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JOHN LAVERY

## HOW PF MET HIS WIFE, SANDRA BECK (PART 1)

It was October, early evening. Dark, pouring. Outside the heavy wooden side door of Saint Peter's Church stood, hesitantly, Paul-François Bastarache. The matted, soaked leaves were treacherous underfoot, the black, doddering trees lurked close by, drooling rain.

His mother was watching him from the car and would not drive off until after he had opened the door and entered. Enter he must.

Paul-François was a Catholic and French-speaking. He lived on Casgrain Street in Sherbrooke. Saint Peter's, on the other hand, was the Anglican church in the neighbouring town of Lennoxville. He was, therefore, at least as far as his friends were concerned, had they known what he was up to, which they did not, in enemy territory. But it was not this that made him hesitate. Like any twelve year old boy, Paul-François was not short on subversive curiosity. Nor was he putting up a token show of resistance to his mother's organizing his life for him, seeing as he was still young enough to believe that a lack of such parental organization was tantamount to an authorization to do nothing at all, and this he found tiresome.

No, what made Paul-François hesitate was simply the captivating, incontrovertible necessity of entering.

His mother, considering, one, that her own great-grandfather had in fact been a Protestant, his wife, her great-grandmother, an Irish Catholic, two, that the Anglican musical tradition was, and is, a good deal richer than the Catholic tradition, three, that her son possessed a wonderfully natural and pure singing voice as well as an astonishing ability to reproduce any melody whatsoever after hearing it only once, and four, that this same son's marks in English were hardly sensational, his mother, for all these reasons, had thought it would be an excellent idea for Paul-François to sing in the Saint Peter's men and boys choir.

Daniel Hyatt, the director of the choir, was, for his part, only too willing to give Paul-François a try, seeing as his dreams of performing excerpts of Handel's *Messiah* were founded upon two smoky bases, one good tenor, and four watery trebles. Mr. Hyatt himself sang the alto part.

Paul-François did enter, necessarily, and was relieved to discover the dairy-milk walls and chocolate floor of a bright vestibule so recently renovated that it still smelled strongly of latex paint. Taped to the pristine wall was a piece of music manuscript paper with an arrow and two words written by hand, "choir rehearsal", both of which were unknown to Paul-François. However he recognized almost instantly the first word as being the English version of what was in fact a "*choeur*," and so felt the first of an incalculable series of small awakenings that would, after a good many years, result in his achieving the deceptively simple realization that "*choeur*" was equally the French version of what was in fact a choir.

The trail to the rehearsal room was well blazed with music manuscript signs, the last of which was stuck to the door and carried the entire brief sentence, "Congratulations, you found it."

Paul-François opened the door, without hesitation.

“Paul-François!” said Daniel Hyatt who was in the process of pinning a music manuscript sign to his own white shirt, “Enter, enter. Welcome. I must say it’s almost frightening to have a choir member actually arrive on time.” He consulted his watch. “And even slightly ahead. This, as you of course know, is an English choir, so rehearsal starting times must be considered as mere approximations. Good. So. Why don’t you come over to the piano then and we, my name’s Daniel by the way,” he pointed to the sign on his chest, “I’m the choir director, if such an aleatory and open-ended system as this choir represents can be said to have a director, why don’t you come over to the piano and we’ll give this voice of yours a listen-to. You like choral music, do you? It is a bit of, of an a-choired taste.” He paused to relish the avid incomprehension on the young French boy’s face. Hyatt was always pleased when one of his puns was well received, but even more so when it passed unnoticed.

Paul-François, although he remained perfectly silent, did approach the small, upright, shoe-brown piano, giving the impression that he had grasped at least the essence of what Hyatt had said. In fact, he had not understood a single word. He was simply moved by a boyish desire to reduce the physical distance between himself and the director, like any young, forest animal, attracted by a shaft of sunlight. Hyatt seated himself on the piano bench, warily, as though he suspected the bench of choosing that very moment to amble off, and Paul-François sat down beside him.

They went through a series of simple vocal exercises after which the director, captivated by the incontrovertible grace, the imperious, almost painful loveliness of Paul-François’ singing voice, beamed beatifically at his new recruit.

“You’ll do,” he said.

He unpinned his music manuscript sign, turned it over, wrote Paul-François’ name on it, and repinned it to the boy’s raglan-sleeved sweater. Paul-François was likely too young and certainly too delighted to appreciate or even notice the slight tremor in the choir director’s voice, or the shyness of his fingers.

The other members of the choir arrived—Mr. McKeague, chewing the barrel of his pipe which was upside down because of the rain, a loud, sloppy individual, with a mottled nose and an unpleasant, yellowish odour; the boy trebles, all slightly younger than Paul-François and, to him, incomprehensibly childish; William Lake, a staunch, neckless man, with a Cro-Magnon ridge over his small, dull eyes and an incongruously high-pitched, airy speaking voice that, when it sang, became a warm and lulling tenor; Phil, the other bass, with meticulous, silk-white hair and a tranquil face that was as pink as sandwich ham—and each, in much the same terms, was introduced to Paul-François by Mr. Hyatt, each welcomed him in much the same manner, so that not only was Paul-François able to grasp what was being said, he even managed to summon the courage to say in English that he was pleased to meet them too.

A brief discussion followed, none of which Paul-François understood. The choristers then took their respective seats, Mr. Hyatt installed himself at the keyboard, standing up so he could be seen, and the rehearsal began. The songs they worked on were printed in a white booklet written by Healey Willan. Paul-François had little trouble with the melodies which were simple and hovered around the same few notes. Naturally, he found the English lyrics intimidating, and he was also surprised by certain words, such as “*kyrie eleison*” and “*agnus dei*,” which reminded him distinctly of Mass and which he certainly had never thought

were English. It was true he hadn't been to Mass in many years, not even at Christmas, or to confession either, despite the fact that he had gone practically every week with his school class when he had been six or seven.

But what impressed him the most was how his voice, on leaving his mouth, was absorbed instantly by the voices of the other choir members, like an isolated molecule of air sucked into the slipstream of a motorized model plane. And what was more, it, his voice, seemed to want to drag him, Paul-François, along with it, so that it was all he could do to prevent himself, if not from levitating, at least from standing up.

"Would you all stand please," said Mr. Hyatt, magically, as though he too were being swept into slipstream. PF was the first to his feet. They sang without the piano this time, Mr. Hyatt leaving the keyboard to come and stand next to his newest singer. This had the odd effect of redirecting PF's voice back into his own ears before it reascended.

"Very nice," said Hyatt, returning to the piano. "Really. Very. Very nice. We've added just one new voice. But effectively we've," he was beaming, "trebled our trebles."

"Yes, and doubled our troubles likely!" said McKeague, roaring at his own cleverness, holding up his smoldering pipe like a trophy.

This exchange was lost on PF. Nor was he aware of the general admiration his singing inspired, open and spontaneous though the admiration was, untainted, for the moment, by jealousy or resentment. He did feel exhilaratingly autonomous. For although he was an outsider, a newcomer, surrounded by unfamiliarity and Englishness, he had the distinct impression of participating, of having a function to perform. Normally he walked himself through the rooms of his house, and from his house to his school, and through the corridors of his school, with every detail and point of view along the way instantly, unfailingly recognizable. Which, he supposed, was how lives in Sherbrooke were lived. But what, besides walk himself and occasionally horse around, did he actually do? He listened, yes, paid attention, usually. But were he to attempt to observe himself walking through his own surroundings, would he be sure even of being able to make himself out?

And so he sang for all he was worth, making little attempt to decipher Hyatt's directions, simply starting when the others started and stopping when they stopped, launching his voice into the rehearsal room and watching it orbit the walls with the other voices, dimly, ingeniously aware that his sense of belonging depended on his being a stranger in a strange place.

After a time, a girl arrived. Not a man or a boy, but a girl, her straight hair painted black with rain, her chest enormous. Mr. Hyatt welcomed her with his hallmark affability, "Sandra! Enter, enter," helped her out of her formless, sodden, greyish-pink coat under which, to keep them dry, she had slid an implausible number of schoolbooks, her chest, freed of its armour and protected only by a lifeless blouse and sagging green cardigan, revealing itself to be in fact so un-enormous as to hardly seem capable of housing even an adequate pair of lungs. She could not have been much older than PF himself, if at all. She pushed up her sleeves, hooked her wet hair behind her ears and disappeared behind the small piano out of which then thundered a cascade of warm-up exercises executed at subatomic speed.

Paul-François' face burned with apprehension. He wanted to flee the English universe in which he suddenly felt he had no part.

In the first place, Mr. Hyatt had not introduced the girl to him or mentioned his presence in any way, and he was far from having the assurance necessary to see his status as

newcomer simply neutralized, to melt into the group.

In the second place.

In the second place, he knew the girl. He had seen her. Somewhere. He did not know where, no, but he was certain, certain he recognized her and more certain still she would recognize him, ask him what he was doing there exactly, why, if he was French and a Roman Catholic, he was singing in an Anglican choir. She would pick away at him. She would definitely speak French. Girls were like that. They knew things. And they had to know things about you.

Nevertheless, once the rehearsal resumed, he felt much better. Mr. Hyatt stood next to him, singing alto. The girl handled the piano accompaniment. It helped that he could barely see the crown of her head. He could not even see that if he looked elsewhere. But he did not look elsewhere.

“Break time,” said Mr. Hyatt. “Five minutes. Give or give.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Hyatt,” said the girl over the general din. “One of the boys is singing far too loudly. Far too loudly.”

It was, and would always be, a curious fact that PF had not the slightest difficulty understanding this girl’s English.

“I know, I know, isn’t it *vundairfool*, my dear?” said Hyatt enthusiastically. “Come oafar here. I introdoose you to our noo-a mehmbler.”

“But I feel the balance of the choir has been utterly destroyed,” said the girl with high artistic intent, not moving a muscle.

Paul-François examined his knees.

“Yes,” said Hyatt. “Yes and I am entirely in accord with that assessment and I assure you that I, that is together we, will work to make the necessary adjustments to create a sound that is at once equilibrrious and harmonifful.” He paused, looking at the girl as though over imaginary reading glasses. “Now get your fanny over here and meet Paul-François. This dood can sing.”

The girl approached. Every detail of her manner expressed doubt as to the possibility of integrating this new and grandstanding treble into the small but rigorously musical unit which was the Saint Peter’s men and boys.

“Paul-François, Sandra Beck, Paul-François.”

“*Salut. Ça fait plaisir*,” said PF.

“I don’t speak French,” said Sandra Beck, much, much to PF’s relief. Her stressing the word “speak” suggested that she did do something to the language. Grind it up and feed it to her cat possibly. She fixed her grey gaze on the new member. “I feel you are singing far too loudly.” She moved on.

Mr. Hyatt put his arm then around PF’s shoulders, bent down and whispered into his ear in stiff but clear French that it might not be a bad idea to turn down the volume a notch when Sandra was around. He tightened his grip on the shoulders, as though to certify PF’s unstated, secret accord.

So that later that evening, when he reluctantly opened the door to his mother’s car, Paul-François was starving, having rarely inhaled so much oxygen and exhaled so much carbon dioxide, his lungs and midriff were aching, and the piece of music manuscript paper with his and Daniel Hyatt’s names on it glowed in his pocket like a nugget of raw plutonium.

He had wished the choir rehearsal would not end until the next one began. He was in that state of lightbodied elation which characterizes young people who have encountered on older person for whom they have completely fallen, Mr. Hyatt in this case, and he could still hear, harmonizing with his own, Mr. Hyatt's piercing, falsetto voice, which sounded as though it had been cranked through a pencil sharpener.

He climbed into the front seat. His mother asked him how it had gone.

"*Bien*," he said, with no discernible enthusiasm.

She asked him if that meant he wanted to continue with the choir. He pouted thoughtfully before delivering his considered reply, "...oui. *Je pense que oui.*"

And when, later still, as he lay in his bed, the enzymes of sleep began at last to break down his brimming excitement, and the melodies of Healey Willan began at long last to precipitate out of his consciousness which was dissolving into a dream-tinged liquid, Paul-François, in the last dry crystals of his awareness, was still searching for an answer to the question that continued to taunt him with its disquieting menace. Where? Where had he seen her before? Where?

And he could feel, dancing over his skin, swirling like pigment into the oily images conjured up by his brain, the pale, grey gaze of Sandra Beck.

He loved to sing, loved the rehearsals.

But even more he loved to put the black cassock on over his stiff shirt, to do up the first cloth button at the neck, the first of twenty-eight such buttons that closed the cassock all the way down to his ankles, to put his head through the white surplice and arrange it on his shoulders, to feel the sober holiness of the garments invade him as he entered the hushed church and took his place in the choir stalls beside Mr. Hyatt, to smell Mr. Hyatt's everyday, pungent odour coated with Sunday cologne like, he thought, an onion with icing, to shiver at Sandra Beck's explosive, introductory organ chords that dispersed the silence like magician's smoke, leaving in its place the sudden presence of the Reverend Christopher Kidd who offered the congregation his practised, rending, earnest salutation, "*Dear*ly beloved..." the heartfelt syllables filling PF's ears with English dignity, "...the skritch moo vithussin Sunday places tooik nawlidge inkin fess..."

And how the thrilling, incomprehensible, wizardly language of the minister contrasted with the stumbling, toneless indecipherability of the congregation as they bumbled their brief, collective responses. No no, PF was not a member of the congregation.

The Christmas rehearsals often going overtime, Mr. Hyatt drove PF home so his mother would not have to wait for him. He drove Sandra as well. She talked about the various piano pieces she was working on and her innumerable musical activities, often asking Mr. Hyatt's advice. PF presumed that Sandra presumed that he couldn't follow the conversation, and certainly he was doing his best to not listen from the back seat, to not understand. Fortunately, Sandra did not live far.

Mr. Hyatt had a cream-coloured Renault Dauphine with red vinyl seats that, by his own admission, was little more than an upside-down baby carriage, a tin snail with every conceivable disadvantage and one, and one only, redeeming feature: that it belonged to him. Once Sandra had been dropped off, he rarely stopped talking. "We, you and I and Phil and Bill, we the choir people in our black and white outfits, we belong to the uniformed élite.

There's a French word for ya. We ain't the soldierers, our gear doesn't come from the army surplisce store," he permitted himself a sideways glance at PF, knowing full well there was no danger of his having caught the pun, "the congregational fill that function. No, we're the police. We enforce the liturgy, do the crowd control thing, keep the many-headed multitude thinking God. We get them to stand and sing at the right times, and sit and shut up at the right times. We fire into the air, vocally, when they start to nod off. You like singing in the choir, PF? Maybe you should think about being a cop when you're growed up."

"What you say? Me, a cop? *La police? ...moi?*"

He cultivated the friendship of the boy who sang next to him, Stokey Leggatt. Stokey had stiff, blond hair and a nose so turned-up his ridged front teeth were always visible. PF found him strange, almost exotic, he could be giggling almost to the point of hysteria one instant, and the very next be in perfect command of himself. Stokey made it his task to discreetly teach PF a new English word every week. He wrote the word, usually with an illustrative drawing, he was very good at drawing, on a slip of paper that he glued to the back of a hockey card. He traded new cards for old ones at rehearsals, and tested PF whenever the opportunity presented itself. Consequently, among the most long-standing words in PF's English vocabulary, more long-standing often than their French counterparts, were "cervix," "vaginal wart," and "Kotex."

What gave PF the courage to overcome his shyness and endure Stokey's tasteless obsession with sexuality, was the absolute necessity of having someone to talk to during breaks, in case Sandra Beck tried to talk to him. Or in case she didn't.

Sandra, according to Mr. Hyatt, was missing some molars, which was why she stifled every impulse to smile and also why her cheeks appeared somewhat sunken. She had no nose to speak of. A filament of saliva stretched between her lips when she spoke.

The first time PF heard Sandra play the organ, that is to say, the first time he saw her confront the terraced keyboards and raft of bone-coloured, push-pull knobs, her body perched on the very edge of the bench and her legs perfectly straight so she could just press the foot pedals with her toes, the first time he saw her minnowy fingers poise themselves over the keys before depressing them silently, effortlessly, and heard, not from any immediate vicinity, but as it were crashing through the far end of the church, a damburst of chord, the highest frequencies crawling in his ears like tiny insects, the lowest making his abdomen flutter, the first time, the blood drained instantly from his face. Suffocating he was, hot with amazement.

If Sandra was not much older than he was, twelve in other words, thirteen at the outside, then there were more days in her years, more hours in her days. More life in her life. Suddenly and at any time, the image of her face, contorted with the concentration of playing, might surge into his consciousness, unleashing a new wave of stifling admiration. At such moments PF would be genuinely relieved that Sandra had so little use for him.

There was something soothing, flattering, about being disliked by Sandra Beck.

"Sandra," said Mr. Hyatt as he drove, "Paul-François has this theory. He says that the choir, along with the organist of course, is sort of like a police force in church. The preach fuzz, you might say."

“I didn’t say it,” objected PF, “You say it!”

Sandra’s head revolved until her eyes were directed at PF in the back seat. PF, whose eyes were directed at the weathered back of Mr. Hyatt’s neck, could feel himself absorbing the pale, grey gaze. Like a wick absorbing kerosene.

“I do not,” she said, “see what a choir could possibly have in common with a police force.”

“They wear uniforms,” offered Mr. Hyatt.

“The minnster,” said PF, turning red, “is a sort of dictaytor, no? Mr. Hyatt, you say it. The choir is a sort of...*garde du corps*.”

“Bodyguard,” translated Mr. Hyatt. “We’re the Reverend Chrisco Kidd’s henchmen, Sandra.”

Sandra’s gaze shifted to Mr. Hyatt. “You guys,” she said, “are weird.”

“At any rate,” said Mr. Hyatt, “I wonder what the bleary-eyed faithful who stagger in on Sunday mornings still suffering from their Saturday nights would think if they knew that the two Depotty Chiefs in the choral police force are barely twenty-six years old between them.”

“What do you mean by two Deputy Chiefs?” said Sandra.

“I mean you. And Paul-François.”

Sandra returned her gaze to PF. She smiled thinly, tensely, PF caught his first glimpse of the gaps in her teeth. She was silent after that.

Loved to sing, loved the rehearsals.

But even more he loved being one of the Chrisco Kidd’s henchmen. Paul-François may or may not have believed that he believed in God, but he knew that he believed in the Chrisco Kidd. All the more so in that, a part from Sunday services, he rarely saw him.

“What is it, that noise?” he whispered to Stokey Leggatt.

Every time the choir stopped singing, he could hear a soft but perfectly distinct scraping sound coming from the ceiling of the rehearsal room.

PF might have known, objectively, that the ceiling of one room was the floor of the room above, but he believed, phenomenologically, that a ceiling was a surface, not endowed with thickness at all, or, conversely, infinitely, immaterially thick. No sound of any sort could emanate from a ceiling because there was nothing there, only ceiling. So that his question was grounded in genuine anxiety.

“That’s Reverend Kidd,” said Stokey softly, “his office is just above this room.” He said this with his usual bright-eyed tremulousness, conveying the impression that what he was revealing was not only highly confidential, but also glowing with sexual implications.

The effect of this answer on PF was profound. In the first place, it dawned on him that it was perfectly possible for him to hear activity in the room above, if there were such a room, without his appreciation of the ceiling as ceiling, as the upper limit of his personal universe, being necessarily invalidated. His theoretic knowledge meshed suddenly with his empirical awareness in a way that was quite exciting.

In the second place, he had never found Stokey’s gift for salacious innuendo so repellently juvenile. He had to look away in order not to punch him.

In the third place.

In the third place, no answer could have done less to quiet his sense of alarm. The idea of the Chrisco Kidd – a nickname which, in PF's ears, contained no trace of humour but epitomized the minister's black and dignified presence – the idea of the Chrisco Kidd so close at hand appalled him with its intimacy. Paul-François was completely unaware of the administrative responsibilities of a Church minister, and so he presumed that if the Chrisco Kidd had an office, it was unfurnished, unlit, and was where he went to plead, in his secret, soaring language, with his God. Nor could he resist the terrifying idea that were the minister to become aware that he was being listened to from below by a Catholic, his anger would seep like an odourless gas into the rehearsal room, seek the offender out and melt his ears shut forever before he had time to scream, "I am a 'enchman! I am."

And a henchman he certainly was, prepared to walk on his knees to Canterbury were the Chrisco Kidd to lead the way. PF wandered nonchalantly through the corridors of Saint Peter's church hoping to run by accident into the minister who would be wearing the flowing, black cassock he always wore, would be tall, commanding, his hair would be combed over his balding head in a shiny, black strip reminiscent of a warped phonograph record, he would run his tongue over his upper teeth, would be smoking, holding the cigarette in his right hand, under his curled and nicotine-stained index finger. They would nod silently at each other as they passed.

But he never did run into him