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Abstract
My troubles began when I was ten and my parents spent the summer traveling in Italy, leaving me with my great-aunt Ethel Patch, in her decrepit gray Prairie School castle, way out past the fairgrounds. This disconcertingly spry octogenarian had a large collection of vinyl records, and out of desperate boredom one rainy afternoon, I took one at random, impaled it on the nub of her old Garrard SP25 and dropped the needle. When Glenn Yarbrough’s honeyed voice came pouring out of the speakers, crooning about a lumberjack drowned while freeing a logjam, I was lost.

Cover Page Footnote
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My troubles began when I was ten and my parents spent the summer traveling in Italy, leaving me with my great-aunt Ethel Patch, in her decrepit gray Prairie School castle, way out past the fairgrounds. This disconcertingly spry octogenarian had a large collection of vinyl records, and out of desperate boredom one rainy afternoon, I took one at random, impaled it on the nub of her old Garrard SP25 and dropped the needle. When Glenn Yarbrough’s honeyed voice came pouring out of the speakers, crooning about a lumberjack drowned while freeing a logjam, I was lost.

It was music from a different era: The Weavers, The Limelighters, The New Lost City Ramblers, The New Christy Minstrels, The Brothers Four, The Stanley Brothers, The Carter Family, Richard Dyer Bennett, Eric von Schmidt, Dave Van Ronk, Buffy Sainte-Marie, The Kingston Trio, The Chad Mitchell Trio, The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Odetta, Phil Ochs, Burl Ives, Theodore Bikel, Blind Blake, Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Boy Fuller, The Blind Boys of Alabama and many others. I have since guessed that Ethel Patch was some kind of closet Bohemian in her day. Probably she did not have all those records. It is partly my own present collection I must be thinking of.

I fell in love with these voices, especially the male groups, singing gloriously on-pitch and in harmony. They sounded bold and manly. I wanted to be like that—to sing sea chanteys, murder ballads, love ballads, work songs, protest songs, rebel songs, songs of
the frontier, union anthems, Celtic dirges, Mississippi field hollers, Appalachian hymns, Oklahoma war whoops, Cape Breton lullabies, and satirical topical political ditties. Clearly this was the life for me, and I knew folksinging would make me popular. I couldn’t imagine women not falling in love with me, were I only to sing “Poor Wayfaring Stranger” to them. Naturally, I would find some like-minded fellows, and we would travel and have adventures together as balladeers. But these things never happened.

Through years of diligent practice, first in my cellar and later at the Fort Wayne Academy of Music, I developed my voice until it was, if nothing else, powerful. Whenever I listened to recordings of myself, the oddness of hearing myself from the outside, so to speak, befuddled me and made aesthetic self-judgment impossible. But when I sang in public, it was plain that my voice did not have a thrilling and seductive effect on my listeners. In fact, I can only describe the principle emotion I elicited as puzzlement. But was this condemnation of my singing, or mere unfamiliarity with my taste in music? So far as I could tell, I was Winesburg’s lone folk enthusiast. Perhaps people were only revealing their own ignorance and limitation. Even one person’s appreciation would have made a difference.

My teachers at Fort Wayne praised my hard work, but did not offer me the introductions to musical friends in Indianapolis or Chicago that they gave to others, so I returned to Winesburg, and have been trying to make a go of it here for the last twenty years.

I now teach music appreciation at the Richard Corey Technical Institute. It is an elective class, offered only to fulfill a Federal grant requirement. Not many students elect it. The metal lathe shop is next door to the room in which I teach. When I play records, Joan Baez for example, it is often difficult for my students to appreciate music properly because of the loud sound of metal being lathed.

Christmas Eve this year, I went to the annual family gathering of Patches, Garfields, and Studemonts, at the big Patch house on Ash Street. Because I am unmarried and have no children, and am no longer youthful, and because I am large, awkward, balding, and bespectacled, I was there in a role I do not like, that of the funny uncle. “Why don’t you boys play a game with your funny uncle Howard?” Julia Patch or Annie Studemont will say, when they want a reprieve from their rambunctious offspring so they can drink Old Fashioneds and flirt with the clergy.

That night, after many tumblers of bourbon, brandy, and hard cider had been passed around, Selma Patch made everyone gather at the Christmas tree so we could hear her six-year-old daughter sing. Brittany Patch was, as my students would say, a hot mess of teased blond hair in a red and green felt elf costume, thirsty for attention, and arrogantly
confident she could command it. She sang “Oh Holy Night” a cappella, belting it aggressively, without any sense of dynamics or nuance, or, for that matter, the most basic understanding of the lyrics. When she sang, “The stars are brightly shining” it sounded as if “starzar” was one word. Nevertheless, because her voice had a kind of juvenile cuteness and clarity, there was an explosion of clapping and cheering, and calls for her to sing it again, which she did.

My ears pounded and my white Aran Islands sweater grew smotheringly hot. Action figures, toy cars, Legos, and electronic gadgets were all over the floor. If had known for sure that an individual Barbie or Sugar Plum Fairy doll had been Brittany’s, I would have stepped on it. Instead, I excused myself, telling people that I was coming down with something, which in a sense, I was.
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In my Volkswagen, I raced dangerously through the streets, splashing slush on the walks, tearing past all the Lutheran versions of holiday extravagance—the raw wood crèches, the plain white lights outlining the front hedge, the undecorated wreaths, the daring, almost Catholic blue lights under the eaves and around the windows—mentally shaking my fist at all of them, until I got tired of it and drove over to Biff’s bar and grill down by the railroad tracks.

Biff’s was open, and serving one other customer, a short wiry old fellow in dark blue denim bib overalls, his tan Carhart jacket draped over the stool next to him, a hard hat on top of it. We were both drinking Hamm’s, which seemed reason enough to join him. He introduced himself as Walt, and said he worked on the railroad. After I’d bought a couple of rounds, he began to talk a blue streak about couplings, sidings, crummys, frogs, points, tie plates, grades, and lag bolts. He used his hands a lot as he spoke, showing me the way a knuckle-coupling fit, or how a shunt worked. His hands were hard and red, with thick yellowing pads of callous on the flats of his palms, and ridges of gray callous along the edges of his crooked fingers, even up to the quick of his short blunt flat fingernails. Watching those hands, it occurred to me that I’d stumbled into someone who was actual folk, maybe the only genuine folk person in Winesburg. My students were hardly folk, nor were the other teachers, or my relatives. Brittany Patch was probably the perfect mathematical inverse of folk. But this guy was unquestionably, unarguably unmitigated folk, and it felt like I’d been searching for him my whole life without knowing it.

By the time Biff kicked us out, we’d had more than a few, and it had turned Christmas.
We stood there, beer-sodden in the raw foggy moistness of the new global-warming Midwest winter, not knowing what to do. “I think I’m going to walk my line,” Walt announced. He settled his hard hat firmly with both hands, and headed down the slope towards the railroad track. After a moment, I followed him, helpless tall shambling boy to his diminutive Pied Piper.

He’d perfected a kind of rolling trot that put his feet naturally on one tie after another. I tried to imitate it to keep pace behind him, but I kept hitching my gait, or stepping on the gravel and tripping on the tie. A half moon the color of dirty milk blinked between the low fast moving clouds, making the rails glint intermittently, like Morse code in slow motion. We said nothing, for nothing needed to be said.

Then came what I took ever so briefly to be a Christmas miracle. Walt began to hum a tune, one I knew well. It was “On the Banks of the Ohio.” After passing through it once, he began the first verse softly, as if afraid to disturb the delicate atmosphere he’d created with his humming. I understood him completely: the moonlight, the tracks, Christmas Eve with a stranger, all cried out with an unspeakable sadness. His folkish heart, like mine, instinctively craved the melancholy relief that only a murder ballad could provide. I held my breath, not wanting to spoil things, until he came to the chorus and I joined in, quietly harmonizing a third above him on, “And only say that you’ll be mine.” He glanced at me, surprised, I thought, that I was privy to the signs and countersigns of the tribe. I started in on the second verse, and for a moment, we were singing in unison. Then I couldn’t help myself. I had a song to sing, and I was going to sing it all over this land. I let my voice swell to its fullest until it resonated in the natural echo chamber of the high dark embankments on either side of us. I charged into the chorus again, and then into the third verse, and “Willie dear, don’t murder me.” Then I realized he’d stopped singing, stopped trotting, and instead stood staring at me. On his face was the unmistakable expression of pure puzzlement.

Then he smiled that gentle, terrible smile you give your sick dog just before you put him to sleep, and patted me on the shoulder. “Thanks for the beers,” he said. “You’ll be okay. Sure you will.” And with that, he turned, and walked away. A cloud came over the moon for a minute, and when it had passed, he had disappeared. He must have taken some secret railroad way known only to him.

Alone now, I kept stumbling up the line in the same direction, not knowing where I might come out. I’d gotten my answer, one I couldn’t deny or ignore. Of all the people in Winesburg, or Indiana, or the world, he was the one whose appreciation might have redeemed me, and I had seen plainly in his face that he preferred to let the earth and the mists swallow him whole than listen to one more bar of my grotesque singing. There in the wet cold and dark, on the tracks behind the back wall of the Business Athenaeum, the painted diploma and mortarboard blazoned on it as if to mark the exact spot of my
graduation from my dreams, I felt something die inside me, and knew that nothing would ever be the same.

Lost in my thoughts, several sheets to the wind, I could have missed the rattle and hum of the rails, the faint trembling in the ground, the subtle but ominous change of pressure in the air, until it was too late. But I had enough presence of mind to look up as the single eye of light emerged from around a bend, rushing at me with murderous speed—an express freight on an inside through track. I jumped from the ties into the gravel culvert. A moment later the locomotive passed with a buffet of air that almost shoved me off my feet, and a piercing scream of steel wheel against steel rail, like a thousand metal lathes. I yelled in surprise and fear, but could not hear my own voice over the rattling cacophony, could not even feel it vibrate in my throat. I fell on my knees, threw my head back and sang the last verse, about killing the only woman I loved—sang it unheard by any human ear, including my own, without any art or technique, forgetting everything I’d ever learned, sang only for the sake of singing. The train was long, the black hulks of the boxcars roared past me endlessly, as I sang to them beneath that lonely moonlit Athenaeum, sang to them of my despair, my longing, and my failure. When the train finally passed, I was left in the darkness, silent, trembling, and shaken, and I realized that only then could I even begin to think of myself as a folk singer.