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**Dante Finds a Second “Eternal” Home
inside a Harry Chapin “Rooming House”**

In “Stranger With the Melody,” Harry Chapin tells the story of a young boy who is spending his first night in a rooming house. The boy is comforted and annoyed by the sound of an old man singing the same “nonsense” song over and over again. When he has finally had enough and would really just like to go to sleep, the boy confronts the man and asks him why he is singing. The man explains that he was once a famous musician and that he sings not to “remember,” but “to forget.”

I think that Dante could benefit from hearing this song. One of the main themes of the song is how important it is to use our actions to support our names, instead of always relying on our names to support ourselves. Dante is told several times in *Purgatorio* that someone’s name or position in life is not important in the afterlife, but he still has trouble internalizing this message and fully accepting its validity. When the old man in the song first introduces himself, he mentions that people use to pay him to play songs, but he does not tell the listener his name. He states his profession as a fact, unlike most celebrities who would spend a long time basking in the glory of fame. It is only at the end of the song that the listener says, “You sound like what’s-his-name,” and the old man replies “That’s who I am/But you can’t wrap a name around you.” Even when the boy realizes who the old man is, Chapin does reveal the man’s name, only calling him “what’s-his-name.” The man’s name is unimportant, and by not offering it, Chapin is highlighting that the man’s name does not change his message or the way the listener should view him. The man offers the

boy sage advice that Dante could use when he says that “you can’t wrap a name around you.” This conjures the image of a name being used as a cloak, something to shroud and protect the wearer from the world. The cloak, however, should not be mistaken for the wearer. We should all be proud of our names and who we are, but we cannot wrap our whole identities around them. Names allow us to identify each other, and when we hear another person’s name, we are usually confronted by some sort of knowledge about their reputation. However, we cannot allow our names to be the most important thing about us. If the only information we give people is our reputation, then we never really allow people to see who we actually are. The problem is that it is far easier to only show one carefully curated part of ourselves to the world instead of opening up and truly revealing every part of ourselves.

The words in Chapin’s song could also help Dante because the man’s song shows how important it is not to live a life filled with regrets. The old man sings his song over and over again because he is not sure what else to do. It is clear that he is “drown[ing]” in sorrow and music is the only thing that allows him to keep his pain at bay. What he is not doing, however, is actually processing his pain. At one point, the man says, “All I could do was play,” which shows that he is not able to effectively articulate his feelings. Playing music is the only coping mechanism he has, but without the words that his partner provided, he has no way of actually processing his feelings. Instead, he has become a hermit, singing in a dingy boarding house late at night to keep the darkness at bay. Had he been able to articulate and process his feelings in a productive way, he would likely be in a very different place in life. Dante could benefit from hearing the man’s struggle because it emphasizes how important it is to process our emotions. If instead, we bottle them up with

no proper outlet for them, we become a broken record, unable to focus on anything but our pain but without a way to lessen that pain. Dante needs this reminder because while he seems to grasp the importance of the work he must do in Purgatory and Paradise, he still struggles to truly internalize, understand, and then adapt his behavior based on the messages he is shown. This song could serve as a form of motivation, assuring him that he is on the correct path and that if he learns how to process his feelings, his life will improve.

While Dante could benefit from hearing this song, the most important message is that everyone can benefit from Chapin's music. The experiences of his characters are universal and they speak to any and every listener. In this age of social media, teenagers especially can become incredibly distracted by our online personas. We carefully sculpt them, presenting what we think is the "perfect" image of ourselves to the world. We wrap this one tiny part of our identities around ourselves, failing to actually connect with other people in a meaningful way and often we even begin to mistake our profiles for our own identities. Chapin also reminds us how important it is to process our feelings. As a teenager, adulthood and especially old age can feel very far away, but the song is a reminder that if we do not live our lives to the fullest now, processing our emotions along the way, we too could become the old man "singing to forget" what our lives have become.

"Stranger with the Melody" by Harry Chapin

It was my first night in that rooming house / In the last room down the hall / I heard a
hoarse voice and an old guitar / Coming through the paper thin walls / A crazy nonsense
nursery rhyme / That did not mean a thing / But for the first of what was to be a thousand
times / This is what I hear him sing / Hold that D chord on the old guitar / 'Til I found the

G / Drop it down to old E minor / 'Til the A chord rolls back home around to D / I had to lay there listening / It seemed he was in the room / This stranger with his melody Singing there in the gloom / And he repeated it over and over again / Such a soft and sinkin' sound / It was kind of like a music box / That was slowly winding down / You see, he sang it, he hummed it / Whistled it, and he strummed it / He laughed it and he cried it / He did everything but hide it / And he sang Hold that D chord on the old guitar / 'Til I found the G / Drop it down to old E minor / 'Til the A chord rolls back home around for me / So I lay there in that lumpy bed / Countin' choruses instead of sheep / 'Til I banged on the wall and out I called / "Hey bub, I need some sleep" / The sudden void of silence, then I heard that hoarse voice say / "It weren't so long ago, boy / They paid me to play" / I said, "It's kind of late for music, sir / Two hours 'til it's daylight" / He answered, "I need my music most in these dark hours of the night / You see I've tried gettin' high on something, son / But it only brings me down / Staying dry don't work out better, boy / 'Cause my eyes get wet and I drown / Won't you please let me continue and I'll be in your debt? / You see I'm not singing to remember, son, I'm just singing to forget" / And he sang / Hold that D chord on the old guitar / 'Til I found the G / Drop it down to old E minor / 'Til the A chord rolls back home around for me / That's when I said "If I'm supposed to listen to you, sir / Just one quick question then / Why in the hell do you sing one song over and over again?" / And this is what he said / He said, "I gave her the music, son / She gave me the words / Together we'd write the kind of songs / The angels must have heard / Of course we'd fight like cats and dogs / But life ain't no rosebud dream / Still whatever we'd do everybody knew / We truly were a team / I can't remember now if I done her wrong / Or if she done wrong to me / But all I know that when I let her

go / That it did not set me free" / That's when I said, "You sound like what's-his-name"/
He said, "That's who I am / But you can't wrap a name around you, boy / 'Cause it really
don't mean a damn" / "You see, a song don't have much meaning When it don't have
nothing to say / What she could do was magic, son / All I could do was play" / He started
singing again That's when I drifted off / Maybe I dreamed what I heard / 'Bout this
stranger with his melody / Who'd gone and lost the words / Hold that D chord on the old
guitar / 'Til I found the G / Drop it down to old E minor / 'Til the A chord rolls back home
around to D.