

SPARROW AT STARBUCKS

It was chilly in Manhattan but warm inside the Starbucks shop on 51st Street and Broadway, just a skip up from Times Square. For a musician, it's the most lucrative Starbucks location in the world, I'm told, and consequently, the tips can be substantial if you play your tunes right.

I was playing keyboard and singing backup for my friend, who also added rhythm with an arsenal of percussion instruments. During our emotional rendition of "If You Don't Know Me by Now," I noticed a lady sitting in one of the lounge chairs across from me. She was swaying to the beat and singing along.

After the tune was over, she approached me. "I apologize for singing along on that song. Did it bother you?" she asked.

"No," I replied. "We love it when the audience joins in. Would you like to sing up front on the next selection?"

To my delight, she accepted my invitation. "You choose," I said. "What are you in the mood to sing?"

"Well ... do you know any hymns?"

Hymns? This woman didn't know who she was dealing with. I cut my teeth on hymns. Before I was even born, I was going to church. I gave our guest singer a knowing look. "Name one."

"Oh, I don't know. There are so many good ones. You pick one."

"Okay," I replied. "How about 'His Eye Is on the Sparrow'?"

My new friend was silent, her eyes averted. Then she fixed her eyes on mine again and said, "Yeah. Let's do that one."

She slowly nodded her head, put down her purse, straightened her jacket and faced the center of the shop. With my two-bar setup, she began to sing.

Why should I be discouraged?

Why should the shadows come?

The audience of coffee drinkers was transfixed.

I sing because I'm happy;

I sing because I'm free.

For His eye is on the sparrow

And I know He watches me.

When the last note was sung, the applause crescendoed to a deafening roar. Embarrassed, the woman tried to shout over the din, "Oh, y'all go back to your coffee! I didn't come in here to do a concert! I just came in here to get somethin' to drink, just like you!"

But the ovation continued. I embraced my new friend. "You, my dear, have made my whole year! That was beautiful!"

"It's funny that you picked that particular hymn," she said.

"Why is that?"

She hesitated again, "That was my daughter's favorite song." She grabbed my hands. By this time, the applause had subsided and it was business as usual. "She was 16. She died of a brain tumor last week."

I said the first thing that found its way through my silence. "Are you going to be okay?"

She smiled through tear-filled eyes and squeezed my hands. "I'm gonna be okay. I've just got to keep trusting the Lord and singing His songs, and everything's gonna be just fine."

She picked up her bag, gave me her card, and then she was gone.

Was it just a coincidence that we happened to be singing in that particular coffee shop on that particular November night? Coincidence that this wonderful lady just happened to walk into that particular shop? Coincidence that of all the hymns to choose from, I just happened to pick the very hymn that was the favorite of her daughter, who had died just the week before?

I refuse to believe it.

God has been arranging encounters in human history since the beginning of time, and it's no stretch for me to imagine that He could reach into a coffee shop in midtown Manhattan and turn an ordinary gig into a revival. It was a great reminder that if we keep trusting Him and singing His songs, everything's gonna be okay.