while Jacob scouted a better one. They never missed a turn.

"What is it you're playing?" Sage asked. "I thought chess was played in silence."

"Ahh," Magnus explained. "Special rules. Blintz Cream. Ten seconds to move. If you don't, why, you lose your turn." Jacob rotated the board again and they placed the pieces for a rematch.

Shirley set a serving dish of raw vegetables and one of potato salad on the table. "Don't go starting another game," she said, "we're about to eat." Then to Sage, "Blintz Cream. Magnus's father invented it. They still play it in Norway, he's famous for it."

"*Blitzkrieg*," Sage corrected her. "It's a German word. They play it all over the world."

"I'm sure you're wrong, dear," Shirley said. "Old Magnus –Pops's father?—thought it up." She left for the kitchen.

Cam had out his cell phone. "Here it is. '*Blitzkrieg*. A swift intensive military attack, designed to defeat the opponent quickly.' From the German for lightening, *blitz*, and war, *krieg*. I don't think the Norwegians can take credit, looks like it was started by Hitler's ancestors."

Brianna opened with pawn to king four. "How can that be?" Magnus said. "My father was in the resistance. Hated the Nazis."

Shirley came through the living room carrying a white crockery platter on which was displayed a sizeable, nut-brown turkey. "Dinner everyone. End of game."

"Six, seven, eight..." Brianna moved out her knight.

"This will be over soon," Magnus said. "Designed to defeat the opponent quickly', I like that."

Shirley walked the platter from guest to guest, collecting compliments. "Children, stop

playing and come to the table. This turkey has been cooking since nine this morning.”

“Well then,” Magnus said jovially. “It won’t mind if we get through the opening.”

Magnus resumed counting. Brianna warned, “No, no, that’s mate.” Jacob withdrew his hand and pushed a pawn just as Magnus sounded time. In response, he resolutely brought forth his queen.

“We’re screwed,” said Jacob. He saw what was coming. Shrugging, trapped, he brought up a bishop. Magnus moved his queen to take the king’s bishop’s pawn. A version of Fool’s Mate.

“Aha!” Magnus said with glee. “A comeback for the old generation.”

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“German,” said Magnus and opened the fitted walnut carving set. “Who would have known? Bet the old man wasn’t even in the resistance. Live and learn.”

“You’ve made me look the dunce,” Shirley said to no one. “I hope you’re satisfied.”

“This turkey looks delicious, Shirl.” He stepped from the sideboard so his guests could view the bird again. “See how it falls off the bone.”

“Don’t try to get around me. All these years you told me that was your father’s game. Now someone has to teach me they play it everywhere. Someone who marries into the family.”

“No matter, Shirl. We all have our little fairy tales.”

Magnus carefully removed the wings and the joints. After each amputation, he stroked the knife against the sharpening steel. From the chime, from his energy and posture, he looked pleased. Also as if he had something to say.

“Now Sage, sweetheart,” he switched to the boning knife and spoke as he sliced dark meat from a drumstick. All but Sage had heard his annual play-by-play: first the legs, thighs,

wings, those to a platter with the neck and gizzards. Then the breast, slicing a single oval, each an identical thickness, for each portion. The meat gleamed white and moist against the skin. “Like a magazine cover,” he said. “Someone tell *Ladies’ Home Journal*, send over a photographer.”

“Now Sage, sweetheart,” he began again when everyone was attending, “when are you and our son gonna give us some grandkids of your own?”

“Magnus!” Shirley said at once. “You can’t ask her that.”

“That’s not so, Shirl. You ask me once a week. When are they going to have kids.”

“I don’t know what he means,” Shirley’s voice rose.

“Oh yes you do,” and he laughed, the same as when he first moved his queen.

“Besides. Audrey’s children....”

Magnus spoke over his wife. “Audrey’s children are ten and thirteen. Their momma lives with someone from the Blockbuster store....”

“No more,” Audrey put in.

“That right? Well, hooray for Hollywood. Anyway, these children know more about making babies than we do. Ain’t that right kids? What with TV and tweedling and the wide-wide web. Am I right, Jacob?”

“Right Pops,” Jacob answered. Under the dusty beginnings of a mustache, Jacob brightened. Brianna inched down in her chair.

Encouraged, Magnus went on. “They know the daddy has to make an appointment with the stork—isn’t that what your momma told you, Cam?”

“She sure did,” Cam said. “Until I was twenty-three. Trouble is, I haven’t had a chance to explain it all to Sage.”

“Never you mind all that,” Shirley said and passed her cup for Audrey to fill. “No matter. You just can’t ask a young woman that.”

“Damned if I can’t. I just did.”

Audrey turned to her mother and engaged her in a discussion of shampoo.

“It said so right on the label. ‘100% pure, purer than water’. Now I ask you. How dumb do they think we are?”

“So what happened,” Magnus asked, “with Carl?” He wore a short-sleeved, blue rayon shirt that buttoned down the front. With his exertions, dark U’s had formed under his arms, and when he turned to tease Audrey the outline of his breasts showed in blotches of sweat. Now he dipped the ladle into the bowl and, urging aside the diminished block of ice, scooped the last of the punch.

“He just moved on.”

“Left all that opportunity? Clerk at a video store?”

“The store closed. He moved to Denver.”

“Imagine,” Magnus said with mock surprise. “Take a job in video rentals when Blockbuster is closing stores all around the country. Who’d a thought? What’s he going to do in Denver? Shoe horses? Learn to pilot a zeppelin?”

“Now, Dad,” Cam rose, walked to his father, took the heaped platter of cuts from his hand and began to pass it around. “Sit down. Carl’s gone. Let’s start in on the turkey and leave off Audrey.”

“Shirley,” Sage took up the diversion. “I’ve never heard how you and Magnus met, more than forty-five years ago.”

“Not much more,” Shirley said, then exchanged knife and fork in her hands. “Forty-five

years and ten weeks.”

“A whirlwind romance,” Magnus said.

Shirley placed her silver on the plate at ten and two with an arresting clink. She resumed the story. The dance, the handsome veteran, a senior at the University and she, a sophomore, who had never met anyone so worldly, the ride in the Nash Rambler. It was a recital piece, a family favorite that, though played inaccurately, played as a set and without discord. The only remaining version. Parking by the gravel pit lakes, the difficulty they had in getting the Rambler seats to recline and her embarrassment while he read the manual, the fumbblings, the anxiety over the unwanted but inexorable pregnancy, those details had all been tacitly erased from the story years ago.

There were too many fixed points for them to change the birth date. Her home town newspaper ran an announcement, and of course the birth certificate. Ingeniously, she moved their marriage back a year. Their happiest year, Magnus had once joked to her. But only once.

The bowl dry and the Triple Sec gone, Audrey mixed herself a bourbon-rocks with a splash from the kitchen faucet. Sage removed the half-gallon of French vanilla from the freezer so it would soften on the counter. The oyster stuffing prompted a discussion of whether months with or without an R were the proper time; also of the family mystery—how could it be Shirley’s grandma’s recipe when they, and before them she, lived 1200 miles from the nearest oyster? The sun slipped off the roof of the house and bent its rays through the naked windows at an uncomfortable angle, lower but no cooler.

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“Why the funk, Mom?” Cameron asked. “Something wrong?” Shirley said nothing. The table quieted.

“I don’t enjoy that,” Shirley said. “I don’t enjoy being humiliated in my own home.”

“Now, Mom. Nobody’s humiliating you.” He reached for her hand but she pulled it away.

“Yes they did. How was I to know Sage didn’t drink? And all those jokes about the stork. That’s just how we raised our children, how people talked. Times were different. I’m right here, it’s not like I live on Jupiter. It’s not hospitable.”

“The atmosphere of Jupiter,” said Jacob, “is inhospitable to humans.” Brianna giggled.

“It’s not nice to poke fun. And all the time he—” and she pointed her chin at Magnus, “I believed him about his father inventing Blitz Cream. It’s humiliating.”

Cam and Sage began removing plates from the table. When they returned the family had fallen into silence. Magnus stirred, his chair scuffling on the hardwood floor.

“I think it’s about time we cleared the air. I don’t see anything wrong with clearing the air. You kids listen. There’s a lesson here. Live and learn. Don’t go perpetuating stupid superstitions. Sometimes people take offense, but that’s the cost. I don’t want you ending up at my age with a cellar full of regrets.”

“Do you have regrets, Pops?” Jacob brightened. Finally some action.

“Jacob, let it be,” Audrey said.

Magnus put out his arm as if to pat him. “Jacob, m’child,” he said, “I’ll tell you the truth. I do.”

“Like what?”

“Live and learn. Wished I’d followed that motto.”

“What else?”

“I never saw a World Series game. Aint that something? No one’s fault but my own, I

grew up three hours from St. Louis and they've had dozens in my lifetime, but I never got my kiester in gear and done it."

"What else?" Brianna asked again.

"Regrets? I'll tell you. I'd rather spend time with you kids than anyone else I know. Didja know that? God's honest truth. So I regret I spent so little time with my own children. One on one."

"Why not?"

Magnus looked up to see Shirley watching him. "I didn't speak up. Again, no fault of anyone's but me. I married an insecure woman. I didn't realize. She was jealous of other women. Of other men. No fault of hers, just the way she was. Jealous of our own kids. Hard to believe. I didn't speak up. It would have been easy. I should have said, Shirley dear, you just have to get used to it."

Shirley's voice was tired. "So it was my fault?"

"I didn't say that."

Shirley flared. "It's my fault? Who ruined today's picnic?"

"Picnic?" Jacob said. "Was this a *picnic*?" His leer brought a laugh from Briana.

"I said it was *my* fault," Magnus insisted, "for not speaking up. A jealous, insecure woman always seeing the one-eyed monster."

"What's that?" Brianna asked. "What monster?"

"Jealousy," Magnus said. "The one-eyed monster." Sage and Cam returned to clear the serving dishes.

"The green-eyed monster," Sage said.

"You sure?"

“Othello. ‘The green-eyed monster, which mocks the meat it feeds on,’” she said.

“Don’t mess with Sage on Shakespeare,” Cam said proudly. “She knows her apples.”

“Why green-eyed?” Jacob asked.

“Beats me,” Cam answered. “Maybe Pops is thinking of the one-eyed trouser snake.”

Audrey snorted a laugh and Sage, her fingers to her mouth, hushed a giggle. Even Magnus allowed himself a smirk.

“What’s funny?” asked Shirley.

“Nothing, Mom. Just a little joke.” Cam blushed.

“Won’t anyone tell me what’s funny?” No one would look at her.

Cam pushed on. “Now Mom. You sit still. Sage and I have a little surprise.” Shirley leaned in. Perhaps they would announce a new grandchild on the way.

Sage opened the swinging door to the kitchen, and Cam entered with a tray: seven wine glasses and a bottle in gold foil.

“Real French Champagne,” he announced. “You better make an anniversary toast, Pops, or I will. And I’ve got pages of stories.”

“You’re not giving that to the children?” Shirley said.

“Just a taste,” Cam answered. “So they know they’re not missing anything. If it’s OK with their momma.”

Audrey waved him by. He poured a drop in each of two glasses and filled the others. The glasses went around, and Magnus stood, a bit uncertainly.

“I’d like to toast my wife. Here’s to Shirley. Forty-four years of a wonderful marriage.” Everyone raised his glass and watched Magnus, unaware of the look of horror and fury on Shirley’s face.

“Forty-four wonderful years,” said Magnus, “and one just so-so.” Laughter all around.

Shirley’s color had vanished. “That’s it,” she said. “Dinner’s over. We’ll skip dessert.”

“But Granny,” Jacob complained. “The pies.”

“Never you mind the pies. I’m not sitting for more of this. Dirty jokes, one-eyed, two headed.” Sage had explained the joke to her. “You pack up your pies, Missy,” this to Sage, “and take them home.”

Sage began to rise. “I’ll box the left-over for the kids, Audrey,” she said. “Will you have them?”

Audrey was tired. She looked at her watch. It seemed they’d been at the table for a week. “This is silly, Mom. Everyone just sit and I’ll serve the pie and ice cream and then we’ll all go home. The kids will be happy, we’ll all be happy.”

“Good for you,” Sage said. “I’ll help.”

“You sit here and make up to Mom.” Audrey left through the swinging door.

“I don’t like this,” Brianna pushed her wine glass away.

“Shirley,” Sage said in the silence. “I want to apologize.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” Magnus said. “We can all use a dose of truth now and then. Does us good. Live and learn.”

Sage was resolute. “Be quiet, Pops. Let me do this, I’m clearing the air. I apologize, Shirley. I should never have used that word.”

“You mean the snake?” Shirley asked. Sage realized how much she had had to drink. How much everyone had.

“No,” she said, wishing she didn’t have to utter it. “*Blitzkrieg.*”

“Nothing to apologize for,” Magnus said again. “Just the truth.”

Shirley addressed Sage. "He calls it truth, I call it flirting." She turned to Magnus. "I may have been jealous, but you gave me cause." And to Sage, "He and that girl from high school, talking behind my back, joking. Secret telephone calls, for all I know. And letters."

"What are you talking about, woman?" Magnus seemed to be speaking from a barrel.

"You know."

"But I don't."

"You know. Marianne Leach. The picnic."

"I don't believe this," Magnus said.

"Calls and notes. I with a child in my arms and a second three months along."

"When did this happen?" Sage asked.

"The Municipal Picnic. Memorial Day, 1981."

"Pops, you should be ashamed." Sage was smiling.

Audrey entered balancing plates up her forearms, waitress-style. The oven had been left on, she told them, with the door open. The ice cream had melted over the counter. There wasn't enough for a single scoop. She'd poured the white liquid over the pie as a sauce.

Dessert was eaten in silence. Afterwards, the kids left the table to watch *The Wizard of Oz* on the television, which they'd last seen last Thanksgiving. Shirley sat with them, watching too but mostly nursing her hurt and thinking what a bad shake was dealt the Witch of the West.

The movie played out while Audrey dozed, making a small, insect buzz through her nose. Towards the film's end Cameron stirred her with a shake of the shoulder, and brought her a cold cloth to wash her face. After they made their farewells, he proposed to drive her and the kids home. Sage would follow with their car.

The Scarecrow got a diploma, the Lion a medal, and the Tin Man a heart-shaped watch.

Everyone agreed it was the best scene. Dorothy awoke in her own bed, and all the guests went out to the backyard to say goodbye to Magnus. He was choosing among flats of heat-withered flowers-- scarlet phlox, ice plants, and blue veronica. He'd bought far too much material, asked for guidance on how to combine the colors, where each should go. His children offered opinions.

Shirley lay down for a nap. Sage and Cameron stacked the dishwasher the way Shirley had taught him. Orderly, so that unloading would be logical and easy.

Before they left Magnus insisted that each visitor listen to the sound of the water. "You have to hear this," he said in his master of ceremonies voice. "It sings, in chords." Brianna beamed and he winked at her. His children couldn't hear the notes, so he sang for them.

"Sol, fa, do."

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