

42nd Street

A Paul Toolan short story

The Beetlecrushers clog-dancing team clicked and tapped their way across South Petherton village square. Folk Festival Day was warm and muggy - shirtsleeves and pushchairs, panting dogs, the smell of fried onions, fresh pizza and spit-roast Dexter beef, wafting from West Street and the courtyard of The Brewers Arms.

A fiddler bowed a single note and the crowd, squatting on lines of straw bales, stilled to a murmur. Two guitars mirrored the note. A bearded mandolin player fine-tuned his strings as eight rainbow-coloured dancers slid fresh flower-stems into hats of yellow straw.

Leaning heavily on his stick, an old man shuffled towards the one remaining bale, helping his frail companion ease slowly down. It wasn't comfy, the bale, but at least it was a seat.

'Hope I can get up again', she said.

'I'll give y'a push.'

'Tuh, you couldn't push a fly, these days.'

He looked at his gnarled hands. No, he thought, these days the fly would win.

'Keep still', she said. 'They're goin' to start.'

The pair of them watched as bright skirts swished to the music and felt the first beat as eight clogs rose and hovered over the ground, pausing for muscle-tearing moments before dropping to the tarmac with a single *click*. Eight more beats and eight more again, the rhythm quickening to the trill and ching of mandolin and guitars, and the fiddle spinning tight circles of sound which the tapping dancers chased and caught.

'You're tapping your stick', she whispered, pointing. He was following the beat, hadn't noticed.

'Well, *you're* tapping your foot. I saw you.'

'Tuh, tapping the good one,' she said, rubbing at the bandage on the other.

With a swirl of skirts, the dance grew faster, his well-worn stick and her one good foot involuntarily tapping, tapping to the circles of sound, to the rhythm of clogs, tapping the two of them back, tapping their memories back, back to 1934 in Yeovil, to The Gaumont Cinema on Stars Lane, where they 'stepped out' together for the very first time, his arm around her

warm young shoulders in the back row of the celluloid palace, watching Dick Powell's dancers in *42nd Street*, and she asking him, 'who's best, Ginger Rogers or Ruby Keeler?'

And him saying, 'You are.'

As one, the dancers climbed into the air on invisible strings, landing and spinning, eight clogs tapping and heeling, tapping and heeling, before the music flicked to a sudden stop - *click* - and eight pointed toes slow-slow-slowly rose, knee-high, the audience rising with them, breath held, tensing, waiting, for one final rhythmic *clack!* Then eight toes falling in teasing-lingering-unison till they touched the ground with the tiniest of clicks, and the smiling dancers bowed.

Whoops and whistles rattled the windows of the homes and shops surrounding the square as applause swelled and fell, its last echoes fading into silence somewhere between the Delicatessen and the Pharmacy.

Then the crowd dispersed, and the dancers were gone, pitching the two companions out of their cinema seats, out of The Gaumont, spinning them back from 1934 to a new century, all the way back to an old straw bale in the emptying village square.

'I wish I could dance like that,' she sighed.

'You are', he said, his stick pointing at her one good foot, still tapping.