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TUPPENCE A BAG

by Greg Wilson

The pigeon is three shades darker than the centuries-old stone she stands on, but the morning sky overhead is exactly the same pearly gray as her breast feathers. She cocks her head to watch a young woman in impeccable middle-class camouflage hurry by below, her steps shortened only slightly for the benefit of the two children beside her.

The pigeon fluffs her plumage. It won't be long now...

"Oh look! The cathedral!" the boy in the sensible tweed suit says excitedly.

"Father passes that every day," his sister says dismissively. She isn't entirely sure that's true, but as the older sibling she feels it is important to seem certain. Father always is, no

matter what the subject, and their new governess is certain in the same way that water is wet.

The girl herself is no longer as certain of anything as she was a few days ago. She very clearly remembers stepping into a chalk drawing and taking part in a carousel horse race, and there was a tea party where—

But no. At eight years old she knows that people don't float into the air, no matter how hard they laugh. Not in the age of telephones and flying machines, and certainly not in London.

"Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag." She stumbles slightly when she hears the words the governess sang to them the night before. An old woman in a hodgepodge of scarves and shawls is sitting on the steps of the cathedral. The tray beside her holds little paper bags of corn. A few pigeons are investigating them, but most of the flock have settled on her shoulders or beside her.

They 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 racing over to the old lady even before he takes his first step. "We have an appointment to keep," she chides him.

"But I want to feed the birds!" he protests. He fishes a coin out of his pocket and holds it up, sure as boys of all ages are that being able to do something is the same as having a right to.

The girl's breath catches in her throat as a memory surfaces like a fish in a murky pond. Last night, after the governess sang them to sleep—did Father come into their room? Did he wake her brother and press the coin into his hand and tell him to keep it safe for the morrow? *It must have been a dream*, she decides. Father never looked sad or afraid, and he would never kiss his son on the forehead and say, "I love you."

But the governess is speaking. "After we visit your father at the bank," she says firmly. "If you still have your tuppence, of course."

The boy stuffs the coin back into his pocket. "Now come along, spit spot," the governess says. She sets off briskly once again, her sensible shoes clicking on the cobblestones.

The girl glances at the old woman one last time. The old woman smiles in return, a gentle, wistful expression that tugs at the girl's heart. *She must have been my age once*, the girl thinks, and for the span of a heartbeat she teeters on the edge of something enormous, but then a pigeon lands beside the bags of corn. The whole flock flurries into the air and her thought flies away with them. She takes her brother's hand and hurries after the governess.

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The pigeon fluffs her plumage. Right on cue the boy pulls the coin out of his pocket. The pigeon spreads her wings and takes to the air.

"Oh look! The cathedral!" the boy says excitedly.

"Father passes that every day," his sister replies loftily.

The governess smiles. She remembers how excited he was—how excited *she* was, and how hard she tried to hide it. It was nothing compared to what she feels today, though. Today her heart is racing and every sense is heightened. Today 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 steps of the cathedral. The faint aura around her had been invisible to her younger, innocent eyes. Even now it wavers ghostly-thin, the mark of someone who has drawn on her power too long or too deeply.

"Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag." Those six words, long remembered, had been the seed of her plan. She cannot tell her brother (so young, so *human*) that in a few minutes an ancient evil will offer him a bargain. Wealth and power, an empire spanning the globe—he can buy all that with a single coin, just like Father and so many others before him. A single coin to seal the deal, then toys set aside and afternoons of make-believe foregone because big boys don't do that. A marriage entered into because the woman's family can help advance a career, children

neglected because there are accounts and reports to read, all of it going to sustain something that should have died long ago.

She cannot change history, not directly, but she has learned at great cost that she can nudge it a little, so she puts out a hand to stop her brother before he takes his first step. "We have an appointment to keep," she chides him.

"But I want to feed the birds!" he protests. He fishes the coin out of his pocket and holds it up. It is all she can do not to slap it out of his hand. Its aura is not faint at all: her skin crawls to be so close to such a thing, but she has learned to be strong.

"After we visit your father at the bank," she says firmly. "If you still have your tuppence, of course." *Please, please, please still have it*, she adds in her head, not knowing which god her prayer is directed to.

Her brother stuffs the coin back into his pocket. "Now come along, spit spot," she says. She glances at the crone one last time. The old woman smiles in return, a gentle, wistful expression that tugs at the young woman's heart. *She must have been powerful once*, she thinks, and for the span of a heartbeat she teeters on the edge of recognition, but then a pigeon lands beside the bags of corn. The whole flock flurries into the air, and her thoughts turn once again to the enemy ahead. She sets off

briskly once again, knowing without looking that her younger self has taken her brother by the hand to follow.

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The pigeon spreads her wings and takes to the air, landing next to the bags of corn a heartbeat later. Her arrival sends the other birds flurrying upward as if she were a hawk or a cat.

The sun is warm on the cathedral's stone steps, but the old woman still feels the night's cold in her bones. "Feed the birds," she calls to the very serious men hurrying by, their suits three shades darker than the pigeons' plumage and their expressions just as blank.

She can see their parched souls in a way her younger self could not, and it is all she can do not to pour what light she has left into them. But her younger self would definitely see that, and she must not distract her. As much as she loved—loves—her little brother, there is more at stake here than one boy's soul. When he gets to the bank he must want to keep his tuppence more than anything in the world.

And there they are: a freckled boy with an awful haircut, her first self in a mustard-colored coat and hat, and herself again as a rosy-cheeked witch in a sensible blue coat that does nothing to hide the curves beneath it.

She clears her throat and pitches her voice to carry. "Feed the birds, tuppence a bag." As if on cue a pigeon lands beside

her, sending the rest of the flock flapping into the air.

Whatever self-control the boy had goes with them. She sighs with relief.

Out goes her second self's hand to stop her brother racing over to the cathedral steps. "We have an appointment to keep," she chides him.

"But I want to feed the birds!" he protests. He fishes a coin out of his pocket and holds it up, darkness boiling off it.

"After we visit your father at the bank," her second self says firmly while her older lips move in time with the words. "If you still have your tuppence, of course."

The boy stuffs the coin back into his pocket. "Now come along, spit spot." The old woman blinks back an unexpected tear at the phrase, wishing she had never had to learn what her second self did not yet know.

The Old Ones' bargain had seemed horrible—was horrible—but there were worse things in the world than even her wisest teachers had known of. Today and what follows will draw some of them out into the open. 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. Other ancient evils will sense weakness. Tensions will rise, alliances will shift. A shot will be fired and nations will send their millions against each other,

not once but twice. By the time the bloodshed ends the Old Ones' proxy empires will finally have started to fall.

She doesn't know what comes after that. A better world, she hopes, but it will be others' turn to watch over it. Coming back to this moment has drained the last of her strength. Bert and his fellow fey will see the children safely home. It is finally time for her to rest.

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The pigeon takes one last look at her three younger selves, together in this moment and forever. She is glad she came back to see them, but it is time for the next part of her story. As the sun breaks through the clouds she spreads her wings and flies up to join it.

The End