

*Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organizers launched the third publication in the series titled 'The Barn and other short studies'. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was Joe Kelly, Chairman, Ballea Writer's Group.*

By JOE KELLY

Tik-tok, tik-tok, tik-tok; his heart danced to the rhythm. For as long as Eric could remember, this was his life. As a young boy growing up in the mountains of Switzerland, Eric Von Pendulum knew that his name would dictate his path in life.

Over the large window in bold letters, brightly lit for all to see was the sign, The Little Tik-Tok Shop, and in smaller letters plain and simple, Mr Pendulum, Clocks. The Von had been dropped a long time ago. He was also a fixer of barometers but that skill was in less demand these days. As he crossed the deserted street, he looked back at the sign proudly and smiled in satisfaction. Life's been good, he thought.

He walked toward the old Volkswagen Beetle, which cut a lonely figure parked on the empty street. Gertrude was nowhere to be seen and his heart began to beat faster as concern turned to panic.

'Eric,' a high-pitched voice sang out, and he breathed a sigh of relief. 'Over here.'

He could barely make out her silhouette in the darkened doorway. Were it not for the faint shine of a street lamp on the glass door she would have been invisible.

I was startled,' he said, 'when I didn't see you in the car,' his S's sounding harsh, the last reminder of his Swiss accent. He stood on tiptoe to kiss her, stretching his arms beyond his ample girth. 'Home please, Mrs. Pendulum,' he chuckled in his best English accent. Gertrude opened the passenger door for him and turning away, he aimed his backside at the seat and, collapsing in a backward motion, landed with a groan and swung his legs inside the car. Gertrude turned the key and the old beetle started with a roar, unique to that particular model.

'Eleven o'clock,' she scolded. 'much too late for any man to finish work, especially a man of eighty years.' 'ya, ya, ya,' Eric replied and she knew she was wasting her time talking to him. Anyway, it wouldn't be for much longer now. She was glad she had finally talked him into selling The Little Tik-Tok Shop. It was just a pity it was to that awful Mr. Peacock. Still not our problem now, she thought.

'Have you set the alarm?' she asked.

'Yes, my dear. I've been setting alarms all day and that burglar thing is set also, primed and ready for action,' he joked, nudging her elbow gently as she drove. Gertrude couldn't help but smile. Eighty years old and still as quick-witted as the day she met him.

The Little Tik-Tok Shop was busy next morning. 'Goodbye and thank you for everything. I hope you have a long and happy retirement.'

Eric was sad to see the door close behind another of his long-standing customers. All he seemed to be doing these last few weeks was saying goodbye to people. It was with more than a little sadness that he reflected on the fact that they didn't have any sons or daughters to carry on the business now that age had finally conquered him. But then he thought, didn't my clocks receive all that love and affection instead?

He stood behind his counter, lost in thought, how ironic that in this little shop every second had marked its passing with a tik or a tok, every hour welcomed him with a cheerful chime, yet the years had slipped into history almost unnoticed. He felt a little sad also that his trade was dying.

'Nobody wants a real clock anymore,' he often said to Gertrude. 'Too much maintenance, oiling, winding, care and attention. The same with watches, those battery operated disposables. Buy a watch in some cheap department store, two years later the battery runs out, throw the whole thing away and buy another.'

Now he snorted in disgust. Ding went the doorbell and he was shaken abruptly from his dreamy meanderings.



Joe Kelly

'Mr. Pendulum! How very nice to see you again.'

The insincerity was not lost on Eric. 'good afternoon, Mr. Peacock,' was the reply, short and snappy. Two men in overalls followed the strutting Peacock into the shop, the first holding a notebook and pencil, his mate in charge of the measuring tape.

'I hope you don't mind the inconvenience but...'. Eric just flicked his hand in a gesture, no respect for anybody he thought. Eric wept after they had gone, resting his arm on the magnificent grandfather clock with the gold plated pendulum as he wiped away a tear from under his half-moon spectacles. Grandfather, as it was affectionately known by generations of children, had been brutally manhandled from its position of prominence facing the door and plonked unceremoniously in the corner. After what seemed like an eternity a very red faced Eric wiped the sweat from his brow and smiled with satisfaction as Grandfather once again stood to attention and solemnly greeted the valued customers of The Little Tik-Tok Shop, its pendulum swinging with pride.

All in all Mr. Peacock had four shops in the town, a unit in each of the two shopping centres, for you couldn't call them shops, and a shop in both the northern and southern suburbs. As soon as the acquisition of Mr. Pendulum's Little Tik-Tok Shop was complete he would have his flagship store in the centre of town.

Peacock knew how to make money all right. There would be no grandfather clocks in his shop. He wouldn't restrict himself to just selling clocks and watches and those stupid barometers could go to the dump. Trinkets, lockets, bangles and brooches - that's where Peacock had made his millions, and as for rings, now there was profit. Isn't young love sweet,' he would say with a smirk to his assistant each time a happy couple would float out the door.

'Glorified tinker,' old Mr. Pendulum would pompously exclaim anytime Peacock's name was mentioned. 'wouldn't know a good clock if it jumped up and bit him.'

The little bell over Mr. Pendulum's door was in grave danger of wearing out that afternoon as most of his friends. Customers, suppliers and colleagues trooped in one after another to wish him well in his retirement. He put on a brave face of course, smiling and joking, saying he was glad now for the opportunity relax, travel maybe, see the homeland, spend more time with his darling Gertrude. They all smiled back at him, nodding

their agreements, but once outside shaking their heads as they could feel his sadness.

Gertrude was in the shop today keeping a watchful eye on Eric as he kept up the facade. She would occasionally make eye contact with someone, a little nod expressing more than words could say; silent understanding. She looked at him lovingly all day as he pinched little pink cheeks and ruffled curly hair whilst holding out the big lollipop jar with the narrow neck for little hands to reach into. She laughed with the parents as he reminded them that if their hands were too big for the jar then their mouths were too old for a lolly.

At four o'clock the removal van arrived. Eric insisted on travelling in the back with the clocks to ensure their safe passage home. He had steadfastly refused to sell his stock to Mr. Peacock, telling Gertrude that he would keep them at home where they would be properly cared for. She couldn't refuse, knowing full well how much those old clocks meant to him.

At six o'clock the shop was quiet, empty except for Eric and Gertrude standing together in lonely silence. For the last fifty years The Little Tik-Tok Shop had exploded into life every evening at this time. Children out shopping with their mothers would be taken to Mr. Pendulum's little Tik-Tok Shop to experience the wonderful crescendo of sound as hundreds of clocks of all shapes and sizes suddenly spring to life and old Mr. Pendulum would smile proudly as grandfather boomed above the din.

'Leave me alone here for a moment?' he asked Gertrude.

'Of course my love,' she said, a lump forming in her throat. 'I will get the car.'

As she walked out into the cold evening she looked over her shoulder to see him standing there, a lonely forlorn figure in the empty shop. As she crossed the street the lights of the shop went out, no longer could she see the sign, The Little Tik-Tok Shop.

Mr. Pendulum didn't hear the old Volkswagen pull up outside and Gertrude thought it slightly odd that she couldn't open the door of the shop. Cupping her hands over her eyes and leaning against the plate glass window she peered inside. For an instant she thought she could see the old grandfather clock again, its pendulum swinging in the darkness. She recoiled in horror as she remembered Grandfather was at home. 'Eric!' she screamed.

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L to R Deputy Mayor Cllr Derry Canty, Joe Kelly, Chairman of the Ballea Writers receiving his award, and Sinead Collins of cork County Council who organised the Bealtaine Competition.