

Echoes in the Chapel

by Kate Coghlan

Choir practice is held in the music hall at 10am on Tuesdays. I take the lift down to the cuboid room on Level -3 with my friends. For events, projectors pattern the walls; rippling green for our 'Concert by the Cam' and dappled stained glass for our 'Chapel Concert'. As we file in today, the Music Director says she's arranged a backdrop of pulsing Northern Lights for our upcoming Christmas performance. My friends chatter excitedly. I try not to roll my eyes.

My parents met inside Jesus College Chapel nearly 30 years ago, singing in the choir. It was the year that the kitchens were built underground and celebrated for their 'Green Innovation'. In later years, the move underground was quieter. I was ten years old when my parents died in the Long Storms. After losing them, I treasured every photograph, video and musical recording from their time here and decided to follow in their footsteps. Their carol concerts were lit by the flickering glow of candlelight, their faces turned towards each other as they sang. Photos show them playing frisbee on the sports fields, posing by the horse statue in First Court on graduation day. Now the horse is displayed in a box in the archives room on Level -6, the lowest level, for maximum safety. The Cam has consumed Jesus Green and the sports fields and gnaws restlessly at the protective wall around the surviving overland buildings. The site stands grey and ragged like an old heron watching over the flooded fenlands.

The rehearsal begins and our rendition of "Oh come, all ye faithful" is note-perfect, but my heart aches because nothing can drown out the background whirr of the air-conditioning units. This song was special to my parents because they

sang it when they first met; it's important that we get it right, but it sounds all wrong. The concrete walls deflect our voices and bounce them back unchanged, a mirror image with no added value. My collection of recordings has taught me what we should sound like. Our voices should be rich and deep, our notes should be softened by cushioned pews and ancient porous beams.

As we pack away the music stands, I hover near the Music Director trying to think of a new way to ask my usual question, but she pre-empts me. 'I'm sorry, Venice. The answer's still no. The structure is too weak. We need to respect the Chapel's history, preserve it for future generations.' I look at my feet and nod, clench my jaw, afraid of saying something I'll regret. I flee from the room, ignoring my friends' concerned faces. I've tried to explain to them why it means so much to me. I wish I'd had more time with my parents, I wish I could feel what they felt here. My friends are ignorant; they accept their underground lives as blindly as moles.

My parents named me Venice after the lost city, to pay respect to history. Honouring the past is important, it's what led me here rather than joining my school mates at one of the popular, high-ground universities like Birmingham, Glasgow or Keele. I'd have followed my dad into music, but that's no longer sponsored. Funding's limited to the areas of preservation, adaption to life on Earth, and exploration of life beyond it.

Back in the lift, I decide to miss the next lesson, and the one after that. What's the point of studying how to preserve buildings for them to stand empty and unused? The Chapel's been in use since 1515. Five centuries of theologians and singers would turn in their graves if they saw its desolation now. I could return to

my pod on Level -4, but the thought of the peachy 'sunrise' lighting is depressing. I long for dull winter light. I press the button for Level 0.

The canteen is empty and the fire door to Pump Court opens without a sound. I've not been outside for weeks; we limit exposure during winter, when the worst storms come. I gulp at the air, tasting grass, dirt and burnt sugar. My arms prickle with goosebumps, and my shoes soak up puddles as I run towards the Chapel Tower. Close up I see that its lower brickwork is eroded from below like a sandcastle at high tide. I've never been inside. I reach the gateway and slow down, expecting to find Porters blocking my path, a gate with a padlock or laser-activated alarms. There are no obstacles, only a laminated 'Do not enter' poster adorned with the college crest. I lean on the pockmarked wooden door as I turn the iron doorknob, then let out a cry as it shunts open, and I tumble inside.

The scent is different in here, a yeasty archives aroma. The nave is dark, except for chinks where the sky leaks in through gaps in the roof and illuminates the dust. A few original wooden panels still cling to the walls, bases stained grey with water damage. I pass the tower crossing and enter the inner Chapel, heading towards a long lancet window above the altar, now empty of glass. Most of the choir stalls remain, and I slip into the first one. My heart beats loudly, happily. This is where my parents met, where they sang together. The child choristers sometimes joined them. I think of them lined up in their white robes, on their best behaviour.

I stand up, inhale deeply as if to sing, then hesitate... What if someone hears me singing? What's the punishment for trespassing and disobeying? It's the College I fear rather than God because I feel sure that God would want me here. My eyes search for a sign and fall upon the finial carving of a cockerel on the end

of my stall, the same as the one on the college crest. I cup its round belly in the palm of my hand and wonder how many others have done the same.

I leave the stall and stand at the entrance to the inner Chapel. An engraved oak screen once divided it from the tower crossing. This area is bigger. It's where the choir sang at special services, to be closer to the pews in the nave. I crane my neck to see the arcaded gallery above. Its arches once supported the tower roof, but now reach emptily to the sky like fingers spread apart and touching only at the tips, 'Here's the church, and here's the steeple'.

A scuffle comes from the stalls behind me. The stone tiles creak as if under the weight of a large audience. I breathe in again, imagine the opening organ chords, and then I sing. My parents' favourite carol was "Oh come, all ye faithful," so that's how I start. At choir we sing the repeated trios at the end of each verse quietly, increasing in volume until the third line but I can't bear to lower my voice now that I'm finally inside the Chapel. Instead, I sing every line as loudly as possible, enjoying the echoes in the vaulted space, making the place mine, singing myself into its history.

I've never sung so loudly. I sing so loudly that the floor quakes beneath my feet. The imagined choir behind me raise their voices too, until they merge with mine to soar upwards and sweep through the stone arches with the birds. A low creak under my feet draws my attention back to ground-level. I spread my legs wider for stability, as I watch a crack spread across the tiles then creep up the bricks of the wall opposite. The crack grows into more cracks, like branches from a trunk, then twigs from those branches. For a moment, the wall bears the tattoo of a whole tree, before bricks start to tumble, one by one and then surrendering in clusters.

My legs start to tremble. I brace them to stand. The walls crumble inwards. I know I should stop singing and run, but hot fear roots me to the spot. My voice shakes, my lines fragmented by gulps and pauses. I only stop singing when clouds of dust fill my throat and make me cough. I crouch low and look for the exit. The door is already half-buried in rubble. I'm edging closer when something hits the back of my head, and I fall. When I open my eyes, I see that my leg is trapped under a wooden beam, bent at an unnatural angle. It should hurt but when I poke it with a finger, I feel nothing. I shout out, 'Help! I'm stuck!' then I wait. I shout and wait.

I'm horrified by the damage I've caused, terrified of the repercussions. Mixed in with those feelings though, is a new sense of peace. As I watch the sky turn from coral to navy through gaps in the wreckage, the words looping in my head are 'joyful and triumphant'.