

12. *Homecomings*

During my final December in Oregon, my high school friend Eileen tagged a bunch of us former choir kids in a Facebook post. Our alma mater had a long tradition of inviting alums to share the stage with the current choirs during the annual singing of the “Hallelujah Chorus.” She had written, “It’s too late for this year’s concert, but maybe next year?” I hadn’t yet shared with anyone about my directive to move back to Illinois, so that post felt like an invitation engraved just for me. I knew that the following December, after I’d returned to the Midwest, I’d get to sing Handel’s classic with my old choir friends.

When that night finally arrived, I did the math and shook my head in disbelief that it had been thirty-five years since I last stood on that stage. With this cross-country move, I was learning in ways both sweet and bitter that one cannot really go home again, even as I attempted to nestle in after being away from Illinois for over twenty years. I belonged here, and I was an outsider; I fit in, and I stuck out. I was betwixt and between, well into this crazy adventure. But as I took in that choir of young kids, with their sparkling eyes and twitchy excitement, I had to swallow the lump in my throat. *Oh, my dears*, I thought. *You are so sure of what lies ahead, but you can’t even imagine the twists and turns that await—the paradox of life being far better than what you have now and it never being this sweet again.* But when my friends and I had climbed onto the risers as students in 1981, neither could we have fathomed all the changes the years would bring. Young and healthy and smart and talented, our collective horizons were brimming with hope.

Back then, I was preparing to sing my final Christmas concert on that stage. I also played piano for the freshman and sophomore women's choir that same night, so there were fancy dresses and flowers and giddiness involved. I was missing my boyfriend, who'd graduated a year prior and was far away at a Michigan college. We thought we were going to marry, and it felt true at the time. I was definitely ready to get out from under my parents' rule. And I undoubtedly was full of myself with the bravado that comes from being a high school senior and knowing everything.

But that December, post-move, I remembered the iconic Indiana Jones movie line, "It's not the years, honey. It's the mileage." That's what gets us in the end. I was wearier and more dinged up than I would have anticipated back in 1981. Ricocheting between past and present, my longing surfaced for something solid, lasting—something life generally does not provide very often. This time around in my hometown, I was a recovering empty nester, kind of lost but navigating some major life changes and, in more ways than one, a survivor. But the same was also true for many of my peers. Life had not turned out the way we'd planned back then, for worse and for better: We were older and wiser and broken-er and soulful-er. Our horizons now looked more barren, the colors pigmented by the hard lessons we'd learned and the harder miles we'd walked. Hope was still there, no doubt, but sometimes harder to find even as our losses had created more room in our lives.

As I took in the poignancy of the evening, I also looked around, foolishly, for those who were missing. Our former music teacher, ridiculously talented, boyish, and maybe just ten years older than we were when he'd taught us, had suc-

cumbed to Lou Gehrig's disease several years prior. He'd inspired so many of his students to go into music and teaching. Simply put, he'd been a gift on loan to us, with his crazy, wavy hair, his Groucho impressions, his two-fingered typing, and his utter dedication to his music kids. My eyes welled, remembering; I ached to see him at the podium once again. Another talented friend had recently lost her battle with melanoma, and others, for various reasons—suicide, domestic violence, and terminal illness—were with us in shadow only that night.

Among those fresh, young faces, I sported my crow's feet and gray strands proudly, if only for the sake of adding balance. As we elders climbed the stairs to the stage, tentative yet excited, we were humbled to connect once again. My old friend Nancy literally ran to me for a long hug; what a delight to see her again! I then stood next to Debbie, whom I used to accompany at high school voice competitions. She was born with a bell-like soprano voice and sang like an angel. Back in the day, my second soprano pipes earned me junior angel status at best—like the angel Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, bumbling, but somehow managing. As it turned out, several of us once-soprano angels had fallen an octave or two, dipping into alto and even dangerously near tenor range. I later messaged Nancy on Facebook: "The soprano section? What were we thinking?"

After the final hallelujahs, I braved an unusually chilly wind on my way back to the car and considered that my ability to hope over the years had changed almost to the point of unrecognizability. For so many decades, I'd always believed my best lay in front of me; even when life had been truly awful, I took comfort in the belief that things could be re-

deemed. But knowing what I did at that point, after having traveled some hard miles, I wanted to tell those choir kids that hope is not some far-off destination where they'll put down forever roots. Rather, hope is a shape-shifting, shadow-bending, elusive series of moments that require constant remembering.

In 1981, life was black and white, right and wrong, good and bad. Now, with our years and, yes, our mileage, my friends and I all knew better. Life is every shade of gray, fleeting and precious, and worth wrestling with and fighting for.

Some of my friends who stayed put after high school have been surprised by the tenderness I still feel for this place where I grew up. Perhaps it doesn't become clear—the bad and the good—until you've been gone for a while. So even though it took thirty-five years, those high school risers offered a homecoming I didn't know I needed—an unexpected perspective that helped bridge a bit of the longing I felt in my in-between season.

And in the days that followed, after I got back to business in my middle-aged life, I remembered that stage...the years and the miles, the loss and the hope. I spoke with a hoarse and terribly overextended voice, but it made me smile.

Jehovah Goelekh, The Lord Thy Redeemer

"Then you will know that I, the LORD [Jehovah], am your Savior, your Redeemer [Goelekh], the Mighty One of Jacob." (Isaiah 60:16)