

GOOD MORNING, HEARTACHE

ALISON ALSTROM

It's around five p.m., and shadowy inside the bar, though the bright afternoon flashes on the other side of the heavy swinging door. It's the third Sunday in August. I'm standing at the edge of a small dance floor, looking up at my father on the stage.

He's wearing his go-to black button-down shirt and black trousers, with the addition, last couple decades, of comfortable shoes. Lips pursed around the mouthpiece, he cues the other players with his eyes and the movements of his saxophone. Wide eyes say, *Hold this, now, stay with me.* A pause in place, followed by a downward stroke with the bell of the sax says, *Aaaand...stop!* These gestures are a native language to me, part of the non-verbal lexicon I absorbed growing up, probably in the womb.

The band started at four, but he's been here since three—setting up, double-checking, generally making things right. As the song they're playing comes to its rollicking finish, I look down at the table in front of me to see what's next: *Good Morning Heartache*. That one's a vocal. Billie Holiday made it famous. My father arranged the song for my sister to sing, so the key's a little high for me. But the song itself suits me, its cadence and feeling. Since I've been back, he puts it on the setlist every show.

Three years ago, I looked up at him from my chair next to my sister's hospital bed. In a few minutes, she would take her last breath. The quickening beeps of the life-support would fuse into a steady moan. Her twelve-year-old daughter would howl, would walk around the CCU to each adult in turn, collapsing into each pair of arms in a torrent of sobs. But at this moment the room was quiet, just the soft whoosh of the respirator and the heart monitor's steady chirping, and my father was discussing what to do about the upcoming gig. He and my sister had a steady booking at a small bar in our hometown.

He stood facing the window, lit up by the bright February sky that poured its light into the room. Beneath the window sat my mother, her broad hands folded over her cane which lay across her lap. "I'll call the club," Pop was saying. "They can bill this one as a tribute show..." He looked, as he usually does, both solid and light

on his feet, always poised for a step. There were just four of us in the room then, my parents, my sister, and me. As he strategized, my mother nodded her support. Her expression mirrored mine, a look not of surrender so much as a slackening, each of us awed into stillness by this thing we were facing, this loss. But Pop was soldiering on.

Which didn't surprise me. Eighty-five then, now closer to ninety, my father just gets on with it, whistling absentmindedly through his teeth, part of a generation of men who don't complain but do what needs to be done. He takes care of my mother. She doesn't move around well these days, so he fetches her things, cooks the meals, does dishes and laundry. Mostly, what needs to be done is music. My father needs to play his horn, an ancient tenor sax reminiscent of Willie Nelson's guitar, covered in a patina of oil and skin cells thick like wax except in little circles around the keys, where the metal is thinning and shiny. He needs to load up the back of the RAV4 with a thirty-pound library of sheet music—a folder for each of the guys—and seven iron music stands and a backup PA and a bag of cords. He needs to sit at the cheap keyboard in his cluttered, moldy studio, a place where the phones don't work, which he swears is incidental. He translates the sounds ever-playing in his head into strange characters on peculiar lined paper. The sounds will re-emerge later. They will explode into loud brassy harmonies, a sea of beauty you could float in forever.

It did surprise me when I saw him flinch the night before she died. I've seen him through a lot of loss. He's somber in the face of grief, respectful, but he doesn't fall prey to it, not like other people. Not like me. But that night, when the conversation turned toward its inevitable crux, that my sister wasn't moving away from death but steadily toward it, he stumbled. He told us he'd heard a song come on the radio that day and thought, "Ooh, this would be a good tune for Eri!" He sat up tall, eyes wide, index finger pointing up to indicate an idea. "And then I remembered," he said, and slumped in his chair as if he'd been punched in the stomach. It had happened fast. Ten days earlier she was belting it out like always, no inkling that it was her last performance.



Robert Driscoll

And it surprised me, but only a little, when after the room had calmed, after the child's sobs gave way to deep, brave breaths, and my sister's new widower walked his daughter down the hall, held up by his late wife's oldest friends—also singers, ebullient and hopeful in the face of their pain, when once again, my parents and I alone flanked my sister, I said: "I can do it, Pop. It's not that far. What, once a month? I can fly down once a month for those third Sunday gigs."

He turned his head quickly "You could do that?" and then he nodded, his bandleader brain kicking into gear. It was the easiest thing in the world to step back onto that stage, the same stage I shared with her all those years ago, before I left to make a different kind of life for myself.

After she died, he was sick for months. Mysterious, painful inflammation developed in the lining around his lungs and—no joke—around his heart. But he never missed a gig, not with his band or any of the bands he plays with, nor would he consider for one moment that his ailments might have something to do with his daughter's sudden death.

I was careful when I brought up my concern. We were sitting in his studio, him in his chair at the keyboard, bent over a fat stack of paper folders spilling their sheet music onto his lap, me on the floor at his feet. I told him I'd talked to George, a friend of his who plays the stand-up bass. "Even George thinks you might feel better if you let yourself grieve, Papa." I waited to see if I'd get more than a shrug in response, but I didn't, so I prodded: "George is even more of an old fart than you are," I said, which got him to laugh a little.

"I suppose it's possible," he shrugged. He was being diplomatic, employing a long-honed politeness he uses to keep the peace. "But I really don't think so."

We'd talked a few months before about his unusual response to grief. What looked, to me, like not grieving. We were having a drink on a Mexican beach, on a trip we'd planned before she died, and went on anyway, at my mother's insistence, right in the wake of it all. "It's not that I don't feel the loss," he said. "I don't push it down, or stuff it away." He paused, held my gaze with his light green eyes, red-rimmed with age, set high above weathered cheeks. "I just leave it behind me," he said.

I thought of the family hikes of my childhood. Of him, whistling, always a couple hundred yards ahead of my mother and sister and me on the trail. I thought, too, about something he'd told me years before, how in the months following the break-up of his first marriage, he'd immersed himself in his music "as a way forward." Back then, I'd compared this to losses I'd endured. In my twenties, after the death of the man I loved, grief rushed in like a mob. It ransacked me, took possession of me, and I let it. I gave myself over to it, painting self-portraits that plainly rendered

devastation in my face and crumpled posture. When it happened again a few years later—when I loved a man again, and again, he died—I stopped painting altogether. This was, of course, another loss, but self-initiated, felt like an act of strength, like reclaiming the agency that grief had stolen. Each time, my world was left a shambles, a field of ruins to clamber across. But this was new. When my sister died, the hole she left was on the inside. It was half of me, missing, where she suddenly wasn't.

Pop watched me for a minute while I let his words take root. Then he took a sip from his icy glass and turned back to look out over the ocean.

When she was five years old, and I was four, my sister was diagnosed with leukemia. There was chemotherapy and radiation, daily blood tests, bone marrow samples extracted weekly from her tiny spine. In less than a year, she went into full remission—a small miracle in the '70s. Back then, our mom was the singer. We grew up watching her work through songs at the piano with our dad, then paint her nails and do her makeup on gig nights. As preteens, we sang with our dad's Big Band—just a song or two each, at a school fundraiser or the town fair. By high school, we were sharing the odd gig led by various band uncles, splitting the pay. Giggling, limbs akimbo, as we changed from school clothes to evening clothes in the smoke-drenched backseat of the drummer's car on the way in to the city.

The cancer and its treatment shaped her. Outwardly, it made her small. She would never reach five feet, nor outgrow her baby face. But her triumph in the face of death awarded her a kind of buoyancy, a light-hearted confidence sourced from the plain fact of her existence. My sister entered a room largely, her very countenance a grand *Tadah!* Her powerful voice would startle a crowd when it rang out from her tiny frame, dark eyes sparkling. Like him, she came alive in front of a crowd.

Her cancer shaped me, too, angled me inward as it wrapped me around her pain. I stood puny and helpless through her schoolyard tauntings, as her hair fell out and then grew back in again. Later, when the impact of her treatment began to show in her developing body—its hormones hobbled and ineffective—I stayed up with her nights through bouts of hysterical rage. I'd talk her to sleep, my tone rhythmic and rounded, my body bent in around hers. When it was my turn to sing, I bent in toward the mic, or turned in toward the players.

When I left home young, it wasn't my family or the music I was leaving, not exactly. But there was a way in which I was severing myself from aspects of both. There was something in that angling inward that made me not a fit—if not a square peg, an introverted one. The show-biz shimmer of the family business was a scratchy sweater to shrug off, and

free of it, I donned new styles: punk-rock teenage runaway, bespectacled bohemian-socialist bartender, artist, teacher, wife. I didn't stop loving music, or the pleasure of singing. I made a backup track here and there for friends' records over the years, and later, sang duets with my husband, a showman, like my dad. But I was never the natural performer that she was. I didn't love the spotlight, or even like it much, and was content to be my sister's biggest fan.

It was the treatment she died from, in the end. When the doctors went to battle with her cancer all those years ago, the risks of radiation were yet to be fully understood. Even as we cheered at her

Swishy brushes on the drums are like seaweed fingers.

miraculous remission, her heart was already irreparably weakened by the same blasts that had killed off the cancer cells. But no one tracks

you down to inform you when they realize that the cure was also a poison. Her massive "coronary event" caught us all off guard, and in a way, I'm glad we didn't know. She thrived those four extra decades, a survivor—loud and funny and endlessly kind, with that gorgeous voice. And then, one day, she collapsed.

Out of instinct, or habit, I stepped in to catch what crumbled around her, tried to stanch the fissure she left by putting my body in the spaces she'd left empty, mostly to little effect. On the plus side, the monthly trips required by my new band-singer life created pockets of time I could spend with my niece as I tried clumsily to establish an intimacy she could lean into in years to come. But they were pockets robbed from my own life. Creative projects were abandoned, dreams left to languish, while my finances took hit after hit. Meanwhile, performing drained me like it always had.

A few months in, tucking a pair of strappy silver evening shoes into my overnight bag, I asked my husband, "How long am I gonna keep this up? Until the next one dies?" At forty-eight, my sister was the baby of the band. "Until *he* dies?" We both knew my pop will never stop playing, not as long as he has breath to blow his horn. I reached for the red-and-white-striped cosmetics case I'd pocketed the day we cleaned out her bathroom, filled with bottles of nail polish I'd collected since. There was a color for each month, each dress I'd worn as I stood in her place at the mic. It's been three years of third Sundays, now. Every month, I pack up those evening shoes. I book a flight, pick out a dress, find nail polish to match. My father's inflammation has long since ebbed. The new sound guy doesn't even know I had a sister.

You can look down the hill and see this little bar from the house she and I grew up in. The stage has been rebuilt since we first sang here together. I was fifteen then, the same age her daughter is now. I've left the

bandstand between vocals to greet the regulars, mostly swing dancers and other musicians, nodding when I passed my brother-in-law ordering a beer at the bar. I bent down to kiss my Auntie, Pop's kid sister, who hasn't missed a gig since Eri died. Then I stopped to stand next to my mom. She's in her usual spot up front, her cane leaning up against her chair. On the table, next to my silvery makeup purse (the one that used to be hers) is the setlist. It's her copy, he always makes her one, and her hand rests on its edge, palm down like she's keeping it in place. I look to see what's coming up next and read its name out loud: "Good Morning Heartache," I say. Mom hears me, glances down at the list, nods, and looks back up at the band.

The old song speaks to heartache like a pesky visitor you just can't shake. One you never invited, who keeps showing up anyway. One you soften to, even grow fond of over time. *Might as well get used to you*, it says. You know me, Heartache, pull up a chair. I always knew that heartache could keep me company, could smooth out the edges of grief into something I could hold on to. When it became too much to hold, I tried to turn away, pretend grief had no power over me at all. But that fell apart, as pretenses do, and grief was there still, waiting to be reckoned with. What I didn't know was that there could be this other way, and that I'd find it here, of all places, in this band-singer life. I wouldn't have chosen it. I didn't choose it, all those years. But steeping a few hours each month in this sea of sound, being of the sea, a part of it—a way forward, maybe. Maybe also a way back.

Pop lifts his eyes and chin in my direction, calling me to my place. When it's time for the solos, he'll play his with his eyes closed. I'll probably close my eyes, too, and turn in toward the players. That's when it feels most like I can float in it—the swell of notes untethered from the page that will fill up the room.

I climb onto the stage. I squeeze behind Uncle John, who's not really my uncle, but who's shared a thousand stages with my pop over almost as many years, and Mack, who's draining the spit valve on his trumpet. I do a shimmy to get past the drum kit without bumping into the high hat, which makes Pat smirk a little. Rosi, on the bass—a second mother to me and Eri—greet me with her usual "Ali-song," voicing that last syllable in a mock soprano. I turn in front of the other John, at the keyboard, who smiles brightly, and step up to my place.

My father counts to two, then three. He lifts his saxophone. Horns swell up like waves, glints of keyboard sunlight bounce off and through them. Swishy brushes on the drums are like seaweed fingers, softly stroking. Bass notes are smooth, sturdy stones along the bottom.

I close my eyes. I take my sister's hand. ●