

Shake
Terribly
the Earth

STORIES FROM AN APPALACHIAN FAMILY


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O Glorious Love

HEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, THE MOST important musicians in my life were John Denver and a Methodist minister named Keith Leap. I listened to them equally—John Denver on the living room record player, Keith Leap on a locally produced cassette tape my parents had purchased from Leap himself.

I thought both men were handsome. John Denver had the same big glasses my daddy wore, and Keith Leap had heavy sideburns and fascinating clothes. On the cassette's cardboard insert, the minister smiled benignly in a tan plaid jacket and a wide, robin egg-tint necktie. I had no reason to believe that either of my two singers was better than the other. If someone had asked me, I might have said I preferred Keith Leap. His voice was rich and sonorous as a cloudless night sky.

My mother had seen both of my artists in person, so I often requested the stories. At a John Denver concert at the Huntington Civic Center, the singer had joked about how bad the local drinking water tasted. He'd played all our favorite songs—"Country Roads," "Calypso," "Annie's Song"—and my dad's shy little brother had danced like crazy when Denver sang "Thank God I'm a Country Boy." My mother had heard Keith Leap sing at a local Baptist church, and, after the service, she'd shaken his hand and bought his tape. "He looks just like the picture," she said. I smiled to myself, imagining these encounters with musical genius.

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When my mother, Marcy, was fifteen years old, she got born again by listening to the radio. Her parents had been divorced for three years, and she lived with her mother, Dot, who sulked and smoked on the black vinyl couch after work and forbade Marcy to use her washing machine. When Dot repeated her favorite threat—“You’ll come home and find the door locked and your clothes out in the street”—Marcy found radio evangelists more comforting than the top forty station.

One of Marcy’s favorites was Jimmy Swaggart, back in his preadultery days. Taking inspiration from his sinful first cousin, Jerry Lee Lewis, Reverend Swaggart preached the evils of rock and roll along with redemption. A talented pianist himself, the reverend took pride in keeping his wayward fingers on a leash. He performed only the most church-appropriate flourishes and chords. Moved by Swaggart’s sermons, Marcy smashed her record collection and kept her radio tuned to a station that played only preachers and hymns.

I grew up in the late ’80s and ’90s, but I have no memory of the musicians of that era. While other children bought New Kids on the Block T-shirts and hid Nirvana cassettes in their underwear drawers, my two sisters and I cheered when the soft-voiced radio announcer played our favorite hymns. “To God Be the Glory” and “He Arose!” were my hymns of choice. “To God Be the Glory” had an upbeat, singable melody, and the account of Christ’s death and resurrection in “He Arose!” was triumphant enough to give me goose bumps. We made do with what with we had, and we were happy.

But even though I could appreciate the hymns station as a little girl, I knew those church choirs and Sunday morning soloists weren’t serious artists. When I needed to hear some real music, I asked my mother to root out the Keith Leap cassette or one of the John Denver records that had survived the music purge of her youth. She’d made an exception for Denver

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because she loved him. He sang about the mountains, roads, and moonshine of our home state, West Virginia.

I needed some real music one evening on the way home from visiting Dot, my granny. We ate dinner at Granny's house every Thursday, and her food was tastier, and greasier, than anything my mother ever fixed. Chicken fried in Crisco, saltine-coated flounder, macaroni and cheese layered with butter and canned milk. When Granny was doing well, she showed up at the door in a neat polyester pantsuit, ushering us into the kitchen through a cloud of cigarette smoke. When she was doing badly, she wore a pink nightgown and forgot to cook.

One night, Granny fixed fried chicken, but she came to the door in the nightgown. We smiled and drank our iced tea like everything was normal, but she started screaming at my mother during the meal. My mom pulled my chair out from the table and grabbed the baby. "Go out and get in the car *now*," she hissed. My dad had bolted first; he already had the motor running. One more glance at Granny—her wild black hair, her eyes glaring at me like I was a roach that needed squashing—and I ran for the car. My mother had to sneak back inside for my shoes.

On the car ride home, I wept silently for a few minutes, then I said, "Put on Keith Leap." I snuggled down into my booster seat and squeezed my Cabbage Patch doll as my dad turned up the volume. "O glorious love of Christ my Lord divine!" Leap's voice rumbled from the speakers like floodwater through a dam, filling up the car to the chocolate-stained ceiling.

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DURING dessert one year at the Pearson family reunion, a man stood up and sang. In the reunion's former days, the Pearsons themselves had done the singing, gathered around a battered piano in a corner of the rented community room. A middle-aged distant relative banged out rousing melodies like "I'll Fly Away," and my great-aunts and second cousins kept time with their

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canes. The best singer by far was Dot's ex-husband, my PaPa Ralph, who closed his eyes and bellowed like he was standing alone at the front of a church.

By the year the man sang, Ralph and many of the cane-tappers had already flown away, and the reunion organizers hired local southern gospel groups for our after-dinner entertainment. While we piled green beans onto our paper plates, a clean-shaven man in an Oxford shirt and a few women with teased hair set up their amp and speakers. They placed a modestly short stack of their latest recording next to the reunion photo albums, ready for purchase.

I was a teenager then, and I'd rejected hymns—those solemn melodies penned by long-buried reverends—in favor of Christian rock. I'd absorbed enough of my mother's holy streak to steer clear of real rock stars, but I loved those jeans-wearing, guitar-playing, messy-haired performers who grinned from the pages of Christian music magazines. I considered southern gospel one dull step above hymns, and I usually escaped outdoors with my dad during the reunion performances. But this year was different: the southern gospel group included a blond teenage boy. I liked blond, male Christian rockers, even the ones with scratchy voices and goofy lyrics, so I figured I'd give this group a shot.

But then, while the singers were testing their microphones and the Pearsons were still loading cobbler onto their dessert plates, a man stood up in front of his folding chair. He had a prominent mole on his large nose, and his untucked shirt had a greasy stain. To my teenage eyes, this man looked repulsive, more like a cobbler-devouring Pearson than a vocalist whose music I'd buy on CD. "I'm your dear sister Rita's pastor," he explained, motioning toward the beaming elderly woman in the seat beside him. "She asked me to sing 'Beulah Land' for you all."

The man paused while a few uncles shuffled to their seats, and then he closed his eyes and sang. He launched his

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unaccompanied baritone into that linoleum-tiled room, and I realized this was the way the song was meant to be sung. A pure expression of the spirit. The man's voice sliced through my teenage trendiness-worship and touched the part of me that had loved Keith Leap when I was a little girl. I felt sorry for the southern gospel group after that. At least one Pearson no longer cared to hear them.

After the song ended, the man confided, "When I think of that song, I think of my mother." The elderly female audience chuckled with approval. Then he told us a story. The night his mother died, he drove her to the hospital, surrounding her emaciated body with pillows in the backseat of his station wagon. The road was long, winding, and potholed, and every bump jolted agony through her bones. "Honey," she gasped, "sing 'Beulah Land.'" Her son's voice filled the car, and she imagined herself already in heaven.

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IN moments of profound sorrow or disquiet, I sometimes find myself replaying that Keith Leap tape in my head. I close my eyes and imagine every note as Leap sang it; when he hits the high notes, I hold my breath. "O glorious love of Christ my Lord divine! That made Him stoop to save a soul like mine." The words themselves calm me, I'm sure, but it's not only the words. If I try to hum the song in my own weak voice, the spell is broken. So it seemed preternaturally fitting when Keith Leap himself preached and *sang* at Dot's funeral a few years ago.

On a bright July day, Dot fell beside the bathtub and landed in the hospital. Her mind didn't go with her. When I visited her hospital room, she thought we were sitting at her kitchen table. She shook a finger toward her refrigerator, telling me to get myself a can of 7UP. My cousin came to visit, and suddenly she and Granny were in a dark alley, crouching under blankets in a truck bed. Rain pounded the thin wool, and the truck

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rocked with every crash of thunder. Somewhere in the darkness, a rapist lurked. “We have to get out of the truck,” Granny wailed. “We have to get across the street.” Granny had received messages from her toaster in the past, but she’d always been able to live alone. The doctors told us she was dying.

We were sad, but my mother’s chief worry was finding someone to preach the funeral. My family hadn’t been to church in several years, choosing to pray at home on Sunday mornings. Dot hadn’t been to church in three decades; she’d left her Methodist church about the same time she’d stopped working. I wonder if God existed for my grandmother in pieces of remembered hymns.

My mother called Paul, a licensed minister friend she’d known since her teenage years, and he said he’d love to help out. “I’ll even buzz by your mother’s room, be a pastor to her,” Paul said. He never did buzz by, and he backed out completely on the night she died. “Funerals make me nervous,” he said. I wonder if Paul sat down to compose his sermon and remembered my parents’ wedding shower. Dot had shown up with unwashed hair, offering a stack of flyspecked recipe cards.

When my mother hung up the phone and sat down to cry, my dad had an inspiration. He’d heard somewhere that Keith Leap had accepted the pastorate at Dot’s old church. *Keith Leap!* My dad found the church’s number in the Yellow Pages, and my mom called. The minister answered the phone himself. My sisters and I hovered in the background, in our twenties but still giggly. My mom covered the mouthpiece and told us he’d do it.

I whispered, “O Glorious Love!”

“And would you mind singing ‘O Glorious Love?’”

Of course he didn’t mind singing. What surprised us was Keith Leap’s sincere joy at the prospect of preaching a stranger’s funeral at the last minute. “I won’t take a penny,” he told my mother on the phone. “She’s a church member, and I don’t charge members of Highlawn Methodist.” He was

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doing my family no favors: he was preaching this funeral for Dot. To me, he seemed to regard my granny as a bruised, dirty, and cigarette-smelling sheep, returned to his fold at last.

Dot's viewing happened to fall on the day of the Pearson reunion, so we grieved in a crowd. After the last cobbler crumbs had disappeared and that year's southern gospel group had loaded their speakers back into their minivan, the Pearsons descended on the funeral home. They had been Dot's in-laws before her and Ralph's divorce, but they were there to support my mother, not Ralph's nutty first wife. Dot lay forgotten in the corner as her guests yarned and joked. I stood by Granny for a while, keeping her company, then I gave up and sat down next to Ralph's sister Anita. In between stories about her own days as a vaudeville dancer in Kansas City, my great-aunt confided she'd "never had any problem with Dot."

Keith Leap hovered around the gathering's edges in a black suit, armed with a Bible and a handshake. His hair had gone gray and his wide tie had shrunk, but Keith Leap he certainly was. He paid his respects beside the casket and contemplated the picture collage: Dot as a dark-haired mother with Cherokee eyes and white gloves, Dot as a smiling grandmother with a turquoise blouse and baby on her hip. "What a beautiful woman," he remarked. Dot *was* beautiful, even at eighty-two. Seeing only the photos and a body at peaceful rest, the minister could imagine a woman remarkable not for her mind, but her beauty. Dot wasn't there to make him forget it.

By the day of the funeral, the Pearsons had all gone home, leaving only Dot's three children and her small swarm of grandchildren and great-grandchildren to fill the pews in the funeral home chapel. Dot had driven away all of her friends long before, and most of them were dead by then anyway. Even some of Dot's own descendants hadn't always been willing to brave her company, and the tiniest of the group had never met her until my cousin lugged her children into the room where Dot

died. “Kiss your granny,” my cousin had said, pointing to the half-conscious woman, her dentures in a labeled Ziploc on the nightstand, her features flattened and gray.

My grandparents on my dad’s side filled two spots on a pew, though they’d barely seen Dot since my parents’ wedding. They’d pulled their funeral garb from the clothes they wore to the Baptist church every Sunday: Grandpa in a gray wool suit, MaMa in pale blue, her blond curls fresh from her neighbor’s basement salon. My sisters, my brother, and I gave up our seats to our cousins and sat in the back with MaMa and Grandpa, the only grandparents we had left. I shuddered when MaMa tucked a brochure for prepaid funerals into her handbag.

Leap’s sermon was nothing special: an eloquent treatise on flower-like grandmothers that had little relevance to Granny. But then he put down his Bible, he pushed *Play* on a boom box, and he sang. “O glorious love of Christ my Lord divine!” His voice burst through the stale funeral air, and the funeral chapel transformed into an ordinary room. I was attending a live performance by a singer I’d loved for years.

I’d dragged my family to Christian rock concerts, where we’d purchased seats just two rows from the amped-up drums and guitars. And I’d heard plenty of talented vocalists at church. But except for that singing preacher at the Pearson reunion, I’d never heard a performance like this. Before Leap sang, I’d feared age might have weakened his vocal chords, but his voice sounded fuller and richer than it did on the tape. And I could see his eyebrows lift and his chest swell as he declared: “My song will silence never! I’ll worship Him forever! And praise Him for His glorious love.”

Listening to Keith Leap, I was a little girl holding a Cabbage Patch doll in my parents’ backseat. But this time my granny wasn’t alone in her house, quivering as she lit a fresh cigarette. She was free of her body and diseased mind, really well for the first time in decades.

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Leap's song soared through the chapel's cheap stained-glass windows and into the bread factory across the street, his voice mingling with the warm, yeasty scent. When he finished, MaMa leaned over to me and whispered, "That was so beautiful I could hardly stand it."

Shorn

I TOOK A WALK WITH MY PAPA RALPH ONE spring afternoon when I was five. Because of his heart condition, PaPa walked often, thumping along the brick streets with his prosthetic leg and metal cane. PaPa seemed old to me then, but he was only sixty-two; dark hair still covered his head.

On that walk, PaPa and I clutched each other's hands as we plodded past a gaping pothole, an unsteady blue house with a jungle of weeds, and a driveway that seemed to angle straight up into a thatch of maples. I held PaPa's hand believing he needed me for balance; he held mine to keep me from skipping off down the street.

I'd been able to read badly since I was three and well since I was four, and PaPa was proud of his first grandchild. He showcased his tiny reader for visiting cousins, handing me *National Geographic* and gloating as I sounded out articles about the Nyangatom people and Kentucky caves. As we walked, PaPa pointed out road signs, business signs, names on mailboxes, and angry poster boards nailed to shabby porches. He belted, "Read that one, Doll!" And I read. TWENTY-NINTH STREET. GINO'S PIZZA. THE MAYOR IS A CROOK.

We stopped for a root beer in TED'S IMPERIAL LANES, a prospect I found exciting because my parents refused to take me. The inside was less spectacular than I'd hoped: a dim

bowling alley full of loud, greasy-haired people with cigarettes. I clung closer to PaPa's polyester polo as he bought our root beer and chose a table with two sticky vinyl chairs. When PaPa sat, he crossed his fake leg over his real one and straightened his sock; the white nylon had slipped down the flesh-colored plastic. Then he asked me to read the names on the scoreboards.

On the way back to PaPa's, we ambled past SANSOM'S USED CARS, and the name intrigued me. *Sansom*. So close to *Samson*, the hero in my Bible storybook, drawn with seven long black locks and muscles that bulged under his dark red tunic. Early in Samson's story, he snarls in the picture, fists outstretched, gripping the dry jawbone of a donkey he's used to slay a thousand Philistines. Bodies litter the sandy earth around his sandals. In a later picture, after his run-in with Delilah, Samson's hair is short and ragged, his eyes empty bruises. Feasting Philistines in gold rings and purple cloaks mock Samson as he stands, chained to stone pillars that support the house where the laughing people sit. The Philistines should have known this was a bad idea. Samson bows his head, so shamefully bare, and prays for the strength to kill himself with the Philistine lords.

PaPa died three years after that walk, and when I think about him, I often think of our journey to the bowling alley: I'm alone and happy with PaPa, who is as healthy as I ever saw him. And in this memory, that sign for Sansom's car lot burns as clearly as PaPa's shiny cane, his striped polo shirt, his wavy dark hair. And behind that sign lurks a drawing of Samson. I wonder why I remember that sign so clearly—if, as a five-year-old, I connected the two fiery, dark-haired men. Both of them robbed of their might. With PaPa's left leg a dead thing he propped in a bedroom corner when he slept, he barely seemed the same man as that robust father in my mother's photo album, the teenage sailor in his sisters' stories, who had battled the Japanese in the South Pacific.

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But I didn't think of PaPa as weak. I squeezed his hand in dingy alleys because he needed me; deprived of his sight, even Samson needed a child to guide his hands to the stone pillars. And I clung to PaPa because I depended on him. If a greasy person had crept after us out of that bowling alley, PaPa would have defended me with his cane if he had to, summoning his former strength with a prayer.

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