

# American Cream Soda

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It was nearly seven o'clock on a damp October night in 1955. The old pre-war car was struggling again, coughing and spluttering its way home through the Glasgow murk, a mixture of fine rain and smog caused by coal fires spewing smoke from hundreds of chimneys.

The two men had been working overtime and were worn out after a long day outdoors in the raw autumn weather, with winter approaching.

'Eddie, have you always bred budgies?' asked Jack.

'Aye, Ah goat ut frae Faither. He wiz a great budgie breeder. Mammy wisnae that keen, cause o the mess, innat, but she didnae cumplain about the extra pockut money he geed her. Aye, Jack, thur's money un budgies, nae doot about ut.'

The two joiners, both in the early thirties, were travelling in an ancient Austin 7 car from a building site in Johnstone, near Paisley, heading for Pollokshaws, near Glasgow. The car was Eddie McKelvey's pride and joy, bought from a friend of a friend three weeks earlier for thirty-five pounds, with money he and his wife Lizzie had saved hard for. It had been a poor bargain, the car was worn out, a heap of rubbish.

Rearing budgies was one of many similar enterprises which Eddie and Lizzie tried then dropped. Unlike Jack and Betty, with three boys in their single end, the McKelveys lived a flat with two rooms; a kitchen cum living room and a bedroom. They also had an inside water closet, a gas geyser over their kitchen sink and a fancy kitchen cabinet stuffed with cans of food.

'Did you ever try parrots?' asked Jack. 'A boy out Rutherglen way, near my brother, has a big cage in his allotment where he breeds them.'

'Aye, Ah did think o' ut, but they say ut the Breeders' Club, it's no' a good idea tae mix yer birds, cause o diseases. Whit about you, Jack? Did ye never try breedin' birds? Did ye no' tell me wance thit yer faither usetae dae the breedin, innat?'

'No, it was my mother's brother, my Uncle John. He used to have roller canaries. He bred them for years, gave us one, a great wee singer. We called him Mario after Mario Lanza. The problem is, Betty's not that keen on pets, especially not birds. The truth is, she was always a bit frightened of Mario so, when he escaped out the top of the kitchen window while I was cleaning his cage, I think she was quite pleased.'

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'So, whit happunt? Did ye no' try to git him back, innat?'

'Aye. Uncle John brought one of his hen birds and we had her in a cage beside Mario's cage by the window, but he didn't come back. Uncle John said the sparrows would have killed him out of jealousy.'

The old car approached the Toll in Kinning Park, at Paisley Road West. The rain, which had been light, got heavier, making it difficult to see the road ahead through the tiny, misted windscreen. The windscreen wiper started to slow down then stopped. At busier times this Y-junction was controlled by a policeman, standing on a platform in the centre of the traffic, armed with a whistle, a torch and wearing white gloves with long cuffs over his uniform.

The Austin's right indicator arm refused to rise when Eddie pulled at the inside lever and the window would not wind down. Eddie slowed to a stop and waited, hoping the policeman would somehow guess he wanted to turn right. The engine, which needed to be kept revved to stay running, spluttered and died. The policeman blew his whistle, waving his arm upright, indicating Eddie should continue straight ahead as he was not signalling. From behind, a long stream of cars began to toot. The rain increased to a downpour and the cars behind the Austin began sounding their horns continuously.

'Right, Eddie, leave this to me', said Jack.

He opened the passenger door, got out, eased the door up on its wobbly hinges and eventually managed to get it to shut. He ran forward to the policeman to explain the Austin had stalled then ran back to the car while the policeman held up the oncoming traffic to allow Jack to get behind the Austin and push it into Seaward Street where it was out of the traffic flow.

Twenty minutes later, after much cursing, with Jack on the starting handle and Eddie pumping the accelerator pedal, the engine caught and fired up. Drookit, Jack negotiated the passenger door's mysteries, got inside and retied the cord which held the door in place. The car limped onwards to Pollokshaws, with Eddie keeping the engine revs high by slipping the clutch. About half a mile from Eddie's home, the car conked out and refused to re-start. The rain had eased. Jack got back out and pushed again. They were now in home territory and the car attracted a gaggle of local boys.

Sonny McPhellam, the oldest of the group, shouted, 'Hoy, Mr B, hop in a-side Eddie an we'll push yees hame, fur a pokay chips.'

Fifteen minutes later, the old car reached the entrance pend which led from the street to the back of the houses where Eddie lived and he parked his car at the foot of the external stairway which led to his front door.

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The nightmare was over. Instead of about half an hour, the journey home had taken nearly three hours. Jack was exhausted and looking forward to some hot food. Fortunately, he lived only a hundred yards away but he knew Betty would be up to high doh, worried about him.

The day after the breakdown, Jack was back on his push bike, cycling to work as he had always done, before Eddie had bought the car.

Eddie, mollycoddled by Lizzie, spent the morning in bed recuperating from his alleged exertions although he had spent the whole time in the car.

Lizzie, always keen to keep Eddie from lazing around, was soon on the telephone from her office at the Cooperative Headquarters in Morrison Street where she worked as a French Polisher. By late afternoon, she had Eddie fixed up with a job at the Victoria Infirmary as a maintenance joiner, where her brother worked as a plumber.

It was a cushy number but with no chance of overtime, a situation which suited Eddie very well indeed.

A few nights later, Eddie visited Jack, Betty and their three boys in their single end just as the boys were being tucked into bed for the night, the two younger ones already asleep with the eldest, seven-year-old Johnny, lying awake, all ears.

'Aye, Jack, Lizzie's thinkin' we shud putt the caur intae *The Evennin Times* fur sale coallum coz Ah'll no need a caur noo Ah'm startin' ut the Vicky a week oan Munday. Lizzie says Ah huvtae shake aff these sniffles afore Ah go onaywhairs near sick folk, case a catch sumthin worse, innat.'

'So, Eddie, Ah'll tell them at Johnstone you'll not be back then?'

'Thanks, Jack, but thur's nae need. Lizzie telt thum oan the phone fae the Coop un Morrisun Street. Thur sending ma money bey a cheque tae peiyit intae oor bank accoont, innat.'

'You have a bank account, Eddie?'

'Aye an' naw. Ut's Lizzie's auld man's accoont, fur his scrappie bizniz, innat. Onayweiys, Ah've brung yees a wee pressunt. Ak-chooly, twa wee pressunts. A wee breeding pair o budgies. Sammy and Susie. Thur ur three wee eggs in her breeding box so yer aff tae a great stert, innat.'

Johnny was out of bed like a flash, his face up against the cage.

'Uncle Eddie, which one is Sammy?'

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'The blue yin, son. He's a proddy, like yer Auntie Lizzie. The green yin's Susie, she's a Kafflick, so itza mixed marriage, innat, jist like Lizzie an me. Aye, Jack, yer oan yer weiy tae maaken big bucks noo, so yees ur. They'll sell fur two quid each coz Sammy and Susie urr great wee talkers, so thur weanzill be talkers tae, innat.'

Betty, Jack's wife, answered quickly. 'Eddie, that's really kind of you to think of us like this, but sorry, we'll have to say no, thanks very much. I think Jack explained, birds set off my asthma so we can't have them here, in the confines of this small place, sorry.'

'Aw, Mummy, please. Please can we keep them. *Please.*'

'No, Johnny and back to bed right now. On you go, there's a good boy.'

'Tell ye whit, Jack. Why no take thum right noo tae Andy Arbuckle ut the front red sandstane bulddin ower the bank. He's been pesturran me fur ages tae sell hum a good pair o talkers, so he huz. Noo, dinnae tak less thun seven quid fur them but start hum ut ten coz he likes tae haggle, duz Andy.'

'Eddie, that's far too generous of you. No, we can't accept, can we Betty?'

'Well, Jack, if we refuse again, surely Lizzie would be sorely offended. Anyway, maybe it would stop Andy breeding those rats. His Alice hates them. They're always escaping, she says, running amok.'

'Naw, Betty, thur no' ratz, thur gunnee pigs, no' ratz. Onayweiys, itza deal, eh? Yeh see, Ah jist cannae tak thum hame tae Lizzie un try tae splain hoo cum yees dinnae want thum. It wiz hur idea, innat, tae help yees oot since Ah heard thur cutting the ovurtime oot by, un Johnstone.'

'Oh, that's sorted. I've been out to East Kilbride and I've got a start there a week on Monday, with two nights a week, Saturday morning and a Sunday, all inside work.'

'East Kulbride! Fur fu'..., sorry hen. Jack, dae ye no ken, even the Eskumos cannae live oot therr, un East Kulbride. They say they pack up un heid sooth ut the furst sign ae snaw. Aye, un they say thur ur Polur bears roont evry cornar oot therr, un East Kulbride, innat.'

'Aye, so I've heard,' said Jack, chuckling. 'I'll have to make snowshoes and get tyres with studs for my bike, eh?'

'Right then, folks,' said Eddie. 'Ah'll lee yees an luv yees, eh? Ah huvtae get back hame wi a pokay chips fur Lizzie afore *Dan Dare* starts oan the wirluss, eh? If ye dinnae mind, Betty, hen, Ah huvtae take thus travull rug hame coz she won ut un a raffle ut work and ut's Mackenzie tartun, her ane tartun, afore we merrit. We eyewiz use ut tae cuvurr oor burdz, tae get thum tae sleep so we kun hear the wirrluss, innat.'

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Eddie bustled off whistling 'O solo Mio', completely out of tune.

Jack closed the door behind him and said, 'Betty, I didn't know you had asthma.'

'Jack, you know I don't have asthma! But I could hardly say just no, could I? Now, quick as you like, get these out of here. Andy's Alice will be out at Housey-Housey at the Orange Hall tonight so you'll get him on his own. He's softer than Alice.'

'But Mummy, can't we keep them please? Please?'

'No, Johnny. And keep your voice down, we don't want you waking Douglas and Richard, do we? Look at the time! It'll be *Dan Dare* in five minutes. Cuddle under and I'll put it on low for you now, there's a good boy. That's it, cuddle into Douglas.'

The door opened and closed as Jack made off with the cage draped in an old bit of blanket, warned to bring it back for washing as it was used under the pram cover for extra warmth.

Jack returned home half-an-hour later, beaming, smelling of whisky and clasping two five-pound notes.

'Betty, you were right. Alice was out so I asked for fifteen and let him beat me down to ten.'

Betty, who was tee-total, raised her eyebrows. 'And the drink? Was that a necessary part of the deal? And where's the blanket?'

'With Alice out, he opened a new bottle to seal the deal so I let him keep the old bit blanket.'

'Jack! What did I say to you? It wasn't that old. It was a wedding present from Edith. And it was warm. And Alice Arbuckle will turn up her nose at it and throw it in the bin.'

'Aw Betty, it would have been unfriendly not to accept a wee half, eh?'

'Just one, was it?'

'Aye, Betty, but it was a big one, a gentleman's measure. And he's promised us a salmon, next time he goes fishing. He's just got a new job, working in a stockbrokers' office and he's on the look out for a car. Just a small one, a fixer upper, he said, so I've put him onto Eddie, about the Austin. He's gone off round there now. I told him the car was a heap of rubbish but Andy doesn't want to miss out on the chance, he said.'

'Oh, Jack, I hope he doesn't go on about those budgies to Lizzie. You know she doesn't get on with Alice and she won't like having Andy as a competitor in the budgie-rearing business.'

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'It'll work out fine, Betty. Andy's a butterfly. You know he has a new hobby every few months, doesn't he? Anyway, if he sells on the chicks and the breeding pair, he should clear ten pounds no bother. Did I say, he took out the family purse, as he called it, from a locked drawer? It was stuffed with five and ten-pound notes and the drawer was filled with loose pounds, ten bob notes and half-crowns. I had no idea they were so well off.'

'Oh, Jack, we've got ten pounds. We could buy that bike for Johnny for his Christmas and get a better pram for Richard. Maria McPhellam's sister Agnes, over in Shawlands, has a nice one going for two pounds but I think I can get five bob off if I give her straight cash without paying it up at two shillings a week. And I owe Molly Murray eleven and six and the coal man for four bags of coal. But we should still have enough to make it a better Christmas for the boys.'

'Aye, and we'll have that salmon from Andy as well.'

'No, Jack. I wouldn't know how to cook it and we don't have a big enough pot. Anyway, it would stink this wee place out, wouldn't it? Better to give it to your mother. She'll know what to do with it. Thinking of fish, how about running round to the chippy and getting us two fish suppers as a wee treat? And tap up Molly Murray and pay her what I owe and get us forty cigarettes while you're at it. And stay away from *The Swan Inn*. On second thoughts, give me that money, Jack. I'll save you from temptation. You stay here and get the kettle on for tea and I'll go.'

'Okay, Betty. And get us a bottle of America Cream Soda too, eh?'