# The Inner Song

Kate had been quietly listening to the inner song that was playing in Freda’s heart and mind. For the last few months she had been visiting Freda in her flat, which now showed signs of neglect and abandonment. Once house-proud, she would never have let the cobwebs string their way from the light fitting to the picture rail, and the curtains would have been pulled back to let in as much light as possible. Her confidence was seeping away, it was as if she had drawn the curtains in her mind and inside the house an unheard story was being enacted.

Kate enjoyed hearing stories of Freda’s past. Recently subdued and depressed it had been hard work coaxing her to communicate, any mention of activity met with a negative response. Her idea of getting her to a reminiscence group had become a distant dream. Never one to give in easily, Kate would occasionally mention the group that met in the Black Cat Café and what lovely cakes they had there. Freda’s sweet tooth competed with her fear of the future and the dread of the past.

It was a spring day when Freda agreed to go with Kate. ‘Just to have a look at the cakes.’ They set off making their way in the gentle sunshine, Freda’s stick tappity-tapping on the pavement. The café was only a short walk away. Outside it didn’t look much, but inside it was clean and the food was good.

Barry and Audrey were regulars who had commandeered the sofa, and Ted was at the counter trying to decide which cake to have. Kate motioned to Freda to pull up a chair and said she would order the drinks and cakes. ‘Have a look at the menu and let me know what you fancy - the hot chocolate with marshmallows is superb.’ Raising her voice barely above a whisper Freda asked for a hot chocolate and an éclair.

The café bell rang as another customer came in. ‘Hi John’ called Audrey, ‘good to see you again. How’s your knee after the op?’ John leant heavily on his stick, ‘Fine I’m doing fine, it’s good to get out again.’ He made his way over to the armchair next to the sofa, and motioned to Stan the owner, ‘Cup of the usual, Stan, and a bacon buttie.’

Kate returned to the table and, as she handed her the éclair, she introduced Freda to the group. Freda liked the café, it was warm and homely, more pleasant than she had expected. She and Kate sat a little away from the group that was now forming, close enough to hear their conversations but keeping their distance. Ted had finally settled on a vanilla slice and joined the others, lowering his bulky frame into a vacant chair.

Barry decided to get the ball rolling and asked if anyone would like to share about their childhood. Audrey said had learnt to knit when she was four and had built on the skill all her life. She nodded in the direction of Barry, who was modelling her latest hand-knitted creation - a Fairisle pullover. Acknowledging her skill, he launched into his boyhood love of cricket. ‘I played in the village cricket team using my Dad’s bat which was almost as big as I was. The pitch seemed so big then, and I dreamed of scoring a hundred, but I never made more than seven runs before I got bowled out.’

Ted joined in ‘The teas were the best bit of our cricket matches.’ If you asked Ted what his hobby was he would have to admit it was eating, and by the look of him he had been practising all his life. His mind went back to the halcyon days when he would pray for bad light or rain to stop play, so he could go to the clubhouse and tuck into the amazing array of sandwiches and cakes. ‘First there were the sandwiches to enjoy - the sausage ones were best, then the ham and tomato, egg and cress, cheese and pickle.’ Ted’s eyes glowed and he was smacking his lips as he continued. ‘There were scones and jam, marble cake, and Mrs Pickle’s Victoria sponges which were about a foot high and oozing with jam and cream.’

He had brought a selection of sweets from Grace’s Olde Sweet Shop in town with him. He had been a customer for 60 years and whatever else he had lost – hair, hearing - his sweet tooth remained intact. He offered the paper bag around the group, leaning towards Kate and Freda and included them in his act of generosity.

Barry then was reminded of buying sweets when he was a boy ‘When I was a lad I used to walk from our cottage to the nearest shop which was half a mile away but it was always worth it. I’d worked up an appetite by the time I got there gripping my sixpenny piece tightly in my fist and spending it ten times over in my mind. ‘The Suffolk village where we lived was very remote, with just one weekly bus to Norwich on a Friday morning. On a Sunday afternoon a car. A would hoot its horn and we would rush out from our cottage, almost dehingeing the gate in our impatience. In the boot were the Sunday papers and comics and boxes of confectionary. We jostled with the neighbours and then went back to relax and enjoy our purchases. Reading the Beano and sucking everlasting toffees in the drowsy summer sunshine, life seemed perfect then.’

‘But it wasn’t,’ interjected Audrey ‘I remember you complaining about the outside lavvy it smelt in summer and you froze in the winter.’

Freda tilted her body towards the group, edging slightly closer, but with her arms tightly folded across her chest, not wanting to be included but fearful of missing out on something.

John shifted his leg to alleviate the pain. ‘My Mother was a wonderful singer, she sang in the church choir on a Sunday, and in a choral society on a Wednesday night. I used to love hearing her practice’ He paused to change position again, ‘Sadly I didn’t inherit her singing voice, but I did get her good looks!’

Laughter rippled around the room. Freda smiled and Kate was pleased to see her respond. Audrey then said ‘When I was a young girl we lived near the seaside, at Leigh-on-Sea. It was lovely we used to play on the mounds of cockle shells, and when the tide was out we would run across the mud to paddle in a tiny little river called the Ray’

Freda envisioned the scene, and the smell of ozone was almost tangible. In her mind she could hear her mother and aunt singing ‘I do love to be beside the seaside’, their skirts tucked into the legs of their bloomers as they paddled in the sea, giggling, forgetting how starved of pleasure their day- to-day lives had become. ‘Well Kate, would you or your friend like to share anything?’ Barry was keen to give Freda an opportunity to share if she wanted to. Kate was unsure whether Freda would rise to the occasion and there was no pressure to take part. Freda kept quiet, so she launched into sharing some of her own memories. ‘I travelled between my estranged parents and their various partners. Mum lived in rural Berkshire and my Dad lived in the East End of London. Dad was best taking us to the museums and art galleries. I didn’t fit into the horsey scene in Berkshire. I had no desire to ride, and mucking out would have been my worst nightmare. I retreated into a world of books. That’s why I became a librarian, books were my best friends.’

Freda’s own childhood had been filled with love, despite living from hand to mouth. Without thinking she suddenly said, ‘One day my dad took my brother Bill and me to Petticoat Lane and we went to Kossoff’s bakery and we bought jam doughnuts and the jam oozed out when I bit into it and trickled down onto my leg.’

Ted looked up at the mention of doughnuts. ‘My grandfather bought me a doughnut for breakfast once, I never forgot his kindness.’ The conversations then continued along the subject of food until Barry called a halt and asked for suggestions for next week’s themes. A few ideas were made including, ‘Games we used to Play’ from Audrey, ‘Old Films’ by John, ‘School Dinners’ from Ted, but it was decided that everyone would bring a photo from their past and use that as a visual prompt.

Freda felt so much better that when she came to go, her mood had lifted and she was already turning over in her mind what photograph to bring next week.