

Pigeon Coup

Annie said they were bloody vermin, she said they should all be shot.

“What’s that square in Venice that’s covered in pigeon shit? Can’t remember now but you ask them how they like pigeons, rats of the air, that’s what they’d tell you.”

She jerked the oven door open and shoved in a leg of lamb, big as a wrestler’s arm.

“And what’s that disease they can give you? What is it, Tom?”

Tom wasn’t listening. With his good black felt tip he was sketching out the plans for his pigeon cage. It was to be down in the rear of the yard, well away from the house. That would keep Annie off his back. He liked the far left corner of the garden, under the flowering gum. There his birds would get some protection from the summer heat, down near the fence, there was a good flat spot where the old shed had been. He would have to move Rosie’s swing set but he knew she wouldn’t mind. Rosie was a good kid. He pushed his thick grey hair from his eyes and looked up,

“I’m not eating any more birds, no chickens, no ducks, no more birds.”

Bending down to his plans again he added another perch. Annie shrugged,

“Fine, I’ll add it to your long list of peccadilloes.”

She leaned over his shoulder to look at his drawings but he covered the page with his hand.

“It’s going to be a surprise, Annie, you’ll just have to wait until it’s finished.”

His coop was to be built from the usual corrugated iron and chicken wire but he had something special in mind for the front. On graph paper he had drawn a plan for a Chinese pagoda style façade. It was to have gold fretwork curlicues and glossy red paint for luck. This was to be his winning touch, the one thing that would bring Annie around.

Tom’s father Alfred had kept pigeons. When he was just a little kid he used to go with him to release them. The birds would then fly home and the tag on each bird’s foot would be put into a time clock. The bird that had flown home in the shortest time was the winner. They would drive in his old Ford up to Kyneton. Alfred would check that all the birds were

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tagged before releasing them in a vast flapping cloud. On the way back they would stop at the pub for a beer and a raspberry lemonade for Tom. In later years Tom used to dream about those raspberry lemonades. When Alfred died, struck by a car on the way home from yet another pub, there were no more pigeons. Tom's mother got rid of them, had them driven away in the back of her friend's ute, along with the double breasted suits and the shiny Oxford shoes. Alfred Campbell now existed only as a photograph on her mantelpiece, a sepia tinted portrait of a young soldier smiling cheekily into the lens.

Tom knew that his mother would have been much happier if Alfred had died in the war instead of the way he did, ignominious, unremarked. A mere civilian death and drunk as well. There was prestige in being a war widow, you were treated with respect. You could get assistance from the government and from Legacy, while she was left with five kids and only a part-time cleaning job to support them. Tom remembered eating a lot of bread and dripping. He remembered giving her the money from his paper round and the vegetable patch they tended almost desperately. It was his childhood that galvanised his support for the left. He couldn't understand why, in a rich country like Australia, anyone should be poor. Alfred Campbell had been Labor and Tom, after a period of questioning found he couldn't be anything else. It was not the only thing he had inherited from his father. Since nineteen forty-nine, when his father died, Tom had dreamed of having his own pigeons. But Annie had never let him, not until now.

On the Friday before the nineteen seventy-two federal election, Rosie came home from school to find her father erecting the poles that would hold up the roof and the walls of his pigeon cage. He whistled as he poured concrete into footings, standing back every now and then to visualise his work. Soon he had the chicken wire up. Rosie helped him unroll the wire cigars that it came in. It reminded her of lace when it came off the roll all beautiful and new like that.

"What if the pigeons don't like their house," she asked her dad, "what if they don't want to stay here?"

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Tom laughed and replied; “Oh, they’ll like it Rosie, by the time I’ve finished they’ll think they’re living in the flamin’ Ritz.”

By Saturday it was finished altogether, smelling of sawdust and straw, the new chicken wire gleaming in the sun. It was all there, apart from the Chinese pagoda style façade which lay, in pieces, on the grass. Annie and Rosie knew it was better not to ask about that.

“It’s ready for the pigeons,” Tom declared, smiling proudly. “I’m picking one up from Pete tomorrow. Wait ‘til you see him.”

That night Labor won the election. Tom couldn’t believe it, there hadn’t been a Labor Prime Minister since Chifley and that was twenty-three years ago. Within minutes of Gough’s victory speech Tom’s friend Vlad, arrived. In his arms he carried a dozen bottles of beer and a bag of pigeon food. They stayed up all night, Rosie got up in the morning and found them both asleep at the kitchen table. After a while things calmed down a bit but Tom still felt a deep sense of satisfaction every time he saw the Prime Minister on the television. The only other thing that gave him such satisfaction was the thought of his pigeons in their brand new cage.

“I’ve got it, Rosie! The first of our residents! Oh, and isn’t he a beauty!”

Rosie, who’d been lying on her bed listening to her transistor radio, threw it down and went to have a look. Her father stood there nursing his new pigeon. The General was an unusual bird. For a start he possessed only one eye, giving him the look of a wounded soldier. But you had only to glance at the look in that eye to realise that there was nothing wounded about this pigeon. He affected a military air, hence his name, and was a bird of rare plumage. His body was black and white piebald and he wore a frill of white feathers around his stately neck. With his chest puffed out he would strut up and down his perch, his speckled head cocked at a cheeky angle, his one eye fixed on his audience, daring them to look away. He was nothing like the grey bird that Annie had been expecting.

“I’ll admit, Tom, he’s not as ugly as I thought he would be,” Annie peered closely at the General, “but he’s still a bloody pigeon.”

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Rosie didn't agree. She adored him from the moment her father first allowed her to hold him, perched on her outstretched arm. Standing by the pigeon cage she maintained a perfect stillness just as Tom had taught her.

"Don't frighten him," he'd said, "he needs to get used to you."

Rosie stroked the General's feathers and fed him some wheat on her open palm. The bird looked at her with his one good eye and somewhere a connection was made. Soon Tom brought home more pigeons until they had eight in total. There were white ones and brown ones and another piebald one like the General but with two eyes.

For a couple of years Tom was happy. He had his pigeons and Gough was making sweeping reforms. For the first time in his life Australia was becoming the kind of country he wanted to live in. When Labor was returned in nineteen seventy-four he was even happier. Though it didn't take him long to realise that the Liberals had started their plotting again, and this time it was in earnest.

Over the next year, as Gough struggled to hold on to power in Canberra, Tom began to spend more time down the back of the yard with his pigeons. He would have long conversations with the General, most of them taking place in bills and coos although Tom was trying to teach the bird English. This was difficult because pigeons, unlike parrots and cockatoos, do not have the capacity to form consonants and vowels. Tom, on the other hand, was easily able to perform the glottal clicks and whistling sounds that made up the pigeon's speech. In this way they could communicate and it wasn't long before Tom was spending nearly all his waking hours talking to the General.

"Whatever you want to say about him, Annie," he said on one of his visits to the kitchen, "that's a very wise old bird. Oh yes. I only wish the General were running the world and not the bloody Americans."

The next day Tom began to construct a perch for himself in the flowering gum that stood next to his coop.

"I feel better down there, Annie," he explained.

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Annie snorted in derision. She wondered where all of this would end, aloud she said;

“I don’t care what you do; next you’ll be painting your bum red and calling yourself a baboon! It’s all bloody immaterial to me.”

But it wasn’t, Rosie could see the furrow in her mother’s brow that only appeared when she was worried. When Tom’s perch was ready he stationed himself in the branches of the tree. He stayed there for most of the day and, when Annie wouldn’t talk to him, he went back outside and resolved to spend the night in an upright position.

As he sat up there that evening, enjoying the quiet and the clear night sky, Tom recalled what the General had said. ‘There’s too much plotting going on behind closed doors, that Fraser and his cronies, they’re like the damned Borgias. If the coup goes ahead you know what you’ll have to do, you’ll have to foment revolution, that’s what!’ Tom supposed they would, but he wasn’t sure he had the energy for many more campaigns, the protests against the war in Vietnam had taken it out of him, helping people who were running from the draft, spending time in prison himself. All his life he had fought for humanity but the avaricious bastards kept coming back. ‘Maybe it’s true,’ he thought, ‘perhaps we’re not far from brutes, perhaps greed is the only impulse we know.’

In the early morning Rosie took him down some food on one of the enamel camping plates. Her dad was sitting in the crook of the thickest branch, his head leaning against the tree’s gnarled trunk, she could hear his snoring. Rosie was surprised he didn’t fall off but it seemed, along with his newfound capacity for billing and cooing, he had also attained an extraordinary balance.

“Dad,” she called softly, from the ground below. “Daaad! I’ve got some food for you, c’mon Dad, wake up!”

Rosie watched as her father raised his head; for such a big man, Rosie was amazed to see he had the grace of an acrobat as he swung himself down from the branch.

“How’s it going Rosie?” He stroked her hair and gave her the big smile that was only for her.

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"I'm O.K. Dad." Rosie didn't know what else to say. She passed him the plate of food and stood, head down, kicking at the dirt, while he ate.

In the days that followed, Rosie established a routine. Every morning before she left for school, she made him up a plate. She took it down to him along with her own breakfast. Sitting cross-legged on the crackly leaves under the tree, they ate together and Rosie was able to see her dad for a while, along with the pigeons, of course. One morning, she took down her transistor radio so they could listen to music but Tom didn't like Skyhooks so she didn't bother again. Before long Rosie was the only person who was allowed to take him his food.

"I'm going to make pigeon pie if he doesn't come down soon," said Annie. Her sister, Laura sat at the kitchen table sipping tea.

"I wouldn't blame you if you left him, Annie. I mean, there's only so much a woman can put up with."

Rosie sat listening, her pen poised above the drawing she was finishing, waiting to see what her mother would say next.

"That's just the thing, Laura. I know him, I know what he's like and it's only because he's too sensitive that he's up there in the first place."

Violently she pulled the skin from the flesh of the chicken she was preparing, and stuffed butter and herbs into the cavity.

"And we're having roast chicken today whether he likes it or not. I've been dying for a piece of chicken."

Rosie didn't understand how her dad could be sensitive and yet continue to ignore Rosie herself, and her mother. Still, she decided she would stick by her dad and eat only the vegetables.

In the morning Rosie lay on her back in bed. Staring up at the ceiling she knew something was wrong but she was still too sleepy to work out what it was. Then it hit her, the pigeons weren't making their usual morning racket. Over the last few years she'd grown used to

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waking up to the General and his fellow pigeons billing and cooing like mad. They seemed to have a preference, also shown in other species of birds, for greeting the day with as much noise as they could possibly make. But on this morning they were silent. Rosie jumped out of bed and ran barefoot down to the pigeon cage.

The door of the cage was open and there was not a pigeon to be seen. Rosie ran to the base of the flowering gum and peered up into its branches; not only was Tom gone but also the perch he had spent the last few weeks on. In a panic, Rosie ran back up to the house. She couldn't find her dad anywhere. In the lounge room Annie was sitting in a chair crying while Aunty Laura sat on the arm patting her shoulder and making soothing noises. The new colour television was on and Rosie could see Gough on the screen, he was making a speech, something about 'We may well say *God Save The Queen* because *nothing* will save the Governor General' and 'maintain your rage.' Rosie didn't really understand it all except to know that her mother was upset and her dad was missing.

"What's wrong, Mum?" Rosie approached her mother and reached out a hand to touch her on the arm; "Where's Dad?"

When Rosie said this Annie began to cry even more.

"Oh Rosie," Annie looked at the television and collected herself, "the Labor Government has been dismissed!"

"I can see that," said Rosie, "but I want to know where Dad is. And where are all the pigeons? Where's the General?"

Annie tried to look understanding though compassion was not something that came naturally to her. Aunty Laura kept her mouth firmly shut but Rosie could hear her sharp intake of breath.

"Your dad's gone on a bit of a holiday, Rosie, he needed some time to be by himself for a while." Annie began to sob again and Laura shooed Rosie out of the room.

"Go and play, Rosie, give your mother some peace."

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Rosie ran down to the back of the yard. She walked in the open door of the pigeon house and lay down on the pigeon shit that covered the bottom of the cage. Curled up in a foetal position she cried quietly to herself. Then she heard the flapping of wings, brushing straw from her face and hair she sat up. In front of her, pacing up and down on the floor of the cage, was the General. He seemed to be trying to say something but Rosie couldn't make out what it was. Once again the old bird's pigeon tongue was working against him but Rosie thought she heard the word, 'Tom'. Another bird flapped into the cage and landed next to the General. It wasn't a pigeon that Rosie had seen before, its head was grey and its body was covered in what looked to be grey feathers; when the light struck them, however, they would flash with the most brilliant purples and greens. This bird was also trying to say something, Rosie listened very carefully but couldn't make it out, the bird twisted its head this way and that, coming up with a peculiar grimace. Rosie studied the bird closely and all of a sudden it was clear, he was trying to make the big smile that was only for her.

The pigeons flew the coop again and Rosie was left alone. She wandered slowly back to the house and on the way decided not to tell her mother anything.

"Where have you been, Rosie?" Annie examined her closely.

"I just went for a walk," said Rosie; "you guys sent me away, remember?"

"Yeah, well," for once Annie was unable to find the words.

She began to clear teacups and plates from the table. The sight of her strong arms made Rosie feel better for some reason. They were solid, something you could rely on, not likely to fly away at a moment's notice.

After that Rosie didn't want the cage knocked down.

"But Rosie, we don't need it. We don't have any pigeons left and I'm not planning on getting any more."

"You have to keep it," Rosie stood firm; "he might come back one day."

Annie sat there blinking in confusion.