

I'LL BE THERE

Holly Goldberg Sloan



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I'll Be There

Words and Music by Berry Gordy, Hal Davis, Willie Hutch and Bob West

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Lyrics, for reference:

3. The lyrics reprinted shall be as follows: "I'll be there/Just call my name, I'll be there/You and I must make a pact/We must bring salvation back/Where there is love, I'll be there/I'll reach out my hand to you/I'll have faith in all you do/Just call my name and I'll be there/I'll be there/I'll be there to comfort you/Build my world of dreams around you/I'm so glad that I found you/I'll be there with a love that's strong/I'll be your strength, I'll keep holding on/Let me fill your heart with joy and laughter/Togetherness, well that's all I'm after/Whenever you need me, I'll be there."

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For Gary Rosen...
who is always there.
And for Max, Calvin, Madeline, and Alex...
who are my inspiration.

1

The days of the week meant nothing to him.

Except Sunday.

Because on Sundays he listened to pipe organs and pianos.

If he was lucky, handheld bells, pounding drums, or electronic beat machines might vibrate while people sang and sometimes clapped and on occasion even stamped their dressed-up feet.

On Sundays, wherever he was, whenever he could, Sam Border woke early, pulled on his cleanest dirty shirt, and went looking for a church.

He didn't believe in religion.

Unless music could be considered a religion. Because he knew God, if there was one, was just not on his side.

Sam always came in after things had started. And he always left before the service was finished. He sat in the back because he was there only to visualize the patterns in the

musical notes. And maybe grab a glazed donut or a sticky cookie on the way out.

If someone tried to speak to him, Sam nodded in greeting and, if he had to, threw in a “Peace be with you.” But he had perfected the art of being invisible, and he was, even when he was younger and little, almost always left alone.

* * *

What he could remember, when he thought of the dozens and dozens of towns where he’d lived, were sounds.

Even Junction City, where he’d spent a whole winter and made a friend, was now gone, except for the ping of the rain hitting the metal roof on the apartment off the alley where the city parked all its noisy trucks.

That was three years ago. Fifteen towns ago. Another lifetime.

After Junction City they’d been outside of Reno for a while. And then in a trailer that rattled as if every screw and corresponding piece of corroded metal was ready to come undone.

The trailer was in Baja California, and it felt like living in a cardboard box, which was one of his many recurring nightmares. But he’d appreciated those five months south of the border.

Being an American automatically meant he was an outsider, so for the first time in what he could remember of his blur of a broken life, he’d felt like he could relax. He was different. It was expected.

But even fitting-in-because-you-don’t-fit-in didn’t last.

His father got them out of the country and back to the U.S. just as Sam was learning to speak Spanish and figuring out how to swim.

For weeks, while his brother and father slept, Sam had gone down right after sunrise to the crashing waves. Teaching yourself a skill, especially one that could kill you if things went wrong, wasn't easy.

At first, he only went in up to his knees. And then, gradually, he ventured into the swell, moving his arms in the cold surf like he'd seen people do from a distance.

He was pretty sure he looked like a real idiot.

But he was always able to get back to the gritty beach, even on the morning when the ocean suddenly shifted gears and began to pull him sideways down the shoreline. For what seemed like miles, he slapped his arms against the waves and thrashed his legs in a fury as he swallowed mouthfuls of icy salt water.

Because something inside him, even when he most wanted to give up, just wouldn't.

After that day, Sam figured he had once gone for a real swim. But he assumed that whatever he'd learned from the experience would disappear, like so much that had come and gone in a life dictated by his father. There were so many things that were a mystery. That's what happens when you've never gone to school past second grade.

But the good thing was that he didn't know what he didn't know, and that made it all easier.

* * *

Emily Bell was a collector.

And what she gathered and sorted and prized was carried with her wherever she went.

Because Emily's obsession was with other people's lives.

Her grandmother had once said that Emily would have been the greatest spy ever born. But only if spies didn't have to guard secrets as well as unearth them. Because Emily's own emotional wall of self-protection was see-through. She wasn't hiding anything about herself, so why should anyone else?

It was disarming.

Emily's interest in personal histories made her accessible to people's deepest emotions. It was as if she had some kind of magnet that pulled at someone's soul, often when he or she least expected it.

And that same magnet, which had to have been shaped like a horseshoe, allowed someone to look at her and feel the need to share a burden.

Hers was a gift that didn't have a name.

Even she didn't understand what it all meant.

Emily just knew that the grocery store clerk's cousin had slipped on a bath mat and fallen out a second-story open window only to be saved because the woman landed on a discarded mattress.

But what interested Emily the most about the incident was how the cousin had subsequently met a man in physical therapy who introduced her to his half brother who she ended up marrying and then running over with her car a year later

after a heated argument. And that man, it was discovered, had been the one to dump the mattress in her yard.

He'd saved her so that she could later cripple him.

Emily found that not ironic but intriguing.

Because everything, she believed, was connected.

Now, at seventeen years old, Emily's question was how she fit into the big scheme of things. Where was her minor incident that would change the course of major life events? So far it had all gone according to plan. Good parents. Decent younger brother. World's greatest dog. Loyal best friend.

There had been no dramatic hairpin turns in her road. And not even any real bumps to speak of.

But she had lived in one town, and she had seen how small things changed big things. She saw every person as part of a ripple effect.

And, because of that, she believed in destiny.

At least that's what she would later tell herself.

* * *

Emily took a bite of whole wheat toast and stared out the window. She did not have a beautiful singing voice. She could carry a tune, but that was the extent of the situation.

So why was she going to sing a solo at church?

The answer was right across from her, drinking coffee.

Tim Bell was a college music professor. But on Sundays he was now also the choral director of their congregation. And,

as Emily chewed, she decided that he really must not care about that new position if he was going to subject the people to her rendition of “I’ll Be There.”

Because it wasn’t even a church song she had to sing.

It was a classic pop melody that the Jackson Five had made famous, and people had heard this song and seen this song performed and they all knew how it was supposed to sound.

Which made her singing it even worse.

Her father had a theory — because he had theories about everything — that love ballads could be used in places of worship and reinvented to have a spiritual dimension. Being an instructor, he knew that the key to emotional involvement with music was familiarity.

So the way Emily saw it, he was basically tricking people.

He was using songs that already made them feel good. The only problem in the scheme was her. It was just plain wrong to make her a guinea pig in the plan.

Emily had tried all week to appeal to her mother, who was always a voice of reason. But Debbie Bell was an emergency-room nurse and she said that she handled pain and he handled poetry, which meant she left music to her husband.

In desperation Emily had even worked on her little brother, Jared, who was only ten years old and, being seven years younger than her, would pretty much do anything she said. But even Jared didn’t think her singing was a big deal.

Emily shut her eyes and she could hear her own voice,

ped up suddenly like a cartoon chipmunk, singing: *"I'll be there. Just call my name. I'll be there."*

It was a total nightmare.

She would just have to grit her teeth and get through it.

But was it possible to grit your teeth and still sing?