

Jenny Bouilly

## What I Have Been Listening to Lately

Lately, I have been listening to Debbie sing; whenever it was time to sing, the other waitresses and I went to find Deborah, because Deborah was the only one who could sing. We put a candle in the little birthday cake and brought it out to the customer whose birthday it was, and we sang Happy Birthday or rather Deborah sang Happy Birthday while we all stood in a row behind her.

Replenishing artificial sugar and sugar packets, filling pepper- and saltshakers, consolidating ketchup bottles, rolling silverware, Debbie would sing. Debbie sang. She had sung in church, and she loved Jesus.

The last time I saw Debbie, she was a greeter at the Wal-Mart in Hondo. Like all Wal-Mart greeters, she had to smile, but her real purpose was to check if you were bringing any bags with returns into the store so she could mark the bags and staple the bags to make sure that you weren't going into the store to fill the bag up with stolen Wal-Mart stuff. I had a bag.

Although I had waited tables with Debbie on and off for five years, and although she had also been my little sister's music teacher in elementary, and although she had given me rides home on those nights when I couldn't reach my family, Debbie did not seem to remember me.

I have been listening, in my mind, to Debbie sing, because I could not believe the news that my little sister had told me, that her old music teacher, Mrs. Meyers, had died. She must have been very young yet, and so I could not believe that something—disease or stroke or heart attack or cancer—could have killed her.

I know how Mrs. Meyers died, my little sister texted back a few days later. She shot herself in the chest with a shotgun. So, lately, I have been listening to the sound a shotgun might make were it to shoot a woman like Debbie in the chest and what the silence after such a shot must have been like.

I have been imagining Debbie's house and the inside of her house, and I have, in my mind, constructed what her kitchen looked like and there I see her, in her eat-in

kitchen, sitting at the table and shooting herself in the chest with a shotgun. In my mind, there are newspapers; the table is formica.

Before I was a waitress at Sammy's, where Debbie and I waited tables together for \$2.15/hr, I washed dishes for \$4.35/hr. When I washed dishes, I listened to the industrial washing machine and dishes being sorted and silverware being dropped into a basin of bleach water; when I went home mid-afternoon, I listened to my ears ringing until I went to work again at six in the morning.

Debbie and my folks both lived on one side of the highway, and the rich folks lived on the other side of the highway, and my little sister, in middle school, had a friend who lived on the rich side of the highway and once, when she was on the phone with her friend, who lived on the rich side of the highway, she heard a gunshot, and then she had to hang up the phone because she could no longer talk to her friend because her friend had just been shot, but she didn't know this at the time, when she was on the phone with her friend.

Lately, I have been listening to Debbie sing and her voice when she replied when I asked if she enjoyed singing. She sang with a church group, and it was a lot of fun she said. So much dirtiness on the table we were busing together; so many cracker crumbs and salad stuffs with salad dressing all smeared and a beer bottle all sloppy with chew spit. We have a lot of fun, she says. And her husband sang, too.

And so Debbie was hired to teach music part-time at the elementary school but she still waited tables and she and her husband shared an old silver-grayish-blue Buick, the old Buick that she drove me home in some nights because she didn't live too far away from my folks.

I went on-line trying to find Debbie's obituary, but the small-town newspapers didn't have an on-line presence. I tried typing in "Debbie Meyers" "Deborah Meyers" "Debbie Meyer" "Deborah Meyer" "Debra Meyers" "Debra Meyer"—in case the newspaper offices had spelled her name incorrectly—followed by such keywords as "obituary" "died" "Castroville Texas" "shot herself" to no result.

Debbie, singing by the cracker drawer, filling her pockets.

After my little sister's friend was shot while talking on the phone with my little sister, I was able to find the story in the *San Antonio Express News*:

CASTROVILLE, Texas - A man apparently disgruntled over a breakup shot and killed his ex-girlfriend, her mother and 7-year-old brother before committing suicide, authorities said.

The 27-year-old man also wounded two other family members of the ex-girlfriend, said Castroville Police Chief R.L. McVay.

Investigators think the man broke into the family's home in a wealthy subdivision Wednesday, possibly through a window in the kitchen, McVay said.

The man fired with a shotgun, killing his 22-year-old former girlfriend, her 44-year-old mother and brother, McVay told The Associated Press. His ex-girlfriend's 13-year-old sister and 41-year-old stepfather were wounded, McVay said.

So, lately, I have also been listening to that shot on the phone, what it must have sounded like, the aftermath of all that, how my little sister was there with her friend when her family died.

I have been listening to Debbie sing because since that day when my little sister told me that Mrs. Meyers had taken her life by shooting herself in the chest with a shotgun, I have been trying to understand what makes a woman, who seemed to be the happiest woman working with me at the very depressing restaurant, take her life, and not just take her life, but take her life so violently.

When you wait tables at a restaurant like Sammy's, everything happens so quickly. The cooks are moving so fast because it's so easy to get behind, especially on a Friday night when the whole high school has come out for burgers before the game so instead of doing prep for Friday night, you're grilling burgers and everyone is helping the person working grill. Everything is happening so fast because everyone is just coming in and out; people aren't here to *dine*, but rather they are here to *eat*. And they want their iced tea filled quickly and the glasses are too small to keep full, but the owners won't invest in bigger glasses even though it's what people want and what the waitresses want and what the gas station across the street already has in a to-go cup, a whole 32 oz. of drink and the big farmers and the big farm boys and the big football players and the corn and beef-fed big children can't just drink the 8 oz. in their glasses; they want more and more, and so lately I have been listening to the sound of tea being poured out of a plastic pitcher into an 8 oz. glass.

I have been listening to Debbie sing because it seems to me that that's what she would have rather always been doing; she would always rather be singing. And I like to think that perhaps if Debbie were allowed to sing and not greet customers at Wal-Mart or wait tables at Sammy's then perhaps she would still be very happy to be alive and to sing.

When you wait tables at a restaurant like Sammy's, you expect everyday you work to be the last day, because you begin to believe that life is over.

What I have been listening to lately is the sound of Debbie's voice when she wasn't quite singing, when she was in a half-sung, half-hummed hymn, because that is what Debbie would sing; she would sing hymns, and the hymns she sung were all about what would happen when Jesus returned or when you went to Jesus; they all said something about being washed in the blood of the lamb, being blind in this world but able to see in the next, about having your sins forgiven, about leaving behind all the struggles and grievances of this world. Although the hymns seemed to portend happy things, I couldn't help but think that they all seemed to both celebrate and mourn the leaving of this world for the next one, that in the core of those songs, humanity favored this world over the next.

You will never have a hundred-dollar night. You begin to believe that you will get a better job, win the lottery, get a windfall somehow. Then you realize that you're still there, that people who have quit have come back, that so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so have been there forever. And when you suggest to the owners that perhaps female waitresses should not be required to wear pantyhose on account of it being *unsanitary* and they don't quite seem to know what you mean, then you think that today will be the last day that you work there but it isn't and you keep going back and back, even after you've earned your B.A. and your M.A. and your M.F.A. and no one believes that you went to school or a school like Notre Dame because what are you doing waiting tables.

What I have been listening to lately isn't poetic or dreamy and certainly isn't *song*. I think that song is what we have *after the fact*; it's celebratory, but it's also mourning; I have heard Ave Maria sung at both weddings and funerals; and so, if Debbie was always singing, I think she must have felt life so deeply, as she was always either celebrating or mourning, and I too grow depressed thinking of celebrating or mourning in the places where I have seen Debbie.