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## Did you hear that?

by Sue Hitchcock

“Did you hear that?”

“Pardon?”

“I said, did you hear...”

“What?”

“Well, a sort of piping, squeaking noise.”

“Obviously not – it’s well above my hearing range. It was probably that old guy’s shopping trolley.”

They had been down to Motcombe Community Centre, where there was a market every Saturday, to swap some books for a few potatoes and they had managed to get an onion as well this time.

It was five years since the Pandemic had been downgraded to epidemic status and people were supposed to return to the previous normal, but things had changed for the worse. You could ignore the fact that everyone coughed and sneezed all the time, with no idea if they were spreading a cold, covid, the flu or even avian flu, though where that came from nobody knows – birds were going extinct along with the humans. The trouble was that the new normal for the rich meant making good the losses they had suffered during the Pandemic.

This was true, not only in supposedly democratic countries, but also in dictatorships, whether left or right. Dictators had always taken care of their own interests, only spending on an army to defend the status quo.

The problem of climate change had been ignored, while oil companies continued to refill the pockets of the masters. The air and the water became more polluted and weather events made more and more people homeless or starving.

The shops locally were still open, though too expensive for a growing number of folk, so the Saturday market was a godsend. Money in the form of coins or notes had been abolished, so bartering had become the norm. The old couple's only capital was their books and sometimes a local gardener would have a surplus and take pity on them. There were plenty worse off than them, especially those whose homes had been flooded the previous winter.

The man with the shopping trolley was probably one of those, sleeping in abandoned cars, now petrol had finally been banned, all his worldly goods ferried about all day. Everyone looked bedraggled, shoes wrapped on with rags and their tatty clothes hidden under an everlasting, synthetic rain jacket. At least with the end of burning fossil fuel last year, the air had begun to clear. Humans began to hope, but was it too late for the birds? Those that survived the pollution had been preyed upon by people looking for eggs and by their hungry pets. They were gone – Silent Spring!

“I can still hear it.”

“What do you think it is?”

“It's coming from over there.”

He looked and saw a tiny creature at the top of a tree, “I do believe it's a robin.”

Could it be? They stared, open-mouthed.