

If only!

The tram arrived at Pollokshaws terminal just before the chip shop closed. Jack and Betty were first off, Jack running to join the queue, Betty heading at a slower pace for their single-end, desperate to visit the toilet.

Their tiny home was in a squat mews building located in the shadow of a towering sandstone building, on the corner of Pollokshaws Road and 84 Greenview Street. There was a funeral undertaker business on the ground floor and three levels of large tenement flats above.

If Betty had all the money in the world, she would move into the top floor flat owned outright by Miss Walker, the Infant Mistress at Sir John Maxwell school where her son Johnny was a pupil.

Although Betty had never been in Elma Walker's flat, she could imagine what it was like; light and airy with high ceilings, rooms facing back and front with full-height windows, a large kitchen with a water boiler and a mangle for clothes washing and not one but two four-rail pulleys for drying. There would be a back boiler for hot water in winter and a gas geyser for instant hot water in summer. There would also be a good-sized bathroom, a huge front sitting room with brocade curtains right to the floor and a fully fitted deep pile Axminster carpet. There would be two bedrooms and, best of all, a large square entry hallway with a cavernous walk-in storage cupboard for the pram, the kid's toys and Jack's bike.

Maybe if Jack won the pools? If only!

This thought caused her to shudder, feel guilty.

Jack used the same numbers every week and always left his football pools money and entry form on Thursday mornings for her to hand in to May Mackinlay at Mack's Decorator's office cum showroom, an odd and cavernous almost empty place next door to Molly Murray's small and cramped tobacconist and confectionery shop. To be valid, the pools form must be handed to May by four o'clock.

Since their marriage, Jack had never won a penny but his mantra was - *persistence pays. It's all about playing the long odds, second and third dividends. If we keep plugging away, someday our ship will come in.*

Betty thought of his pools' entry money as a sheer waste. In recent months she had missed the hand-in deadline several times and, without telling Jack, had used his pool's money to pay off a little from her secret tick bill from Molly's book, a ploy which allowed her to get five single cigarettes to tide her over until Jack brought his pay packet home on Friday.

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During the War, Jack had been at sea in the Submarine Service for five years, mostly in the Mediterranean where he had been depth-charged several times by E-Boats, once being confined on the bottom foot forty-two hours. Resulting from these traumatic experiences, Jack continued to suffer from bouts of "war nerves", flashbacks and vivid dreams which made him fearful, tearful and, very occasionally violent, lashing out at her in frustration. When his nerves flared up, he would attend a voluntary Saturday morning walk-in clinic at the Royal Infirmary. This clinic was organised by a lovely, kindly man called Dr Robin Gilmour, a man Jack had become friendly with and for whom he had built a garage beside his huge house in Bearsden. During that summer, Jack had worked on this garage at weekends for several months, returning each Sunday evening with his bike laden with flowers and vegetables, gifts from Mrs Estelle Gilmour.

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Once inside her tiny home, Betty grabbed the torch and key then retraced her steps to the outside WC. Finished, she flushed the pan, closed the door, pulling it tight until the sneck clicked then raced back to wash her hands at her jaw-box sink.

The single swan-neck tap provided cold water only. Looking out from her small sash window onto a wide expanse of rough ground called 'The Greenie', she saw a bunch of kids playing rounders in the gathering gloom. The teenager Lizzie McPhellem was in charge, tall, rake thin, in a thin summer dress that was years too short for her.

Betty smiled. Lizzie was a good girl, the eldest of a growing tribe of siblings. Annie and Paddy lived in happy chaos in a two-bedroom council house. Paddy had a club foot which somehow qualified him for a job as assistant stoker, keeping the furnace fed at the Steamie (Pollokshaws Public Washhouse and Baths) where there was also a full-sized swimming pool. His job meant they always had coal for their living room fire. Annie also got free washes in the Steamie and the kids got entry to the swimming pool. Annie cleaned after hours at the fancy Bank in Greenview Street, located on the ground floor of a posh red sandstone building across the pend from the chippy. Currently the McPhellems had eight kids in steps and stairs with another on the way. Their house was also the base for two scruffy dogs who ranged free in the neighbourhood, following anyone who might offer them scraps. With so many kids to feed and clothe, Annie and Paddy were always struggling. Where did they all sleep, Betty wondered, but at least their tenement flat had an inside bathroom.

Betty pulled down the blind and saw again that it was ripped and stained. She was trying to save for a new one but her purse was nearly always empty. She owed money to several shops for goods obtained on tick, trapping her in a juggling act each Monday, making her anxious at the prospect of eking out another four days until payday. Jack kept his pocket money and gave her the rest, expecting her to cope alone. Betty had never been good

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with money but generally Jack never complained, so long as he had money for his pipe tobacco and his pools entry, asking only for a few of her cigarettes.

Betty put the kettle on the larger of the two gas rings of her basic hob. It had a toasting grill below which was a boon. She would have loved to have an oven but there was no space and no money for one so she had to make do with her coal-fired range. Skirting the table, she moved four paces back to the door to switch on the new electric light, a single bulb dangling on a flex. This had been fitted only a few months earlier with a single 5-amp socket by the bedside for the radio and for her brand-new electric iron, a gift from her mother.

She judged the light to be too harsh. The electricity meter seemed to swallow money faster than the gas meter. Switching it off, she moved back to light the gas mantle above the hearth then moved three paces, turned on the radio, fiddled and found a music programme. Out of habit, she lowered the volume, to avoid waking her two sleeping boys. Only then did she remember Johnny and Douglas were staying overnight with Margaret, Jack's eldest sister. Her girls, Ann and Moira, were good with Betty's boys. Margaret's Billy was eight months older than Johnny, in the same class at school and the boys enjoyed each other's company. Margaret and Sammy lived in a spacious two-bedroomed top floor flat about half a mile away at Riverford Road, near the Town Hall. It had a vast sitting room, a great big kitchen and a lovely, long thin bathroom with a big geyser.

Betty and Jack had long ago accepted they were the least well off among both families and their friends. They had only lived in the Pollokshaws single-end for four years, a place Margaret had found for them. Before that, since marrying, they had struggled in digs with various landladies, trying to live quietly without causing upsets. Jack's noisy trauma dreams and occasional outbursts had meant they were always walking on eggshells, try always to placate their landladies to avoid eviction.

Although their single-end was a modest home, Betty loved it. Since moving to Pollokshaws, she had fitted well into the gregarious neighbourhood, a real community with every kind of shop anyone might need. There was also a small but well-stocked public library which allowed three books per adult per visit. Since Jack was not much of a reader, using his card gave her a choice of six books. There was also a community library shop where a book or magazine could be swapped for a donation of a halfpenny to an honesty box. Best of all, since she only had a sink and kettles or pots for hot water, she could wash her clothes at the Steamie, only five minutes' walk from her door where she could also have a luxury bath once a week, usually on Monday nights when it was quieter.

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Margaret had volunteered this outing for Betty's birthday, giving Jack five shillings to take her out for a special Saturday night out on their own. They had been to an early

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evening showing of *South Pacific* then on to the Plaza dance hall for few hours before heading home for a fish supper treat. In a way it was a reward to Betty for having Margaret's three kids after school as her shifts at Cohen's clothing factory did not end until five o'clock, sometimes later if there was a rush order to be completed on piecework rates.

This passing thought made Betty glance at the stiff manilla envelope on the mantle shelf, wedged behind the alarm clock. Although she had tried to conceal it, Margaret had been annoyed that Jack and Betty had been selected ahead of her in the queue for a new council house.

The envelope contained a formal notice advising their mews building was to be demolished under the Pollokshaws Comprehensive Development Plan, like many other substandard houses in the area. Attached with a staple, a second slip of flimsy paper advised that they should expect an offer of a newly built house in Arden, to be built by the SSHA, (Scottish Special Housing Association). Jack was keen on the move, seeing it as a step up the housing ladder but Betty was worried. She had not told him she had walked the five miles to Arden to look at the place, with Johnny by her side and Douglas in the pram. It had been a cold, windy day with showers coming at them in short, sharp bursts.

To her it seemed like a scary wilderness with no shops, no schools, nothing but new houses surrounded by farmers' fields and workmen shouting and swearing as they swaggered about carrying lengths of wood or pushing wheelbarrows filled with bricks or concrete. She wondered if that's how Jack behaved when he was on his building sites. At home and among friends he was always well-spoken but in a work situation he would no doubt want to fit in.

Jack came along the corridor, whistling a warning greeting, a family whistle used by all the Bonthrons. He opened the door, removed the Yale key, hung it inside on its night hook then bumped the door closed with his backside, leaning on it until the sneck clicked. A joiner of the old school, Jack always set himself high standards when fitting doors and locks.

"One special fish for *madame*, a fish supper with three pickled onions for *sir* and, 'Da-da-daa-daaaa', a bottle of American Cream Soda, the poor man's Champagne!"

"Did you get cigarettes?"

"Yes indeed-dee, dee-dee-doo!"

He threw the twenty-pack across to Betty who caught it deftly, lit two from the mantle and handed one to Jack. They settled to eat directly from the newspaper wrappers, eating, drinking lemonade then tea, smoking and chatting about the film.

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The luxury of a night free of children meant they could turn up the radio with Jack singing along in his fine baritone. Untrained, he had worked hard at learning the words and tunes by ear and could offer a good rendering, especially when singing along with the radio to songs he knew.

The announcer said, "And now a treat. Here again is the classic song from the 1949 stage show 'South Pacific', a song first made famous by Perry Como and Frank Sinatra. Now we have the film, here it is again, the wonderfully romantic 'Some Enchanted Evening', this time sung by Al Jolson."

They moved the table and chairs to give space to dance and Jack sang along as they swirled and turned, making the best of the confined space, transported to the plantation owner's villa on the mythical island of *Bali Ha'i*, reliving the soppy love scene from the film.

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Later, lights out, snuggle together in bed, they listened to the radio playing a mix of dance music and songs, keeping the volume low.

Although it was ancient, the radio had a good tone. It was a hand-me-down from Jack's other older sister Lottie who had also given them a well-worn gate-leg table and four battered dining chairs. Betty's sister Bunty (real name Marie) had gifted a small sideboard in good condition and a narrow, child's wardrobe. With a single bed for Johnny and a cot and pram for Douglas, the room was crowded with no space for anything else.

Jack and Betty's inset bed was raised high from the ground to create an essential storage space for a motley collection of old trunks and battered suitcases which held clothes, dishes, cutlery and pots and pans, all neatly arranged and easily accessible, each with its own pull cord used to retrieve it and a broom handle to push each back into its allotted place. It was a system devised by Jack, based on his experience of serving in submarines during the War where every inch of space had been at a premium.

The music programme ended. Jack reached across out of bed and switched off the radio.

In the near darkness, Betty tensed and closed her eyes sensing Jack was about to raise the dreaded topic of 'Arden', again! She hoped it would not lead to another argument. Jack had been obsessing over Arden since the letter arrived the previous week.

"Well, Betty, that was a nice surprise for your birthday. A new house at last, eh?"

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"Mmm, well, I like it fine where we are. Maybe if we could hold on, other people will move to Arden first then maybe we could get their house. I mean, what if we could get Margaret's place! That would be far better for us than Arden, wouldn't it?"

"No, Betty, that's years away. Sammy and Margaret need to wait until Billy's twelve to qualify and only because they have a boy and two older girls or they would be stuck where they are. There are not enough houses for people to pick and choose, you know that. If this place wasn't to be knocked down, we would be stuck too. Besides, under the Development Plan, they're even going to knock down the front building. Andy and Sadie Arbuckle got letters too."

"Not the front building, surely not. But it's perfect, isn't it. That's a waste, is it not? Where will all those people go? There are no children in that close so they won't qualify for Arden, will they?"

"No, you're right. But they are all well off. Andy says he's going to buy a bungalow in Mansewood. There's just a few left so they've reduced them to £500."

"£500! Where did Andy Arbuckle get £500?"

"He won it at Perth Races. He is in a syndicate with Murray Mackinlay, you know, the guy that owns the decorator's shop. Andy and Murray and William Fraser from the undertakers go salmon fishing at a beat on the River Tay, just beside the racecourse. Aye, Andy's struck it rich at last. Maybe it will be our turn next. You see, Betty, with the football pools, it's down to persistence."

"Oh, yes, Jack, I know you always say that but honestly, it'll never happen, not for us."

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The next morning Jack had a long lie while Betty walked to Riverford Road to collect Johnny and Douglas. When she got there, it was just Margaret on her own. Sammy had taken the five kids to the swing park.

"Ta," said Margaret, accepting a cigarette from Betty, the last two in her packet. Margaret sucked on the cigarette deeply, two drags only then nipped it, putting the long doubt in her pinnie pocket, saving it for later.

'A cuppa, Betty? How did it go last night? Did you tell him.'

"No, not yet. I'm not sure. I think I just missed. We've been very careful. We've been using condoms since Douglas so I don't see how I could be expecting. There's no way we could afford another wee one. Apart from the cost, there's no space."

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"Betty, about your move to Arden, I'm sorry I was so snappy about it the other day. It's just that we've been on the list for years and the rent on this place is going up again. And there's another leak. Thank God it's dripping over the bath. It's not causing that much damage so far but I'm worried the ceiling is going to come down on us."

"Could Sammy not fix it, I know he's a brickie but he can do slating, can't he?"

"Betty, Sammy's not an ordinary bricklayer nowadays, he's a chargehand, he gets other people to do the actual bricklaying. And just as well, with his bad back. Anyway, he had a look at it but it's too big a job. He says the whole roof is shot with nail rot, just like most of the houses around here. I went to see Mr Redpath at the factor's office in Shawlands but he says the owners can't afford to re-roof because the rents have been too low for years. May Mackinlay says Murray knows the owners. They're called Wilson-Browning. He's a solicitor and she's a head teacher somewhere, maybe Giffnock. No kids, just poodles. They live in a mansion in Newlands. Murray's men do all their decorating work for them. They own tenement closes and shops all over Glasgow. May says Murray says the word is they are looking to sell all their property in Pollokshaws and invest in something more profitable. Sammy heard that talked about at the Masonic Lodge too. He says Pollokshaws is finished. I'm going to sneak a long lunch break on Tuesday and go into town to the Housing Department again, pester them, tell them about the water ingress, push our case."

"Oh Margaret, I didn't realise. I love this house. You have it so nice. It's like Paradise on Earth."

"Betty, when you move, even if you get your new place before us, I'll let you have some of our furniture at trade-in prices. I've been saving for this move to a new council house for years. I'm fed up waiting. I'm determined to have every bit of furniture new before the move. New beds, new bedding, new crockery, new everything. Fitted carpets too. I missed out on everything because of the War. As you know, we've been working overtime at nights and Saturday mornings. It's a rush contract for Manchester Police, new uniforms. Cohen certainly knows how to get the work in. They tell me he owns half of Pollokshaws too and is set to make a fortune out of the Comprehensive Development Plan. He probably owns your place and all the buildings in Greenview Street except the bank Building. You should see his mansion in Pollokshields. Lottie made curtains for it. Fifteen rooms. Can you imagine what that must have cost?"

"But Margaret, your furniture, it looks perfect to me. We could never afford it."

"Don't worry about the money, Betty. There's no rush paying me back. It's the least I can do for my favourite brother and his lovely wife."

If only!

The heat had been building for days. A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. Then came a flash followed quickly by an enormous crack. The rain started to fall and was soon a downpour, a cloudburst. A few minutes later Sammy and the kids returned, drookit.

'Right,' said Margaret, taking charge. "Time for everyone to have a bath and a hair wash. I'll run the geyser for you. Girls, you go first and take Dougie with you. Billy and Johnny can go in after you're finished. Betty, you get the living room fire going and put up the clothes horse and get these wet togs dried. Sammy, nip round to the bakery behind Molly Murray's and get a dozen rolls and we'll have scrambled eggs for everyone when the kids are ready. Come on everybody, **actions stations**. Now! Please."

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When Betty and the boys arrived back at Greenview Street, Jack was up, washed and shaved, singing with the radio.

Betty's heart began to thud and her mouth went dry when she saw the tattered master copy of his football pools entry form beside the results page of *The Sunday Post*.

He beamed across the room, singing - "We're in the money, we're in the money. Look, Betty, I've done the sums. At a rough estimate, we've won two thousand spondoolucks! We can buy a bungalow in Mansewood and move up in the world. Think about it, we can have our own garden, just like Mr Gilmour!"

'Oh Jack. I'm so sorry. I didn't get your pool's form in on Thursday.'

"What?"

"I was too late. May was gone, the shop was shut. I was at the swing park with the kids and I lost track of time."

"OK, I get it. Your joking, right?"

"No, Jack. I didn't tell you because I thought you would never, ever win on the pools."

"Christ, Betty. You've fucking, fucking, **fucking** shattered us! You know how this works. I've told you hundreds of times, chances like this one don't come along twice in a lifetime. Christ, Betty, you really have fucked us good and proper!"

"Language, Jack, please."

He breenged past her, pushing her roughly in the chest and she crashed to the ground, more stunned than hurt.

If only!

The door slammed and he was gone.

Betty slumped onto the bed and buried her head in her hands, sobbing. There was a lump over her eye and blood on her lip from the fall.

A hand touched her face then handed her a damp cloth.

'Mummy, why is Daddy angry at you?"

"It's alright, Johnny, it's alright. It just a wee misunderstanding. Tell you what, let's go to Granny Bremner's in Govanhill."

"Can we go on the tram?"

"No, Johnny. The rain's off for the day now, so we'll walk, do us good. But when we get there, you can have tuppence to go to the café and buy sweets. How would that suit you?"

"OK. Do I have to give Dougie some?"

"Yes, just a wee bit. Come on, let's get to Granny's before it starts to rain again."

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It was just after six o'clock when Betty and her boys returned to Greenview Street.

Jack's bike was back, wrapped in its tarpaulin again, propped against their coal cellar.

Entering the corridor, she saw the Yale key was in the lock.

Johnny ran ahead, reached up, opened the door.

Jack swept him up in his arms and gave him a bear hug then threw him onto the bed and tickled him.

There was a pot of soup bubbling on the larger ring. The smell was wonderful. Jack was good at making soup.

Betty saw the flowers standing in her chipped old vase and the vegetable peelings in the sink and realised Jack must have ridden on his bike to Bearsden to see Dr Gilmour.

Johnny took the torch and the key for the outside toilet and raced off.

If only!

Douglas was asleep in his pram.

Al Jolson was singing his latest hit.

Jack took Betty in his arms and kissed her forehead.

They did not dance, did not speak. They just listened and tried to put the incident behind them.

The song ended.

"Betty, just wait till we get to Arden. You'll love it. You really will."

Betty said nothing.