Honky-Tonks and Hospices

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"*I'm just an old chunk of coal, but I'm gonna be a diamond some day . . .* "

—"I'm Just an Old Chunk of Coal (But I'm Gonna Be a Diamond Someday)," written by Billy Joe Shaver and recorded and popularized by John Anderson as a top-ten country hit in spring 1981

As a young boy, I first heard these lyrics as they struggled to make their way through the blown-out speakers of a long-suffering country and western jukebox. With a hard working mother, son always in tow, who regularly took the weekend night shifts at a local honky-tonk, I would eagerly look forward to the lessons in this jukebox that my school never seemed to address. To my mind, convinced since birth of the ancient and secret knowledge contained in music, Anderson's proclamation seemed an urgent prophecy, a buried hope awaiting excavation. I would learn many years later that I was not so far off. The song's writer, Billy Joe Shaver, his body a crumbling shell of its former self, had composed it from the pitch-black depths of drug and alcohol abuse as a final grasp at self-worth through faith. The song was his salvation; he willed it into being. As a young fan, unsure of how to offer such lyrical atonements for the soul, I thought I could do something more direct and worldly. Perhaps, I imagined, by playing the record enough times I could slowly, even geologically, fulfill its dream—the stylus producing just the right heat and compression as it burrowed into the vinyl grooves to reveal the inner walls of an underground mine, its almost-loose minerals glistening in the coal-black. And play it I did, over and over, as perhaps the youngest self-appointed jukebox DJ in all of South Texas. But at the age of eight, I did not quite grasp that playing a record continuously, no matter my

anticipation at the possible transformation held within its plastic heart, does not produce gemstones, only dust.

A South Texas honky-tonk in the dead of summer is a unique alchemical blend of heat, hospitality, and fatalism—a mixture that seeps from the oil in the wood grain of the bar as much as from the skin of the people sitting at it. In the early ’80s, and with a bequest no one ever wishes for, my mother was given the reins to just such a place—the very same honky-tonk she worked at. It was called Dave’s Place and was run by a man named Dave. Without asking, you knew that Johnny Cash was playing in his mind’s ear no matter what the jukebox was spinning, and after years of living Cash’s songs—one of the tolls of playing records on repeat—he succumbed to the cancer that often ends those tunes. In Dave’s final days in hospice care, I accompanied my mother on a visit to his home, where I was told to wait in the den as the adults entered his bedroom. I may have thought I understood the consequences of the “honky-tonk life” with so many hours of country jukebox selections under my belt, but my mother wasn’t so sure. Listening to songs about death and witnessing the actual erosion of a body was a divide she didn’t yet want me to cross. My protests, although soon revisited, would for now be put on hold. But there was a strange solace in knowing that the songs in the muffled jukebox speakers at Dave’s Place were not unlike the desperate voices emanating from behind his bedroom wall, whispering of secrets and regrets.

With no experience in running a business, my mother struggled to keep Dave’s Place afloat for the next year. Stationed stoically by the jukebox with a handful of quarters, I created soundtracks to hope her along with songs that had lost all hope, their total commitment to anguish a contradictory form of inspiration: George Jones’s “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” Patsy Cline’s “I Fall to Pieces,” Tammy Wynette’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E,” or Barbara Mandrell’s “Sleeping Single in a Double Bed.” And then, in my first real lesson about the art of timing, “I’m Just an Old Chunk of Coal (But I’m Gonna Be a Diamond Someday).” After lineups like that, any song about diamonds rang out as loud as Second-Coming church bells.

As she had with Dave, my mother would have to watch Dave's Place pass, but it prepared her for a rare transition few would have the guts for: from honky-tonk to hospice. There aren't many experiences in life that prepare one for the demands of hospice more than working the night shift at a honky-tonk. They are both last-chance bastions of goodbyes between two worlds—sober or addict, life or death—and furnish superhuman tests of one's capacity for empathy. My mother committed the next twenty years of her life to the mission of compassionate end-of-life care. And although she never wrote a song about it, watching friends and acquaintances who once looked for relief and some lost dignity at the bar, and were now looking for the same on their deathbed, is surely the subject of a country "hit" waiting for its slot in a jukebox somewhere.

For my mother, leaving work at the office was a luxury she was denied; death ignores all such orderly contrivances. Dinner talk, weekend workdays, late-night calls, "bring-your-kid-to-work" day—they were all filled with lyrics about "death rattles" and "final breaths." No longer able to buffer me from that divide between singing about and witnessing death, and perhaps no longer seeing any reason to when there are lessons about life and compassion waiting, I felt as much my mother's companion through these experiences as her son. Through the "hospice years," with their crippling losses, small triumphs, and lingering scars, being co-parented by a honky-tonk jukebox proved to be the perfect salve. For my mother, for myself, for our team, there was always an eroding 45 with a song about diamonds and anxious renewal from which we could coax one more play.