When the Band Broke Up

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When the Band Broke Up

Abstract
Randy took off with the PA. Al got the 24-channel mixing board. The strobe lights, flash pots, pars, cams, and spotlights went to Greg. Mike got the power amps, EQs, and drum risers. And I came into possession of a 74-passenger school bus. Chromium yellow with shiny reflectors flashing red and yellow on the roof like crazy eyeballs. Super-wide side mirrors mounted on the hood...

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I got the 74-passenger bus with the ten back rows unbolted and removed to make space for the sleeping cots and equipment when we drove to gigs. The ghost letter outlines of the original school district—Ackley Schools—were still visible under the black enamel that our business manager Jim Johnson had smeared on to make the bus street legal.

I could stop traffic if I wanted to with the fold-out arm of the red stop sign. I could sit in the captain’s chair behind the big wheel and fiddle with the long gear shift jutting up from the floorboards. I could wear creepy aviators and stare into the infinity loop of my own reflection staring back at me in the rearview mirror, because when the band broke up, the ground halted. I could peer into the rows of empty seats, say, okay, now you kids, knock it off! I could keep my eye on the rear escape hatch.

When the band broke up, I turned worn circles in the shag carpet of my basement efficiency apartment on Fargo’s north side until the electricity went out, then I bought a newspaper and circled job ads that matched my marketable skills.


And to think that in high school, I was voted “Most Talented” and “Most Likely to Succeed.” When our choir director, Mr. Mosbrucker, discovered I could sing notes above C6, he gave me the coloratura soprano solos and sent me off to state competitions.

No one other than Mr. Mosbrucker and the judges at state seemed impressed by the clarity of my whistle register or my three and a half octaves. I still had to do the dishes. I still cheered my voice to hoarseness at basketball games and got colds without worry and yelled for the cows to come home from the pasture.

Those rare notes rode around inside my body like cloistered jewels. Some people can make their eyes move independently of one another, some people can bend their thumbs all the way back to their forearms. I can sing fast arpeggios in the highest tessitura of pitches written for the human voice.

No one ever said, “Be careful, dear, you must guard your vocal cords.”

But being a singer must have become part of my story, and I don’t mean to brag, but my rendition of “MacArthur Park” is still near legendary in my small hometown because of the ghostly oh no, oh no parts at the end of the song that culminate in a high floating C held for five measures after the cake has melted in the rain and the singer despairs that “we’ll never have that recipe again.”
WHEN THE BAND BROKE UP

Although inexperienced in life, love, and the disappointments of baking, I must have understood even then that the melted cake was a metaphor for the destruction of someone's intricately imagined dream.

Something you don't realize until you own a 74-passenger school bus. How difficult it is to find a parking spot on 32nd Avenue North near your efficiency apartment. How your neighbors will hate you for hogging three spaces. And how reluctant you will be to surrender the sweet spot you've claimed after you discover your Plymouth Fury—parked idle all these months while you were on the road—has developed starter, battery, alternator, heater, transmission, brake, and tire problems.

So when the band broke up, I cranked up my 74-passenger school bus, pushed down the clutch with my gold stiletto, cranked the ignition, and maneuvered the bus onto the interstate through all five gears to get to the job interview at a construction company in the north side industrial park with an open field for a parking lot, big enough, fortunately, to park my bus.

For the interview, I wore a shimmering aquamarine leotard, skin-tight, with a body-hugging Danskin skirt as blue as the Mediterranean. Surfacing, I told myself, I am resurfacing after a long time in the dark, watery underworld of music.

When you dive in, you are thinking only about the songs in your head and how refreshing it will be to swim around with other musical dreamers, those underwater breathers who also spent their childhoods in their bedrooms, listening to albums, copying song lyrics into notebooks, singing with their heads bent over the neck of a guitar. But what you soon realize is that there are other creatures in those waters too—sharks and alligators. The criminals and psychopaths who lurk always around the edges of the places where dreamers swim.

When the band broke up, I came to know the wonderful efficiency of my efficiency apartment. I could sit in a spinning chair in the center of the room and put my hands out and touch everything—refrigerator, desk, hotplate, waterbed. (The bathroom and the closet were two small side rooms.) No one called. The phone became disconnected. No one knocked on the door.

Each morning, I left my efficiency at 7:30 to go to work at Curtis Construction Company, where I'd gotten the job as a receptionist, and when I arrived at work, pulling my 74-passenger school bus into the parking lot, and finally got to my desk, I'd find sheaves of handwritten notes from the engineers that had accumulated since the day before in the right-hand work file on my desk. These were building specifications for projects the company had under contract.

And it was my simple job to type them neatly using the language of building specification codes—Flush Aluminum Doors, I typed, and Cast-in Place Concrete. Polycarbonate Glazing and Soil Stabilization Systems. All morning, my fingers going at the keyboard. Rough Carpentry, Floor Joists, Gypsum Board Assemblies.

It turns out, I was a monster typing machine. When the right-hand file on my desk was empty and the left-hand file was a stack of neatly typewritten pages, I was free to leave for the day, usually by noon. Sometimes, if I had more to type and had to work through the noon hour, I would have the building to myself with all the estimators gone off to lunch.

Sometimes if someone had left his radio on, I would go into his office and turn it off. Because after the band broke up, I couldn't listen to music. Hearing the sounds of it only reminded me of betrayals.
didn’t want music drifting into my silences. Even if I was standing in a checkout line and I heard some­one whistling behind me, I had the impulse to turn around and punch him in the face.

The night the band broke up, we had a big party at Greg and Mike’s apartment, and we drank a lot of whiskey and beer, and there was a lot of crying. Someone came to the party with a big area rug-sized piece of sod he had carved out of the neighbor’s lawn, and this was the uneven wedge we all stood on as we said goodbye, held each other in a big drunken circle, arms laced within arms, saying how much it fucking sucked, and how fucking good we were, and how, we swore to god, the band was going to fucking get back together once we all had a chance to make a little fucking money, and of course we never, any of us, ever saw each other again.

And after the band broke up, books and Carlo Rossi became my constant friends.

Each day, after all the specifications were typed and stacked in the left-hand file at Curtis Construc­tion, I would pull out of the parking lot in my 74-passenger bus and drive downtown to the Fargo Public Library and check out large stacks of books—novels and biographies, philosophies and histories—and drag the piles of books up the steps of my bus like it was the fucking bookmobile, then drive back to the north side to my efficiency, and pour myself a short little sipping glass of Carlo Rossi Chianti and crawl into my waterbed, slosh around a bit until I had three pillows tucked behind my back, then just sit and read. Just read and read and read in silence, working my way through the piles of books all afternoon and into the darkness.

During this time, I read a story in a South American novel—Argentinian, Chilean—I've never been able to find the book again.

In the story, two men have decided to walk from their poor village in a mountainous region across a wide valley to a large city. The men are carrying a heavy wineskin of homemade alcohol they hope to sell for a profit once they reach the city.

As they travel, they take turns shouldering the heavy wineskin, and after they've been walking for a while, the one man says to his friend who is carrying the liquor, “See here, I have these ten pesos which I would be willing to pay you for a sip of that.”

“Well, surely,” his friend says. He pulls the skin from his shoulder, collects the ten pesos, and hands the container over for the man to drink.

A short time later, when the other man is now carrying the skin, his friend turns to him and says, “I am certainly growing thirsty. I wonder if you would allow me to buy a sip of that wine with these ten pesos I have in my pocket.”

“Of course, friend,” the other man says and hands over the container of alcohol, then pockets the ten pesos.

Well, you know how this story ends. The two of them arrive in the city quite drunk, with an empty wineskin, and still only the ten pesos between them.