

The Most Human Sound

By Rosanne Cash

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I eat no more than four oranges a year. They're either too tart or too bland. Definitely too watery. But in the winter of 1981-1982, in the months of December and January, I ate nearly a dozen oranges a day. I was heavily pregnant with my second child and I lived in a big log house in the wood of Middle Tennessee with my then-husband Rodney, my two-year-old daughter, and my six-year-old stepdaughter. It was one of the coldest winters on record in the South. The house stayed warm until it got down to about fifteen degrees; below that, they beautiful old virgin pine just could not hold the heat. For days on end, as the temperature hovered around zero, and below, we all stayed close to the stone fireplace in the great room. Rodney kept the fire going (a full-time job) and the little girls played quietly with their dolls on a green turn-of-the-century Chinese rug that had been rescued from an old brothel in Western Kentucky. I sat in a rocking chair next to them, profile to the fire, a little melancholy, with a bag of oranges on my lap. I ate my way through a new bag each day, tossing the peels in the flames as I rocked. The bitter, wild aroma of singed oranges cut into the comber iciness of the room, and soothed me. It was my personal statement against the chill. I spent many long days like this.

In the first few days of January, three weeks before my due date, my old friend Randy Scruggs called to ask Rodney and me to participate in a project he was doing with his dad, Earl, and Tom T. Hall. They were making a record called *The Storyteller and the Banjoman*. He invited us to come to his studio and sing a couple of songs. It was around Earl's birthday and there would be a lot of people there. I was past the point of maternal glow, way past being cooed at and patted, and lately inspired only expressions of shock and nervous retreat at this penultimate phase of gestation. But Randy was my dear friend, the record would be finished before I delivered my baby, and I really wanted to sing on it, so I decided to go. I didn't have a coat big enough to close around my belly, and that night turned out to be the coldest one yet of the relentless winter. The air was blue when we stepped outside. The thermometer in the carport registered eleven below zero, and sharp little ice crystals rose in gusts from the hard-packed snow in the driveway. I sulked as we started the long drive to the studio. Rodney,

experienced with the consequences of unintentionally provoking a woman near the end of her third trimester, gave me a lot of room. It was a very quiet trip.

But it was a wonderful evening. We sang on three songs: “Shackles and Chains,” “Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms,” and “Song of the South.” Instead of being a sideshow freak, I was treated as a ripe little goddess, and it brought out the best in me. The company of friends and the balm of playing music was liberating, and I was fatigued, but content, when we left. The silence on our return had a decidedly different texture.

We drove, as if in a dream – past the empty country roads at the borders of wide fields enclosed by Civil War-era stone fences, past big, dark, and looming old estates and grand columned mansions that lonesomely adjoined lazy suburban tracts.

We had not seen another car for several miles when we made the turn onto the pike that began the final leg to our hidden house in its miniature valley surrounded by the thick oaks and maples. Rodney drove very carefully as this road was used less than others, and it was still swathed in ice. I was drowsily contemplating having a few oranges by the fire before bed.

Suddenly, flashing red lights appeared on the shoulder of the opposite side of the road about a hundred feet ahead. We slowed to a crawl and as we came upon the scene, we saw an ambulance, a car behind it, and, between the two, a man stretched out on his back on the frozen ground. The few people standing over him seemed in no hurry to get him into the ambulance.

“Oh, my God,” we both said quietly when we realized the man was dead. Rodney glanced at me. I turned away, profoundly conscious of the baby inside me, reacting to a fierce, primal impulse to protect it from unexpected surges of my adrenaline – the heady, dangerous mix of hormones of hysteria and fear. There was clearly no way we could help, so we drove on. A mile or so farther, we were astonished to see, striding toward us up the road, a sturdy-looking middle-aged woman with a tall walking stick. Her gait was so determined, and the stick planted so authoritatively with each step, I could practically hear the drumbeat behind her march. More astonishing still, she was dressed only in a skirt and a

sweater: no coat, scarf, or gloves, and she was bare-legged. On her feet were awful brown oxford-type discount-store shoes, shaped carelessly from thin, cheap leather. Only sandals would have been more inappropriate in this weather.

Rodney stopped and rolled down his window. "Ma'am? Can we give you a ride somewhere?"

In a tight, high-pitched voice she said, "Are you sure you don't mind?" and then got into the back seat. She was pale and fair, and though her demeanor was reserved, even stiff, her eyes were darting about and she spoke quickly. "Oh, thank you so much! I'm just going back up the road a little bit. My neighbor there called and said someone had been hit by a car, and my husband was out takin' a walk and now I'm a little worried about him."

I didn't dare look at Rodney, but I could feel that we had both stopped breathing. My heart began to pound, and a queasy feeling rose in my abdomen. Rodney drove the car forward to a little cross street where he could turn around. Fortunately, we didn't have to say anything because the woman was chattering nervously.

"I told him it was too cold to go out walking, but he's stubborn. Said he had to have his evening constitutional no matter how cold it was. Now, are y'all sure you don't mind takin' me back up there?"

"No, ma'am, not at all," I said. "We saw some kind of disturbance back there, but I'm not sure what it was."

"Oh my Lord," she trilled, pleading and panicked. "Now, I don't want y'all to get hurt, too!"

I was struck as if by a two-by-four by that sentence. It still reverberates now, fifteen years later: the pitch of her voice, her self-effacing Southern politeness, the tears building behind the contained panic, the uncontrolled sense that danger newly pervaded the entire world. My heart broke for her. In about thirty seconds her entire life was going to detonate and two strangers were sharing her last moments of peace. But it was not my place to tell her.

It was several years later that a friend gave me a tape of Irish keening, which is the sound of women wailing at the graves of their loved ones – long, sustained, unbearable plaintive cries elevated by the deepest sorrow to an art form; the most human sound of the genesis of music. It sent chills down my back and brought tears to my eyes when I first heard it, and the first thing I thought of was her.

She got out of the car that night and a woman came up to her and put an arm around her shoulder and began to talk softly to her. We waited for a moment, then drove away slowly.

Through the closed car windows I could hear her screams: long, deep, circular cries, rising from the roots of her body, like a train whistle disappearing into an endless series of tunnels, like the wrenching Gaelic echoes that hang in the graveyard, like the hiss that escapes from the permanently shattered heart.

I had to borrow from my future that night in protection of my unborn baby. I drew from an unknown reserve of circumspection. “I will feel this later,” I thought. And I was unyielding, my hands over my ears, my head bent to my chest.

And I paid, with interest.

On January 25th of that year, I gave birth, after only six hours of labor, to a gorgeous, nearly nine-pound baby girl with enormous bright blue eyes. She was healthy and strong and I felt proud that I had done my job so well. We named her Chelsea Jane, and I swaddled her warmly and took her home to the big log house. The girls welcomed their little sister and the temperature gradually eased back up into the thirties, where it belonged. My natural indifference to oranges returned abruptly, and the last few left in the bag shriveled and gathered mold before I finally threw them away. I kept the MAN KILLED BY CAR ON ICY ROAD newspaper clipping for a week or so longer, and then, that too, I threw away.