



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

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## The Last Night of the Proms

By Jayne Martin

The rural town of Peacehaven was enjoying another Indian summer, balmy breezes and an azure sky. The 'Albion' retirement home was a large brick building set on a hill overlooking the town. It was surrounded by beautifully manicured gardens in the traditional English style.

The bees and butterflies were gently making their way through the flower borders, sunbeams highlighting their iridescent colours as they flitted about. There was a gentle, melodic buzz surrounding the home. The lawn had been cut that morning, leaving the scent of freshly mown grass and petrol in the air.

Inside the building, the twenty residents were looking forward to the evening. Their annual 'Last Night of the Proms' party. The bunting was being put up and the handheld Union Jacks would be freely distributed as the guests arrived. Everyone was quietly going about the crucial business of choosing their patriotic outfits for the evening, some quietly humming Rule Britannia and Land of Hope and Glory to themselves as they did so.

They would watch the concert on the TV in the communal room and Marianne, the home manager, had worked out how to get the sound onto the stereo system. A traditional, popular buffet supper

would be served. The staff made a special effort to get the menu right. They would ask the residents what they would consider appropriate. This usually meant pork pies, sausage rolls, crisps, cheese and pickle sandwiches and jelly and ice cream. The residents decided that on this occasion, Doctors orders could be forgotten and the staff turned a kindly blind eye.

Florence, one of the longest 'serving' residents, was the main driver behind the event. She was an upright, petite lady, birdlike in her manner with a ready smile for everyone. The smile only faded if you had the temerity to call her 'Flo'. Proper names were required at all times. Her deep blue eyes looked at you with great intensity from a face remarkably free of lines for a lady of her age. She put this down to the religious application of suntan lotion, the wearing of a broad brimmed straw hat and getting plenty of beauty sleep.

She was a huge fan of the concert; she particularly loved the finale with everyone singing the sea shanties, and of course the glorious rendition of Rule Britannia. She had very tender memories of the event. It was at the concert at the Royal Albert Hall that she had met her darling husband Fred, now dead, and she sorely missed him. This evening would be bittersweet as always and she was grateful to have company. It was extremely important to her that the evening was a great success. It usually was and she secretly enjoyed the compliments she received every year.

Marianne had printed out the lyrics for Rule Britannia and Land of Hope and Glory, ready to be handed out to those who wanted them. In her experience, most people only really knew the chorus. Marianne was originally from La Rochelle in Brittany. She found the English, or was it British, love of the 'Last Night of the Proms' somewhat endearing.

When she was searching for the words of Rule Britannia on-line she had come across the history of the song. This she found rather amusing. The song came from an opera that was written for a German prince who just happened to be the heir to the throne of England, Scotland and Ireland. But then the British had always been good at ignoring, or selectively forgetting that they had been ruled by the French for several hundred years, and more recently by the Germans.

As the sun started to set, cerise hues filled the sky and the temperature started to fall. This prompted 'Liberty', the home's resident cat to saunter elegantly back into the building and take her place in the bay window to observe proceedings. As usual she sat in a very upright, statuesque pose, languidly washing her pure white fur.

The guests started arriving and the residents were there to meet them and take them through to the communal room. The concert had already started and was playing quietly in the background. The first half was always a mixed bag in the view of many of the residents. What they were all really waiting for was the final patriotic section. Friends and family mingled happily with residents and staff alike.

Florence was delighted to see so many people. This really was her event she felt. She had put so much energy and enthusiasm into making sure it happened every year. The success of the evening was of paramount importance to her. The sense of anticipation had been growing in her all afternoon. A slight tingling in her veins combined with an inability to keep still. She felt slightly out of sorts, 'off key' as her musical friends would say.

She had made a special effort this year for her outfit. Melody, one of the younger members of staff had shown her all the fancy dress costumes available on the internet. Florence had spent many happy hours 'surfing,' she believed it was called, to find just the right thing.

It was now the right time to go and change as the interval was approaching. She quietly and sedately made her way up the stairs to her room. She had kept her room firmly closed and locked this year. Unlike last year, when that irritating cat had got in and proceeded to play and lie all over the large Union Jack that she had purchased for the occasion. She had planned to wear the flag as a shawl but it was completely ruined by that obnoxious cat.

As she sat on her bed she went back over the frustrating conversation she had with Marianne last year.

"That cat really isn't a suitable pet for the home and simply caused too much disruption and damage. She is particularly adept at digging up the beautiful garden. It's such a shame after all the effort that goes into keeping the garden in pristine condition."

"Florence, I appreciate your point of view, I really do, but many of the other residents adore Liberty. They are very protective of her and proud of her. She is such an elegant creature." Marianne tried to smooth Florence's exasperation. It had not worked. It seemed to her that Marianne had taken the side of that stupid cat. It was clear that she was not going to deal with the issue. So, she had decided she would manage the situation herself.

That was all last year and now she was focussed on the here and now. She got out her costume with a growing sense of expectation; flutters of nervous energy ran through her body. She could feel her

pulse skipping a beat every now and again. Her hands shook as she laid it out on the bed. She stopped and thought “dam I forgotten my pills again!” She had become so forgetful recently and her head had been full of all the preparation for tonight. She got out the packet, took the warfarin, smiling secretly to herself as she did so.

A few minutes later she had regained her poise. Leaving her room with steps full of purpose and pride she proceeded towards the stairs. There was a large mirror at the top and she stopped to check her appearance. She smoothed down the folds of her toga with satisfaction. It was so important to look the part. Now she had to play the part. She readjusted the Centurion helmet on her freshly coiffured hair. The shield and trident were a little awkward as she began her decent down. It was just as well she had decided against the soft toy lion to complete the outfit. That would have been too much. She couldn't wait to see the faces of the other guests as she made her entrance!

As she reached the final few stairs, she heard the music start. She had clearly been longer than she thought, they were the opening cords of Rule Britannia; she had missed the sea shanties completely!

She quickened her pace. As she did so, Liberty the cat streaked across the hall and up the stairs. Florence was momentarily distracted and the next thing she knew she was falling and then there was a searing pain in her head. She collided with the banister before landing in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. She tried to move but couldn't she let out a little whimper of pain and then a louder, demanding cry for help.

Marianne got to her first. She immediately assessed the situation as serious and told Melody to call for an ambulance. The

other guests gathered nervously at the door, looking at Florence with concern and curiosity.

What is the matter with those ridiculous people thought Florence. That bloody cat caused this. Liberty reappeared at the head of the stairs and slinked down gracefully on silent paws. She stopped where Florence lay, briefly looked her straight in the eye and then walked out the door with her tail in the air.

Florence tried to move but could only follow her with her eyes. The light around her seemed to be fading fast. She wanted to shiver as the cold seeped up her legs. Voices and noise faded into the distance.

Strange to see that cat again, I'm sure I buried her in the garden last year after I gave her the warfarin in her food. The others had never got to the bottom of her disappearance. With that thought Florence closed her piercing blue eyes and followed the ghost of Liberty from the building.

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