Song for my FATHER

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PART ONE

FEBRUARY 1951

TED SAT AT the piano, half playing, half conducting, his long thin wrists protruding from his air force battledress blouse. A dull afternoon light filtered through the high metal windows and the men huddled around the piano as if it would take away the chill. He signalled the end of the last note. 'Lovely, lads. Really lovely. Coming on ever so well. Same time next week, and we'll run through the Vaughan-Williams, so have a look at it if you can in the meantime.'

'Thanks Ted, see you next week.' As the nine men filed out of the hall, the lights came on. Ted looked up and saw Frank Bassett walking towards him, uniform immaculate as always, his boots reflecting the yellow lamplight.

'Very nice, Ted. I never realised we had such talent here.' Ted didn't know Frank well. He'd come to the station about a year ago from somewhere up north. They would occasionally meet in the sergeants' mess but Frank wasn't Ted's type. He was a bit of a show-off, a great one for a dirty joke, everyone's best friend. What on earth did he want? 'Are you thinking of joining us? I didn't know you could sing.'

'Don't look so worried, Ted. Tone deaf. Not a chance. But it is your musical help I'm after. It's my boy, you see.' Frank handed him a piece of folded newspaper. It was an advertisement: *Choral Scholarships – St Christopher's College Choir School, Cambridge*. 'I want to put him up for this. First-rate education. All paid for.'

Ted handed the cutting back. 'Can he sing?'

'That's why I'm talking to you. His schoolteacher told Sheila it were the one thing he were good at, but I don't know anything about music. I thought maybe you could try him out. See if he's up to it.' He took some duplicated sheets out of a buff envelope and gave them to Ted. There was an application form

and a description of what was required for an audition. Scales, aural tests, performance of *O Rest In The Lord*, 'plus piece of applicant's own choice'.

'I'm not sure if I'm the right person. I'm only an amateur. This,' he waved towards where the choir had stood, 'is only a bit of fun. Applicants for St Christopher's need professional singing teachers I should think. I'd be out of my depth.'

'You're doing yourself down, Ted. I've talked to some of the blokes in the choir and they reckon you know what you're at. That's why I'm asking for your help. Anyway, you know I couldn't afford to get a professional teacher on a sergeant's wages.' Frank checked himself. 'Not that I'm asking you to do it on the cheap – don't worry I'll see you all right – it's just that I'd like your opinion, and maybe your help, as a friend.'

Ted didn't want to get involved but could see that it was going to be hard to say no. 'I still don't think I'm the right person but I suppose if you brought the boy around some time I could listen to him and see if he's worth getting some professional help for.'

'I knew you'd be the right man to talk to. That's capital. When would be a good time?'

Frank brought the boy to the hall after the following week's choir rehearsal. 'This is Geoffrey. Say hello to Sergeant Cunningham.'

The boy looked at the floor and mumbled, 'Hello, Sergeant Cunningham,' in a squeaky monotone.

'Hello, Geoffrey.' Ted tried to put some warmth into his voice. There was no response in the boy's expression, but maybe this was normal. He had no nieces or nephews and didn't know much about children.

'He's a bit shy. Might be best if I left you to it. Get to know each other, you know. Shall I come back in half an hour? I'll be in the mess if you need me.' And, over his shoulder on the way out, 'Behave yourself, Geoff.'

Ted looked at him properly. He did seem very small. And

thin – a sharp chin, fingers peeping out from the sleeves of his oversize blazer, stick-like legs appearing from billowing grey shorts.

'How old are you, Geoffrey?'

'Nearly eight.'

'Your dad says you like singing. Would you like to sing something for me?'

The boy stared at him blankly.

'What about a nursery rhyme, or a hymn, maybe? Your dad said you sing at school.'

'We sing hymns at assembly and then after that they sometimes play us the wireless and we sing along with it.'

'*Singing Together* on the Home Service?'

'I don't know.'

'Why don't I play something, and then, if you know it, you can just sing along a bit?'

Geoff nodded.

Ted took from his battered briefcase a piano book of nursery rhymes which he had been given when he was a boy and started to play *Sing a Song of Sixpence*. After a few notes Geoff began to hum along quietly, and then, as he found his voice, an astonishingly pure and accurate treble emerged. Ted played some more songs with similar results; then he tried an aural test, playing a few bars of a made-up tune which he asked him to sing back. Geoff repeated it note perfect. 'Well done, Geoffrey! Very well done.' The boy smiled briefly, then the blank expression returned. Perhaps smiling wasn't 'behaving himself'.

'Do you know why you're here? Do you know what this is all about?'

'My dad told me to come.'

'But do you know why?'

'No.'

'Would you like to know why?'

'I don't know. I mean…' Ted could see that he was trying to think what the correct answer was.

'Your dad thinks you might be able to get into a choir school. Do you know what that is?'

Geoff shrugged.

'It's like a normal school but as well as the regular lessons like English and arithmetic there would be a lot of singing, and you'd be singing with other boys in a choir in somewhere like a church. Do you go to church?'

'No.'

'Would you like that? To go to a special singing school? And you'd be boarding – living there, that is, away from home.'

'I don't know.'

'But you do like singing, don't you?'

'It's all right.' Hadn't his father discussed it with him at all?

Just then, Frank came back into the hall. 'So, how are you getting on then? What do you think, Ted?'

'There's no question he's musical.'

'So could he get into this school, then?'

'That's another matter. As I said before, I've no experience in this sort of thing at all.'

'But he's musical, you say, so couldn't we have a try? Get him up to scratch?'

'I still think you'd be better off with a professional.'

'But you'd have a go, to help me out, wouldn't you?' Ted was still silent. 'To start him off. And then we could get a professional in later on.'

'It might work, I suppose. And then there's also the question of whether it's what Geoffrey wants.'

'Don't worry about that. You don't have children, do you, Ted? He's only seven. How can he know what's right for him? That's a parent's responsibility. I want the best for him, like any parent, so if I tell him that this is best, he'll do what he's told. Won't you Geoff?' Geoff nodded.

THE LESSONS TOOK place every week. Frank would drop off the boy after the choir practice, and for half an hour Ted would go

through voice exercises, aural tests and the other stuff required for the audition, dredging up boyhood memories of singing in his church choir. Geoff made rapid progress and in his timid way seemed to be enjoying the lessons and the attention he was getting. Ted enjoyed the lessons too, pleased at how the boy was coming on and resigned to the fact that no professional help was ever going to be sought, though it still irked him.

At the end of April, Ted told Frank that he reckoned Geoff would be ready for St Christopher's June audition date and Frank sent off the completed application form to the choir school. In due course a letter came back inviting Geoff to an audition on a Saturday afternoon in late June.

'I don't know how to thank you for everything, Ted.'

'Thank me if he gets in. I'm still not sure whether I've taught him the right way.'

'Don't worry, you've done a great job,' and he patted him on the shoulder. 'Look Ted, I know I already owe you and all, for what you've done and I hate to ask you for another favour, but I wondered if there's any chance you could take the boy up to the audition. You've got a car, haven't you? You see, for me to take him up by train is bit of a performance, and I think it'd give him more confidence too, if he knew you were there.'

Ted doubted it would really be so difficult for Frank and Geoff to go by train, but as Geoff was his protégé in a way, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea. To show he wasn't a complete chump he replied, 'Might be possible. Course I'd need something for petrol. Must be a good sixty miles each way, probably about five gallons would do it… shall we say a quid's-worth?'

'Of course, I was going to say that. A quid it is.'

JUNE 1951

TED WAS WAITING for them outside his quarters dressed in civvies – a tweed sports jacket, grey flannels and cloth cap, his driving cap as he liked to think of it.

'You look different, Sergeant Cunningham – not in uniform, I mean,' said Geoff.

Frank was quick with, 'Don't be cheeky, Geoff.'

'Is this your car, Sergeant Cunningham?' said Geoff with more excitement in his voice than Ted had ever heard. It was an MG Midget in pillar box red with beige upholstery. The chrome gleamed like the silver in the officers' mess. It was a fine day and the roof was down.

'Nice motor, Ted. Oh what it is to be single and fancy-free. Fat chance a family man could own a car like this.'

'It was a bit of luck. One of the flight officers was posted to Rhodesia and needed to get rid of it quickly so I got it for a bit of a song, otherwise I could never have afforded it.' It didn't sound very convincing.

'In you get, Geoffrey,' said Ted, opening the passenger door.

'Wow!' Geoff was wide-eyed.

Frank gave Geoff a playful punch on his shoulder. 'Now do your best at the audition. Remember everything Sergeant Cunningham has told you, and behave yourself. The wife's made some sandwiches for you both,' and he handed a brown paper packet to Ted, 'and here's the quid for the petrol and another couple of bob to get some pop for the boy and a beer for you.' Would this be the extent of Frank's 'seeing him all right'?

As they drove off, Geoff was positively animated. 'I never knew you had an MG, Sergeant Cunningham. It's a TC, isn't it? One and a quarter litre.'

'You seem to know a lot about cars.'

'One of my dad's friends gave me a Motor Show catalogue. I read it every night. MGs are one of my favourites.' And so until the wind noise became too intrusive, they talked about cars, with Ted quite astonished at the small boy's encyclopaedic knowledge. In Baldock, Ted bought some lemonade and a bottle of light ale. Outside the town he found a lay-by and they sat on a grass bank to eat the sandwiches.

'How do you feel about the audition, Geoff?' Immediately the mood had been broken, and Ted saw it had been a mistake to leave the safe subject of cars.

'I don't know.' Geoff looked at the ground, shrinking back into his school uniform, the only clothes Ted had ever seen him in.

'Oh well, let's not worry about it. It's worth a try. You've a very good voice, you know, but if it doesn't come off it's not the end of the world, is it?'

'My dad'll kill me if I don't get in.' They finished eating their sandwiches in silence. Back in the car, Ted tried to distract him by explaining how the clutch and the gears worked.

They had directions on how to reach the choir school, which was on the edge of the city. Ted asked Geoff to read out the street names and tell him when to turn and they arrived at a building which had been designed to look more like a private house than a school. They entered through the panelled front door into a generous hall with a floor of shining black and white marble tiles. The domestic character was maintained by the grandfather clock and large oak settle, but the smell – a combination of disinfectant, furniture polish and boiled cabbage – betrayed that it was an institution of some kind and invoked in Ted strong memories of his own schooldays. In one corner there was a half-glazed door labelled 'Office' in gold paint, at which Ted knocked. It was opened by a neatly-dressed young woman who was clutching a clipboard. 'Interview?' she asked.

'Yes. Geoffrey Bassett.'

'Good. Now, Geoffrey, you just wait on the bench in the hall

and someone will take you in shortly. Mr Bassett, I would suggest you come back in about an hour; we should be done by then.'

'Actually, it's Cunningham, Edward Cunningham, I'm…' he struggled for a moment with a suitable description, 'his singing teacher and a family friend. Won't you need me to accompany him for his pieces?'

'Just leave the music with Geoffrey and we can manage on our own.'

He knew that this was how it worked, it had been in the audition instructions, but he was worried about leaving Geoff by himself. 'Good luck, Geoff. Don't worry old boy, it'll all be all right.'

There was just time to take a quick stroll into the city centre and back. He'd visited Cambridge once as a boy but his memories were vague and he'd forgotten how pretty it was, especially on a sunny afternoon like today. Punters lazily drifted down the river, flower beds were full of colour, lawns were immaculate and the college buildings looked completely unaffected by the six years of war and privation suffered in the rest of the country. He wondered whether Frank Bassett had ever visited Cambridge.

When he got back he found Geoff sitting on the settle in the hall. 'How'd it go, Geoff?'

'I don't know,' came the predictable answer. Then a door opened and a portly bald-headed man in a three-piece tweed suit came out and walked towards them. He put out a hand to Ted. 'Mr Cunningham, isn't it? Claude Cowdray, headmaster.' Ted accepted an extremely firm handshake. 'So you've helped young Bassett prepare for the interview.'

'I'm only an amateur. I just did what I could.'

'I see. May I have a few words in my study?' Leaving Geoff on the bench, he followed the headmaster into a panelled room with desk at one end and sofa and easy chairs at the other. The headmaster waved him into one of the easy chairs.

'Quite an enigma, your boy. Sings like an angel, clearly very musical, reads well enough but otherwise academically very

questionable. You see,' he stroked his chin, 'we expect a pretty high standard at St Christopher's as boys are expected to go on from here to one of the better public schools. Is your boy up to it?'

'The boy's father asked me to help with the singing. I just helped him prepare his pieces and the aural tests and so on; I wasn't aware of the academic requirements. He's just at the local school. I don't suppose their standards are particularly high. He's certainly a quiet boy, but perhaps that's simply a lack of stimulation.'

The headmaster carried on stroking his chin accompanied by some heavy intakes of breath. 'I'll need to think about it, but on the whole I believe I shall give him the benefit of the doubt. What's his father do?'

'Sergeant in the RAF. Like me. We're colleagues.'

'Oh, I see. Stayed on after the war.'

'Yes.'

'Well, we certainly owe you chaps a debt.' More chin-stroking. 'I'll be in touch in writing next week. Thank you so much, Mr…'

'Cunningham.'

'Yes, of course, Mr Cunningham, or should it be Sergeant Cunningham?'

'Either is fine for me.' He was keenly aware of the tone in which the headmaster had said 'sergeant', a tone carefully graded for NCOs. No doubt the headmaster had a full range of tones for all ranks from Able Seaman to Field Marshall.

'WHAT DID THAT man say?' They were back in the car and on the Trumpington Road.

'He said you sang very well.'

'Does that mean I've got in?

'They haven't decided yet.'

'Oh.'

There was no point in beating about the bush. 'Singing was good, but he was worried about the academic side.'

'What does "academic" mean?'

'Did they ask you other things, apart from the singing?'

'Yes, I had to do some sums and then read a story and write down answers to questions about it.'

'Well, that's called "academic" stuff. He thought that you weren't as good at that as you were at music and singing.'

'Oh.'

He tried to change the subject to cars but he could see that Geoff wasn't in the mood this time and in a few minutes he found that the boy was asleep.

Back home, he dropped off Geoff and told Frank about his conversation with the headmaster.

'Sang like an angel. Well you certainly did your bit, Ted, and I'm truly grateful. Angel,' Frank sniffed, 'by heck.'

TED WAS AT his desk on Wednesday when Frank rushed in waving a letter. 'He's got in, the little bugger, he's got in!'

'That's great news, Frank. Great news. You must feel very proud.'

'Over the moon, and it's you I have to thank.'

'No really, it's Geoffrey who did it. The boy has great natural talent. I didn't have to do much at all.'

'No, Ted, you're being too modest, and to thank you, the wife and I would like to invite you over to our house. Would tomorrow evening be all right for you? We thought we'd get in a nice steak and kidney pie from Newlands and have a few beers. Would 6.30 suit?'

'Are you sure? I was very happy to help – enjoyed it actually – there's really no need…' Having dinner with the Bassetts was the last thing he wanted to do.

'Oh no, Ted, you must come. We all want to show our appreciation.'

'Well then, thank you, that would be lovely. 6.30 would be perfect.'

'See you tomorrow, then,' and Frank bounced out.

THE MARRIED QUARTERS section of the station consisted of four rows of identical small houses like pieces on a Monopoly board, set in neatly mown lawns without flower beds. Frank opened the door. 'Nice to see you, Ted. You've met Sheila, haven't you?'

'Only briefly. Hello, Sheila. Very kind of you to invite me over.' They shook hands.

Sheila Bassett was the sort of woman that men's eyes would turn to watch as she walked down the street. Ted had heard someone say that she'd worked on the cosmetics counter of a large department store before the war. She didn't mix much with the other RAF wives who thought she'd got above herself. They had to put up with 'make do and mend' but she somehow had money to spend on new clothes and hairstyles.

'Right. Pale ale all right for you, Ted?' Frank poured glasses for Ted and himself and a sherry for Sheila. There was even some lemonade for Geoff, who was sitting quietly in the corner of the room, which was furnished with a utility dresser and a tired-looking three-piece suite. A print of two Spitfires hung over the mantelpiece. 'To happy days at St Christopher's. Well done, Geoff, and thanks to you, Ted. Cheers.'

Polite conversation followed in which Ted had to elaborate on his trip to Cambridge, which as he had suspected, neither Frank nor Sheila had ever visited. 'See how lucky you are, Geoff, to be going to a place so full of history and that.' Ted glanced at Geoff who remained expressionless.

The dining room was just large enough for the four of them, and Sheila passed the pie through the hatch from the kitchen. This was augmented with some runner beans and mashed potatoes. 'I'm afraid I'm not much of a cook, Ted, but the pie's from Newlands so it should be all right at least.'

'Everything's very nice, Sheila. Really.'

'So, what were you up to before the war, Ted?' asked Frank. Ted realised how little most of them knew about each other. 'Before the war' seemed a world away.

'I was in the printing trade, working for my father.'

'In London, was that?'

'Yes, Hammersmith. My father started it up with one of his chums after the first war.'

'Printing, that's always a good business, i'n't it? People always need stuff printed, come rain or shine.'

'I don't know about that. It has its ups and downs like everything else, but Father has been pretty lucky with it on the whole.'

'So that's how you learnt about draughtsmanship and photography and all that stuff.'

'My father and I agreed it would be good for me to learn the trade properly, so when I left school I went to college for three years to get fully fledged. Then I went to work for him for a couple of years and then war broke out and I joined up.'

'What happened to the business?'

'Oh, Father and his partner are still running it, although he's getting on a bit now. Mother died in '44 and that knocked him down a bit. What about you, Frank?'

'Parents? They both died in '44 too. The V1 Christmas Eve raid on Oldham.'

'Oh I'm sorry, Frank. That's rotten.'

'Oh well, that's war, i'n't it.'

'So is that where you're from?'

'Yes. And Sheila too. We were childhood sweethearts, weren't we, Sheila?' Sheila gave the slightest of nods.

'I were in the insurance business. Worked me way up from ledger clerk to salesman.' Talk of Oldham seemed to strengthen Frank's northern accent. 'It were a good job but I don't miss it. Walking round every night, collecting the shillings, even in the bleeding snow. Joining up were the best thing. The RAF's a great life. I'n't it, Sheila?'

'If you say so, Frank.'

'What about another beer, Ted? We're celebrating after all.'

Frank had a couple more pints over the tinned peaches and custard, whilst Ted sipped his one pint more slowly. Geoff

was sent off to bed and Sheila went into the kitchen at which point Frank brought out a bottle of Scotch and poured out two glasses. He then proceeded to tell some anecdotes at which Ted laughed politely. Ted wondered what Sheila saw in him. Surely she wouldn't have been short of offers? Frank was good-looking enough, quite dapper and with the gift of the gab, but also something of a bore and the snobbier officers would definitely have called him 'vulgar'. There again, Sheila, whatever her looks, was hardly scintillating company either.

The telegram came the following Tuesday from Ted's older sister: 'FATHER SERIOUSLY ILL STOP COME HOME SOONEST STOP BARBARA'. In less than half-an-hour he had secured compassionate leave and was driving to Hammersmith. He had been down to see his father about a month ago when he'd seemed pretty well, so it had been a shock to receive Barbara's wire. When he arrived at the house he met the doctor coming out. Dr Boyars had been their GP for about fifteen years and had been in and out a lot during Ted's mother's illness.

'Hello, Ted. I'm glad I've been able to see you. Barbara has all the details, but it's not looking too good. Your father has had a stroke, quite a serious one. It's possible he might recover, in which case you'll see him improve a good deal in the next few days, but it's also possible that he might not improve much at all and even have another stroke. Very hard to tell. I'm sorry, but I knew you'd want me to give it to you straight. I'd like to talk for longer but I have a couple of other urgent visits to do. I'll try to pop in again this evening if I can. Chin up.'

'Thank you, doctor. I understand.' He knew that behind the doctor's businesslike manner lay a well of compassion.

He went into the house, which had hardly changed since his childhood, in fact probably not much had changed in the sixty years since it had been built. Dark brown preponderated: woodwork painted in thick oily varnish, a worn stair runner in an indeterminate pattern of beige and maroon, the original encaustic

tiles of black and burgundy in the hall leading to brown linoleum on the steps down to the kitchen and beyond.

Finding no one downstairs he went up to his father's bedroom. Barbara gave him a hug, possibly the closest physical contact since they had played together as children. 'He's sleeping,' she said. He glanced at the bed with its oversize mahogany bedhead. His father looked diminished with only his head above the sheets, his cheeks sunken and colourless, his chest hardly rising as he breathed. 'I heard you talking to the doctor, what did he say?'

Ted repeated the doctor's words. Barbara sighed. 'It would have been different if Mother were still alive, but I don't think he has much fight left in him.'

Ted held her hand. 'We'll see. Now what about a cup of tea? Shall I bring it up here or shall we go downstairs?'

'I think he'll be asleep for quite a bit longer, let's go downstairs.'

In the kitchen, Barbara filled him in on the details: Mrs T, the charlady, had found him moaning and unable to get out of bed that morning. She'd rung the doctor and Barbara. Thank goodness they'd had the phone put in. Barbara had organised a nurse to stay tonight.

'Poor old Mrs T must have had a shock,' said Ted, 'she must be quite a bit older than Father.'

'She certainly must be over seventy, but she always was a pretty tough old bird, didn't bat an eyelid during the blitz.'

They discussed all the contingency arrangements depending on the speed of their father's recovery but studiously avoided talk of what would happen if he died.

Ted went upstairs and sat by his father. Was he asleep or awake? He talked to him about anything that came into his head: the RAF, the choir, young Geoffrey Bassett, his car, the printing works. Sometimes his father's face twitched. Did that mean he could hear him and understand what he was saying, or was this wishful thinking? The doctor visited again in the late afternoon. The fact that Ted's father had not opened his eyes or moved his hands was not a good sign.

Later, Ted's father's business partner, Joe Peavey, called around. Joe looked much older than when Ted had last seen him. He took hold of Ted's father's limp hand. 'What ho, old friend,' he said. Ted looked into Joe's eyes and saw tears. Like Ted, Joe went through the motions of a normal conversation with Ted's father. A new order for perfect-bound booklets had come in, one of the old platen presses was playing up, a competitor had gone over completely to litho, and more in this vein. 'Must be going now, Ethel will be wondering where I am. I'll pop in same time tomorrow.' Ted accompanied Joe out of the room. 'Can't believe it, can't believe it, Ted. He was fit as a fiddle yesterday.' They made some light conversation but Ted could see that Joe's world was crumbling.

Rather than going home to Bromley, Barbara was staying the night and George, her husband, was coming straight over from the City and would sleep there too. Barbara was four years older than Ted, and George was six years older than Barbara and seemed to come from an earlier generation. He liked to dress for dinner, although that wouldn't be possible tonight.

'I think we all need a stiff drink,' said George after Barbara had briefed him. 'Any Scotch in the house?' Whisky, a soda siphon and glasses were procured from the drinks cabinet in the sitting room, and Barbara prepared an omelette using a tin of spam and some dried egg powder she'd found in the larder. The night nurse arrived and Ted, Barbara and George went to bed. It was still rather early – barely dark outside – but no one felt in the mood for conversation.

The night was warm and sticky. Ted opened his old bedroom window and looked up and down the street as he used to do as a boy, observing comings and goings and imagining the lives behind the windows of the other houses. Like missing teeth, there were two or three gaps in the road where houses had been bombed. He had slept in this room all his life until he'd joined up in 1939. He'd been a young man for some of those years but this still seemed like a boy's room: his model yacht and kite were

on top of the wardrobe, shells and stones he'd collected were still on the mantelpiece, he knew that even his old school blazer and cricket kit, last worn seventeen years ago, were still in the wardrobe. If his father died, what would happen to this room? A knot of nostalgia caught in his stomach.

At about two in the morning the nurse knocked on Ted's door and asked him to come to his father's bedroom. Barbara and George were there too in their dressing gowns, sitting next to the bed, hand in hand. A dry clicking came from Ted's father's throat. The nurse said that it was the death rattle and it wouldn't be long now and that there was no point calling the doctor as there would be nothing he could do. He wasn't in any pain or discomfort, she was sure. Ted wondered how she was sure. Gradually the clicking grew softer and then it stopped altogether. 'He's gone,' said the nurse. Barbara wept silently. Ted felt numb. An image came into his head of a distraught woman he'd seen during the blitz, who had wailed uncontrollably as the firemen had brought a body out of a bombed-out house. He wondered how it would feel to be able to release his sorrow like that.