

# Taxi for Elizabeth and George

by John D Rutter

‘I’ll go and see if they’re here. I can’t tell from this window. I’ll open the door, shall I? That’ll be best.’ His accent is round Lancastrian. ‘It’s only been five minutes. I’m sure they’re on their way.’

George drags his slippers into the hall, leaving Elizabeth on the sofa. His best suit trousers are a couple of sizes too big. A faded black and white couple in wedding clothes gaze out from a gold frame on the windowsill. The front door takes a good tug to open but he’s got the knack. He squints in the sunlight. No one there yet. He sighs and turns back inside, leaving the door ajar so that a streak of yellow pours across the hall. Dust particles foxtrot over the patterned carpet and circle the number 50 embossed on the photo frame.

In the kitchen, two cups and saucers sit next to a teapot with a chipped spout on a Diamond Jubilee souvenir tray. He rests his hand for a moment on the woolly tea cosy and then pads back to the front room, pulling back the sleeve of his cardigan. The minute hand on his scratched watch is halfway between the four and the five.

Elizabeth is lying on the sofa. She looks peaceful with her eyes closed. George shuffles over to the mantelpiece, where a cluster of old photos in eclectic frames compete for space. He picks up a silver-framed picture of a red-haired graduate and wipes the surface tenderly with his thumb.

‘I’ll have to call Linda later, you know, after we’ve...’ His voice fades as he replaces the frame in the exact same spot. Linda usually gives them a lift to the hospital, and that last time they went away on the cruise. The ship had a full orchestra and they had danced every night.

He hears the sound of a car approaching and repeats his slow journey to the front door. The car has gone. He glances at the rack under the stairs, where his black overcoat hangs arm in arm with Elizabeth's elegant burgundy one.

He shakes his head at the Bakelite phone that sleeps on a narrow mahogany table in the hall. Every time Linda visits she says they need to get a more modern one. He tells her phones like that were good enough in the war, they're good enough now.

He shuffles back into the front room.

'Soon be here now.' He says it the way a mother tells a child that a journey is nearing its end. Silence. When you have been together this many years there is very little left to say. He carefully lifts her knitting from the coffee table and tidies it away.

'Tea'll be brewed now,' he says, pulling the curtains shut and setting off on another journey to the kitchen, blinking as the sunlight assaults his eyes. He pulls back his cardigan sleeve again as he passes the 'Home Sweet Home' sign in the hall. Now the minute hand on his watch is covering the five.

'No hurry,' he sighs.

He tugs hard on the fridge door and takes out a flowery milk jug. He totters back to the front room, balancing the tray, and places it on the newly cleared table.

'Just time for a quick cuppa, I think, Lizzie.'

He pours two cups of tea then tuts to himself. 'Yes, well.'

His cup and saucer rattle as he sucks a tasty sip into his hollow cheeks.

'Aaaaah.' The tea is sweet and hot.

Another engine growls outside, a noisy diesel engine. This time it comes to a stop.

'That'll be it, Lizzie.'

He replaces his teacup carefully on its saucer and pushes himself out of the chair. He tiptoes to the sofa and bends down, placing a delicate kiss on her cheek. His eyes are yellow and wet.

‘Time to go now, Lizzie.’

Two metallic doors slam.

A man’s voice calls from the front door. ‘Hello?’

It takes a lifetime for George to move and then a further few seconds to make the distance to the front door, so it’s already being pushed open before he gets there.

‘Mr Dorris?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where...?’

George raises his right arm halfway up, as if lifting a heavy weight, and points towards the front room. The sunlight spreads across the wedding photo as the door opens, making the whole picture match its frame and the gold itself glint as if it were brand new.

Now there is noise-and-bustle-and-greens-and-yellows-and-talking-and-radio-crackling-and-questions-and-moving-and-an-engine-running-and-doors-slamming.

George can’t see or hear any of it. He clutches the gold frame in both hands. The two beautiful young people in the picture are holding hands and smiling. Two green uniforms nudge him out of the way as they carry a stretcher out through the front door. Her face is covered.

George has the smallest moment alone. He’s never been alone before.