

All the Way Home

A sad little story of hope

Peter Holdroyd

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By Peter Holdroyd

I was comfortable in the yard. It had once been a back garden, but the house to which it was attached had become derelict following a fire. A couple of overblown Buddleias kept the wind off and hid me from any casual observer – not that many casual observers drifted into this corner of town unless they were lost – or Social Workers like Mrs Birkin, looking for people like me, trying to persuade us to go back home. Naah! Not for me. I prefer the outdoors – in summer anyway. The last time she came round, she made her usual vain effort. Before she went, she left me a copy of the local newspaper.

It was on page five that I saw it: a report that my parents had both been killed in a car accident. There were photos of them. There was another photo: this one of my little sister, who was to be taken into care. It occurred to me that there'd be a Mrs Birkin back home, sticking her nose in. I wondered how Carrie'd cope by herself: I'd done it, but I'm a bloke, ain't I. She's a dozy little thing – grinning, cheeky, not bad looking, but dozy. At least she was.

Actually, I thought, she did have someone: me. Mind you, I ain't no use to her. Besides, would I want a kid sister to look after? And would she want me?

I folded the newspaper and shoved it well down in the rucksack I carried with me. It was still a bit early, but I thought I'd wonder down the city and pick my spot in the pedestrianised bit, where later, I'd expect the punters to chuck their small change in my guitar case.

My favourite pitch was a bench just opposite a coffee shop – one of those new, trendy sort of places that does mocha and café latte and so on, along with fresh sandwiches and pastries. The reason it's my favourite is Susan. She owns the place. She's about ten years older than me, around thirty, I'd guess, and I must be her 'community project'. Two or three times a day, a mug of coffee arrives and usually, there's either a sandwich or a Danish pastry with it. I think she'd give me more, if I asked, but, hey! who wants to kill the golden goose? My grandad used to tell me the story of the bloke in the pub everybody thought was stupid, 'cause if you offered him a sixpence and a penny, he always took the penny, 'cause it was bigger. Grandad still remembered old money. That bloke would walk out of the pub with 'is pockets weighed down. If he'd taken the sixpence, of course, they'd have soon stopped offering.

I unpacked my guitar. It's a Yamaha, that my Aunt and Uncle gave me the Christmas before I left home. By then, the rows and bickering that went on between the parents when they thought I wasn't listening was getting unbearable and I couldn't see any way to stop them. They seemed suddenly to have begun hating each other. I think they only stayed together for Carrie's sake. Cowardly, I left home and found peace here. But the punters

are fairly generous and here was Susan with a mug of coffee and a sandwich.

‘Hello, Rob, I brought you some breakfast.’

‘Thanks.’ I took them, set the mug down beside me and tucked in to the sandwich. It was chicken, and delicious.

‘What will you be entertaining us with today?’ she asked, sitting beside me on the bench.

I don’t normally chat to people, but I owed Susan something for the food. ‘Well, how do you fancy *Pavane pour une Infante Défunte*? In the Julian Bream interpretation, o’ course.’

She grinned. ‘That’ll please the intelligentsia: what about the hoi polloi?’

‘Let’s see, *Cavatina*, à la John Williams and *Concierto de Aranjuez*. They seem to go down well.’

‘I like them.’

So did I. Carrie used to like me to play *Cavatina*. I finished the sandwich and the coffee and Susan took the plate and mug back into the shop. The early birds were beginning to appear. They ain’t the best prospects, truth be told, ’cause they’re all in a hurry, but you gotta try. Tourists are best.

I let my fingers work idly over the strings, my left hand finding the chords automatically and suddenly I was playing *Cavatina* again and thinking of Carrie. By the time I’d wound my way through the final cadenza, my eyes were filled with tears. The thought of her in a home, or fostered, alone, was upsetting. I wiped my face on my sleeve and realised I’d attracted a small crowd – there must be something about a man in tears that’s more fascinating than rushing to join the rat race. Anyway, I’m not complaining – there was paper money landing in my guitar case and as soon as I decently could, I picked it up before it blew away, or got nicked.

I decided to see if I was on a roll and began to pluck the first notes of the *Concierto*. I looked up and there was Mrs Birkin.

‘Morning, Robin,’ she said.

‘Hello,’ I said, hoping she’d go away.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing.’

‘From where I’ve been standing these last five minutes, it’s more than nothing. It can’t hurt to tell me, you know. I’m not your enemy.’

She sat on the bench. I haven’t told you much about Mrs Birkin, ’cause I don’t like her. She’s middle-aged, short brown hair, permed, and a puddin’ face. She’s as broad as she is tall, nearly, and she’s got these huge cushiony tits that fill the front of her cream polyester blouse – very maternal she looks, to go with a very maternal nature. She’s so nice to young people, I’d guess she never had kids of her own, ’cause they’d have driven her mad, like it did my parents.

She sat quiet, waiting for me to say something. It wound me up, the silence. Eventually, I said, ‘It’s just that my sister might be on her own now. I don’t know how she’ll cope.’

‘How long ago since you saw her? And where are your parents?’

‘About three years. She’s just a little girl.’

‘And your parents?’ she prompted.

An unbidden tear oozed down my cheek. ‘They’re dead,’ I snuffled.

Mrs Birkin slowly moved one hand to her face. ‘When?’ she asked.

I pulled the newspaper from my rucksack and pointed to the article, taking the opportunity to wipe my face on the other sleeve. She read it, then handed it back. She couldn’t resist taking my hand and squeezing it between hers. I wish she’d stop it. I can’t stand being touched. She stood up.

‘I’ll see you later,’ she said and to my surprise, walked away without a backward glance. I pulled myself together and started on Rodriguez’ masterpiece one more time.

Around mid afternoon, after a couple more of Susan’s coffees and cakes, I was entertaining a fine crowd with tunes by Gershwin and Bernstein, when I glanced up. The dumpy shape of Mrs Birkin caught my eye, but my gaze was drawn to the girl standing next to her. It was Carrie.

I stopped playing, mid tune and stared at her. She’d been twelve and gawky when I left. While I’d been away, she’d changed into a young woman, with breasts and all. The hair was still fair, but only shoulder-length now. She was wearing school uniform and fashionable shoes. I put the guitar down and stood up. The crowd moved back, but watched intently. Carrie grinned suddenly and her face lit up. She stepped up to me, right inside my personal space.

‘Hello, Robbie. Do you remember your sister?’

I couldn’t help myself; I put my arms round her and pulled her close. She fitted herself against me and put both arms around my neck. The crowd aahed.

‘Oh, Carrie!’ I murmured.

‘We didn’t know where you were,’ she said.

‘What’s happened to you since Mum and Dad...?’

‘I’ve been looked after by foster parents.’

‘That must be terrible. I should have come home.’

‘It’s not terrible. They’re very nice people. But I wish you *had* come home.’

‘I’m sorry. I only just found out...’

‘Well, you can come home now, can’t you?’

I broke our contact.

Mrs Birkin said, ‘If you go back home, Robin, Carrie can go back home, too.’

I stared at her. I had left home because of my parents, but there was nothing to stay away from, now.

‘You’re old enough to be responsible for her. If you want to be, of course,’ she added.

‘I haven’t a job. I’ve nothing.’ I gripped my hands together, anguished. ‘I can’t!’

Mrs Birkin enfolded my hands in hers. ‘You can, you know. I’ll help you. There will be problems, but we can overcome them. Now, why don’t you pack up and I’ll take you both home.’

I thought about it. I remembered being a kid and the comfort of a bed – the Buddleias were okay, but your own bed has its attractions. I thought of my little sister: the idea of her being with foster parents, no matter how ‘nice’ they were, convinced me.

I was needed. And it was a lovely feeling. It stayed with me all the way home.