Tuppence a Bag

by Greg Wilson

996 words

*The morning sky is the same pearly gray as the pigeon’s feathers. She cocks her head as a young woman hurries by below, her steps shortened only slightly for the two children beside her.*

“It’s the cathedral!” the boy in the sensible tweed suit exclaims.

“Of course it is,” his sister says dismissively. As the older sibling she feels it is important to sound certain. Father always does, and their new governess is as certain as water is wet.

The girl is no longer quite certain of anything. Did she actually step into a chalk drawing? And was there a tea party where—no. People don’t float into the air, no matter how hard they laugh, and *certainly* not in London.

“Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag.” She stumbles at the words the governess sang the night before. An old woman wrapped in shawls is sitting on the cathedral steps. Her tray holds little paper bags of corn. The pigeons on her shoulders look like her courtiers, the girl decides, proud of knowing such a grown-up word.

The governess puts out a hand to stop the boy from racing over. “We have an appointment to keep,” she chides.

“But I want to feed the birds!” He fishes a coin out of his pocket, sure as all boys are that wanting to do something is the same as having a right to.

The girls’ breath catches. After the governess sang them to sleep—did Father come into their room? Did he press the coin into her brother’s hand and tell him it was for the morrow? No—it must have been a dream. Father never looked sad or afraid, and he would never kiss his son on the forehead.

“After we visit your father at the bank,” the governess says firmly. “If you still have your tuppence, of course.” The boy reluctantly stuffs the coin back into his pocket. “Now come along, spit spot.”

The girl glances at the old woman, who smiles wistfully. *She must have been my age once,* the girl thinks. For a heartbeat she teeters on the edge of something enormous, but then a pigeon swoops down and sends the flock flying. She takes her brother’s hand and hurries after the governess.

*As the boy pulls the coin out of his pocket the pigeon takes to the air.*

“It’s the cathedral!”

“Father passes that every day.”

The governess smiles. She remembers how excited she was, but it was nothing compared to what she feels now. Now is the culmination of years of work and sacrifice. She is going into battle and she must not fail.

She glances at the crone on the cathedral steps. The faint aura around her wavers, the mark of someone who has drawn on her power too deeply.

“Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag.” Those six words had been the seed of her plan. In a few minutes an ancient evil will offer her brother a bargain. Wealth, power, an empire—he can have it all, just like Father and so many others. A single coin to seal the deal, then toys and make-believe set aside because big boys don’t do that. A wife chosen to advance a career, children neglected because there are accounts to check, all to feed something that should have died long ago.

This moment is her chance to change that. She puts out a hand to stop her brother running off. “We have an appointment to keep.”

“But I want to feed the birds!” He holds up the coin. It is all she can do not to slap it out of his hand. Its dark aura is not faint at all.

“After we visit your father at the bank,” she says firmly. “If you still have your tuppence, of course.” *Please, please still have it,* she prays silently.

Her brother stuffs the coin back into his pocket. “Now come along, spit spot.” She glances at the crone, who smiles wistfully in return. For a heartbeat the young woman teeters on the edge of recognition, but then a pigeon swoops down, sending the whole flock into the air. Her thoughts turn again to the enemy ahead. She sets off once again, knowing without looking that her younger self has taken her brother by the hand.

*The pigeon swoops down. The other birds flurry upward as if she were a hawk.*

“Feed the birds,” the old woman calls to the men hurrying by, their suits gray and their eyes empty. There: a freckled boy, her first self in a mustard coat and hat, and herself again in an outfit that fails to hide the curves beneath.

She clears her throat. “Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag.”

Her second self stops her brother from racing over. “We have an appointment to keep.”

“But I want to feed the birds!” Darkness boils off the coin he holds up.

“After we visit your father at the bank.” Old lips move in time with remembered words. “If you still have your tuppence, of course. Now come along, spit spot.”

The old woman blinks back an unexpected tear. Her brother’s shouts of, “Give it back! Gimme back my money!” will lead to a run on the bank. Questions will follow, then audits. The things in the City’s cellars will be weakened. Tensions will rise. A shot will be fired. Nations will send their millions against each other, not once but twice. By the time it ends, empires will be falling.

She will live long enough to see a new queen crowned. She doesn’t know what happens after that. A better world, she hopes, but it will be for Bert and his fey to watch over. Coming back to this moment has drained her. It is time to rest.

*The pigeon looks down at her younger selves. It is time to move on. As the sun breaks through the clouds she spreads her wings and flies up to join it.*