

On the Dot

'Right, Betty, if you're sure you're comfy, I'll take a wee dauder up to see if he's flying them tonight.'

'I'm fine, Jack. Off you go.'

It was their twelfth year 'in the wilds' at Dewshill Cottages, in the shadow of the Kirk o Shotts transmitter, almost equidistant between Glasgow and Edinburgh. For a couple who had lived the first fifty-odd years of their lives in the crowded suburbs of Glasgow's South Side, moving to 550 feet above sea-level was a big shock. Here the last sleety snow fell in late May and resumed in early October. Summers were short, cool and rainy, winters harsh with cold biting winds. No longer could they pop out for messages or cigarettes at almost any hour when the need arose.

Jack had never owned a car and, coming up for seventy at his next birthday, his bicycling days were long behind him. For the first twenty years of their marriage he had ridden to construction sites all over the Glasgow area, an itinerant joiner chasing overtime to feed a family of four growing boys and a spendthrift wife with a heart of gold.

Throughout her life, Betty had been a soft touch, opening her purse to folk who plied her with hard luck stories. Always a heavy smoker, she had become housebound with chronic emphysema. Jack now controlled the money and kept their small ship afloat on an even financial keel by eking out their state pensions and his minuscule pension from his decade as a maintenance joiner at Yorkhill Hospital for Sick Kids, a job he had loved. Proud of his independence, Jack applied for no hand-outs or grants and, by dint of his thrift, their rates and electric bills were not only up to date but in credit.

Jack closed the door and set out for his expected rendezvous, heading up the steep spur road to the old A8 which had once been the main link from Glasgow to Edinburgh. This was now sheep country again. It had once been a mining community and the remains of open-cast pits and spoil heaps scarred the barren landscape. Half-way up he stopped and looked back at the row of untidy cottages and semi-detached villas, home to the seventeen families who made up the hamlet of Dewshill Cottages, a small commuter dormitory for those who clung to employment in the nearby towns. It was a poor community served by a sparse bus service a mile's walk away. The bus stop and its lay-by was where he was headed.

Immediately behind these dwellings the evening traffic roared past on the busy M8 motorway, a mere five metres behind and below his retirement home. Betty, an avid reader of the *Woman's Own*, *People's Friend* and similar magazines full of 'true' romance, had always dreamed of 'living in the country'. She had been the driving force behind their move to sell their flat in Govanhill to their youngest son who was engaged to be married. Betty had seen an advertisement in the *Evening Times*; the National Coal Board were selling four-in-a-block cottage flats at a knock-down price. The buyer must take an upper

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and a lower flat and convert their 'half-building' from two flats into a semi-villa. Jack, approaching retirement, had accepted the challenge. Perhaps Betty's other motive was a desire to escape a long train of dependent elderly neighbours she 'ran messages' for. Many were single elderly men and women from Crosshill synagogue where she had been the cleaning lady and hall-keeper for over twenty years.

The adaptations had taken Jack five years, done piecemeal with the help of his sons and work colleagues. Now they had three bedrooms, a small kitchen, and two small bathrooms, one with a bath and another, directly above, with a shower. This had been the bathroom of the upper flat. The upper kitchen was now Jack's workshop where he made knickknacks and mended toys for his small tribe of grandchildren and the kids nearby.

When he had first arrived still fully fit, he had been roped into playing football with these kids, who would chap his door asking: "Haw Betty, kin Jack kim oot tae play. 'N kin he bring his baw?" Jack's new-found career as a footballing super star had ended with his heart attack, aged sixty-three. Betty steadfastly refused to accept it had been a heart attack. Her denial version was he had been suffering from a wee touch of 'flu and should never have been outdoors in such cold February weather, up a ladder painting the high gutters.

Jack turned to continue his trudge up the hill. He was used to the constraints of being his wife's carer and knew Betty would be good for an hour or more. He checked his watch. Twenty-five to six. He only needed about ten minutes to get to his viewing post ahead of the lorry arriving. A light breeze was blowing from the south west, quite warm for late August, ideal for flying-off racing pigeons.

He smiled and upped his pace. Despite his high blood pressure, he was feeling fit. During the last year he had been out on every dryish day to make a complete circuit of "The Loch", as the locals called Roughrigg Reservoir. This man-made loch had been built as a water supply for Airdrie and District years earlier and was now disused. He judged the perimeter route he took was about five miles around, door to door. He had been noting his times, pushing himself faster each circuit and had recently completed his first hundred laps with his times still slowly creeping down. These outings gave him something positive to do and he knew the exercise was good for him. If he stopped to talk to someone, he noted his start/stop times and deducted any interludes to get a net time. He had always been good at arithmetic and easily held the numbers in his head, doing the calculation on his doorstep as he clocked his point of return.

Now, striding out at full speed again, he felt the sweat form at the base of his spine. This brought back another recurring memory, now an old family chestnut. Six months after his heart attack and stabilised by medication for both his heart weakness and high blood pressure, there had been a letter calling him back to Monklands General Hospital

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for a check-up. He had been asked to bring a change of clothing, such as a track suit or shorts and sports shirt; various exercises were to be attempted under the supervision of a physiotherapist.

In the gym, a small room with a changing cubicle and crammed with equipment, he was wired up with sensors by a young technician called Evette (not her real name) who explained that the physio was double-booked but she, Evette, knew the routine. She got Jack on the stationary cycling machine, checked the sensors were responding then invited him to "cycle as strenuously as he was comfortable with". She showed him how to adjust the rolling resistance, suggesting in view of his condition, he try level 4. After a few minutes observing, Evette said she would be back in 'a wee bit' to check his readings.

Unknown to Jack, when the young woman left the gym she was caught up in a minor emergency. A patient had slipped getting out of a hydrotherapy pool and needed to be manhandled to safety. After the commotion, Evette forgot about Jack and went on her tea break.

A few minutes into his session, warmed up and feeling good, Jack gradually ramped up his pace, easing the resistance first to 7 then 8 and finally, standing up on the pedals, he twisted the lever to the maximum setting 9. Closing his eyes to his immediate surroundings, Jack imagined himself to be on the Tour de France and going for a King of Mountains' jersey as he ground out his best ever performance.

Thirty-three minutes into his 'race', Evette burst into the gym and screamed at him to STOP!

When she checked his trace and stats she was amazed and relieved to find his results showed he was well within the 'normal healthy' limit. Two weeks later a letter from his Consultant confirmed his heart operation had been a complete success and he was 'fully recovered'. No more hospital visits were envisaged provided he continued to take his medications and attend his GP for regular check-ups. Betty showed this letter to everyone as confirmation that her 'only a touch of the 'flu' diagnosis had been correct after all.

At fifteen minutes to six, Jack was in position inside the farmer's field beside the sheep who crowded around him, hoping he had brought them food. He fished in his jacket pocket, pulled out a plastic bag and scattered stale bread and end crusts from Betty's sandwiches. With the flock crowded round him, he leaned on a gate directly across from the lay-by on the A8 where the lorry would stop. This was Jack's seventh visit to this spot. On previous occasions he had nodded to the driver then watched, remaining silent throughout the 'release' of the homing pigeons from the multiple tiny hatch doors. These doors, located on both sides of the lorry, were operated by a complicated system of

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wires and pulleys from a master lever pulled fiercely by the lorry driver to ensure, for fairness, every door opened simultaneously.

Over the weeks, Jack had deduced the lorry driver pulled this lever at exactly six o'clock on the dot, the time the birds must be 'flown off'. To get his time, the man used a large official clock in a sealed wooden case. The dial had black hour and minute hands and a sweep arm enamelled bright red for seconds. As six o'clock approached, the driver always became agitated, looking from his wrist watch to the starter clock, his hand gripping the lever. Jack had always been a bit of a joker and the driver's tense behaviour had amused him, causing him to come up with his wheeze.

By asking around, Jack now knew every bird to be flown off was in a race. Sometimes there were several races in the same release, each bird heading back to its home loft with a unique race tag ringed on a leg. On arrival the bird's owner must then retrieve the tag and insert it into an official clock box. The tag would then stop the bird's race clock at the time of its arrival. When returned to race HQ, the times from these clock boxes would be adjusted to account for the location of the home loft. With the adjusted times compared, first second and third places for the race declared and prizes dispensed from the entry monies. Being an amateur hobby, prize amounts were normally small but, Jack had been told, informal side bets between rivals could be high. Racing homing pigeons was a serious business.

In the end it all depended on the birds being flown off from the point of release at Kirk of Shotts exactly at six o'clock on the dot.

The lorry driver was a dour man, all business, never a smile, ignoring Jack's nods. Any time he did look in Jack's direction, his glances were always high to his left as if he had spotted a stray bird over Jack's right shoulder. On the man's left wrist was a very large watch which issued countdown bleeps. It was this watch which had started Jack scheming his bit of fun. The watch had been incorporated into the script which Jack started writing in his head. Because the man had been so taciturn, his responses to what Jack was planning to say were uncertain. In these rehearsals Jack had written down both parts, his own and the man's expected replies, trying to refine his script to get the timing right. Timing was the key.

Jack stood up on the second bar of the gate, leaned forward, looked for the lorry and checked his own watch. If the lorry was coming, it was running close to the wire.

Jack ran over his lines again. He had no fear of forgetting his part. As another challenge, on dark, dreary days when Betty lay snoozing downstairs on the couch in front of the coal fire with the TV babbling inanely, he had been up in his workshop out of hearing, reciting 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' and 'Tam o Shanter'. He now had both of Robert Burns' epic poems word perfect, ready to perform whenever an opportunity arose.

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At family gatherings these might be delivered; alternatively, if the situation suggested it, he would render snippets when meeting someone in the supermarket or travelling on a bus.

Jack stood up on the gate again and this time he saw the lorry in the distance. Nervously, he cleared his throat. What might transpire was different from reciting. It was live drama and to make his ploy work he would have to dance around whatever the man said.

The lorry wheezed its way up the hill. He tapped cold ash from his pipe, re-filled it with Condor Flake, lit it, puffing to get it going. Like his flat cap tipped back on his head the pipe was also a prop for his playlet. He checked his watch and allowed himself a final smile. With his performance imminent, he tried to psyche himself into the 'country bumpkin' look he had practised in front of the upstairs shower room mirror, aiming to get a glaikit, vacant expression on his face, when speaking his lines in the local dialect.

Unbidden, his well-worn tale of the identical Feetley twins came back to him from his time living in Pollokshaws in the early fifties. Both men muddled along with their elderly mother in a single end. Only one twin worked, Johnny, who was a leery (lamplighter), out late every evening to light up gas mantles in closes and streets and again early every morning to extinguish them. The other twin, judged to be 'simple', raided dustbins for jars, bottles and 'luckies' or bummed cigarettes at every opportunity. One morning while riding his bike on his way to work, Jack had called out: "You're right late at it the day, Johnny." After a short hesitation, the man had shouted after him, "Naw, Jack, Ah'm no Johnny, Ah'm Jimmy the Dafty, Ah don't huv tae work."

At last the lorry arrived. It was seven minutes to six when it skidded to a halt and the driver leapt down from the high cab. While he was in mid-flight Jack called across the road: 'Hello there, sir. Aye, it's a right fine night ye've goat fur it, eh? Bit ur ye no' running it tight?'

The man flashed an angry glance over Jack's right shoulder, still unwilling to look him in the eye but at least acknowledging his presence while muttering under his breath.

Jack stuck to his script, attempting the local dialect to conceal his Glasgow roots: 'Ah'm sorry, sir. Ah'm a bit corn beef, ye'll hae tae speak up, ken.'

The man ignored Jack and poured water from a plastic bottle into a sump and began turning a rotary handle vigorously to pump the water into a manifold from which narrow tubes discharged it into the horizontal gutters below each line of pigeon cages. The birds stuck out their necks for a last drink before their flights home. Although agitated, the driver was working through his usual routine.

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Jack volleyed his next ball over the net. 'Aye, sir, ye're right tae gie them wee sows a wee drink. It's sair waarm fur the time o year up here. Is it sair waarm awa doon there in civilisation? Is it Glesga yer frae, sir?'

The man made no response. He was now dangling from rungs on the side of the lorry, pinging wires to check they were correctly in the grooves of the pulleys.

'Aye, sir. An' dinnae furget the yonder side o yer lorry noo, eh?' The man scuttled out of sight and Jack raised his voice to compensate. 'Aye, sir, ye've a right joab on yer hands wi this lot. Is it the full fower hunner ye've goat the night?'

No reply. The man re-appeared, grabbed the count-down clock and placed it on the step beside the open door of the lorry and checked his wrist watch. The starter clock showed two minutes to six and his watch was now beeping loudly at fifteen second intervals.

At one minute to six the watch started beeping every five seconds and Jack fired a further ball over the net, hoping for an 'ace'. 'Haw sir, did ye ken aboot the pergin falcon thit's nesting hereabouts? They're sayin it's oan the tap platform o' the tele-mast.' Jack raised his pipe hand and stabbed in the direction of the TV mast. 'Aye, sir, thur it is! See it? Is it the twa, Mr an Mrs Pergin ? Surklin, gittin riddy tae pick aff yer wee birds wan bi wan.'

Despite the screaming bleeps from his watch, the driver could not resist following the line of Jack's pipe as it pointed up at the TV mast. As was fairly common, a few seagulls swirled restlessly around the halfway platform, some landing, others taking off. It was a favourite overnight roost.

The driver muttered to himself, 'Fuckin' seagulls,' then turned back to his clock.

The red second hand was 45 seconds past six o'clock and ticking upwards.

'SHITE!'

He pulled the lever then slammed his hand down on the ebony mushroom-shaped button on the top of the clock casing, stopping the red arm at 53 seconds past six o'clock.

The pigeons rose in a dense cloud filling the air with cracks from nearly a thousand beating wings. Some flew directly away but others, the majority, swirled in a thinning cloud until they got their bearings then swooped off to their homes, back to their waiting nest mates.

Jack looked back at the driver who was kicking his plastic water bottle viciously. It was trapped against a front wheel.

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'Fuckin' twenty-three years Ah've bin daein this run an' noo Ah've fuckin' failt oan ma last fuckin' turn!

Jack called over, 'Excuse me, sir. Wid Ah be right in sayin' yer burds is whit they cry 'Homin' Pigeons'?'

'Whit? Whit? Whit the fuck dae ye think they ur? Fuckin' budgies?'

'Naw, sir, thur no budgies. Ma brithir use tae breed budgies. It's the wan burd a ken a wee bit aboot. Ur ye *sure* it's no Homin Pigeons yer puttin up?'

'Fur fuck's sake auld yin, a course their Homers, surely ye kin see that! Ur ye daft as weel as deaf?'

'Aye, sir, Ah kent fine they wiznae just stray wans, like doon at the shoppin centur in Airdrie. So, tell me sir, dae they go strait hame? Ah mean, their no just gonnae fly aff tae gang free, eh?'

'Naw, naw, Ah fuckin hope no! Listen, they a' ken there ane loft. In aboot twa hoors thull a' be hame.'

The man was struggling with the hatch doors, using a long stick with a small fork on the end to tap them closed then edging the cables back into their grooves.

'Aw fuck, naw. Fuck, fuck, fuck.'

He unjammed a door on the top right corner hatch and a distinctive white dove with an orange head flew up, circled once and flew off in the direction of Airdrie.

'Aw fuck naw. It just hud tae be Big Willie McGavigan's wee Lily o the Valley. Shit, if he doesnae win an he finds oot. . . .'

'Haw sir, did ye see yonder late flyer? Whit did ye cry it?'

'Nuthin. Nae idea. It wiz jist a wee novice.'

'Haw sir, is yer man Wullie frae William McGavigan's the big butcher ut the Airdrie precinct?'

'Whit? Naw, naw. Naw, it's a diffrint Wullie a' the gither, OK?'

'Aye, sir, Ah follow yer drift. Mind, if it wiz William McGavigan the butcher, Ah mind bein at the skule wi his faither. Is he still wi' us, Auld Big Wullie?'

'Ah fuckin' hope no, they burrit him five year since. Wan Big Wullie McGavigan it wance is merrin enuff.'

'Sir, ye're no furgettin the yonder side o yer motor, ur ye?'

The man disappeared to the far side of the lorry and Jack, now back on script, raised his voice. 'Haw, sir, dae they pigeons a' huv wee maps wi' them? So as they kin get tae their ane postcode, like?' Jack could not make out what was said, only the string of muttered expletives.

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As the man stowed his long stick and picked up his starter clock Jack, feigning a light-bulb moment said, 'Haw sir, ah think Ah ken hoo they dae it. They follay the roads, dint they? Sure it's why ye bring them here aside the M8, is it no?'

The man was back up in his cab, his hand on the door.

'Jesus, fuckin hullbullies!'

The door slammed shut, the engine coughed to life with a cloud of black smoke. It took a few minutes to reverse the lorry during which Jack watched the driver's lips, guessing at what he was muttering.

The lorry made off back down the old A8, gathering speed, with Jack standing up on the gate, waving with his pipe hand and trying hard to hold Jimmy Feetley's glaikit look on his face.