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Tuppence a Bag

by Greg Wilson

*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. The pigeon fluffs her plumage. It won’t be long now…*

“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.

In truth, the girl is no longer quite as certain of anything as she was a few days ago. Did she actually step into a chalk drawing? And was there a tea party where—no. People didn’t float into the air, no matter how hard they laughed. Not in the age of telephones and flying machines, and *certainly* not in London.

“Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag.” She stumbles at the words the governess had sung the night before. An old woman wrapped in a hodgepodge of scarves and shawls is sitting on the cathedral steps. Her tray holds little paper bags of corn. A few pigeons are investigating them, but most have settled her shoulders. 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 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 boys of all ages 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 and say, “I love you.”

“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.” She sets off briskly again, her sensible shoes clicking on the cobblestones.

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. Her thought flies away with them. She takes her brother’s hand and hurries after the governess.

*The pigeon fluffs her plumage. As the boy pulls the coin out of his pocket she spreads her wings and takes to the air.*

“It’s the cathedral!”

“Of course it is.”

The governess smiles. She remembers how excited he was—how excited *she* was—but it was nothing compared to what she feels now. 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 cathedral steps. 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 and too deeply.

“Feed the birds. Tuppence a bag.” Those six words, long remembered, 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 buy it all with 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 advance his career, children neglected because there are reports to read and accounts to check, all of it to sustain something that should have died long ago.

She cannot defeat that, not directly, but she has learned at great cost that she can nudge history a little. She puts out a hand to stop her brother running off. “We have an appointment to keep,” she chides.

“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: 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 still have it,* she adds in her head, not caring which gods hear her so long as her prayer is answered.

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.*

The sun is warm on the cathedral’s stone steps, but the old woman still feels the night and the years in her bones. “Feed the birds,” she calls to the very serious men hurrying by, their suits gray and their eyes empty. She aches to share what little light she has left with them, but her younger self would notice that.

There: a freckled boy with an awful haircut, her first self in a mustard coat and hat, and herself again in a sensible blue coat that completely fails to hide the curves beneath it.

She clears her throat and pitches her voice to carry. “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 at the phrase, wishing she had never had to learn what her second self still does not know.

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. Other things will sense that weakness, and with it, opportunity. Tensions will rise and alliances will shift. A shot will be fired. Nations will send their millions against each other, not once but twice. By the time it ends, empires will have started to fall.

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, together in this moment and forever. She is glad she came back to see them, but it is time for her to move on. As the sun breaks through the clouds she spreads her wings and flies up to join it.*