

SONGS WITHOUT WORDS

By

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Sometimes it seemed to Harper that the only time her life took place was in the summer.

At least, the most interesting parts took place in the summer, the parts that, if a person's life had an editor, would remain after the cuts. So of course she was excited. It was the last day of school. Summer stretched before her like a promise.

Before she could redeem that promise, though, she had to finish putting her office in order. When she returned in the fall she wanted an uncluttered fresh start. One of the many rewards of having summers off was the feeling, whether it was valid or not, of getting a new beginning each fall.

A stack of books in hand, Harper ventured out of her office and into the main floor of the library, past the cluster of computers and the audio/visual desk, past shelves of DVDs and books on tape. She stopped at the reference section and slipped her books one by one back where they belonged.

At some point this library, like so many others, had quit being a repository of books. It had undergone an insidious transformation, starting with the videotape shelves outgrowing their allotted space at the back of the first floor, spreading like a relentless lava flow, eventually engulfing the card catalogue and the numerous volumes of the periodical guide. Banks of computers and printers had sprung up, multiplying rapidly, giving rise to self-service checkout kiosks and sprawling collections of digitized music and movies. The shelf space devoted to those

quaint old printed books, by comparison, was shrinking, even disappearing.

The forward march of the digital revolution had proven too much for some librarians, overwhelming their skill level and sabotaging their entire philosophy of life. They continued to believe in the sanctity of books and in their role of protectors against vandals and censors and loud-talking revelers. The library was their church. It was a place of worship. They had thought it was sacred.

That had been true for Harper too, once. Veneration for books was one of the reasons that she had become a librarian. But as the years passed, she had found that her particular talents, her precision, patience and artistic bent, had meshed well with the requirements of the digital age. She had not merely adapted. She had thrived. That might have surprised her if she had simply observed the end result. But she had lived it every day, adapting to the changes in an unhurried, comfortable manner—much as a slow river takes its turns, flowing this way, then that, as the course dictated. She had eventually found herself in a position that hadn't even existed when she was a graduate student, Director of Digital Library Systems. She liked that about herself, that she was capable of reinventing herself.

As the last book slid into place, a student approached. "Do you work here?"

For a brief, delicious moment Harper contemplated saying no. It was, after all, the last hour of the last day before summer vacation began. She glanced at the reference desk, confirming that the reference librarian had already left for the day, then said, "Yes. Can I help you?"

"I'm trying to look something up on that computer over there," the girl said, pointing to a cluster of workstations. "I think it's broken."

Harper strode over to the unoccupied station, where she found a blank screen and an unresponsive machine. After going through the usual routine of key clicking, button pushing and cable wiggling, she stepped over to the reference desk and called the IT department.

“No, I didn’t reboot it.” Harper said into the phone. “I told you, it’s dead. The monitor has power, but the rest, nothing. No fan, no light, nothing.”

“Is the CPU plugged in?” asked the tech.

Harper balked. “Did you really just ask me that? Look, send somebody over, okay? I think the power supply’s gone.”

“Can’t send anybody today. It’s Friday, after five.”

“All right. I’ll put a sign on it until Monday.” Harper hung up, then turned to see that the student was still waiting expectantly for help. “Try one of the other machines.”

“They’re all being used.” The girl gave her a helpless look. “This is for a paper that’s due tomorrow. It’s my final, my Saturday class.”

“Come to my office,” Harper said. “We can look it up there.”

As she led the girl down the row of staff offices, all dark except for her own, she thought briefly of the old card catalogue with its sturdy wooden cabinetry and typed three-by-five cards. Though inferior to a database in a myriad of ways, it had never “gone down” and had never needed rebooting. This student had probably never used a card catalogue in her life, Harper mused, or one of those stubby little pencils they had kept on hand to write down call numbers.

Harper slid into her desk chair and tapped the space bar to dissolve the screen saver, an alluring beach scene with the caption “Happy Summer, Everyone!” courtesy of the IT department. “What are you looking for?” she asked.

“Sophie Janssen, the sculptor. It’s for my art class.”

Harper looked at the student more closely, surprised to hear the name of someone she had interviewed for one of her video biographies. “Really?” she said. “What’s the assignment?”

“Just to write a paper about an artist you admire and explain why, what you like about her.”

“And you picked Sophie Janssen?”

“Well, sort of. The teacher gave us a list. We could pick one of our own or one off the list.”

“Oh. So why did you pick her, then?”

The girl shrugged. “Nobody else had picked her yet. And the teacher seemed to like her.”

Harper was disappointed. For a moment, she had considered loaning the girl her video.

Hearing the apathy in the girl’s voice, she changed her mind.

“I’m sure you’ll find her fascinating.” Harper said. She wasn’t sure of that, actually. It was hard to know what a nineteen-year-old would find fascinating. She pulled up a list of related books and articles, printed it out and handed it to the girl, who thanked her and left.

Harper walked over to her DVD shelf and pulled out the case with Sophie Janssen’s name neatly labeled on the spine. She hadn’t looked at this since finishing it last summer. It was the fourth in the series. She took the others off the shelf as well: Mary Tillotson, the one that had gotten her started, followed by Catherine Gardiner, the fiery-tempered poet, and then Wilona Freeman, the photographer and Harper’s friend. She put the DVDs in her backpack to take home to re-watch. She had a new subject this summer, Carmen Silva, a weaver, and she was impatient to get started.

Summers, when you have them off work, present a sort of dare, thought Harper, a challenge to spend the time wisely. You could nibble away at them with the odds and ends of ordinary life like organizing your sock drawer. You could get a summer job or do some volunteer work. You could travel, of course, and that was what the majority of the staff did. You could visit family and friends that you didn’t see much during the school year. You could have a summer romance if you were single and, for some, even if you weren’t.

Harper had done all of these things with her summers off. It was a perk she didn’t take for granted, even though she had always had summers free, all through school and then for the sixteen years of her career at Morrison University. Morrison, a school located near, but not

competing with, U.C. Berkeley, appealed to women more than to men and even more narrowly to the type of young woman who wanted something approaching a classical education. Which was not to say that the school was stuck in the past. They did have their computer science department and that fancy new electron microscopy lab. But this was a place where the English and history professors might have just a little more cachet than the math and science professors. Harper found that endlessly satisfying, a sort of ironic coup for her, considering that her father was a physics professor. She loved and respected her father, but after a childhood spent feeling inferior because she wasn't very good at science, she had celebrated a private victory in finding a school like this.

Returning to where she had left off with her office organizing, Harper discarded everything that was still pinned to her bulletin board—Dilbert cartoons, quotations from famous authors—until, finally, only one item remained, a tarot card pinned in the lower left corner. The card depicted a colorfully dressed entertainer carrying a lute—The Fool, also known as The Wandering Minstrel. She had adopted this image as her talisman a few years ago. The Fool was the voice of reason, wit and wisdom, but Harper kept in mind the paradox that he might just as well be a genuine simpleton. She left the card where it was. It was one of the few things that survived the seasonal purging each year. She stared at the card for a moment, remembering Chelsea's Shakespearean response to it: "Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit."

So, she wondered, how long did I manage to go this time without a thought of Chelsea? Fifteen minutes? Maybe twenty?

Two years later, and there she still was, always on the edge of Harper's consciousness, the summer romance that had transformed her life. Even though it had ended badly, she couldn't regret the affair with Chelsea, because it had given her a wonderful gift—self-knowledge. She only regretted that she seemed unable to get past it.

How long, she wondered, will monarch butterflies conjure up Chelsea's smile, or the taste of a nectarine evoke Chelsea's sweet mouth? There had been butterflies and nectarines before, but somehow all of those earlier memories had been displaced by that one summer. In Harper's mind, Chelsea was nearly the personification of the summer sun, all brilliance and warmth, shimmering like a Greek goddess with the flush of youth and a golden glow like the sun's rays. If Harper had turned her into some kind of supernatural being in her mind, it was simply because she had become unattainable.

This was the summer she would move on, Harper vowed to herself. She would cast off Chelsea's hold for good. She didn't like living with longing or regret. She was definitely ready for something new. And at thirty-eight, she really didn't have time to waste, especially now that she understood what it was she wanted.

She wrote "Out of Order" on a sheet of paper using a thick black marker, then walked back out to tape it to the dead computer. Hearing her stomach growl, Harper detoured to the break room. Stephanie, one of the younger staff members, was there cleaning up.

"Hey, Harper, are you still here?" Stephanie asked.

"Hopefully not much longer. If I don't get going, though, I'm going to miss the summer completely."

She joined Stephanie in throwing away paper plates and plastic utensils from the afternoon farewell party. "Are any of those cupcakes left?" she asked.

"A few. They're in the refrigerator."

Harper opened the refrigerator and removed a red velvet cupcake from under a sheet of plastic wrap, placing it on a napkin.

"That's not going to be your dinner, is it?" Stephanie asked.

"You know what, you're right. I'll just take it with me and have it later tonight."

“Well, I think I’m done here,” Stephanie said. “Enjoy your summer, Harper. Just don’t gloat.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Stephanie worked the audio/visual desk and, like the rest of the classified employees, worked year round. Summer school was probably the best part of the year for them, Harper imagined. Not so busy. No big wigs around. As a computer science major, she possessed skills perfectly suited to working in a modern college library. *She’s probably never used one of those stubby pencils to write down a call number either*, Harper thought.

Why am I so stuck on those stubby pencils today? she wondered, taking her cupcake back to her office. Nostalgia? There was really nothing about those three-inch, eraserless pencils to make a person nostalgic. It wasn’t like the old checkout cards, for instance, where you could see the names and dates of all of the people who had checked out a book before you. Whenever Harper had selected a library book, she had taken a moment to read through the names, written in various colors of ink by the people checking out the book, the due date stamped beside it to chronicle the book’s journey. Some of them spanned decades. Some of them had only one or two names, which seemed a little sad, especially if it was a good book. That list of names had made her feel like she had shared something with someone else, that reading the book wasn’t an isolated experience. The whole system had a sort of charm about it, despite how primitive it now seemed. Now that, she thought, was a special bit of library obsolescence to be nostalgic about.

Harper had hoped to get out by five, and it was now almost six. She set the cupcake on her desk, licking a bit of cream cheese frosting from her index finger. Then, deciding she didn’t want to wait, she peeled off the paper and took a bite. She then prepared an Out-of-Office message for her e-mail account, explaining that it was summer break, in case anyone could have missed that, and that she would return on Monday, August 29.

Harper finished her cupcake, savoring that last bite a little longer than the others, then returned to an earlier thought.

Yes, she was capable of reinventing herself and not just professionally, but also personally. The fact that it had taken her so long to actually do it, though, disappointed her. Not because she thought she had wasted her life, but because she had always tried so hard to know herself. She had thought that she was more self-aware than the average person. That was why it was so ironic that she'd taken so long to understand the most fundamental fact about her own heart, that it sought its home in the heart of another woman.

Thinking back, she could see that if she had proceeded in a straight line, she'd have gotten there ages ago. But the course she had taken was, simply, her own unique and wonderful path, however indirect it had been. No point in second-guessing all of that.

Harper turned her focus to her last task and hurried through the unread e-mails in her inbox, noticing one from Lynn, sent around noon. She clicked on it, remembering their date two weeks ago, a pleasant dinner cruise on the Delta, then the rush to Lynn's townhouse, groping of breasts and buttocks, straining toward an impersonal climax. It had been their second date, their first time in bed. And their last, Harper had decided, even before morning had arrived.

There was nothing really wrong with Lynn. She was an attractive, interesting woman. But she wasn't Chelsea. After Chelsea, Harper had naively thought that she could replicate those feelings with any interesting woman. She had thought that the unique and wonderful flavor of their passion was that it was female, *simply* that it was female. But now she understood that it was more than that.

"Want to get together this weekend?" Lynn asked.

Harper studied the note. She didn't get the impression that Lynn cared for her particularly. She was probably just bored or lonely or both and wanted company.

Harper dashed off a reply. “Sorry, I really can’t manage it. Very busy weekend. Final symphony performance tomorrow, et. al. Just out the door here. Hooray, it’s summer!” Before she hit send, she added a happy face emoticon, reasoning that it might lighten the impact of her negative reply. Then, when it was too late, she regretted the happy face because it might look like she was being flippant. *Oh, well, she thought, I have to get the message across somehow. Why is it so much harder to turn down a woman than a man?*

Harper left the library a few minutes later, a load of folders under her arm and a crammed backpack slung over her shoulder. As she skipped up the steps to the Administration Building, the door swung open and Mary Tillotson stepped out, sunglasses in hand. They both stopped short. As Harper worked to get her folders under control again, she saw the unhappily startled look on Mary’s face give way to carefully constructed indifference.

Wow, Harper thought, this sucks.

“Harper,” Mary said, stiffly, sliding her sunglasses into place.

“Hi, Mary,” Harper said, trying to sound nonchalant. “Turning in your grades?”

“No. I didn’t teach this semester. I had a committee meeting.”

“Oh.”

Though they were able to be civil to one another, Mary’s distaste for this exchange was palpable. Two years ago, before Harper had any inkling that she could be Chelsea’s lover, she had hoped for a real friendship with Mary. Now, obviously, that was never going to happen.

It was always anybody’s guess what they’d say to one another whenever they met. The answer this time, apparently, was practically nothing.

“Well, have a nice summer,” Harper said, moving past her into the building.

That was awkward, Harper thought. Thankfully, it didn’t happen very often. Mary never seemed to come to the library anymore, which wasn’t too surprising under the circumstances.

Still, she was bound to be on campus now and then. And even when she wasn't there incarnate like today, it was hard to avoid other reminders such as the Volkswagen-sized Tillotson in the lobby of the Administration Building. Harper stopped in front of the painting, an impressionistic portrait of a woman in blues and golds. It was typical of her work, bold, beautiful and suggestive, but not explicit. Harper sighed, then swung by the mailboxes for one last check. Peering through the glass door of her box, she saw that it was empty.

She headed across campus toward the parking lot, enjoying the warm spring evening. Preston Carlisle, a foreign language professor, was suddenly walking beside her. "Hey, Harper," he said, "congratulations on another school year."

"Oh, Preston, hi. You too. Any exciting travel destination for you this summer?"

"Oxford," Preston enthused. "I can't wait for a chance to work in the Bodleian Library, in those great halls of classical learning."

He was sincere. And passionate. Sincerely passionate. Harper was moved by his passion. She could easily imagine him opening the dusty cover of an obscure book with the ecstasy of a young man unveiling for the first time the breasts of a lover. Here was a man lamenting the obsolescence of books. He probably assumed she shared his admiration for this most prestigious of libraries. She was a librarian, after all. Unlike most bibliophiles she knew, though, she valued the wisdom imparted by books, but the medium didn't really matter to her. A library of the future, she imagined, would be a phenomenally rich electronic database of texts encompassing all of written history, from Sumerian hieroglyphics to the latest Spiderman comic book, where no one would preside over the value or ranking of the information. It would be freely available to everyone via some miniature device held in the hand or implanted in the brain. Libraries, in the sense of a building a person visited, would no longer exist. This process was already well underway. To Harper, these were cheerful concepts.

“How about you?” Preston asked as they stood at the fork in the cobbled path where they would separate.

“House maintenance I’ve been putting off,” she told him. “Visiting the folks in Cape Cod, as usual. And there’s a video series that I’ve been working on for several years. I’m hoping to spend some time on that.”

“You know,” he said, “I saw your video of Mary Tillotson. Someone told me about it and I checked it out of the library. I thought it was excellent.”

Mary again, Harper thought dejectedly. No escaping her around here. Well, she was a campus celebrity. That was the reason Harper had chosen her for the project, after all. Harper’s film biography of Mary had earned her not only an “A” in Lerner’s class, but also two cable TV broadcasts. Lerner, she remembered, had been impressed with the way she had captured the “artist’s inner spark.” Harper had been overjoyed with the success of that attempt, contributing it in large part to Mary herself—dynamic, voluble and photogenic, not to mention exacting. It was Mary’s insistence on excellence, after all, that had motivated Harper to work so hard on perfecting every detail. The fact that the video had turned out so well had convinced Harper to continue the hobby. It fit perfectly with her lifelong admiration for women in the arts.

“Thank you,” she said to Preston. “That was my first one. It started as a class assignment.”

“Oh, well, then, even more impressive,” Preston said. “It managed to isolate her particular, distinguishing style, which seems to me essentially feminine, like Georgia O’Keeffe’s, not derived from the male tradition at all. And that’s what makes her interesting.”

Harper, hearing his description, thought that he was exactly right and was impressed with his assessment. That wasn’t the sort of summation that Harper could ever make herself.

“Yes,” she said, “you’re right. That *is* what makes her interesting. I guess that’s what appeals to me about all of these artists, the feminine perspective.”

“That’s an extremely valid criteria, Harper. It’s such a shame, isn’t it, all of the talent lost to history over the centuries because of the suppression or neglect of female artists. So anything we can do to promote that talent, or to rediscover those earlier talents, is important. Like that piece the symphony did last season by Mendelssohn’s sister, a piece of music to rival anything her brother wrote. What was her name?”

“Fanny,” Harper said. “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel.”

“That’s the sort of thing I mean. If we can find them, let’s flush out these extraordinary women and let them have their day in the sun.”

“Preston, what a feminist you are!”

“My wife and daughters insist on it.”

She laughed. “Good for them!”

“See you in September,” Preston said, turning down his path.

Harper, turning the other way toward her car, recognized the title from an old song. She hummed the tune to herself as she walked through the parking lot. The song’s suggestion of a summer love prompted her to walk just a little faster. The summer had begun and there wasn’t a moment to waste.