

Alison Moore

The Voice of the People

On the day of the protest, Glenda decided to drive out to the retail park to buy weedkiller. She was just setting out, getting into third gear, when a pigeon dawdling in the road caused her to brake hard. The pigeon seemed oblivious, even when Glenda's two-tonne car was virtually on top of it. Perhaps the car actually was on top of it, because having stopped dead, Glenda could not see the pigeon anywhere. She
5 was just about to get out to look beneath her wheels when she saw the pigeon wandering to the side of the road. She watched its strangely sluggish progress, and then drove on, towards the edge of the village.

The garden was really Dougie's responsibility, but work was taking it out of him these days. On his day off, he just lay on the sofa, with the cat asleep on top of him, or sometimes the cat fell asleep on the carpet or in the lengthening grass, wherever it happened to be. Dougie himself did not really sleep, he just lay there,
10 with no energy for Glenda, or for his projects: at the far end of the overgrown garden, a half-dug pond had been abandoned; and the second-hand furniture that he had bought to spruce up was gathering dust in the spare room. The last piece he had done was the little table on which their telephone stood: he had spent weeks sanding and then staining and varnishing it, although Glenda hated it, the darkness of its wood, and its rickety, skeletal legs.

15 She had just got onto a faster stretch of road leading out of the village when another pigeon staggered out in front of her car, not even flinching away from the vehicle as she skimmed past. She wondered what was wrong with these pigeons; they were like zombies.

It was not just Dougie; it seemed to be everyone who worked at that factory. They had all lost their pep. No one in the village liked the factory, although the men needed the jobs; it employed hundreds of them. It
20 was an ugly, stony-faced building, ruining what had been a nice stretch of riverside, at a spot where the locals used to swim – some still did, but not many. The women had been worrying about the factory's emissions, about what exactly was going into the air. Sometimes the smoke that went into the clouds looked yellow. And was anything going into the river, anything that should not be? Dougie used to fish there, but he did not do that anymore. And there was that terrible smell, which had to be coming from the
25 factory.

At the bend, where the road turned away from the river, there was a pigeon, flattened against the tarmac. Its grey wings were splayed around its crushed body. Its underbelly was turned up to face the sky, to face the wheels of the oncoming traffic. These pigeons reminded Glenda of the summer outbreak of flying ants, which did not fly off at the flap of a hand as houseflies did; or they reminded her of the houseflies
30 themselves, the listlessness that came over them at the end of the summer, leaving them too slow to avoid the swatter. But she had never before noticed the phenomenon in birds or other creatures.

Glenda had written the council a letter, which the other women had signed. The letter asked questions about those emissions; it suggested that the factory might be affecting the health of the workers; it requested a thorough investigation and the suspension of operations pending the results. The men had not
35 signed the letter. The letter had been forwarded to a secretary who would liaise with the relevant committee; it was then, after somebody's holiday, to be discussed at a forthcoming meeting. Not having heard anything for a while, Glenda had left messages on a council answerphone. In the meantime, the

women were going to go on a protest march. "We never used to take things lying down," Glenda had said to the women. "When we were students, we used to march." They used to go down to London, on coaches; they had marched through the capital in their thousands, to force things to change. "We should," the women had said in response. "We should do that." Since then, they had been meeting every Wednesday morning at Fiona's house. Fiona had provided refreshments while they made placards, nailing boards to wooden sticks and painting slogans on them — WE WANT ANSWERS! — slogans that they would shout as they marched. They had photocopied flyers to put through people's letterboxes. They had notified the local paper.

Glenda glanced at the dashboard clock. It was almost noon; they were due to meet to start the protest at one o'clock. They would march down Union Street to the river, right down to the factory. They would stand outside that grim building and stamp their feet and shout, make some noise. Someone would have to respond; something would have to be done.

She pulled into the car park of the Do-It-Yourself store, disturbing a couple of birds, which flapped up into the air and flew away. She parked near the entrance and went inside the store. As she entered the gardening section, she recognised a neighbour who was standing looking at the lawnmowers. Glenda said hello. She could not think of her neighbour's name. The woman continued to stare at a lawnmower, and Glenda thought that she had not heard her, but then the woman said, "I've been here for hours. I just can't decide."

"Are you coming on the protest?" asked Glenda.

"I just can't decide," said the woman.

Glenda turned away and picked up a spray-gun bottle of ready-to-use weedkiller. She took it over to the till, where the cashier was sharing a joke with a man who had bought paint in a shade called "Nursery". The colour looked putrid to Glenda. The man turned away and the cashier looked at Glenda and said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Glenda, lifting her free hand and touching her face. "It's just a rash." She handed over the weedkiller.

"Two pounds," said the cashier.

Glenda looked at the silver and copper in her purse. She could not be bothered to count out the coins. She handed over a note and waited for her change, and then stood struggling with the zip of her purse. She took her weedkiller and moved towards the exit, aware of the cashier watching her as she walked away.

She strapped the weedkiller into the passenger seat, as if it were a child. She did not want it sliding around, busting open, weedkiller going everywhere. She drove home slowly, carefully.

It was after one o'clock when she returned to the outskirts of the village, where she found Fiona sitting on the kerb, with a placard on the pavement beside her. Glenda came to a stop and wound down her window. She said to Fiona, "Have they gone already?"

Fiona raised her eyes. "Who?"

"The other women," said Glenda. "Have they started the march?"

"No one else has turned up," said Fiona.

80 “Oh,” said Glenda. “Well, I have to take the car home, then I’m going to walk back down here and join you. Even if it’s just the two of us, we can still march down to the factory. We can still make some noise.” She drove home, passing a car that was so badly parked it looked as if it had just been abandoned mid-
manoeuvre, and stopping to move a child’s bike that had been left lying across the road. She backed her car
85 into a kerbside space and took the weedkiller inside. She put on some sunscreen and checked her appearance in the mirror. She was wearing the olive-green eyeliner that Dougie had once said brought alive her copper-coloured eyes, but now she wondered if it was just making her look a bit ill. She put down some food for the cat. By the time she got back down to the corner with her placard, Fiona was no longer there. Glenda thought about going to the factory anyway, on her own, but she did not really think she had the
85 energy.

When Glenda got home again, she filled a glass with water from the tap, and drank it standing at the sink. It was past lunchtime, but she was not hungry, and there was still food in the cat’s bowl from before. She went through to the lounge and sat down in an armchair, next to the second-hand table with the phone on it. She had disliked that table, she thought, but now she could not really see what was wrong with it; she
90 did not have any strong feelings about it either way. Next to the phone were her phone numbers. There was the number for the council — she would have to call them again at some point, about that letter she had sent to them. And there was Fiona’s number — she ought to call her; she ought to call everyone. The protest would have to be rescheduled. The numbers seemed to blur; she must be tired. She switched on the TV and watched the afternoon programmes. She was still sitting there when Dougie came in from the
95 factory. He lay down on the sofa.

“Have you seen the cat?” asked Glenda.

“Uh-uh,” said Dougie.

In between TV programmes, Glenda said, “I’m going to go up to bed,” but she did not actually move for a while.

100 Eventually, she got to the bathroom and picked up her toothbrush. She looked at herself in the mirror. It felt like being stared at by a stranger. Her eyes were the colour of dull pennies. She left the bathroom and got into bed. She looked at her book but she felt that she just wanted to sleep. She realised that she had somehow not cleaned her teeth after all. She thought about her unbrushed teeth rotting in the night, but she did not get up again; she just left them.

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105 A week and a half later, Glenda found the cat beneath the back wheel of her car, against the kerb. It must not have moved out of the way when Glenda was parking. She had not been anywhere since the previous weekend, when she went to fetch that weedkiller.

She stood at the kerb, trying to remember what she had come outside for. There was no point driving over to Fiona’s house: the group had dissolved.

110 Glenda’s placard was still propped against the front wall. She picked it up, looking at the faded lettering: WE WANT ANSWERS! Had she written that? It did not sound like her, like something she would say. Perhaps she had got somebody else’s placard by mistake. She stood on the pavement, near the kerb. She could see the factory chimney in the distance, down by the river, belching its mustard smoke into the sky. Dougie would be taking his lunch break soon. She could walk down there and try to see him, see if he

115 was feeling any better. If she found, on the way, that she did not want to keep carrying the placard, which may or may not have been hers, she could just leave it somewhere.

She stepped into the road, with the sign hanging down, the message (WE WANT ANSWERS!) dangling in the gutter. She moved out into the road, slowly, as if she were stepping through the mud at the edge of the river, mud in which Dougie had seen fish lying belly up.

120 She did have a sense of the size and weight of the vehicle that was coming towards her. She was not oblivious to the juggernaut that was bearing down on her. But it felt more peripheral, more distant, than it was. She was moving forward, looking towards the far side of the road, but with no great sense of urgency.

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