

Diamond Minds

The door closed. Now they are alone at last.

It had been a brilliant day, a diamond day, but exhausting.

'A wee cup of tea and another piece of cake, Princess Bettina?'

'That would be lovely Don Juan.'

While Jack was away through to the Kitchen, she let her mind drift back over old territory, something she had been doing increasingly over these last few months.

ooOoo

They only use these pet names when they are by themselves, nobody else knows about them; just another of the daft things which has kept their marriage young for these sixty years.

After 6 kids, and now 15 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren, their canoodling days are long gone, but every now and then he still pulls her to him and gives her a 'big smasher' as he calls it. Betty (Bettina) knows she is no longer much of an oil painting. To be honest, she knows she never was. Jack (John), however, was always the best looking boy in their class, always the one all the girls fancied, so full of fun and mischief.

How did she get him?

Over the years his only reply was to shimmy up, grab her and well, you know.... It was a question she had liked to ask him every night, at one time!

Now that she had been wheel-chair bound for these last few years, and Jack with his prostate problems, well.... Pity, she sighed, she had always enjoyed that side of things.

From the Kitchen she could hear him crooning away quietly. He still had a lovely voice, all the old numbers from the Forties, the War Years. He had been away in the Subs but he had always said, when he went had to go back:

"Get out to the dancing as much as you can, Betty, enjoy yourself for both of us. You never know what could happen, so don't you sit about, go out, go to the dancing."

She had loved to dance. When he was home they went out dancing every night. When he was away she had always gone to the jigging with one of his sisters and at the end of the Dance had always said:

"No thanks, I have a lad in the Subs, but thanks for the dances."

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Jack had been the only one she had ever wanted, ever been with. For him it was the same too, at least as far as she knew.

What she remembered best of all, apart from the kids, was the dancing. Everyone said they were brilliant together. They were always among the last few on the floor for the Elimination Dance, especially if it was a 'Slow Foxtrot'. Later, a long time later, after the kids were off their hands, it was the Tango, when they had started going dancing again on Saturday nights, to the Plaza.

The telly had been rubbish on Saturday nights anyway. No change there, still rubbish. The best shows that had ever been on the telly were 'Victor Sylvester' and 'Come Dancing'. And 'Upstairs Downstairs', of course, and 'The Onedin Line', that had been good too!

Some radio shows were still good though, especially that one with songs from the Forties and Fifties, all the old numbers and they can sing along. Remember Sidney Devine? Och, he was not that great a singer but he really could get it across.

It's so hard to get a good book now. I keep saying: "I'll just look for one with a gun on the spine", but the wee library lady just smiles and says: "that went out with the Ark".

Och, but I seem to fall asleep so much nowadays, that one book does me for ages anyway.

Jack is back with the tea tray.

A tray?

When did he eventually get the message and find out where the tray was kept?

Only ten million times of telling to get that one through into his nut.

He is singing one of their favourites: "When they Begin the Beguine", swirling the tray around as if it was his dancing partner, then swooping it down to place it on the wee table by her side.

He pours her tea, lots of sugar, no milk.

Working in the Co-op all through the war years she was always able to get sugar and tea: and she had known she was always a 'soft mark', always generous to friends and family.

"Betty, any chance of?" would be boldly asked of her by everyone, even people she hardly knew; and she was never able to say "Sorry, but No!" and had always done her best never to disappoint, a characteristic that had dominated her life, even nowadays.

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Her generosity, giving freely from her purse, or anything else that was asked of her, had driven Jack mad. But, in the end, even after he had said "No way, Jose", she had always persuaded him, eventually, to do whatever had been asked:

"It's just a wee job, Jack; and wee Maisie Sprunt is such a poor old soul, and on her own now.'

Time, after time, after time he had said:

"Never again Betty, never again, are you listening to me?"

But because, deep down, Jack was just like her, he always gave in. And being a joiner he was always in demand. How many doors had he 'flush paneled', how many 'pelmet's' had he made for folk, she wondered, maybe millions.

That time she had said "Yes" to that Lily Harrison, the woman with the caliper, was now a family legend. Lilly's man, Danny, has "a bad back and a heart condition", Lilly had whimpered.

Afterwards Jack had said:

"Aye, Betty, she was right there, her man does have a 'murmur' on his heart I heard it, saying: "Whatever ye dae Danny son, "Don't Work! Don't Work!" "

And her big thirty-something son, Archie, is "hopeless, Lilly had said, "two left feet and two left haunds, so he huz".

It was Archie that had riled Jack more, as he had recounted the tale.

I was up their old ladder, Betty, and old Danny was 'footing' because it was wobbly. And he said, "Well Lilly, this'll no dae ma back ony good, so it wullnae, aa' this staunin' aboot. Ah'll need to stay aff work the morra', just you wait and see."

Then big Archie came in, slumped into the settee, lay back with his hands behind his head, put his feet up. lit up, and said "Mammy, Ah cannae see the telly for that ladder, kin ye no get them tae move oot o' ma way?"

Jack had been blazing mad when he came home and had refused to do other 'homers' for weeks.

But, like her, Jack had a kind heart and a great sense of humour and so, the rancor long forgotten, the tale had become a family 'standard', told and re-told to hoots of laughter down through the years.

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Betty knew she wasn't the best looking or the brightest in their class but here she was, sixty years of a great marriage. It was she who had won the prize, ahead of all those other girls who had wanted him!

And Jack had been really great with the kids, encouraging them, helping them with their homework, stuff that was beyond her. They had all turned out well, hard-working, kind, polite and well spoken. All with a good education, away above what their father had had the chance of, all with good jobs, nice wives, lovely kids and grandkids and now the great-grand kids. Yes, it had been such a great Diamond Wedding Day at the Dixon's Halls, being able to see them all in the one place, enjoying themselves.

Unlike his brother and brothers-in-law, Jack had never had a car, riding every day to work on his bike for 51 years through all kinds of weather. He had to have a bank account when they took on the mortgage, but he had virtually nothing in the bank. Although he had worked hard and she had had wee jobs to help out, they had always struggled. But they had been happy.

She had no jewelry or fancy clothes like her sisters and sister-in-laws. Just Jack and the kids, and their kids and grandkids, and all healthy, thank goodness. That's what I call being rich, she had often said to him. They are my 'real diamonds', she thought.

ooOoo

'Well Princess Bettina do I get the kiss first, or do I only get it after you get your present?'

'A present? What do I need, unless you've got a new pair of dancing legs for me?'

'No, some miracles take longer than others', he joked, passing her a tiny box.

She opened it to see a ring. It was not too big, just big enough to be really classy though. An emerald set with 6 good-sized diamonds. Not that she was any expert, but to her this was a really beautiful ring and it looked as if it had cost a packet. She had never had an Engagement Ring. They had gone straight from his demob to being married, no money for a ring and no desire for one either. All she had ever wanted was him.

Over the years the others, her sisters, sister-in-laws, friends and neighbours had gradually started wearing Engagement Rings that they too had missed out on. She had always smiled quietly to herself and thought: "OK, I don't have a ring but who needs one? Just look at my Diamonds, my Don Juan, and my family! Who needs a diamond ring to prove how 'well off' you are?"

The tears came as he slipped it onto her finger. She reached up, grabbed the back of the neck and kissed him hard and long.

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After she had let him go he said in mock amazement, blinking his eyes, 'My God Betty, where did Gina Lollobrigida disappear too! She just about had my pants off there!

'Oh Don Juan, you galoot, will you never change? '

Drying her tears she added, 'Jack it's really nice but it's too much, really. How can we afford it?'

'Well Betty, it's more like, "Can McGuiness the Bookie afford it?"'

'What?'

'You see, I had that two-way accumulator bet on a few weeks ago, you know my usual bet for the horses on Saturday afternoon, and Bingo! Abracadabra! Shazam! Or whatever you like! But it came up, first time in about 37 years of putting on the same bet every Saturday. Young Denis was all for paying me out, after checking it carefully, of course, but then Faither McGuiness himself got in on the act and checked it and re-checked it.

'Then he came the old soldier, you know:

"Well son, this is a bit o' a queer wan ye know, the boay here shoudnae huv takin on a bet like this wan, ye see it's outside the guidelines a set fur him! Ah think ye can see yersel' son it's jist no' in the spirit o' the game! So, how about we settle on a hunner quid an' shake hauns on it?"

'Well Betty, before it was all legit, you know, before the Bookies had proper Betting Shops and it was all made legal, that would probably been the best I could have got out of him, but I just said:

"Well Mr. McGuiness, you've really got me confused now. You see, you, yourself, for more than 25 years and then young Dennis here for the last 12 years, well you have both been happy to take this self-same bet, happy to take my money and without a single 'hard luck Jack' when I won nothing off you for nearly than 37 years.'

You should have seen his big baw heid, Betty, it was like a beetroot. But before he could say another word, I said:

"So how do 'the guidelines', as you call them, cover that situation? But, just so you can sleep easy tonight Mr. McGuiness, by my quick mental arithmetic, and I'm sure you'll want to check it yourself, my bets, taken cumulatively over all those years, and allowing for say, five percent compound interest per annum, means that you and I are just about breaking even on each other with this win of mine."

'And then what did he say Jack?'

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'Not for the ears of a lady like yourself Princess Bettina.

'However, the Betting Shop was pretty full at the time, and Big Henry Gallacher was paying quite a bit of attention to the proceedings. And you know what he is like when he gets involved! So old Faither McGuiness just stormed out and drove off in his big Mercedes, no doubt to drown his sorrows at home. '

'Young Dennis McGuiness was laughing, tears running down his eyes, when he paid me out. He said:

"Well done Mr. B, that's the very first time I've ever seen anyone win an argument with my Faither. It was so good to be a part of it. Wait till my mother hears, she'll laugh like a drain!"

'So, how much was it you won then, Jack?'

'Enough, Betty. Trust me, it was enough, for everything.'

'So, how much *is* 'enough', Jack?'

'No, Betty, don't think you will ever wheedle it out of me! I know what you and your hard luck cases are like! You could give away the Gross National Product of America if you thought you could get your hands on it. You really are an awful woman when it comes to money. Oh and that money you think you owe to my three sisters, all paid. And all the other money you think you owe, all paid.'

'Even those three Provident Checks, due months ago to Mrs. Williamson?'

'Yes! And even the other money you owed to the kids!'

'Oh God Jack, I was so ashamed to ask them for help, but the money just seems to disappear once it gets into my purse.

'Betty, those days are over. Trust me, we have plenty money now.'

'Are you sure, Jack?'

'Yes, Betty, but there's just one single condition.'

'What's that Jack?'

'If you need money for ANYTHING in future, just ask me? OK? The money is there for us, there's still enough left to see us into our boxes! OK?'

New tears of joy and relief flooded down her face.

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'Oh Jack, you are so good to me. I just don't deserve you. You really are too good for me.'

'Always my pleasure Princess Bettina, at your service.'

'But Don Juan, please! Would you tell me, please, after all this time, now don't try to kid me on this, you know I've always wanted you to tell me. Why did you choose me? Why me? All those other girls that wanted you, all the way from primary school. Why me?'

'Simple Princess Bettina. I've loved you from the first minute I saw you. Can't explain it. Don't need to explain it. I've always wanted you and only you. Surely you must know that by now?'

'Well, I suppose I did really. You see it was exactly the same for me! But you always knew that I loved you, and only you, didn't you?'

'Yes. I knew it and that made me sure that you were the one for me.'

'So, Princess Bettina, how about a wee cuddle? And maybe another one of those Gina Lollobrigida moments? I could get used to those!'

'My Dearest Don Juan, your every wish is my command. Time for bed, but you'll need to help me out of this wheelchair. And right away, please, kind sir!'