

The Carol Singer

1st December

It was too dark to see anything through the windows of the bus, but Alison wiped the condensation from the glass anyway. When they passed by fields, all she could see was the interior of the bus reflected in the dark glass. The bus was full of people like her, returning from a busy day of Christmas shopping, well wrapped up against the cold, and loaded down with plastic carrier bags. Two women sitting behind Alison were talking about a party they were going to, while another woman across the aisle was on her mobile phone, moaning about the shops. The old man sitting next to her was whistling to himself. Alison tried to ignore them all. She preferred to watch the darkness outside, looking out for the occasional flashes of light from a house, or a garden lit up with fairy lights.

2nd December

Trees covered in lights glowed with their strange fruit. Alison caught glimpses of them all across the dark landscape, little splashes of magic in the night. It made the tiresome bus journey through the dark a little more bearable. It reminded her of why she was here. Her own Christmas shopping was not much but she was pleased with it. She had found the book that her Dad wanted. She smiled, knowing how much he would want to start reading it on Christmas Day, but also knowing that he would put it aside until later. For her grandparents, she had a set of coloured mugs that would brighten up their little kitchen. She knew Granny would insist that she was the first guest to use them, which would mean a visit on Boxing Day.

3rd December

She was most pleased with her present for her mum. She had selected a pair of slippers, thickly lined with sheepskin. They were the most expensive present she had bought, and it had taken her a long time to save up for them. It wasn't a very glamorous present, but knowing how cold her mum's feet got these days, she was pleased to think of how much they would help her. She almost wished she could give them to her mum as soon as she got home, rather than waiting for Christmas Day. At least there wasn't too long to wait. It was already 23rd December. The shops had been very busy, but at least she had finished her Christmas shopping.

4th December

The bus was drawing close to the town of Morton. This was where most of the other passengers would get off, leaving Alison to go on to the next village of Wixford. Morton was not a very big town, but it was much bigger than Wixford. Her home village was such a small place that Alison wasn't surprised to see herself left alone on the bus. After Morton, the bus would trundle on to Wixford, and then turn around and make the journey back to the city. Alison often got the feeling that the bus drivers objected to having to make the extra trip to the tiny village, but like most residents of Wixford, she was very glad that they did.

5th December

Once all the other passengers got off, Alison felt she could relax. She was no longer squashed on the seat once the whistling man had gone. She sat back, waiting for the bus to start up again, to make the last ten minute drive that would finish her journey. But there was some delay and the bus stayed stationary at the stop. Alison looked up, thinking that one of the passengers getting off had stopped to talk to the driver. But then she saw that it was actually someone getting on. That took her by surprise; no one ever got on the bus at Morton to go to Wixford.

6th December

Her first thought was that it must be someone who lived in Wixford, who had maybe been visiting a friend in Morton. She looked to see if it was someone she knew, but it was a boy that she didn't recognise; she was the only teenager who lived in Wixford, and she had never seen this teenage boy before. She decided that he must have got the wrong bus. He probably wanted the bus back to the city. Maybe that was why he was having an argument with the driver. But as she listened, she heard that he really did want to go to Wixford. He was adamant that he had to go there. Unfortunately, he didn't have the money to pay the fare.

7th December

Alison listened more intently. The boy was pleading with the driver to let him on. He kept saying something about having to sing in Wixford that night. However, the driver was having none of it. Without listening to the boy, he kept repeating the cost of the fare, and how the boy was going nowhere until he produced it. Alison was used to grumpy bus drivers and thought it was very unlikely that the driver was going to change his mind. But the boy kept trying.

"I have to get to Wixford," he kept saying, over and over again. "I have to be there to sing tonight. It's really important."

8th December

He sounded so desperate that Alison thought the bus driver must be the most cold hearted man in the country. It was really mean of him not to let the boy on. The fare was only fifty pence after all, and just a short journey. And it was Christmas, when people were supposed to be full of goodwill towards each other. This gave Alison an idea. She quietly got out her purse and looked inside. There wasn't much money left after her shopping, but there was still a fifty pence piece there. Without saying a word, she got up and made her way down to the front of the bus. The driver and the boy stopped arguing and looked at her. Alison handed the money to the driver. That made them both stare at her in surprise. Alison gave the boy a quick smile and then went back to her seat.

9th December

The driver almost looked disappointed that he was going to have to let the boy on the bus after all, but he printed out a ticket and the boy was allowed on. The driver got his own back by driving off very quickly before the boy had a chance to sit down. He almost lost his balance as he made his way down the bus to find a seat. Despite the fact that there were plenty of empty seats, he came all the way down the bus to where Alison was sitting, and sat in the seat across the aisle from her. Now that he was closer, Alison could see that he wasn't as young as she had first thought. In fact, it was very difficult to judge his age at all. He looked young and old at the same time.

10th December

The boy smiled gratefully at Alison.

"Thank you," he said in a very soft voice.

Alison nodded to him. She still didn't recognise him and she felt sure she would remember if she had seen his face before. She wondered who he was singing with in Wixford. Maybe he was some relative of someone in the church choir, who were singing that evening. But he seemed a very unlikely member of the church choir, in his scruffy coat and dirty jeans.

"Do you live in Wixford?" he asked.

Alison nodded again.

"Then you'll hear me singing there tonight," he said. "Listen out for me."

"I will," said Alison. "I'll be going to the carols."

"Good," said the boy.

11th December

After that, he said no more. Alison returned back to looking out of the window, but found herself watching the boy's reflection in the glass. He had long, untidy hair, and he was incredibly thin. But he also had a rather beautiful face, she decided. She was a little disappointed when the bus reached Wixford and the journey came to an end. Alison gathered up all her bags, checking carefully to make sure she had not left anything behind. The boy got off before her. Alison hurried after him, meaning to ask him about the singing, but he was already hurrying away along the pavement by the time she got off. Before she turned to head for home, she lingered to watch which way he went. She was not at all surprised to see him go through the gate into the church yard and disappear into the dark.

12th December

Back at home, Alison found her dad making the tea. She went straight to her room to wrap her presents, ready to put under the tree that evening. Tonight was the night they always put up the Christmas tree, decorating it before going out to hear the church choir do their annual performance of Christmas carols in the centre of the village. Alison had been attending this little ceremony with her mum and dad for as long as she could remember. But this year they had been doubtful about whether they would be able to go or not. After wrapping her presents, Alison went down stairs to see her mum.

13th December

Mum was sitting on the sofa, wrapped in a thick blanket. Dad had already got the decorations down from the loft, and Mum was sorting through them, untangling the tinsel and straightening the angels' wings. She looked happy and was humming Christmas carols to herself. But she looked so tired and ill that Alison could not share her happiness. However, she could not show her mum that. She came into the room and pretended to scold her mum.

"Mum, you should have waited for me," she said.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," said Mum. "In fact, I feel so well, I don't think there's any way you can stop me going to the carols tonight."

14th December

Alison wished it could be true, but it was a long time since her mum had actually been well. Nothing had been the same since the spring when Mum had slowly but surely begun to lose all her strength. Since then, many doctors had given their opinion, but none of them had been able to deliver their promises of having her well for Christmas.

"I've done everything you said," said Mum. "I've rested all day, and taken all my pills, so you have to let me go tonight. Christmas wouldn't be the same without the carols."

"We'll see," said Alison firmly. "Maybe if you eat all your tea, Dad and I will take you down for a short time."

15th December

Alison was so worried about her mum that she forgot all about the strange boy on the bus. After tea, she and Dad put up the Christmas tree and hung all the old decorations on it. Mum sat and told stories about the decorations, each of which had a personal memory to her. When the lights were lit and the presents carefully arranged underneath, Alison and Dad wrapped Mum up in her warmest clothes, and helped her into the wheel chair that she had to use these days. It was very different to all the years before, when Mum was usually the most excited, but Alison felt happy that they were still going through with the tradition. It made one thing right, even if everything else was wrong.

16th December

Down in the centre of the village, people were gathering outside the church. The carols were a popular event and everyone in the village was there. The choir wasn't very big, but they knew how to make the carols sound really good. To make it even more special, they carried old-fashioned lanterns, giving an atmosphere of something really old. There was an excited buzz in the air as the villagers chatted and gossiped amongst themselves as they waited for the choir to begin. Mum and Dad saw some people that they knew and soon they were busy talking.

17th December

Alison suddenly remembered the mysterious boy. The choir were just getting ready to sing, but he wasn't with them. Alison looked all around at the people gathered to listen, but she couldn't see him in the crowd either.

Mum saw her looking. "Are you looking for someone?" she asked.

Alison quickly told her parents all about the boy on the bus. "He said he was singing, but I can't see him," she said.

Mum smiled sympathetically. "It was very kind of you to help him," she said. "I wonder who he was. I could ask Jack if he was expecting any new recruits."

18th December

But at that moment, Jack the choir leader clapped his hands for quiet and the choir began with a spirited rendition of *Deck the Hall*. It was one of Alison's favourites but tonight she was too busy thinking about the boy to enjoy it. There was definitely no sign of him amongst the choir or the audience. Alison was disappointed.

"Maybe he didn't mean with the choir," said Mum. "Or maybe it was some other night?"

"Or another church?" suggested Dad.

"No, he definitely said Wixford," said Alison. "And he said to listen out for him tonight."

"Then it's a mystery," said Mum. The three of them stood together, listening to the beautiful old carols. It was a perfect night for it, still and cold and clear. There were many stars twinkling in the sky above and Alison studied them, wondering which had been the star that had guided the wise men.

19th December

However, before long, it began to grow very chilly. The choir finished with a rousing chorus of O Come all ye Faithfull, and then the landlord of the village pub came out with warm mince pies and hot mulled wine. It was a part of the festivities that Alison usually looked forward to, but tonight she was worried about Mum.

"Maybe we should go home now," she suggested. "It's very cold."

"Just one mince pie," said Mum. "I promise I'm not getting cold yet. And we could ask if anyone knows about that boy."

Dad asked around the other villagers if anyone knew of a boy who was supposed to be joining the singing but no-one did. Jack the choir leader knew nothing about him. The vicar had seen no boy, even though he had been at the church all evening. Even Mrs McCarthy from the Post Office, who knew everything that went on in the village, had no idea who he could have been. There was much speculation about who he was or where he had been going. Alison began to wonder if she had made a mistake; maybe the boy hadn't said Wixford after all.

20th December

Alison tried to forget about him. After all, she had Mum to worry about. She was just about to say that they should be going when she noticed the voices around her begin to fall silent. One by one, people were stopping their chatter to listen. Alison lifted her head and realised she could hear singing. It was coming from somewhere near the church, a single voice, singing pure and clear and sweet. It wasn't a song that Alison recognised, and yet at the same time, she felt she knew it in her heart. It was extremely beautiful, making her feel happy and sad, excited and afraid, brave and humble, all at the same time. And looking around at the faces of the other villagers, Alison could see that it had the same effect on everyone.

21st December

No-one said a word. They all just listened as the voice sang on. It was a high voice, and it sounded quite young, though it wasn't possible to say if it was a girl or a boy. It was also impossible to say exactly where it was coming from, but no-one seemed to want to go and look for the mysterious singer. They were all transfixed by the beautiful sound. And then, just when Alison was beginning to wonder if it would go on forever, it stopped, fading away to a perfect silence.

22nd December

Around her, the villagers were shaking themselves, as if waking up from a dream. "Who was that?" people were asking. Jack, the choir leader, was interrogated but had no answer. All the members of the choir were accounted for and besides, there was no-one with a voice as beautiful as that. Eventually, people decided to look for the singer. Everyone agreed that the sound had come from near the church, so a group of villagers went off to look around the dark grave yard.

23rd December

Alison stayed with Mum while Dad helped with the search.

"It's funny, but I don't feel cold anymore," said Mum. "Not the tiniest bit."

"Neither do I," said Alison.

Dad and the others returned. "We looked everywhere," he said. "There's no-one there."

And yet, despite the mystery, no-one seemed troubled. People were laughing and smiling and saying how wonderful it had been. Alison realised that she felt happy too, happier than she had felt for such a long time; since Mum had got ill, in fact.

24th December

She looked at Mum, and for the first time, she didn't feel so scared or worried. And Mum was smiling and looking really well. Her eyes were shining.

"I'm glad he sang for us," she said, "whoever he was."

"He?" said Alison. And then she remembered the boy on the bus, with his strangely ageless but beautiful face. She suddenly felt sure that it had been him singing. And if that was the case, then she was absolutely certain that he hadn't been an ordinary boy. She had seen pictures of angels in books. They had wings and long white robes and were not at all like the boy on the bus. And yet somehow Alison believed she had seen and heard something very special that night. Something miraculous even. She looked up at the high roof of the church, half expecting to see him up there. But there was just the dark sky and the million stars twinkling.

"Do you know, I feel so well, I think I'll walk home," said Mum.

"Are you sure?" asked Dad.

"Yes, I am," said Mum. "I think all that singing has done me good."

Alison hugged Mum as she got up out of the wheel chair. "The singing has done us all good," she said. "That's why the boy said we had to listen out for him."

The End. Merry Christmas!!!