

It'll Never Happen Again

Remember how when you were young, certain songs cut through you like a knife? in 1965, Bobby Darin was on Top 40 with "If I Were a Carpenter." It was a little thick, but it was so naked for radio. Would you marry me anyway? Would you have my baby? I was fifteen, and that song slashed me to ribbons.



The composer was a fellow named Tim Hardin, and for a while he was the next big thing, perhaps the first of the “new Dylans.” In college I bought his second LP, and listened to it with my roommate Robert, who also owned the first. I played both records for my girlfriend Clare, a faculty brat who knew much more music than me, everything from Woody Guthrie to the Fugs.

In those days Hardin was called a folksinger, but what he really was was a prototype singer-songwriter, along with like Jackie deShannon and Paul Simon. He had impossible emotional range, and was able to nail obscure variations of sadness in just a few notes. In one, Hardin addresses the tragic figure of Hank Williams, who died of TB in the back seat of his car before Hardin could hear him perform:

*Goodbye Hank Williams, my friend.
I didn't know you, but I been places that you been.*

In another, he begins:

*I remember our first affair.
All the pain, always rain
In our lives.
It'll never happen again...*

That last line, repeated three heartbreaking times, was what threw me: It'll never happen again. Could there be a more sobering thought, implying severance of love, and therefore severance of hope? And isn't it

true of everything sweet that ever happens to a person? It can't ever happen again. Because that's how life is.

I thought of the sorrows of my own life – my sister's death of a leaky heart when she was 15 and I was 11, and my father's coming round to the empty house a year later, to tell me he was going away, and shake my hand goodbye under the old Chinese elm.

I dreamed at least every week that Kathy had come back, and her death was all a big mistake somehow, or my dad came back, and was my dad again. But neither ever happened, just like in the song..

After Christmas break Robert, my roommate, told me he got tickets to a Tim Hardin concert in Greenwich Village, and he and his mom Nancy drove up from Princeton to see it. His dad was in the foreign service and Nancy was an artist, so Robert's dorm room was full of her paintings of interesting people she encountered in Khartoum and Rome. Robert figured she would enjoy Hardin, and he never dreamed Hardin would make him regret the choice.



But that is what happened. By this time Hardin was addicted to heroin and pills and booze, and he staggered onto the stage frantic and repulsive, rubbing his crotch with the microphone stand and talking to the audience about cunts and cocks, and flicking lit cigarette butts into the front rows. And his songs weren't the tender ballads of our records, but jazzed-up going-nowhere heroin crotch songs you wouldn't want your mother to hear.

Nancy was cool enough with it, but Robert was embarrassed, disappointed, and out thirty dollars. How could that foul-mouthed beatnik be the same guy who sang "Misty Roses" and "Reason to Believe"? We continued to listen to Hardin that spring, but more as a conundrum than a fan favorite.

Clare and I had a good thing going. She was the kind of girl anyone

would like to know, beautiful inside and out. I once overheard a pre-med student say I was with the greatest looking girl at school. The thought made me dizzy. I looked at her with blood in my eyes. She was tall, and hip, and kind, and she loved to laugh. She had small features, faint eyebrows and a sort of an indistinct mouth, and her complexion could go haywire with hives at the drop of a hat. But she was gorgeous just the same, the kind of woman you could lash yourself to for life.

I was a virgin, but Clare thought I was witty and a poet, which was practically as good as not being a virgin, and we would walk around our college town for long afternoons in the warm October light, talking about everything and nothing, my arm around her waist, resting on the cool bare skin above her belt. I was very hot for her, and the news that she would be pulling out of school and going to a place up in Minnesota instead, where her dad Ned taught art, distressed me no end. But what could I do? I had no intention of being a carpenter; indeed, I'd be an awful carpenter, because I had no patience with details, and no humility, things didn't fit handily in my hands, and she was the one who wanted babies, not me. Still, I yearned for Clare like the man in that song.

I yearned for her family as well. When I visited with them, I joined them at the family dinner table and exulted in the conversation, which managed to be both unselfconscious and intelligent. Clare was the oldest, a regal daughter. Her brother Cleo was a bodacious prince, innocent but opinionated. There was a mom and a sister and another brother, too. Aces every one of them. I would have ditched my family in a minute for them.

The cornerstone of this family was Ned, the art professor. He was a small man, but red-headed fiery and ferociously clear about what he believed. He'd been a Navy pilot in the Pacific in World War II, and I got the idea that he came home against all odds and married his sweetheart from school. Which was something I could get my mind around. Now, his hand almost always cradled a warm pipe bowl, like him a survivor of wartime action. He was a man who was tempered by flame, and just naturally more serious and sensible than other men. He seemed to

honestly respect me, and as a result, I acted better around him than I did around other people. I liked who I was when I was with him, just like I did with Clare.

I didn't want to lose these people.

Ned seemed to like the spirit of the sixties, but not the predation or the laziness or the bullshit that accompanied the spirit. He despised faculty members who fooled around with students. He despised shortcuts of any kind. "Do the work," was the advice he gave everyone. Clare once confided that Ned liked me very much, and it took me by such surprise I had to blink back tears.

One remark stands out for me. Ned was recounting a conversation he'd had with other faculty members that day. "Fred, you hold onto that pipe of yours like it's a friend," one teacher joked. "It is my friend, Charlie," Ned said ruefully. "My only friend." And he chuckled violently at the recollection.

Several times, trying to regain access to Clare, I hitchhiked to Minnesota and bombed in on her. Each time was a disaster. Her mom and dad were patient and kind with me, but Clare had outgrown me. She had new boyfriends, older boyfriends, artists and actors. Gradually, it sank in to me that the thing we had at the college in Ohio was over, and it would never happen again, just like in the song.

I dropped out of school and made one final effort to make Clare see my way, flying into Minnesota without a winter coat on a cold night in November. We talked, and became friends again, sort of – we said we were "going unsteady." I took a job at a parts warehouse, and after work she reintroduced me to her life and to her friends, like Maddy, an artist who had studied under Ned.

In the end Clare shut me out. On the last day of the sixties, she told me she was engaged to marry a Vietnam veteran from her home town who had got shot up and shipped home. They never actually got married, but I



withdrew from her forever, to an apartment a half mile away.

One day, as I was lying on my mattress on the floor of my upstairs apartment, Maddy came by to look in on me. Maddy was five years older than me. Her husband, a chiropractor, had been in Vietnam for almost a year. She was blonde and attractive without quite being pretty. I don't think they were in love. When I looked at Maddy I saw an asymmetry that made her seem tentative. But she was smart and serious about painting, and she gave me fair warning when she pushed a sketchbook of self-portraits in pencil into my hands. In each picture, there was something disturbing about her. Her face would be ready to cry, or the sun would be in her eyes, or her cheeks would be sallow and aged, or a shadow would be passing over her, a shadow of depression and doom, like March in Minnesota, the season of ice and obituaries. I told her they were great.



She relayed to me her sympathies regarding Clare dropping me, and something in her eye led me to kiss her, and we made love on the raggedy mattress. A part of me just wanted to be loved by someone, anyone, and this was great on that level alone. But a vengeful part savored the idea of doing it with a friend of Clare's and a student of Ned's.

Maddy and I were only together for a couple of months. We never lived together, but we spent nights together a lot. Because painting was what she cared about, she set me up with an easel and paints, and encouraged me to paint ripoffs of pictures from her art books. I did what I thought was an OK version of a spooky landscape by the Nazi painter Emil Nolde. But my first painting was a copy of the cover of Tim Hardin's Greatest Hits. Thinking back, it seems weird to have painted a picture of another man in front of a naked woman. But something about Hardin was hooked in me. He had a penchant for sorrow, and I was starting to have one, too. I wished I could express things the way he did, that reduced all of life to a satisfactory, blubbing heap.

Maddy and I didn't work out. Before we split, I took her to visit a friend of mine, a black cop I knew in Minneapolis named Roger. He and Maddy exchanged glances, and as we were leaving, Roger took me by the arm and asked if I would mind if he called Maddy, because "she sure has a beautiful body." I swiveled to look at Maddy slide into her VW Bug as if I had lost her forever, and I had. Because Roger was right, she was a beauty, but I never appreciated it until that moment.

But I wanted out, of everything. I was ashamed that I was sleeping on the home front with the wife of a man in combat – albeit a chiropractor. Ned would never go for that, I knew. It was sleazy and insincere. It was ignoble and wrong.

I was drifting into a decade of loneliness. Clare married and soon had three children. My old roommate Robert moved to Minnesota, and we took up where we left off, as grown men. The thing that still connected us was the music. We spent hours listening to the people who mattered to us – Tim Hardin, Leonard Cohen, Tim Buckley, Nick Drake. We were lonely men listening to lonely songs.

We sometimes traveled with our dogs on canoe trips and car trips, and trips to folk festivals. For a time we were even in business together, collecting glass jars from people's alleys and using them as candle molds to make candles we sold to knickknack stores. It wasn't a very good business. I was just helping him to have something to do.

It took me years, but I eventually began putting a life together, meeting and marrying Rachel, a freckled foundling from Indiana and a lovely girl, and having a daughter in 1984 with her, and in 1988 a son. As a father I wanted to be like Ned, charismatic and unstinting in love, but it wasn't in me. My life was too unheroic and too gruesome. I ate the crusts from the kids peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and gained weight.



About that time Robert was going with a nurse named Eve. He and Eve and Rachel and I and our kids would sometimes get together at our place for a cookout, and to push the children in the backyard swings. As they had been serious for over a year, Robert indicated that if she got pregnant not to worry, that he would take care of her. But there was a misunderstanding, because Eve did get pregnant, and instead of marrying her Robert broke it off, and in cruel fashion, marrying another woman, the daughter of a local surgeon, in the space of a couple of months. I went to the wedding, which was quite a toney affair after our dumpster diving days. I toasted their happiness, but inside I was troubled.

Eve had the baby, but Robert never visited the hospital. Eve took the child home and set about to raise him, but Robert never came around. He agreed to pay child support on the side, but on the condition that he not be the boy's father. His excuse was that he was a married man, and he needed to focus on the life he had chosen, not this one that was trying to trip him up. But it was hell for me to be his friend, because I had little kids, and I knew how important having a father was, and it tore me up to visit Eve and see the little boy who asked about his dad.

The funny thing was, Robert's parents, back in Princeton, knew about their grandson, and came visiting every year with gifts and games. His mother Nancy, whom Robert had taken to see Tim Hardin at the Village Gate, took the boy into the family with all love and honor. Robert knew about this, and permitted it, but he could not bring himself to be a party to it.

And little by little, I stopped seeing Robert. I still loved him, but our friendship ended in a flaming wreck over the boy, who I knew would grow up hollow and hunting, the way I did.

The following year I got word from Clete, Clare's brother, that Ned was dying of lung cancer. His best friend the briar pipe was taking him down.



I went to the funeral, and saw Clare and her husband and family. At the reception afterward, at the house, a woman came up to me and asked if I recognized her. "It's me, Maddy," she said. "Maddy Anderson." I nearly choked at the need to reprise in a moment our relationship of a decade ago, but she put me at ease with a smile. Clare came up to me, too, and told me once again how fond Ned had been of me.

On the back porch was Clete, sitting in a still glider. I sat beside him on the top wooden step and swigged from a bottle of beer.

"After the war," Clete said, "Ned spent nearly a year in Idaho in a mental institution. He didn't speak during that period. People who knew him gave up on him ever coming out of it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"The plane he was flying, with a crew of about ten men, was shot down by Japanese antiaircraft fire. They went down about 500 miles from Midway, and he and four crewmates floated in the ocean for the better part of a day. Ned's head was injured, and he was a small fellow, but he kept the plane's navigator, Les, who was injured and unconscious, afloat with him the whole time. The ocean wasn't rough, but it was still challenging, you know. But Ned held onto Les all that day and into the evening, talking to him, encouraging him to hold on, help was on the way. Les talked at first, but as time passed he just spit saltwater out.

"Around nightfall a rescue ship arrived to pull them out of the water. One of the two other men was plainly dead by this time, floating face down. Ned and Les were still upright together, and Ned insisted that Les be pulled aboard first, clambering up the riggings after him. But just as Ned reached the top, the rescue team kicked Les overboard, obviously dead. Ned watched as Les's body toppled back into the waves, and something inside him broke."

Clete looked at me. "The part I don't get is what happened to him in

Idaho that year. He was empty and useless all that time. But at the end of the year something happened and he became who he would be for the rest of his life. Not just a healthy man, but a strong one, strong enough to raise us all, and be a decent artist, and a good man, too. I wish I knew what he did to heal himself."

It's funny how things come around. Thirty years later I remain friends with Clare and her brother Clete. This past summer she invited me and Rachel and my kids out to her horse farm. All her family made it, even Clete, who drove all the way from New York with his son Victor. It was a hot day, but we sat in plastic chairs under an oak tree so big and so spreading that no grass grew underneath. The ponies cantered in the enclosure, and the kids of all the families climbed the corral planks to watch them, all except the ones too young to leave their mothers' laps.

Everyone was there, except for Ned, and we didn't have much to say, but we sat and told teasing stories about the old days anyway, and I felt I belonged as much as I ever did. It's not true that it never happens again, but it sometimes just feels like it.

In time even Robert and I became friends again. His marriage to the surgeon's daughter came apart, and he suffered like a man in a parable, having created two families but being welcome in neither. In time he married again, and was a good father this time around, staying home with two daughters and loving them modestly and with all his heart. He never reconciled with the little boy he abandoned, but he changed in his heart, and that is something.

One night the two of us went out to a steakhouse, and over meat and red wine I told him how sorry I was to have pulled away from him all those years. Poor Robert looked at me with dumb surprise. "I thought you were just tired of me," he said.

"I was always your friend," I said to him that night. "But every time I saw you, I thought about the boy. And living the life I've lived, I couldn't choose you above him."

It was about the time of Ned's funeral that Tim Hardin died of an overdose. Robert told me about it on the phone. Obituaries mentioned that Hardin, a Marine, was among the first group of advisors sent to Vietnam in 1959, and that he first took heroin while there, as a soldier, before he ever sang on stage. Before the hammer came down, he made two great records. He went on to make other records, and they had their moments. But none resounded with people the way his first two did. It was a heady swirl of youth and nerve, and because he was young he must still have had hope, no matter how sad the songs. He wasn't finished yet. There would be other opportunities. But there never were. He sold his writers' rights in the late 1970s. Tim Hardin died of a heroin and morphine overdose in 1980, and is buried in the Twin Oaks Cemetery in Turner, Oregon. The moment of sweetness never came round again.

And when I hear him today on a CD, I sometimes still cringe with embarrassment, sitting in Maddy's apartment, painting Hardin's face instead of a naked Maddy. I know Ned would have understood my dalliance. Everyone has to heal, in Idaho or Minnesota, and we are all of us sanatoriums for one another, if we take the best we are offered. And look what happens when you do. My babies are grown, and in the fullness of my years I bask in the grace and love of so many.

But when the winds inside blow chill I can still summon up that feeling of bereftness, when you sense that everything is stripped away, and your sister died in the night and your dad is upstairs packing his duffel. That's when you are alone in your soul, and your only solace is knowing your shout of surprise could not have gone unheard, and that look on your face, in acrylic or in oil, may be all that is remembered.

Goodbye, Tim Hardin, my friend. I didn't know you, but I been places that you been.



