

## **Why Don't You Call Me "Father"?**

### ***The 1970's***

*"What the fuck you mean the price went down?"*

*Denise thought she was used to it. Her mom had acted as a shield, but an aggressive form of breast cancer put Denise on her own with her father at the age of 15.*

*He spent his days in his den, on the phone, following his investments. In the late afternoon he took out his whiskey and watched sports, cursing at the games he bet on. He would come to the kitchen during commercials.*

*"Why the fuck don't we have any ice?"*

*Months after her mother died, Denise cleaned the shower stall. The soap caddy, which was old, broke into her hands. Her father was furious.*

*"Fucking useless slut. Can't you do anything right? You always fuck everything up."*

*The house fell into decay and filth.*

*Defending herself against this man became Denise's obsession. They had horrible fights as she got older. He trembled with booze. She shook with fury.*

*"You fucking burned the goddamn eggs again? You are so fucking worthless!"*

*“Go fuck yourself. Just leave me alone and go fuck yourself!”*

*She took care of her own meals and schooling and dropped piano lessons. The day after she turned 18, she left. She never went back, and never called.*

*Denise needed seven years to get her teaching degree. The man who would be her husband was a Catholic, so she became one too. She told him everything about her past. He agreed not to talk about her father, ever.*

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### **October 1999**

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

Denise’s laugh comes out as a single blast. “Ha!”

The two meet in the rear section of the parking lot at St. Kate’s before going in together for rehearsal. Oleanders, huge as elephants, grow wild along the neighboring fences.

The pinks that dominated the western sky in 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 the sun’s radiance. It is that moment of dusk 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 and Helen are bracing themselves for their first personal experience with Derrick Knowles, the pastor-appointed director. The adult choir and Spanish-speaking choir have not done well under his leadership. Most of those musicians have already quit.

Helen slides open the passenger 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?”

### ***The 1980’s***

*In the early days of Helen and Denise’s singing group. Nick Giametti, the first director, took his baton out when he wanted to be “Zee Maestro.” He used it as they rehearsed Mozart’s “Ave Verum Corpus.” He swung his body like an incensory on a short chain.*

*“Zee Maestro only deesires zee pairfect sound! Look at zee Maestro pleeze!”*

*The whites of his eyes flashed. Margaret Mitchel laughed so hard she had to excuse herself and go to the ladies’ room. The group had a dozen members, with two tenors, three guitarists, and a flautist.*

*Nick’s divorce put an end his time there. He resigned and went back to San Diego to live with his parents. Denise does not remember how much wine she had at the farewell “party,” but she had a wicked headache afterwards. Everyone was holding themselves together pretty well, until Nick took out his baton and handed it over to Paul O’Bryan, the new volunteer leader of the group. Margaret Mitchel sobbed openly. The pastor, Father Ed Morgan, never offered to hire a new director. He never said anything to any of them and no one dared to approach him.*

*Paul led the group until his company moved him to Texas. He never used the baton, but he 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. Denise had replaced the paid pianist as a*

*volunteer. Learning to play the piano for a Mass was not easy, but her husband encouraged her, and Helen helped her.*

“Yes,” says Denise. “I remember.”

Helen twirls the baton in her fingers. “I was thinking I should give it to Derrick.”

Denise guffaws. “Do you think Derrick is even here yet? The other choirs say he’s always twenty minutes late.”

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

They have arrived early, as they always do. Denise reaches into her car and picks up her hymnal.

“I didn’t bring my piano accompaniment book. But I suppose I could pull the old one in the cabinet if I need to.”

Helen scans the parking lot. The damaged blinds in the school windows look like a freeway after an earthquake, giving 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 muffled sounds of a piano escape from the second door on the right, and Denise knows she will not play piano after all. Derrick is waiting for them. But how? She is confident in her information this man is always late for rehearsals.

Denise would like to get along with Derrick. Perhaps he might be a helpful resource. Their level of communication with the pastor could not get much worse. Father Ed never talks to them about music.

Rebecca Geraldson, the office manager, once relayed a message from him after Mass.

***October 1994***

*"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."*

*"What is it?"*

*"The pastor asked me to ask you to please play more upbeat music."*

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

*Rebecca's eyes shift between Helen and Denise. "I don't know. I don't think so. I think he meant 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."*

*Denise and Helen exchanged looks, and Helen finally spoke. "Did anyone listen to the readings from today? God was about to do awful things to 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. I’m only the messenger. This has nothing to do with me.”*

*Helen straightened up. “Well, we’re more confused than ever. If Father Ed wants us to do something, he really should explain it himself. But I don’t think anyone is going to tell him, 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 discussion 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.

Denise has had one exchange with the pastor.

### ***September 1995***

*Helen was on a business trip to Utah, so Denise was leading the group. She needed to know if there would be a children’s dismissal that day. She found the pastor in the sacristy before Mass and got the answer to her question. As she turned, he had a question of his own.*

*“Why don’t you call me ‘Father’?”*

*“Huh?”*

*“You called me ‘Ed.’ Would you mind calling me ‘Father Ed’.”*

*“Oh. Okay. Sorry.”*

Denise never spoke to him again.

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Derrick is wedged between the piano and the back wall. Denise and Helen have heard Derrick play before. He does not “play the ink,” as Denise does, following the page. Derrick extemporizes, usually with the chord corresponding to the music.

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

After 16 years of playing music together Denise and Helen know each other well. They still organize Super Bowl gatherings and their families come along. 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, looking 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. Helen is a powerful soprano. Denise admires Helen’s willingness to take charge, and her unchanging devotion to church music.

Denise teaches at a public high school in Long Beach. She has professionally cut, honey-blonde hair that tends to get frizzy as the day wears on. The way she attends to her looks is as practical

as her Toyota minivan. After their many years of singing together, Denise's alto voice blends so perfectly with Helen's that most people cannot distinguish who is singing which part. 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.

Derrick's sandy-blond hair is parted in the middle, with curls flying off in diverse directions like distracted children. He wears a plaid button-down shirt, the bottom of which shows a bulge. His lower back is straight, but his neck swoops downward while his eyes focus on the sheet music. He stops playing and looks up. "Hi," he says, stretching his face into a grimace of a smile so tight it makes his eyes squint.

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

Denise opens the same hymnal the congregation uses. She also brings a pencil and sticky notes to mark the pages. She can only see the top of Derrick's head behind the piano, and she positions herself to keep it that way. She folds her legs 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, Helen also sits down. Like an egg, she lifts a concert sized Guild out of its case. She rests the valley of the guitar's side on her right knee as she turns her tuner on. Playing in a seated position feels awkward. Her right elbow sticks 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 of other noises in the room.

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

"Oh," says Derrick. He stops playing and leans back.



Helen plays her E string again. Her left hand adjusts the guitar's pitch until the tuner 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. "Okay. This first time is going to be awkward. There is going to be an adjustment phase, but I'm sure 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 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 powerful noise of the guitar and piano fill the room. Denise cannot figure out how anything can sound so glorious at this moment.

If Denise had still been playing piano, they would have played the old dramatic eight-measure introduction, set off by itself at the top of the page. The new introduction 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.” 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 thinks Derrick’s face matches the pleading sound of his voice.

Denise and Helen say “okay.”

At Derrick’s request, Helen 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.”

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.”

Derrick says “ritardando,” rather than the more common “ritard.” Why? Denise wonders why it is up to Helen to set the tempo. Why can’t the director set the tempo? Is that not why he took her place at the piano? Is that not why he is the appointed director? 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 Derrick wants. She thinks she forgot one of the crescendos but is not sure.

The assembly sings this gospel-styled song with enthusiasm. Denise doubts anyone in the congregation will follow these directives from Derrick.

They finish, and Derrick asks everyone to pull out the Gloria. Denise takes a little longer to find the right page since she is not used to the hymnal. She marks the page with a sticky note.

Derrick asks Helen to count out the start of the Gloria. Before, when Helen and Denise played together, they agreed they would not do a count-out for this song. Helen simply nods to make the cue, and the two start the introduction without any awkward pauses in the Mass. But this time neither Helen nor Denise mention 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 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 issued reminders which cajole and threaten. 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 acknowledge Tan's arrival. 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.

“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 does not. At the cue for the cantor, no one sings. Derrick stops. Helen stops. Derrick does not take his eyes off his music.

“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 reliably came for every rehearsal. Yet they have not seen Dolores in weeks and are uncertain if she is still active as a cantor. They do not ask.

Denise lifts her missalette. “Sorry, Derrick, I can’t. I don’t have my accompanist book. I only have my missalette 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. 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. Although Denise knows the alto part, she sings the melody. Tan waits a couple of measures, and then she starts to sing too. Helen plays the chords but does not sing.

After the psalm, the Derrick says he has selected one of the youth-oriented Mass settings for the upcoming Sunday. Denise adds a sticky note to her music. Tan ignores her music and simply sings what she knows. Derrick makes requests that the music be a “tad” slower, or a “tad” louder. 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 in preparation for this rehearsal. 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. “I did not know you made this change. Sorry. I’ll just look on Denise’s hymnal.”

“Oh,” says Derrick. “Um, okay. I’ll play the intro.”

Denise does not mark all the following requests for crescendos and diminuendos. 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 All for the Lord.”

Helen does not move. “Sorry,” she says. “Those odd beat measures confuse me. You’ll have to play it yourself. I’ll just sing it.”

Denise knows this is a lie. They have played “Sing All for the Lord” 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 the alto part. 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 Father Ed is presiding. His exits are always so quick."

He stands up. "Thanks for coming this evening. I'll see you Sunday." He closes 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 gear onto the pavement. She fumbles through her bag, picks out the baton and walks into the plaza. Denise sees her silhouette against the far lights. Helen's head is bent low, and her steps are broad. She grips the baton with both hands and gives her wrists a firm twist, snapping the baton in two. She raises the pieces with her right hand and flings them at a trash bin. A hollow plastic tinkle emerges from the darkness. 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. 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 open expression remains frozen on her face. “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. Mounted lights, piercing and orange, make Denise's eyes squint. The sky has no moon and no stars. The air is bone dry. Denise sees her reflection in the driver's side window; squashed and distorted. Does she always look so serious, or is that simply the way the window is curved?

She climbs into her minivan. No cars are in the lot now. She is the last one. She tosses her music book onto the passenger seat across from her.

She starts her car and a classic rock station booms, so she turns it off. “Time to go home” she says aloud to the empty insides of her car. She likes the tight resonance of her voice, so she talks some more. She is assertive, severe, poetic.

“An emptiness has drained the group for so long, and you have given us no support. We are dying...”

Her heart starts to pound. She has more to say.

“Helen and I have borne your neglect and played our music well. It's a miracle what we have done, and now you do this...”

Denise takes a couple of deep quavering breaths. In the protected privacy of her minivan it is all flooding back: The indifference, the curses, and the screaming matches. More than anything, she remembers the neglect coupled with the presumption. Her voice becomes shrill.

“Why the fuck is it that Helen and I get fucked over? We have been doing the right thing!

“I never should have joined this fucking singing group! I never should have helped! Why’d you give us that stupid shit of a director? This is how a motherfucker like you repays us?

“We were doing the right fucking thing! But we are just fucking idiots! Others left because they got bored! I thought I was being faithful, but you still fucked us over! Right? Right?

“How fucking convenient for you! You’ve fucking made it impossible for us to carry out the music! This worthless shit will fuck everything up! And you will fucking do nothing! He has already fucking driven off the adult choir and the Spanish group, and no one gives a fuck!

“The parish has a goddamn hole where a music department was, and no one fucking cares! Certainly not you!”

Denise takes big gulps of air. Tears have been plopping onto her lap. She puts her head on the steering wheel and waits to calm down.

And she does calm down. She tilts her head back on the head rest. Her breaths ease.

She straightens up, puts her car into drive and turns to the exit.

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 she does. Denise will grade tests on the kitchen table. Her son will be working on a university application and asking for advice on the essay component. If her daughter has trouble with her chemistry homework, her husband will turn off the baseball game and help.

Her headlights scan across the old school building, a decaying sentinel to all that happens around the church. She turns onto Stanford Avenue.



A movement by the church's entrance catches her eye. Is it a racoon? She slows down and looks but sees nothing. If it is an animal, it has disappeared into the night, off to wherever it belongs.

The lights underscore the parking lot's desolation, its emptiness. She puts the animal, or whatever it was, out of her mind and heads for home.

As she pulls onto her own street Denise makes a sound like the coo of a mourning dove as she exhales. She has one thing left to say.

“It has been so long. So very long. How you are now?”