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The Lesson

by Sue Hitchcock

The note she gave me with her address also said, ‘come at 4.30 on Tuesday. Do not be early! Do not be late! Just ring the bell and wait!’

The address was in Drury Lane, not a hundred yards from the Royal Opera House, how grand! The door was between a barber’s shop and a fashion wholesaler, the sort of place where shop owners would go to order two of each size and colour of a particular style. There were a couple of dresses displayed, but the window was not arranged to attract a passing shopper.

I rang the bell and waited – and waited, and waited. Finally the door opened and Alison ushered out a young man and beckoned me in. She led me along a dark passage and up three flights of uncarpeted, wooden stairs, with doors on each landing. At the very top was her pied a terre, for surely this couldn’t be the home of a lady of such grandeur. Alison was an opera singer and played the diva, when she came to star in our choir’s concerts. I don’t think she ever sang in Wagner operas, but she was large and intimidating enough. She had kindly offered to take on a few members of the choir as students and I had quickly asked to be one. Of course I had to pay and no doubt extra cash came in handy for her.

Her attic flat was cosy in a cramped way, consisting of two rooms, a bedroom, curtained off from the sitting room, which only had one chair. It had a piano and a cabinet of music. Its one window looked out over the rooftops. The toilet was on the landing below, and was shared with other tenants.

Despite being older than Alison, I was very much in awe of her, and she did nothing to make me feel at ease.

“You can borrow my Vaccai, but please get your own copy.”

Vaccari was the Italian composer of a vocal practice book, which trains the ear in pitching the voice in tune and getting an even transition between the notes. We began at the beginning. The only relief to the repetitions was arm stretches, deep breathing, when she would lean on my ribs to make me push back and on one occasion, scented joss sticks to enhance deeper breaths.

Did I take lessons for six months? I don't remember now, but we became friends in a marginal way. We shared an interest in Alma Mahler and I gave her some of her songs I had discovered, which she performed.

When I changed to a smaller, more erudite choir, another teacher was recommended, and the difference was huge. I could have fallen in love with Bridget, and I developed a voice, which had never manifested itself before.