

Verdi Cries

Of all places ... a hotel lounge.

The waiter placed a silver tray on my table and offered to pour. I declined his offer and waved him away. I carefully inspected the contents of the tray, an old habit of mine. The fine-bone China teapot was attractively decorated with an array of flowers alongside a matching cup and plate. An inviting selection of sandwiches and cakes were neatly arranged on a slate three-tier cake stand. I placed the starched, immaculately white linen napkin across my lap and I began to pour.

Then the music started. Piped music. But not the usual banal stuff that I have so often been subjected to in hotel lobbies or lounges. My ears pricked up. Yes, it was definitely Verdi. Aida. I noticed a slight tremor in my right hand. I steadied myself and finished pouring then I randomly selected a cheese sandwich.

I tried to relax, alternatively sipping and nibbling, as Celeste Aida sang out. I looked around the room. People were either huddled together in conspiratorial clusters or sitting back enjoying the peaceful ambience, seemingly oblivious to the opera opening up before them.

Verdi shrouded me.

My mind tumbled back through the years.

Weed, Molly, Special K, Ching, and finally Mandy Candy. Swiftly followed by homelessness, street sleeping, temporary hostels, sofa surfing, and eventually a police cell.

Mandy, my probation officer, was a pure diamond. She got me a place at The Bridge, a drug rehab clinic based in a small coastal town in the east of Scotland.

Safely ensconced in a cosy room on the second floor of The Bridge is where I discovered Aida. At first, I was oblivious to it. There were other things that were occupying my mind. As the weeks went by my senses began to be rebuilt, and after a group session on 'cravings and healthy coping strategies', I asked the group leader, where is this music coming from?

She explained there was a man in room 119 who always played Verdi's Aida from early morning until lunchtime. It was his way of coping. She said that he rarely left his room, choosing to eat there, as he had complex relationship issues. Aida was his companion. They left his food outside his door. He always ate his breakfast, but rarely touched his evening meal.

Suddenly a wave of guilt swept through me. I could clearly recall the time I spied a tray of pastries outside room 119. I had slipped soundlessly down the carpeted staircase, and in one perfect swoop, I grabbed the pastries and disappeared outside. I sat in the dunes watching the ships slide across the horizon munching the stolen food, with Aida flowing through my sensibilities. In my mind, I had become her.

The beach became my place to release my demons. I often drew a jackal-headed woman in the sand. An effigy to the woman that I thought would become my lover, the same woman that intoxicated me with chemicals, and then left me. I would wait until the sea took her away, and then wash my hands clean.

Over time Verdi became my comrade. I bathed in Aida.

I had broken my addictions. I was due to leave The Bridge in three days' time by which I had I'd have just about learned the entire score to Aida.

My 'holiday' was over, and the 'real' world beckoned.

My thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the waiter asking if everything was OK. I quickly resurfaced and nodded my assurances that everything was fine.

I finished my tea.

The music finishes, and as in the opera, Aida dies, replaced by some obscure orchestral strings.

I called for the waiter to bring me my coat.

"The opera, the stolen tea, the sand drawing, the verging sea, all years ago."

The End

NB. This is loosely based on the lyrics to the song 'Verdi Cries' written by Natalie Merchant and performed by the wonderful 10,000 Maniacs.