



Cat Among the Pigeons

by Sue Hitchcock

Declan was reading the mail addressed to his dead father,

“That’ll put the cat amongst the pigeons!”

“What’s up, Declan? They can’t do anything to him now. He’s made his departure.”

“It’s us! I don’t know what we’re going to do. It’s all of us! It’s not Dad’s fault, but he couldn’t have solved it. We’ll have to call a meeting. Margie, go round all the vans and tell them there’s a meeting tonight. Keep your distance, because of the virus!”

Declan drove to the supermarket and bought what sausages and burgers he could find. Bread seemed unavailable, so potatoes would have to do. As it got dark he set up the firepit and buried potatoes under the wood before lighting it. This was usually the preparation for a celebration amongst the fair people, but this was February and it was bad news.

Families emerged in dribs and drabs, mostly warmly dressed, though the kids insisting on their starry headbands or spiderman masks. When Margie assessed everyone had arrived, she fetched her mother, who seemed reluctant to speak, though everyone was looking at her expectantly. Declan took her arm to encourage her.

“What should I say? You must have all heard that Colum died when we were in Spain...”

Fee and several others closed in, but she put up her hand,

“You’ve got to keep your distance – I’m in quarantine in case I’ve got it too.”

Margie had been in shock, stunned. Now she howled and her knees gave way, leaving her in a heap on the floor. Other folks were crying too and Declan waited till it subsided before he dared speak.

“I’m afraid I have further bad news...” his voice was gruff and he stopped to blow his nose. “We all need to make decisions. All our bookings have been cancelled. Last year’s takings were divvied out before Christmas, so we each have to find a way to get by.”

“The pandemic might be over soon!”

“It makes little difference. There’s no way we can set up bookings, even for the long Summer break. You can still leave all your stuff on site. It’s got to be over some time, but you need to make your own decisions on how you’re going to survive.”

Over the next few days there was at first anger and outrage, then gloom descended. One by one the families said their farewells and departed. It was assumed that Declan would remain as carer for Granny O’Brien, who was otherwise alone, for his mother, now a widow and for his sister too. He had some income from his car repairs, but he had inherited the site, the warehouse and whatever was left of the fairground equipment, bits and pieces of which had been sold to keep each family going. The lorries remained, not useful for towing caravans and anyway, nobody had any use for them at the moment.

Declan himself didn’t see any future in this role and Margie had moved in with Roma, since their mother’s return. At the end of his mother’s quarantine, he moved back into the caravan. It was time for a discussion about her plans, now the situation had changed.

“Can’t I help Bill in the pub, like last winter?”

“They’re closed. No congregating, remember?”

“But they will open again soon, surely!”

“You’ll have to ask Bill, he’s got other barmaids, don’t forget.”

“And when is Margie coming home?”

Declan shook his head, "I'm not sure she wants to. She's happy with this girl, Roma. I'll take you to visit her at the weekend."

Declan sighed and reached inside his jacket to fetch out a small bottle of whisky. Offering it to her, he asked, "Yes?"

She nodded.