

SUMMERTIME

Written By Hannah Louise Shearer

Catherine and I went away to singing camp this summer and fell in love with the teacher. We're both in our forties.

She's happily married to John, and I'm, well, celebrating the end of a tumultuous relationship.

Cat and I met a long time ago, just yesterday, on the first day of the 3rd grade. We were both new to Third Street Elementary School, and I couldn't find my way home. I had no sense of direction, and looked very young for my age because I was so short. The kindly Mrs. Stone suggested that Cathy, a head and a half taller and three days older, take me by the hand and show me the way. She did. She led me under the tunnel and just across the street. My house was there all along.

We've been Mutt and Jeff ever since. Even though she's lived in Manhattan for years and I stayed in Los Angeles, we talk every other day. Sometimes she still guides me home.

When we were in the 4th grade, Miss Greenwood kicked us out of chorus because we couldn't sing in tune with the other kids. Cathy swears another girl was thrown out along with us, but I remember it being only the two of us. No matter. We couldn't sing and never would. It's been another filament in the lifelong ties that bind.

Our relationship took a brief downturn when we were 12 and she and Jill Bender sent a telegram to Bernie Lerner declaring my undying love for him. They signed my name. The truth of the telegram was irrefutable. But I was furious and humiliated, even four years later when she and Bernie became high school sweethearts and I had moved on to other unrequited crushes. I have long since forgiven her, but it seems, not yet forgotten. At least it wasn't a singing telegram.

We've lived through success and failure, divorces, separations, disagreements and disasters. I delivered the eulogy at her mother's funeral; she was there, on her birthday, for my father's. But we haven't sung together since Miss Greenwood culled us out of the pack.

When Cat called me last April, she was laughing hysterically. I could feel the tears pouring down her cheeks. She choked out that when she tried to sing Happy Birthday to John for the first time in their seven-year honeymoon, her mouth was open, but nothing happened, no sound came out. Considering his birthday was way back in December, I didn't quite get it.

Then I realized she was reading a workshop description from the Omega Institute's 1993 catalogue: 'Making Joyful Noises: Singing for Brave People'. Instructor: David Roth.

'The laboratory of no wrong notes'. 'A workshop for shower singers, car singers, or anyone who'd like to sing but may have been discouraged over the years by others, by circumstances, by self-judgment, by their inner critic, by fear, or by anything else.'

By Miss Greenwood, undoubtedly.

David Roth describes the course: 'Basically, what we'll do is open our mouths and make sounds together -- songs, rounds, chants, dreams, desires -- and we'll use every opportunity to encourage the expression of beauty that is in each and every one of us. It's not rocket science, this thing called singing, but rather permission and appreciation for the uniqueness we each have to offer. With honesty as the foundation and vulnerability the catalyst, be prepared to release joyful noise wholeheartedly and enthusiastically. A sense of humor is helpful.' I'll bet.

No way, Cat. Uh uh. I'd have to bring a mask and an air sickness bag. I'll do anything in the world with you. For you. Except this.

But Cathy was relentless. Her husband John, who is a premier musician (one of life's little ironies), will pay for her trip. And she's offering to pay for mine. She sent me a catalogue. David Roth's picture is cute. Very cute.

I hemmed and hawed and stalled. My mother's physical condition is day-to-day; my healing emotional state is fragile, my financial situation is volcanic. I told her it sounds wonderful, it's a generous offer, but I think I should stay home.

She made the reservations. I left my life behind and got on the plane.

All those endless hours of holding the plane up gave me much too much time to remember humiliating voice experiences. Like when my life's joy, my godchild Alexandra, was two days old, I felt an overwhelming and uncontrollable urge to sing her to sleep with 'Summertime', the lullaby my mother used to coo to me. Allie's relatives looked at me in horror. I satisfied all of us by whispering the lyrics lovingly into Allie's delicate ear. That way her unsoiled brain would never be infected with the bad voice virus.

I land safely at a deserted JFK on the afternoon of the 4th of July. No one in their right mind travels on this holiday, they're too busy eating hot dogs and drinking beer and singing the Star Spangled Banner.

The cargo door won't open and my baggage is stuck on the plane. An omen. Not until an hour later are Cat and I on our way up to Camp. We drive up the empty highways, through the lush hills of the Hudson Valley during what meteorologists call 'the Bermuda High'. It's only the worst heat wave New York has experienced in 40 years.

Cat has brought four or five oldies tapes for us to sing along with in the car. To practice, so to speak. This is the first time we've heard each other's 'singing' voice in decades. We hold our noses and plunge into the deep water. We croak along with the Beatles, out of sync, out of tune. Fats Domino is more like it, but then he can't sing either. We turn off the tape and talk instead. We are very good at that.

We haven't been to camp together since Camp Akela, when we were 11. We were both homesick and we fought over who was more popular with the younger kids. It seemed important to me at the time. All Cat remembers is not ever feeling like she fit in there. Maybe this will turn out better.

For the next five days it is over a 100 degrees with 95% humidity. Occasionally a breeze wafts its way past us, melting in the first tree it bumps.

The Camp is not air conditioned.

As we drive along the dirt road, I try one more time to convince Cat that 'African-Cuban dance' or 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain' might be a more appropriate workshop. She's unmoved.

We arrive in time to have our only dinner at the Cafe. All other meals will be vegetarian, in a communal mess hall. I'm very anxious, so naturally I o.d. on chocolate chip cookies. I can't help but think of the late Swami Muktananda, who was intensely spiritual, ate no meat and had a chocolate and sugar craving that was uncontrollable. I like to remember him every time I bite into a chocolate chip cookie. It makes me feel righteous. I wonder if his 'oms' were in tune.

After dinner we trudge up the hill towards our cabin, waving our miniature flashlights in front of us. They don't believe in flat ground here. We pass a huge stack of luggage half-way up, look at it, shake our heads, can't be, and make it up to our own rustic abode. I am only slightly short of breath.

No phone. No radio. No television. No luggage.

We hike back down the hill, and just to prove that weight-training works, we cart our luggage back uphill. All eight pieces plus the fan. As we dump the last suitcase onto our front porch, a hulking young guy in a golf cart drives past, distributing all the bags. Oops.

I'm used to living alone. Cat's used to living with a man who adores her no matter what. I keep telling her I don't care if she never unpacks, but it worries her. What I fret

about is the infinitesimal shower, a pre-fab vertical porcelain coffin dispensing hot and cold running water with a mind of its own. And I can't adjust the shower-head. It's a foot too high for me.

At 5:30 A.M. on Monday morning my travel alarm rings. At 5:32 Cat's buzzes. We drag ourselves out of bed, into the shower that alternately scalds and freezes, and make our way to meditation class. I'm surprised I don't fall asleep sitting up.

Then breakfast in the mess hall. Oatmeal, brown rice and fruit with 300 other people. I haven't seen food lines or a punched meal ticket since I lived at the dorms in Berkeley. I find the homemade peanut butter, bread and jam. It's going to be okay. By the time we finish bussing our dishes, 9 A.M. rolls around. I'm so tired I don't care that my next stop is singing lessons with a bunch of strangers.

Twenty-seven empty chairs sit in a circle, smack in the middle of a large, sun-filled room. The air is thick and suffocating.

I'm from Hollywood, where pictures lie as a matter of course. Not this one. David Roth smiles at me and Cat and the others as we edge our way in. A beautiful man, soulful and smart, funny and talented, loving and, I have no doubt, sexy. A poet in a society that takes delight in squashing poets.

"Welcome, fellow stumblers" are his first words to us. Well, Cat and I fall in love instantly, along with the 15 other women and 9 men in the class who hang onto his every word.

As soon as everyone finishes squirming in their seats, David announces that no one ever has to sing in this class, together or alone. It's whatever we feel comfortable with. This is a circle of shelter and respect.

But if by chance someone feels motivated to get up and sing, they are welcome to do it, anytime, anywhere. That is, of course, only if they want to. I restrain myself from bolting from the room, the camp, the state of New York.

David suggests we go around the room and give our names, and maybe a few words why we're here. Everyone responds like their lips are stuck together with crazy glue.

Meryl, a few seats before me, croaks out her name, almost bursting into tears. Maryanne from D.C. is filled with sunshine smiles and uncontrollable giggles. Brennan from Vermont can't remember her name because she's just changed it as a symbol of starting a new life. Diana, the youngest one in the class, is a dead ringer for the Princess of Wales. She knows vintage feminist songs I've never even heard of. So much for the women's movement being dead.

Mitch, who took the class last year when it was called 'singing for shy people', barely mumbles his name. Nancy whispers that her kids like her singing but her husband makes fun of her. Steve, an overgrown elf with a guitar ends up leading group songs whenever no one else will. I never figure out what he's doing here. There's English Paul with a beard and Vermont Paul with a beard. Nadine, who belongs on the cover of Town and Country. Al, who is here for a rest cure after finishing his medical internship.

Shannon, who looks like she comes from the County of, and Sandee, a dancer, and the class cheerleader. Mari-eve, from Quebec, speaks in a lilting French accent about her father, who expects her and her voice to be perfect. She's not and it's not.

When it comes to my turn, I can't breathe, my mouth is dry and my palms are sweaty. I've spoken in front of large groups, I've run multi-million dollar productions, I've argued politics passionately and loudly, but this...this is terrifying. Instant lockjaw.

I manage to relate that the only music I remember in my house is my father at the dinner table, singing his off-key, tuneless version of 'Oh By Gosh By Jiminy', or anything from Gilbert and Sullivan. My brothers and I were not a kind audience. We reviled him for his lack of talent. It never occurred to us that it didn't matter how or what he was singing, but that he was singing. I know I inherited his voice and his brain, along with the shape of his hands. The hands and the brain are okay. The voice is not.

My heart is pounding so loud and I'm so glad to be finished introducing myself I have no idea what Cathy says. None. Nor anyone else after her. Except I know the one thing everyone, every single other person here has in common, is some chorus experience or musical background or ability to play an instrument. Everyone but me and Cat.

We all sigh in relief when David turns on a tape deck. Now all we have to do is listen. And we do, to a woman with a rich, melodious voice that was recorded sometime in the forties. It's a silly, upswing melody, the kind people sang about Cupid when life seemed more innocent and less gray. We all guess the singer: Doris Day, Rosemary Clooney. I say it's one of the Andrews' Sisters.

Uh uh. It's David's mother singing with that flawless, joy-filled voice. We're in awe, until he adds that she never sings anymore, hasn't in years, because someone had convinced her she was a terrible singer. She lost confidence, and that beautiful voice was silenced.

Maybe, just maybe, letting other people determine what we think of ourselves isn't such a good idea.

David asks us to just sit there for a moment, and take a deep, deep breath, down into our belly. Oh good, just like yoga. Then, let it out, and say 'ah' at the end of it. 'Aaahhhhh'. Eyes closed. Easier. Now, again. A little longer. Somehow, some way, 'aaahhhhh' becomes a note. A note that resonates throughout the group. Oh, good, just like 'oming' in yoga. Still in safe waters.

He lets us enjoy the delight of opening our mouths and making pleasant sounds. Then his long artist's fingers began to strum his guitar. He begins to sing one of his own folk songs, 'Be Kind to Yourself':

I have my moments, yes I do
And I have my dramas just like you
When the weight of the world comes crashing through
And I'm needing somebody to lean on.

I look in the mirror and I see
 A bundle of nerves where I used to be
 I remember the words you said to me
 The words that you said to me:

Be kind to yourself, be kind to you
 That's what you're here on Earth to do
 If you just let your love shine through
 Then life may be kind to you

It's easier said than done, I know
 I'm the first to admit I take it slow
 I just have a hard time letting go
 Letting go of the critic inside me

Sometimes I prefer to stand and fight
 Then you remind me 'Take it light'
 Would you rather be happy or be right
 Would you rather be happy or right?

Whoa. The arrow finds its mark. Right to the heart. We clap enthusiastically. I struggle not to cry. A few others are wiping their cheeks.

Then David immediately makes us laugh, sharing what's it's like to be a perfectionist performer: when people compliment him he thinks they're nuts. But he says he's gotten much, much better at dealing with praise. Now he just says thank you, out loud, and lets the words 'you don't know what you're talking about' echo silently in his mind.

He gently weaves each of us into his web. He reveals his vulnerabilities. He sings to us and with us. He coaxes, cajoles and sweet-talks us. He uses reverse psychology. We know we're being manipulated, but it's done so deftly, with such delicate irony, we allow it to happen.

We allow it even when he suggests we go around the group again, repeating our names -- this time singing them and having the entire group sing it back to us. That is, of course, only if we want to.

The heat is so intense I'm married to my chair. But it's okay. I can just elongate my name without really singing. I can control this voice. I don't have to sing. I don't have to sing. I don't have to sing.

I don't sing. I just kind of let my voice go up on the last two syllables of 'Louise'. It sounds okay, and when the group 'sings' it back, mimicking me, it sounds almost pleasant. Ah, one torture over.

Then he suggests we stand up, and just to make sure we remember everyone's name, we'll sing and DANCE our names. Rather than pass out, I make some kind of dramatic gesture that I'll block out the rest of my life. For which I am very thankful.

All we have to do next is make fools of ourselves doing muscle-relaxing exercises. One involves shaking your head from left to right really, really fast. I don't know if it's age or what, but my cheeks don't catch up with the rest of my face. They have a mind of their own.

There is no stopping this man once he's got us shell-shocked. We do group tones right away. Just open our mouths really, really wide. Piece of cake. I'm used to being heard at the family dinner table over my three brothers. I know I can open my mouth wide.

What I don't know is that my lungs open too. I can *feel* my vocal chords vibrating. I didn't even know I *had* vocal chords.

A sound I never heard before arises, resonant, deep, rich. Coming from me. y voice. know it's mine, because when I close my mouth it disappears. Wait, wait, don't go away!

Before I can get excited, David tells us to find a partner in the room. I figured Cathy would have pity on me. She *knows* I was always the last one picked in volleyball. Nope. Here I am, all alone in the center of the room.

Poor David is stuck with me. How am I ever going to *breathe*, let alone *sing* in this gorgeous man's ear? I would rather be in the New York subway, in this heat, going nowhere.

He's so tall he has to hunch over so I can make my tone in his ear. Everyone watches us. Oh goody, just what I always wanted. David uses a technique he'd shown us earlier, moving his hand like a conductor, up and down as the notes go up and down. Middle for middle, up for up, down for down. Very simple. My own personal conductor.

I picture myself standing there with my mouth ready to catch flies. David signals up a note -- oops, I miss it. I stop and try again. He tells me to close my eyes, thank you God. With my eyes squeezed shut and my mouth wide open, I try again. This time I blend in with his tone. I think our voices actually vibrate together.

No time to get cocky here. We learn our first song. A round, actually. A Zulu round. It's tough, remembering the words and singing them in order: 'Sen zen na na, Sen zen na na.' It doesn't sound too bad -- I actually get to find my 'aaahhhhh' sound again. Until we try harmony, which forever remains a mystery to me.

Sen zen na na means 'What have we done, what have we done?' I wonder.

We break for lunch three hours and ten lifetimes later. David warns us to drink water constantly, to keep ourselves and our vocal chords hydrated. Just like people who can really sing.

Cat turns to me as we limp towards the mess hall. Her face is as lit up as the 20-foot-tree her family put up every Christmas. She says this is going to be the best thing we've ever done. I nod and trip going down the hill.

Everyone comes back from lunch early, hydrated, and raring to go.

David teaches us our second round. More Zulu, but this one's a real tongue-twister. Joseph from Ladysmith Mambazo wrote this song a few summers ago at Omega, when he was missing his family. In English it means 'Be still my heart, even here you are

at home.' In Zulu it's 'Thula Nkiliziyo, Nalapha Ksekaya', then 'Eh Kaya Nalapha Ksekaya'.

It's harder than it looks. Especially with the dance steps and arm movements that go along with it. Now we're into choreography. I never get the words and steps together. Not once.

We close our eyes and sing both sets of rounds, wandering and weaving among each other, feeling our way by sound. A little like a pod of blind whales. I sense myself outside the group a couple of times, open my eyes and snuggle my way back in.

David breaks us up into smaller singing groups. Again he reminds us that no one has to sing. Unless they want to. Of course. I join five other women. Six strong women. Six *very* strong women sitting on the damp wilted grass under a teeny tree, trying to figure out what we want to do. Six different theories of what we should sing together.

Me. Diana, the Princess and Shannon, with her red hair and freckles and a long list of songs. Brennan with the new name. Rachel.

Joyce with the smoky gravel voice and I recite all those songs we love so much from the thirties to the sixties, show tunes, pop, rock, country, you name it. What we can't remember so well are the words beyond the first lines.

Or the tunes.

None of us care. And so I open my mouth and sing almost above a whisper without fearing the croak that emerges. Apprehension, yes. Terror, no. It's safe in this small group.

We go back upstairs and sing 'Where Have all the Flowers Gone' in front of all the others. I start to cry mid-song, but cover it up. This Monday afternoon the memories came flooding back, about growing up in Berkeley in the sixties.

More important, I remember in this instant what I'd buried for so long: how much I love music. All kinds. Every day. My life would be so still and empty without it. I write

to it, shower to it, drive to it, make love to it. It feeds me more than chocolate chips ever have.

My thoughts crash like dueling cymbals in my head. Oh my God, how am I going to get through this week? I hate this touchy-feely stuff. But maybe it's safer to open up in a group. It doesn't seem as fearsome to share with so many. On the other hand, who are all these people and, as Dulcinea says, what do they want from me?

David mentions his own first exploration as part of a group experience. He describes being dragged, kicking and screaming, into a search for himself. I feel better.

We finish the first day with another round of Sen Zen Na Na. It becomes our path throughout the week of blending our voices, our energies, of coming together.

Late into Monday night Cat and I analyze the day. We realize how odd it is no one identified themselves by their profession. Very un-coastal.

And we speculate about David. I say he doesn't like me, I can tell. She says I'm crazy and insecure and self-involved. He didn't *notice* me enough not to like me. We brood over his age (he told us immediately he was 40), his relationship (how could he not have one with some lucky person somewhere), his family. Everything we're curious about, he tells us, in the group, in his songs, or in the way he relates to us. We assume, presume and postulate anyway. That's what women do.

By Tuesday morning I feel like I'm walking underwater, in a dream. No respite, no breeze, no breath. Unbearable, unbelievable heat which knocks out our defenses. We are completely vulnerable, ready to strip emotionally because it is too hot not to. Who has the energy for barriers?

We start with 'Thula Nkiliziyo' again. Be still my heart, even here you are at home. A beautiful sentiment, especially since I feel suspended in a timeless vacuum, ripped away from the moorings of home.

We spend the morning group singing from our course text, 'Rise Up Singing'. Songs I've heard and sung on the sly all my life: 'Those Were the Days', 'Downtown', 'Try to Remember', and anything else people call out.

David teaches us the chorus to his song, 'I Do Not Need a Bag', which he's singing tonight at the faculty talent show. We learn the words so the class can back him up. On stage. In front of all of Omega. Only if we want to, of course.

There are two easy verses to the chorus: 'I do not need a bag, (4 times), To take a brand new bag each time I shop's a drag, Thank you kindly but I do not need a bag' is the first. 'I do not need these sacks (four times), With all these extra sacks I cannot find my snacks, Thank you kindly but I do not need these sacks' is the second. The song has a slightly Jamaican flavor. Pretty simple, huh?

We practice twice. He doesn't want us to get stale. That is, if we want to do it at all. We want to do it for him. Not to worry, it's ten hours from now.

After lunch David sends us off in pairs. Cat and I decide if we're ever going to sing in public, it will have to be a duet. We sit on the lawn, hearing the others vocalize. Beautifully. It's intimidating. We open 'Rise Up Singing', hoping to find a song we can do. Any song. We sing snatches of five or six standards. We're awful. We can't find the same level, stay in key together, not even on the same three words of a lyric.

I tell Cat I'm intensely grateful no one can hear us. She wants to know what on earth I'm talking about: David is right behind us. My head swivels like the scene in the 'Exorcist'. She's right.

We burst into the release of hysterical, embarrassed laughter. Someone has heard us. *David* has heard us. Tears stream down my face. I snort like a pig in heat. I roll on the lawn, completely out of control. My stomach hurts. David ambles over, wanting to share the joke. I tell him he'd never understand.

And how could he? That night he sings several numbers to mass applause. He's funny, charming, at ease. The audience loves him. Then he brings the class up on stage

for back-up. We troop behind him as if we're on the Bataan Death March. I hide behind the whole group. How hard is it to remember the chorus? I forget the words. Yet another performance humiliation.

The best part of the evening is the air conditioning in the main hall.

Cat stops at the pay phone to call John afterwards. I hunker back to the cabin alone. My sense of direction has not improved. I get lost. My flashlight casts a narrow light, catching a small animal in its beam. It looks like a cross between a squirrel and a raccoon, something out of one of my dreams, a creature with no name. I don't know which of us is more startled.

I guess Cat is just as nervous as I am without admitting it. After she talks to John, she saunters into a cabin, flips on the lights and starts undressing.

It's the wrong cabin. Cat yelps. The person in bed barely even notices. Must be the heat.

We stay up until 2 A.M. singing every damn song in the book. It's stunning how complicated Beatles songs are. We try the Rolling Stones. Gospel. The list of songs I brought with me to learn: 'Someone to Watch over Me', 'I've Got you Under my Skin', 'Where or When', 'Fly me to the Moon', 'Just in Time'. Right. None of them work.

Cathy loves 'Jamaica Farewell'. I can't carry the tune if my life depends on it. 'Amazing Grace' is out of the question.

By quarter to two we narrow it down to 'Old Macdonald' or 'Sixteen Tons'. I absolutely refuse 'Old MacDonald'. My Allie sang that in kindergarten. She's six now and is already on 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning'. 'Sixteen Tons' wins by default.

We practice until the people in the cabin next door pound on our wall. I don't blame them.

Wednesday morning David warms us up with our rounds, then surprises us with a game: we have to create a wish list of ten things we've always longed for. Yikes. It's so

easy to know what you don't want. Not so simple to figure out in clear terms what you do want.

David then suggests we *sing* one of our goals. Any one. 'm used to almost constant discomfort by now. I choose the shortest goal on my list and sing-song it: I want my black belt in karate. Everyone laughs. I don't care, not even when they all go 'ooohhhhh' when Cat sings she wants to 'swim with the dooolphinnnns.'

I feel a wave of restlessness in the room I don't yet understand. It submerges when the class begins to sing one of my favorite weepers, 'Sunrise Sunset'. Cat stands next to me while I belt it out with feeling. She pokes me in the ribs, gently, and accuses me of having a beautiful voice.

David begins to sing 'Que Sera Sera', which is how his mother used to sing him to sleep. We all join in with him. My throat starts to constrict. I remember going to see 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' with my older brother, Phillip. I was very young, but I remember Doris Day and Jimmy Stewart, the song, the movie, the popcorn and my brother holding my hand during the scary parts. And I argue in my head with the lyrics. 'The future's not ours to see, whatever will be, will be.' Why can't we know, see, expect? Why are things always such a mystery?

Something loosens, then erupts in the class. One by one, people start singing by themselves. English Paul starts it off with an esoteric Welsh song of the sea. David accompanies him on the guitar. The words are arcane, incomprehensible. But Paul is sitting there, singing.

Then Brennan with the new name, new personality, new life, stands up, and a capella, ala Ethel Merman, shouts out a feminist plea. We all hold our breath, willing her to get through it. She finishes, then bursts into sobs as we burst into applause.

Not once throughout the five days does anyone say you're out of tune, you're flat, what kind of key is that? Only 'good for you', 'you're so brave', 'that was wonderful', 'how

did it make you feel?' Whatever judgments are made about quality of voice and performance are hidden so deeply you can't even read it in people's eyes.

Maryanne and Judy sing a duet of 'Wouldn't It Be Lovely'. Maryanne, as usual, breaks into uncontrollable nervous giggles. Judy, a version of the younger me, sharp at the edges, keeps on going but is furious with Maryanne for abandoning her in the middle. They snap at each other like siblings, then sing it again. Maryanne laughs less.

Shannon gets up and offers a new round for the whole group. She takes over, breaks us up into sections, and leads us in singing the loveliest round:

Now I walk in beauty
Beauty is before me,
Beauty is behind me,
Above and below me.

It is walking in beauty. Bathing in it. All of us, the teachers, therapists, doctors, writers, strong, confused, successful, lonely, married, single people, turning into vulnerable children again. We are relearning something smote out of us by criticism and cruelty in the guise of hearing the truth 'for our own good.'

We feel raw and powerful as David teaches us our last round. We move amongst each other singing, feeling the layers of meaning as the lyrics wash over us like the humidity, feeling the sounds of our souls emerging from long-held silence.

Round and round we turn
We hold each other's hand and weave ourselves in a circle
The time is gone, the dance goes on.

I hike down to the bathroom, hurrying. I don't want to miss anything. I can hear group singing 'Pace Diem' from outside. It sounds like an angelic choir. I can't believe that's MY group singing. Instantly I worry that as soon as I get back there an off-note will sound, with me standing out like a tuba amongst violins.

By Wednesday noon Cat and I reach an agreement. We will sing. We tell David we want to do our song tomorrow. We need his help on the guitar to keep us remotely in the ballpark. He casually asks us to do it for him now, just so he can find our key. Sure. I know he just wants us to sing. However, whenever, and wherever we can. We speak-sing Sixteen Tons, not an easy task unless you're Rex Harrison. When we finish I ask him what key it is. He says it doesn't matter, he'll follow along.

I go back to the cabin and collapse on the bed. Cat attends a sample seminar on 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain'. I am busy timing my breaths to coincide with the rivulets of sweat pouring down my body.

Cat bursts in, on her last legs. She says, pack a toothbrush, we're escaping this place and going to an air-conditioned motel in Rhinebeck. And out to a real dinner. I am a zombie and can probably be convinced to rob a bank.

Rhinebeck is deserted. I assume it's because most people are too smart to move around. We eat a lovely, non-vegetarian, dinner, and check out six motels in the area looking for a pool for Cat. All I want is a cool room somewhere and a decent shower.

We settle on the Golden Manor Motel in Hyde Park, just down the highway and across from FDR's estate. After five minutes in the room, I'm freezing. The motel allots us one 12" by 12" towel apiece, and will not give us another until we turn the first one in. The shower's in the bathtub, which does not drain properly. The tub overflows.

I miss our rustic Omega cabin. Now I finally understand the Stockholm Syndrome, the theory about kidnap victims becoming attached to their captors. I want to go back to Camp.

Cat goes swimming. I wander around the room with 'Rise Up Singing' in front of my nose. I am trying to sing 'Summertime' to see if my voice has improved along with my lung power. Cat comes in right in the middle. She thinks I should sing it in front of the class. I tell her she's been brainwashed. We practice 'Sixteen Tons', decide to leave out a verse that's too hard, and we go to sleep.

We stop at a real coffee shop the next morning. We do not care anyone else is there, including our lovely waitress with a Scottish accent. We practice our song, louder this time. Cat adds finger-snapping and 'ch ch ch ch ch ch' between the verses.

Now some people say a man's made out of mud
 But a poor man's made out of muscle & blood
 Muscle & blood, skin & bone
 A mind that's weak & a back that's strong

You load 16 tons & what do you get?
 Another day older & deeper in debt
 St. Peter, don't you call cause I can't go
 I owe my soul to the company store. (Chorus)

I was born one morning when the sun didn't shine
 I picked up my shovel & I walked to the mine
 I loaded 16 tons of number one coal
 And the straw boss hollered "Well bless my soul"

If you see me coming, you better step aside
 A lot of men didn't & a lot of men died
 I got a fist of iron & a fist of steel
 If the right don't get you then the left one will

The waitress comes over and says we sound so happy. Happy. Well, she's a Scot and she's used to bagpipes.

We get back just in time for rounds and exercises and laughter. Cat and I do not want to subject ourselves to the torture of anticipation any longer. We get up to sing.

I can feel her next to me. It's reassuring and supportive. David strums and we start. I am so taken over by the song, the people in front of me become a blur. I don't know if Cat and I are singing together or going our own ways. I know I'm loud. Very loud. I know I believe I am owned by the company store. I know I'm anguished by it and it pisses me off. I know I'm tough. Who unleashed this person?

The group hoots and hollers and claps. Thank you very much, you don't know what you're talking about. Then doubt and fear wash away in the face of stomping approval.

I can't hear what anyone says, other than Charlie, who says he'll definitely never get in MY way. And David, who says 'you hit all those high notes'. Now what does THAT mean?

We must be inspirational. Charlie gets up and in his deep, deep melodic voice sings a Church song that echoes through the room as if he's supported by a full choir.

Sandee, who suffers major performance anxiety, sits in her chair and sings like a pro.

Mari-eve puts on a tape and does a rousing version of Piaf.

Mitch, who hasn't spoken but has been singing with the group for four days while sprawled on the floor, sits up in the middle of the room. He opens the book to 'Desperado' and begins to sing the part about 'why don't you come to your senses, come down from your fences, open the gate. It may be raining but there's a rainbow above you. You better let somebody love you before it's too late.' *Well.*

In the middle of Mitch's song a Camp administrator walks in. Our eyes move as one to keep her quiet until Mitch is through. She waits politely as we cheer, then announces unfortunately a water pump has taken a major dump.

There's a water emergency until tomorrow. No showers, no flushing toilets. We all have to bathe in the scum-covered lake. Cat and I ran away to Rhinebeck a day too early.

But we can't leave. Tonight is our big show. It's tradition. All the workshops strut their stuff the last night in Camp. Only if we want to, of course. No pressure.

We want to, we want to. We don't rehearse. We decide we'll simply have a regular class on stage. Someone suggests we leave the house lights on, so the audience can feel like they're really participating. Everyone agrees.

Somehow Cat and I are not nervous. Our entire group stumbles onto the stage, looking like a rag-tag collection, singing 'Now I Walk in Beauty'. It doesn't matter.

We don't entertain as much as have a class with our audience. We sing our rounds for them. They sing back, clapping and swaying. Sandee leads the camp in a Sufi song, her anxiety long gone. Mitch then suggests on stage we do 'With a Little Help from our Friends'.

'What would you do if I sang out of tune?
Would you stand up and walk out on me?
Lend me your ears & I'll sing you a song
And I'll try not to sing out of key

O I get by with a little help from my friends
O I get high with a little help from my friends
I'm gonna try with a little help from my friends...'

We do sing out of tune, but we are joined by 300 others. Instead of a performance, it is a community.

Afterwards a bunch of us go to the Cafe for dessert. We simply do not want to let go of the evening's triumph. We feel magical, especially since the water pump is fixed a day early.

David joins us. We joke and laugh and talk about how much fun we had. David says it's the first time in his memory that he doesn't need to analyze his own 'performance' note by note, word by word. Maybe we are giving him something back.

We aren't finished yet. We still have a whole morning to sing. Cat gently suggests after the alarm goes off, at breakfast, after breakfast, and on the way to class that I sing 'Summertime'. I tell her I never knew how pushy she was before this trip.

We do something different to start this last morning. We have what David calls a 'gift circle'. Everyone brings a small token and gives it to someone in the middle of a circle. After you get a gift, you have to say something. Stand in the middle of a circle and be stared at? I'm squirming already.

We start, some with songs and poems, cards, or simple one-on-one thanks.

I give Joyce my cassette of Linda Ronstadt singing old show tunes. I'm pleased with myself until I realize everyone is watching me shift from foot to foot and no one is going to give me anything. I've done it again.

Thank God Diana pops up and presents me with a card with quotes, poems, and a blessing: 'May you always find those with whom you can share your heart's song'. It's very sweet. And I'm safe. Except now I have to thank everyone else. I stand in the middle of that circle and apologize if I am reserved. Distance has always been my safety net. I thank them for the biggest gift of all: I am able to sing, something I could never have done if each and every one of them hadn't made me feel comfortable and secure and unjudged.

Luckily Steve remembers to bring something for David, something no one else thought of. He's written different words to Sen Zen Na Na. We encircle David, coming closer. all of us singing that we love him, and 'what will we do without you'. He cries. I cry. We all cry.

We stay in the circle, holding hands and swaying. We sing my favorite round, 'All I ask of you is forever to remember me as loving you' -- to each other. I look into each person's eyes as we sing.

I. Feel. Stoned. Completely stoned. I am not stoned, haven't been for years and years and years but it's as if there are no barriers between me and these people, these strangers who are my friends. Love is permeable. It seeps through the tiniest of openings and flows to the most unexpected destinations to do its work. I feel warm and gushy, and I don't think it's just the weather.

It's almost time to go. Cat pokes me in the ribs again. I don't mean to pressure you, she says, but if you don't sing you'll regret it.

There is nothing I regret about this week. The last thing I want is to leave here with a sense of failure, a sense of something left undone that will wake me in the middle of the night and force me to bang my head against the headboard.

At the very last minute Nancy announces she wants to sing 'California Here I Come' with me, in honor of my trip home. I'm stunned and pleased anyone would want to sing with me. I politely ask the whole group to join in, as there's something else I want to sing, on my own, before we leave. The words escape my mouth before I can stop them.

They begin a rousing version of 'California' that peters out because no one knows the words. I'm frozen, anticipating singing a capella, a song my mother sang to me as a little girl, a song Broadway singers have trouble with.

I say I'd better do this before I faint. And with apologies to Messrs. Heyward and Gershwin, I don't faint. I even remember to open my mouth wide and breath deep, and I sing it as my mother sang the lyrics to me:

'Summertime & the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin' & the cotton is high
Your daddy is rich & your mama's good lookin'
So hush pretty baby, don't you cry

One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singin'
You'll spread your wings & you'll take to the sky
Until that mornin' there ain't nothin' can harm you
With mama and daddy standin' by.'

Not as good as the shower version, but it sounds pretty. Even to me.

Everyone is appreciative and applauds. I've done it. Flushed with success, it's my turn to poke Cathy in the ribs. It's now or never, Cat. 'Jamaica Farewell' or bust. If you don't you'll regret it.

To my utter surprise, Cat asks David to accompany her, says it'll take only a minute and everyone can just be patient.

And out comes, not the sounds of silence, but 'Jamaica Farewell'. In a clear, dulcet voice, in tune, even with an accent. 'Sad to say I'm on my way, won't be back for many a day...' Amazing.

Everyone says good-bye. A lot of hugging and kissing. Meryl, the shyest person I've ever met, comes up and tells me that her the most touching thing about this week is the friendship Cat and I share. I tell her how beautiful her voice is. She denies it and says she wishes she could sing like me. Like me? Thank you very much, you don't know what you're talking about.

It's impossible for me to say good-bye to David properly. I stand on my tiptoes and reach up to hug him, but how do I tell someone they've changed me forever without sounding sappy and phony? How do I say that he came along at exactly the right time and that he gave me a peak experience?

I don't. I give him a hug and say thank you and good-bye.

Then Cat and I get lost on the Grand Central Parkway, get to JFK just in time, and I wait five hours for the delayed flight home. I spend the afternoon with three thousand very noisy travelers assaulting my brain.

So I wrap myself in the cocoon of the week and carry it with me back to reality.

Cat drove home and sang 'Jamaica Farewell' for John. He accompanied her on the piano, telling her what a sweet voice she has.

I went home and sang 'Summertime' for my mother. Not exactly in tune, but I sang. She cried.

Cathy and I still talk on the phone every other day, like we have for the past three or so decades. Except now we can say, how does that song go? I'll start it or she will (she's much better at melody than I am), then we'll do it together, or not, and laugh.

I'll never be the next Bette Midler. And no one will ever ask me to slink on the piano at a party and sing 'Love Me or Leave Me'.

But a miracle happened. David taught me and Cathy to open our hearts and let the music flow. No more whispering or mouthing the words. And so, many of these mornings I rise up singin', spread my wings and take to the sky.