

Part of the Crowd

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Ms Greener sat on the old park bench in the middle of Central Park, wearing her finest periwinkle-coloured cardigan. Beside her, lay her green velveteen purse, which she opened, pulling out a clear plastic bag full of bread. Dawn was about to break in the park, as the sun's rays illuminated the rough gravel pathway I was walking on. I often passed Ms Greener on the way to my office job, where I worked at the time as a salesman for a big supplies company. She sat on the same old oak park bench as the day before, waiting to feed the city pigeons. I never paid much attention to her, as I was always hustling to and fro, trying to keep on schedule. Nor did I ever think that she noticed my presence, until one day she called out me.

‘Young fella! Young fella!’ she said, waving her hand to get my attention. ‘What’s your job around ‘ere? What could you possibly be doin’ that’s so important you feel the need to zip on by every day?’

Her sudden acknowledgement startled me. ‘I work in an office job, selling supplies to companies.’

‘An’ do you it like there? Is it the cat’s pyjamas?’

What an odd phrase to use. ‘No ma’am, not exactly, but it pays the bills. And that’s all that matters.’

She shifted in her seat. ‘Well if you don’t like it, it can wait. Come ‘ere, boy. Come feed the birds.’

I shrugged and guessed my boss wouldn’t mind if I arrived a little later than usual. In fact, there were days when my boss didn’t even show up to his own office. I walked over to the park bench. She picked up her emerald green purse again, this time grabbing a handful of breadcrumbs from a metal tin. I watched her place them in my hands, noticing that her wristwatch’s hands were frozen.

‘Your watch, it’s broken. Why are you still wearing it?’ I asked.

‘It’s not broken,’ she said, seeming a little offended at my remark. ‘It’s fixed precisely on the time the pigeons arrive for their feeding. I made it that way so I wouldn’t forget. See?’ She pointed to the shorthand, which was fixed on the six, and then to the long hand which

was stuck between the eight and nine. ‘Six forty-three exactly. Same as the day before, and the day before that too.’

I checked my own watch, to see what time it was. It was six-forty-two, and I watched in anticipation, as the second hand ticked towards the twelve. As the second hand inched closer and closer, I began to count down. *Ten...nine...eight... seven...six...where were the pigeons? Three...two...one...*

‘Here they come,’ Ms Greener shuffled around in her seat, trying to get ready for the birds. ‘Get ready, boy!’

My clock struck six forty-three, and the distant cooing from the city came flocking into the park right on cue. The birds came drifting down from the sky all at once, some landing on the dead grass beneath us, and the more courageous ones on the park bench. Ms Greener cackled as one bird decided to land on top of her greying hair, ruffling its feathers as she fed it some of the bread’s crust. I sat there in awe, gazing out at the sea of pigeons. There they were in front of me, cooing in unison, like a choir who had practised their big number for this exact moment. Their harmonies were lifted in the blowing wind, while their melody was kept to a low humming.

Ms Greener tapped her watch. ‘You see, boy, right on time! Just like I told you. Isn’t it wonderful?’

I laughed. ‘Yeah, it’s really something.’ I couldn’t take my eyes off the one pigeon who was busily squirming and squawking his way through to the front of the crowd, like a child who sees his favourite toy in a shop window. He pushed and shoved the others in hopes of getting the beloved sourdough bread.

I picked up some breadcrumbs and threw them into the middle of the crowd. There was a flapping of several pairs of wings, and the bickering of beaks as the birds indulged, followed by a noisy squabble for more. I repeated this process over again for the next ten minutes. I succumbed to the overwhelming joy from throwing the crumbs torn off a chunk of bread, and gave it to the pigeon, who had landed right on my lap. He cocked his head to the left and cooed, clearly interested in me.

‘Ah, you’ve found Dexter, have you?’

I scoffed as the bird snatched the piece of bread I was holding in my hands with his beak. ‘More like he found me! Say, do you have a name for *all* of these pigeons?’

Ms Greener threw her head back at my question, clearly amused. ‘Did I say something funny?’ I asked. She coughed abruptly, trying in vain to cover up her laughing.

‘No, not at all! Not at all. No, I don’t have a name for *all* these birds,’ she gestured to the flock, ‘but I have names for those particularly gallant ones.’ In that same moment, a cream coloured pigeon came soaring from the heavens and landed on her right shoulder. Ms Greener clapped her hands. ‘Good day, Addie. How are you this fine morning?’

The pigeon cried softly in reply, nudging Ms Greener’s neck in a demand for food. She fed the bird a thick chunk of bread from her loaf and smiled as Addie took it eagerly in her beak.

Letting out a sigh, the old woman closed her eyes, but kept her expression blank. The morning sun had finally risen beyond the autumn leaves of the trees, and the hazy layer of city fog that dwelled above us had resigned for the day. The sun’s rays cast their warmth on the park, causing Ms Greener to open her eyes again to bask in its light. I felt my stomach drop, as I began to notice the workers from all around the city had begun to shuffle through Central Park, making their slow commute to their offices.

Seeing their suits of grey and heavy briefcases, I realised I was just like them. I had a job to attend to, where I sat behind a broken desk and made lousy phone calls. It was like the sun had just dropped below the clouds again, no longer wanting to face the hardships of a Monday morning. But I was grateful for that day — I felt a glimpse of joy that could only be found in the smallest of tasks. Never in my life would I have thought that feeding the birds could bring one ordinary man such joy. I just wish I could’ve stayed for longer, and fed the birds until the sun settled behind us at dusk. But alas, time grabbed me by my collar, and dragged me to work.

Ms Greener sat up in her seat, as I stood up from my chair. ‘My boy, where are you goin’ now?’

‘Work.’ I said. ‘I can’t be late. My boss will be angry if I’m not there. But thank you for all this, I had a wonderful time.’

Her face showed an expression of resignation at my departing statement. ‘Oh, right. Yes, you best be going then. Come again, won’t you?’

‘Yes, yes of course. Certainly.’

I found myself in the park once again about a week later, making my usual journey to work. I turned the corner in the park alley and headed onto the main gravel path. Winter’s wake was finally upon us, the cold wind whipping my coat and briefcase as it rushed past me. I kept my head down, in an attempt to try and avoid the cold’s bitterness. It wasn’t until I heard that familiar cackle, I lifted my head.

I saw the same old Ms Greener out in the cold, sitting on the ice-coated park bench, laughing like a madwoman at the pigeon, who had just landed on her hand. I smiled, stopping in my tracks to take a moment's rest and observe the commotion. I looked at my watch and noticed the time: six forty-three. *Maybe I have enough time to stop and say hello.* I waved to her from across the gravel pavement, but she did not notice me, for she was too preoccupied feeding the pigeons, and laughing at their odd behaviour. A herd of shivering commuters came shuffling towards me in a closely-knit pack, their heads hung low in misery about the oncoming workday. They marched in zombie-like unison, narrowing the gap between us. I put my head down once more, too tired to fight for happiness on a Wednesday, and kept on walking.