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# A December Night

BY  
WILL BLYTHE

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In 1967, when he was nineteen and suffering from his first bout of heroin addiction in New York, James Taylor and his father spoke on the telephone. “Wait right there,” Ike said. “Don’t move.” He drove the ten hours from Chapel Hill to New York in the family station wagon, loaded the car with James’s few possessions, and took his son, who slept nearly the whole way, back to the family home in the Morgan Creek neighborhood to recover. Which James did, for a while.

I think I understand why James Taylor came home to Chapel Hill. Other than the fact that he is one of the greatest singer-songwriters in American musical history, and I am not, he and I have a lot in common. We both grew up in Chapel Hill. I didn’t know him because he’s about a decade older, and had already gone off to London, where he was hanging out with the Beatles and cutting his first record while I was still bell-bottoming my way through the final days of elementary school. Our parents were good friends. His father, Ike, and my father, Bill, were both North Carolina natives, bald-headed charmers who liked to drink. They taught at the University of North Carolina medical school, shared similar convictions about the need for socialized medicine, and were often paid by poor patients in vegetables and gratitude.

I remember drinking gin and tonics on a June night at the Carolina Inn with my father and Ike late in their lives. We talked a little about James, among other things, before staggering out into the voluptuous, tree-shrouded summer dark of North Campus, weaving our way along the sidewalks between the ancient brick dormitories of Old East and Old West, heading toward Franklin Street under the canopy of oaks and tulip poplars. For an ec-

static minute or so, I felt as if I had boarded the infinite train of generations linked by love to a common place. I could imagine my ancestors and descendants feeling exactly what I was feeling, that sense of connection backward and forward across time, the similarities of our Carolinian souls, our easy intoxication not only by gin but by summer nights like this. James knew those nights, too.

His mother, Trudy, was a New Englander, as was my mother, Gloria, and both were musically gifted, Trudy a trained opera singer and my mother a whiz on the piano and accordion. Both of our houses were stocked with a variety of LPs: classical, Broadway show tunes, folk songs, so-called “world music”—Celtic, bossa nova, calypso. The records helped James learn how to write songs; they helped me learn to love them. Like the Taylors, we spent part of every summer in Massachusetts, in the process becoming, like James, fans of the Boston Red Sox, who back then were still the accursed icons of impossible dreams, and beloved for that reason. The Taylors’ annual sojourns on Martha’s Vineyard were attempts by Trudy “to save us from North Carolina,” James would one day reveal to Marc Maron, the *WTF* podcast host. She was “afraid we were going to attach ourselves down there . . . become part of that place.” My mother, by contrast, once gave me a bust of Robert E. Lee.

And yet for all of Trudy’s anxieties, James was drawn to the land around Chapel Hill, which soothed, consoled, and delighted him. “Chapel Hill, the Piedmont, the outlying hills, were tranquil, rural, beautiful, but *quiet*,” he told his biographer, Timothy White. “Thinking of the red soil, the seasons, the way things smelled down there, I feel as though my experience of coming of age there was more a matter of landscape and climate than people.”

Landscape is psyche, the novelist Lauren Groff has said. To which I might add that place often becomes what family can’t. A source of psychic nourishment, a temporary reservoir of peace. For many of us growing up in Chapel Hill, there were times when the woods that enveloped the town felt deeply familial, though perhaps more generous and accommodating than that family waiting for us back home.

Every morning that was not a school day (which meant *every* morning in the summer, except Sunday, when we were temporarily incarcerated in church), my friends and I on Hillcrest Circle vanished from our houses into the forest that ran unbroken all the way

to Battle Park on the edge of campus. We knew individual trees better than particular siblings. Certain rock formations rose up like historical monuments to our own young lives, monuments we didn’t yet need. The briars, the vines, the sprigs of miniature swamps curled over the creeks like uncombed hair, as joyously raggedy as our own little heads. Well into our adolescence, the woods remained our salvation, our refuge, our first and maybe final taste of heaven. We lived best as fort-builders, drainage pipe spelunkers, creek-jumpers, vagabonds in the trees, wild animals with vague memories of a formerly human existence. We didn’t return home until suppertime, where we feigned domestication until free again.

And when we did return home in those early evenings, it was often back into our families’ midcentury-modern houses. In 1954, when James was six, three years before I was born, the Taylors had moved into theirs, originally designed by Raleigh architect George Matsu-moto and finished off by John Latimer after James’s mother got into a wrangle with Matsu-moto. Ten years later, we took up residence in our new midcentury modern, mapped out by Arthur Cogswell, an architect with similar principles, who later renovated the Taylors’ kitchen, which in its new guise looked almost exactly like ours.

There was a handsomely utopian cast to those houses designed and built in the fifties and early sixties—Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese style plunked down together into the Southern wild at the same time the civil rights movement was igniting the region with a burning, belated vision of justice. Just by inhabiting such houses, residents tended to feel different, perhaps a bit superior to past versions of themselves, as if they had chosen to upgrade their taste and sensibilities, and in the process become a new kind of Southerner.

Before they moved to 618 Morgan Creek Road, the Taylors had been renting a farm house outside Carrboro off the Old Greensboro Highway. That was the Old South, land as livelihood, their black neighbor John Hairston sharecropping the surrounding fields, then going home to his own tiny bit of property. In the Taylors’ new “modern” or “contemporary” home (as such dwellings were called then), exteriors and interiors were meant to blend together, to integrate into a higher form of space. Integration was becoming a newfound ideal in multiple realms; borders were meant to dissolve. Landscapes entered the houses, and the houses merged

into the landscapes. The Taylors and my family looked out multiple levels of glass windows into a staged universe of organic delight, a nineteenth-century Romantic’s view of nature in the middle of the twentieth. Windows framed the trees so that they looked like pictures of trees, or slow-motion movies of vegetation wavering in a compassionate breeze. The houses welcomed light as if it were a singular, inarguable virtue, no need to deify with a metaphor.

In the song “Copperline” (“Half a mile down to Morgan Creek, I’m only living for the end of the week”) that he would one day co-write with Reynolds Price, the great North Carolina novelist, Taylor clearly sees undeveloped land with a Thoreauvian vision—as generous and life-enhancing by the very fact of its existence and effect on the spirit. It has an aesthetic and moral worth independent of its financial value as a woodlot, or a developer’s tract. In fact, when Taylor, decades after his childhood, revisits Copperline in the song, he is appalled by the area’s eventual fate: “I tried to go back, as if I could, all spec house and plywood / Tore up, tore up good, down on Copperline.”

But when he was younger and in need, he found necessary balm and healing in the wilderness along his creek, as did many of us beside ours.

When James came home again at Christmas in 1970, Ike and Trudy invited my parents over to Morgan Creek Road for a night of music by the fireplace. There was the possibility of carols. “James has brought a friend with him,” his parents said. “She has a beautiful voice and she plays the dulcimer. We’ll sit and have a little concert.”

Prior to the release of his second album, *Sweet Baby James*, in February, James had been known in Chapel Hill mainly for having been

a member of his older brother Alex’s band, the Fabulous Corsairs, who played for chump change at parties and dances around Chapel Hill—“pimpily white adolescents saying ‘I’m a man,’” as James once put it. By December 1970, however, the twenty-two-year-old Taylor had become a full-fledged star of his own devising, one of the originators of an acoustic, more introspective form of pop. Hits like “Fire and Rain” and “Country Road” may have been gentle enough to be called “soft rock,” but the emotions expressed in the lyrics were





hard, painful, often heartbreaking. Within a year of its release, *Sweet Baby James* would sell 1.6 million copies. The following March, Taylor would appear on the cover of *Time* magazine, exalted in a profile called “The New Rock: Bittersweet and Low,” in which he was said to project “a blend of Heathcliffian inner fire with a melancholy sorrows-of-young-Werther look that can strike to the female heart—at any age.”

My parents were not particularly sensitive to Heathcliffian inner fires. Nor did they care much for long hair, mustaches, melancholy looks, or the disposition of female hearts. They followed popular music only by unfortunate (in their view) chance, when forced to overhear me blasting Sly and the Family Stone or Led Zeppelin or Steppenwolf on my brothers’ little box record player downstairs, or when driving around town half-listening to the car radio as WCHL, the local AM station, broadcast such sickeningly sweet ear candy as “Knock Three Times” by Tony Orlando and Dawn or “We’ve Only Just Begun” by the Carpenters. Popular culture in the early seventies struck my parents like a summer thunderstorm, as an aberration that would soon pass, that might be corrected or ignored, a distressing but only temporary influence on their children.

So on that December night, my parents were likely leaving their own house and going over to their friends’ not to scrutinize or eavesdrop on or stand in the gleaming aura of a pop icon in the making, but for a little seasonal entertainment—no more, no less, as if James had arrived home from his first semester of college at Amherst or Williams for what the Taylors liked to call “kitchen concerts.” Deck the halls with boughs of holly, and load up the living room with drinks. A truth rarely spoken: Christmas carols often sound better with booze.

As deeply in love as I was with blaring guitars, exploding amps, and metallic raving, I’d also been listening to James Taylor’s more intimate style of music since his first album, *James Taylor*, came out in 1969, issued by Apple Records, the Beatles’ label. I owned a prized 45 of the original (and still my favorite) version of “Carolina in My Mind,” the song on which Paul McCartney and George Harrison (“the holy host of others standing ’round”) played bass and sang harmony. “I was homesick when I wrote it,” Taylor has said of the tune that he composed in London. That num-

ber made even us sixth-graders at Glenwood Elementary indulge in a kind of premature nostalgia. Kids we might have been, but we too could hear the “highway call”; we too could see those “geese in flight and dogs that bite.” The lyrics and melody induced in us an aching yet pleasurable homesickness for the place from which we hadn’t yet departed.

“Carolina in My Mind” also gave us Chapel Hillians a little extra swagger. We were proud to be represented by one of our own, singing about our particular pocket of Carolina. For all the town’s inherent contradictions, a supposedly enlightened oasis’s insufficient protection of the rights of its black citizens, for instance, Chapel Hill in those days was nonetheless a beguiling place for its idealistic youth—slightly raffish, a bit cosmopolitan, flailingly progressive, and rhapsodically green. It felt like the best that the South had to offer—as enlightened as those midcentury moderns in which we rinsed ourselves in light. To us, it was high praise (which we repeated with the unseemly pride of pubescent liberals) that Jesse Helms, then a blowhard on WRAL-TV in Raleigh, supposedly suggested building a fence around Chapel Hill to establish the state zoo.

But if “Carolina in My Mind” proved a song with which my friends and I could identify, that made us proud to be Carolinians, it was the lullabies and hymns from *Sweet Baby James* that I needed the most by December 1970. That summer, I had lost my faith in God. It happened on a Saturday afternoon in early June as I was lying in the bathtub at home after a week at basketball camp. I noticed an old scar on my leg, and I thought how that scar was still going to be there when my body was laid out after I died. I foresaw somebody else being able to view the body I would no longer be able to see or touch or feel. There would be no me left to witness anything. In the past, I would have taken comfort from the belief that I would be in heaven, wherever that was, whatever it was, whoever I might still be. That’s the boilerplate theology that even we university town Presbyterians were taught in Sunday school and at summer Bible camp. But for some reason on this Saturday in June, I had the thought that the chances of immortality were slim to none. Heaven struck me as a sudden fiction.

I suffered terribly in the wake of my new mind. Every night that summer I begged the God I was no longer sure existed to make his son Jesus show up on the bedroom wall next

to my Jimi Hendrix poster and restore my faith, and every night I cried myself to sleep when nothing appeared. What I was looking for (besides God), though I didn’t yet know it, what I wanted to hear, though I couldn’t yet imagine it, was a *tone*, a tone in which I could hear myself in the sound of someone else’s voice. I wanted to hear my yearning embodied in another’s breath.

In early August, we were driving to the beach. I had cried in church the week before, unable to believe the promises rendered there. Now some evangelical killjoy was ranting on the radio down east, an orgasmic promise of doom and destruction that seemed to delight him. “Repent, you sinners! Or burn in Hell!” he roared, the broadcast crackling with static as if it were on fire. My parents, in the front seat, shook their heads and switched the station.

Onto a beach radio station came James Taylor, whose parents didn’t go to church, who has said he writes “spirituals for agnostics,” the very antithesis of that hotheaded doom-lover. He was singing “Fire and Rain,” exalting sorrow and failure, not faith and submission. “Won’t you look down on me, Jesus?” Taylor begged in that baritone voice with its tinge of stone-soiled New England. “You’ve got to help me make a stand.” It felt like he was singing his way through his—and my—gospel-levels of suffering. His stance toward Jesus was as desperate and uncertain as my own. And in that instant, in the backseat of my parents’ station wagon, I heard the song afresh. My fellow Chapel Hillian had seen fire and rain. So had I. With the song, he built a melodic bridge between us, and gestured me to meet him halfway. There could be a community of those who suffered, especially if they suffered aloud, unashamedly. That realization was a novel form of grace for me. My spirits, as far down as a coal mine, began to lift. Everything we drove by the rest of the way to Brunswick County—the flat fields of the coastal plain; the redbrick churches by the highway; the slow, dark rivers; the shadowy woods leaning over them—suddenly looked less foreign. The eastern light seemed generous, not harsh. I began the long, slow process of learning how to live again in this new, ancient world.

The late, great African-American painter Jack Whitten wrote in his recently published journals about how his paintings were “objects designed for the spirit to have a place of rest.” James Taylor’s early songs are mirrors of sound in which the soul can hear itself. Those songs helped resurrect me in my season of despair.

When they came home from the Taylors’ that December night, my father probably jazzy with drink, my mother likely wary because of that, I vaguely remember asking: “So how was it? Who was the friend?”

“It was very nice,” my parents said. “What was her name? Joni maybe? Joni somebody? I don’t know. She did have a lovely voice. And she could really play that dulcimer.”

The decades passed quickly after that, as they tend to do, though I couldn’t have imagined that back then. At thirteen, I knew nothing of time’s invisible tyranny, its mind and body-altering speed. My musical tastes changed as well. With the exception of the hauntingly beautiful 1997 album *Hourglass*, I stopped buying James’s records in the mid-seventies, when his music struck me as too glossed with the car-paint shine of California rock. By then, I had found another musical answer to melancholy—punk.

Whereas James’s early songs delivered me by mirroring my sadness (as he told Oprah a few years ago, “music is a release from the isolation of life”), punk blasted me into a stratosphere of redemptive blankness, proffering raw energy as the way past sorrow, anger as transformative, thrash as cleansing. With Patti Smith, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, the Sex Pistols, the Minutemen, and X, sloppiness became a virtue, anger a style, and spitting on the audience a gesture the audience might actually like. And even if an occasional audience member might not personally want to be spit on, he or she might nonetheless regard spit as a sign of authenticity. And authenticity was everything. Better than skill, which was often regarded as superfluous, even counterfeit. Was it not more energizing to mosh around the pit than sit alone in your bedroom, listening to solipsistic folksongs about sweet babies and country roads? Back then, rock critic and punk apologist Lester Bangs explicitly called out James Taylor for “bardic auteur crap,” for being one of the “glory boys of I-rock,” for making music “so relentlessly, involutedly egocentric” that Bangs wanted to throw such singers off a high cliff into the nearest ocean. “If I hear one more Jesus-walking-the-boy-and-girls-down-a-Carolina-path-while-the-dilemma-of-existence-crashes-like-a-slab-of-hod-on-J.T.’s-shoulders song,” he wrote, then he planned to break off “a bottle of Ripple” and twist it into Taylor’s guts “until he expires in a spasm of adenoidal poesy.” Ouch. A little vicious, but I thought I knew what Bangs meant.



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A year or so before my mother died in 2013, a vague and ancient memory of that Christmas gathering popped into my head, though I was coming to think that my recollection may have been apocryphal. I had become suspicious of myself as an inveterate embroiderer, the kind of anecdotalist who might trim the truth from a story the way you’d tear the dead leaves from a head of lettuce. Better story, better salad.

I asked my mother if she remembered going over to the Taylors to hear James and some woman sing one night a long time ago. She laughed. She still lived in Chapel Hill in the same house, more than a decade after my father had died. She was nearly eighty-five. “That sounds about right,” she said.

“So it happened?”

“Well, I think so.”

“Who was his friend?” I asked. “Was it Joni Mitchell?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, still laughing, the kind of laughter that was a cloud, intent on fogging up all factuality, and ending my interrogation.

It did seem like this would have been an anecdotal miracle—my parents hanging out with James and Joni. And not even caring about the richness of that. Not even knowing that in the cultural universe that was forming then, they could have capitalized on such an evening, at least with my generation.

“Do you remember anything about that night?” I asked.

“I’m sure it was very nice,” she said.

She died soon afterward. I came to believe that I had invented the story of the Christmas sing-along because I had a tendency for mythologizing the past, for wanting a history more glittering than reality. I thought of that gathering in the terms of the last line of a John Cheever story: “Then it is dark; it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains.” But maybe it was all bullshit.

A few months ago, in the modern way, I decided to google James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, and Chapel Hill. A website called “Chapel Hill Memories” came up, with a thread revealing that decades ago, David Perlmutter, the esteemed North Carolina journalist and, as it turned out, a Taylor family friend from childhood on, appeared to have gone caroling with James and Joni around the Morgan Creek neighborhood. I found my way to him, and he told me the story of that night. Mythic it

may have been, but it also turns out to be true.

The gathering took place on a bristly cold December night for Chapel Hill. The evening started with a group of carolers, including James and his girlfriend of the moment—yes, it was Joni Mitchell—lighting out from the Taylors’ and rambling through the neighborhood from house to house. Ike went along, too, his voice resonant and booming. It would have been just like my parents to join in such a sing-along. My mother had a beautiful voice, and as my father used to say about singers like himself: If you can’t sing, at least sing loud.

I can imagine the smell of that night, woodsmoke flirting with the December air, the scent of pine and fallen leaves. David was seventeen. His older brother Louis was there, too. So was his friend Isabelle Patterson, whom he had picked up on his motorcycle, much to her dad’s distress. The other Taylor siblings were away, probably up north. As the carolers circled around Morgan Creek, David lip-synched his way through “Silent Night,” in part so that he could listen to James and Joni sing. Why listen to himself when such beautiful voices were ringing out behind his ears? Plus he was Jewish and didn’t know the lyrics.

David had treasured James’s friendship from childhood. When David was seven or eight, he’d been helping a group of older boys build a tree house in the woods near Morgan Creek. When they finished, the boys shooed him away. “This is *our* clubhouse,” they said. He slunk home, head down. James, then thirteen, walking up the road, saw him. “What’s wrong?” he asked. David told him. “Come with me,” James said. They went to the Taylor house, picked up hammers and nails, and proceeded to build David a tree house of his own.

The carolers stopped by the UNC basketball coach Dean Smith’s midcentury modern. He wasn’t quite as exalted in 1970 as he would become, but he was still local royalty. They sang to Dean and his then-wife, Ann. In the years after that, Smith would sometimes drive players he was recruiting through the neighborhood in one of his Carolina-blue Cadillacs. “That’s James Taylor’s house,” he’d tell them. Late in Smith’s career (and well along in Taylor’s), he said that to a recruit, who responded, “Who’s James Taylor?” “He’s a local musician,” Smith said.

When everyone finished caroling, they went back to the Taylors’, gathering upstairs around the fire in the open living room. Nearby stood a Christmas tree that Ike and James

had gone into the woods and cut down. Decades later, Isabelle Patterson would tell David that whenever she hears Joni Mitchell’s song “River” (“It’s coming on Christmas, they’re cutting down trees”), she’s convinced that the song was inspired by that visit. That evening, David plopped down on the floor next to Joni. She struck him as shy but very kind and very beautiful. “Is this your dulcimer?” he asked.

“Yes, would you like to see it?” she said. She took the dulcimer out of the case and talked a little about it. When she did that, James pulled his guitar out and they began to play together, as they had in London at the Paris Theatre earlier that fall in a concert broadcast by the BBC. They performed “A Case of You,” “California,” and “Carey,” from Joni Mitchell’s forthcoming album, the epochal *Blue*, which would be released in the summer of 1971.

James and Joni also played “You’ve Got a Friend,” “Fire and Rain,” and a song-in-progress called “Long Ago and Far Away.” David had already been privileged to hear perhaps the first finished version of “Fire and Rain,” which Taylor completed in Chapel Hill after returning from London. He and James’s youngest brother, Hugh, had been hanging out at the Taylors’ when James asked if they wanted to hear a new song. They listened. “Yeah, I think that’ll be a hit,” David told him. That night, when the gathering finally came to a close and the guests got up to leave, James stood up and sang them off with his version of “Happy Trails,” originally performed by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. The guests sang along, my parents included, as they disappeared into the night and the rest of their lives.

*Some trails are happy ones,  
Others are blue.  
It’s the way you ride the trail that counts,  
Here’s a happy one for you.  
Happy trails to you,  
Until we meet again.*

Taylor once told the *Washington Post* that “music suggests an order to the universe that sort of precedes human consciousness,” as if music is where we come from and where we shall return. I am reminded of the Commendation from the Book of Common Prayer, poetry even for us doubters: “All of us go down to dust, but even at the grave we make our song.” When we meet again, if we meet again, we meet in music. Fire and rain and happy trails. 🐾

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