

THE PIGEON MAN

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Ilion, N.Y., Dramatic writing

He could see the car pulling into the lot from his apartment window. He never knew when to expect her, not because she didn't come every month like clockwork—she did—but because he didn't concern himself with things like that. She always came on the same day each month, that much he was sure of. She would pull into the lot, wait in her Lexus for fifteen minutes, come into the building and be at his room within the hour. He hated having to deal with her. He hated her artificial smiles and her pathetic attempts to cover up her thoughts. Like most, she was the kind of person whose gut reaction was fixed on her face just long enough for someone to see what she really thought before it was swept away with a cheeky smile.

He watched the car for several minutes more, snapped the blinds shut and threw on an old overcoat. It was fraying at the edges, and bird droppings had dried and become crusted onto the shoulders and back. The floorboards creaked under his feet; he was not heavy, but the building was old and tired. Like people who live longer than they'd wish to, buildings, too, protest unwelcomed longevity. He left his apartment, not bothering to lock the door on his way out. The hallway walls were stained and gray. He disliked where he lived but he kept the apartment because its condition kept away disapproving eyes. The window at the end of the hall had been blown out years ago and was halfheartedly covered with boards. Shards of glass were still on the floor, and even now they crunched under the sole of his shoe. He opened the door at the end of the hall to the familiar concrete stairwell and followed it upwards.

He pushed the door back slowly, using his free hand to shield his eyes from sun. It was at its zenith, and it beat down on the rooftop mercilessly. He was sure that the concrete was scorching and he felt

pity for the birds. The pigeons were swarming the roof as they always did. Some perched on the ledge, but most were huddled in whatever precious areas of shade they could find. A smile came to his face. He loved these vermin birds, and he didn't judge them for what they were like others did. Their eyes held no hatred because it was beyond them. He cared for them and they returned each day for him, for love and for attention. They trusted him, and they did not fly or scuttle off when he approached them. They were perfect in their way, and he thought he was more like them than like the woman working her way towards him. He did not lord over them like some deranged monarch, but was one of them. He was their caretaker but had no power over them.

Children were screaming wildly in the streets, in the midst of summer games and activity. The children called him the Pigeon Man. They would see him standing on the roof with his birds, and they would point and call for other children to come and bear witness. When he walked the streets, they would gather in dark corners and whisper, unaware that he could hear every word. Some didn't even bother to whisper. He hated them for that, and he wondered how anyone could be so careless. He was a walking myth and when he passed, he heard the stories of his 'origin.' The oldest boys believed he was a criminal, a murderer, ashamed to live among people. The younger ones believed a pigeon once saved his life by accident, and his life was devoted to them out of respect. The youngest believed both, more and combinations of them all. He understood the nature of children, the nature of talk, and that it would be years before they learned when it was appropriate even to whisper. He knew all this but the whispers infuriated him, and not all of them came from children because some never learned the tactful time to murmur.

It occurred to him that he no longer knew what time it was. It had probably been quite a while. She would be here soon. She'd come expecting her money and while he paid her she'd look at him with the same distaste as she always had. She was probably working her way up the building, stopping to bother the other residents as she went. She

was the kind of person who whispered when it was safe and wore a smile while she thought hateful things. Every time she came, he could see it in her eyes, the blind and ignorant judgment. He didn't talk with the other residents, but he was sure she looked at them the same way.

He tended to his pigeons, knowing that she would soon come and find him. He fed them grain and they flocked to him as though he were their mother or messiah. He sat on the floor of the roof, and some landed on him, on his shoulders, arms and legs. He spoke to them in comforting whispers, telling them what he knew of the world and of people. If he stirred, they did not, their instincts long erased by nurturing and city life. They scuttled about, flapping their wings and offering soft coos in return for his attention. He seldom stroked them for fear of causing them pain, but he found himself holding one in his hands, cupping it and brushing its wings with his thumb. Its body was blue and white with splotches of violet and hunter green. The bird stared at him, and he stared back, looking into its vacant yellow eyes. The birds held no judgment; they were simple and pure, uncorrupted by intelligence and the hate it brought to thinking creatures. They couldn't know what people said about them, how people felt about them. They didn't know how disgusting people were, and the kinds of disgusting, hateful things they thought.

"Knock, knock." The greeting came as a surprise to him, and was followed immediately by the creak of the stairwell door. She came forward cautiously, her hand clutched tightly around the strap of her purse. The pigeons were startled by her arrival, and for a minute the world was filled with the sound of flapping wings and falling feathers. They went off in every direction, knowing that their sanctuary had been invaded. The woman cowered as pigeons flew in her direction, afraid of being hit by wayward fowl. The woman wore a blouse with a colorful and atrocious print and a form-fitting black skirt that went to her knees. The bag she was clutching was Prada. He knew nothing about that sort of thing, but he'd been around long enough to recognize it and she wasn't the type to buy a knockoff. If she ever caught a

person with such a thing she'd probably give them the same momentary look of displeasure that he knew so well. She had a polite smile on her face, eagerly baring her bleach-white teeth. "You forgot to pay your rent again, so you know, I'm just here to pick it up." She finished with an awkward enthusiastic gesture, a plucky go-getter swing of the fist.

He pulled himself up from the floor of the roof, wincing as the palm of his hand pressed against searing concrete. He could already see unspoken judgment in her eyes. He could tell that once she got her money she'd make a mad dash for the door. He wanted her gone, but that was what she wanted too, and for that he didn't want to let her leave without having to fight for her money. The children were still hollering in the streets, and it was the only noise that reached the roof. She was just like the children in the street, ignorant and fearful, and like them she'd go home and whisper to her loved ones, her husband, her children, her pool boy. She'd tell them about the crazy man who talked to pigeons and didn't pay his rent on time. She broke the silence. "I've been all over today. You know every one of my buildings has a few stragglers? I don't mind, though. It gives me something to do once a month." She let out a small laugh.

"The money is in my apartment." The words came out gravelly and coarse. He cleared his throat.

Her face lit up after hearing him. "Great! Shall we, then?" She smiled and turned back to the stairwell door without waiting for an answer. He didn't want to pay this woman; he didn't even want to know her. What was he paying for? An infested apartment with broken windows, splintered floors, and a landlady who thought he was less than dirt. People were all the same. Was he so strange for seeking the company of birds? It didn't matter that they didn't have the sense to judge him, but rather the fact that they didn't judge. They made for better company. Human beings were the lowest of creatures, and he thought he must be more bird than human.

"You think I'm crazy." The woman had nearly made her way back to the door. He hadn't moved from his spot on the roof, and sun was

beginning to make him sweat. The woman seemed unsure how to answer him. She was frozen at the door, her mouth slightly open.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mr. Hull. If you don’t mind, I’d really like to get this over with. I’m afraid I still have a rather busy day ahead of me.” Her Colgate grin didn’t return. It was replaced with an optimistic half-smile. He hated her smile, but somehow this new expression was worse. It wasn’t as fake, but it was pleading. It was pleading with him to expedite her suffering, begging to release her from his presence as soon as possible. “Shall we?” she asked.

“I’m serious. You think I’m crazy.” The sweat on his forehead was beginning to fall into his eyes. He blinked to clear his vision. He wondered how long it would take on the roof before the woman’s makeup would begin to crack and melt away in the heat. She seemed unsure of what to do with herself. Her hand was outstretched to the door, but her body was pivoted toward him. He could tell she was ready to leave without her rent money. He wondered how long he would have in the apartment until the cops came and forced him out if she did run. How long would she tolerate him if she wasn’t receiving her money once a month? Not long. She didn’t seem to want to respond. “Don’t you? Admit it now, don’t you think I’m crazy?”

She bit her lip. “I don’t believe you’re crazy, Mr. Hull. I think you’re a fully functioning adult who has always been a good tenant.” He wanted to laugh and to scream at her in the same moment. A good tenant for his apartment was anyone that wasn’t a squatter. He wanted to call her a liar. He wanted to scream at her for not saying what she thought. The look of disrespect, of loathing, that look was always in her eyes. It was in her eyes now while she waited for his answer. It was probably in her eyes whenever she saw a child, a teenager, a drunkard, a fat man, a smoker, a poor man, a loser, but he knew it was in her eyes when she saw him. When she saw the crazy man, the Pigeon Man, he knew how she looked.

Anger was starting to fill out his voice. “You don’t think I’m crazy? You don’t think I’m at all peculiar?” The woman’s body was still

positioned awkwardly, her mouth open and eyes focused.

Several moments passed, and he became aware that the heat of the sun was beginning to burn the back of his neck. The woman managed to pull herself together and take a couple of steps toward him. He wondered where she might have found the courage. “I’ll admit I do think it’s rather strange that you live where you do when I’ve offered you better apartments and it’s a little odd that you spend so much of your time up here with the birds, but no, I don’t think you’re crazy, Mr. Hull.”

The mincing of words pissed him off even more. Strange, odd. She obviously thought it. It was obvious everyone thought it. It was there when he walked down the street or when he walked in a building. All eyes turned to him, and every pair had that look. What right did people have to judge? They were each more flawed than the last. “Mr. Hull? My name is the Pigeon Man. You can ask any one of them.” He gestured down to the streets and became aware that the cheering of the children could no longer be heard. “Every kid within six blocks can tell you that I’m the Pigeon Man. Haven’t you heard? I’m a murderer. I’m a saved soul. I’m a high priest to the avian gods. I’m crazy.”

“Mr. Hull, please, I’d just like to collect your rent and go. I’m sorry I’ve disturbed you in such a way.” The woman swallowed hard. It was in her eyes more now than ever, but it was different.

He wanted to hurt her, to break her. He wanted to hurt those connected to every pair of judging eyes that found him. He chose to ignore what she had said, “You’ve heard that though, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. He knew she had heard him called the Pigeon Man, and he wondered if she hadn’t given him the name herself. “If I said I was going to jump off of this building, would you admit that I’m crazy? I’m the Pigeon Man, after all, maybe I’ll fly away. All the newspapers would say, ‘Crazy Pigeon Man soars!’ How about that? If I said I was going to jump off this building and fly, would you admit that I’m crazy?” The woman had no response. Her Prada bag was now pressed tightly against her chest and she seemed to have taken the question as

the world's most puzzling riddle.

The woman had no answer. They looked into each other's eyes, and for the first time he wasn't sure what it was she might be thinking. The heat from the sun was unbearable, and it seemed to have only gotten worse since he first came to the rooftop. He wondered if the heat bothered the woman. She seemed unaffected, but he imagined that her makeup was no longer intact, ruined by perspiration, and that she was greatly uncomfortable. He heard the soft coo of the pigeons for the first time since her arrival and was surprised they had come back as soon as they had. He waited for the woman to say something, even if it was another lie, but nothing came.

He began to walk toward the ledge of the building. "Fine. I am going to jump. I'm going to jump and I'm going to fly. Now will you say that I'm crazy?" He wasn't going to jump. He wanted to hear her say it, to hear anyone say it, and he wasn't going to stop until she did. He was going to hear the quiet, egotistical judgments that people had always made about him. As he waited for her answer, he wondered what it was that stopped him from jumping. The pigeons wouldn't miss him. They wouldn't judge him for it. Their empty eyes would look upon his live body and his corpse with no distinction, but people would judge him. People who had no affection for him in life would call him selfish. The pigeons never judged, but people judged even after death. Even after they'd beaten a person down with their eyes and words, killed a person that was in need of their help; even then, they chose judgment over remorse. He knew he was more bird than man. He wondered if he jumped if he'd be able to fly. He wondered how much more of a bird he was than a man. He lifted his right foot onto the ledge, and he took in a deep breath of air. He knew people would judge him for it, but they were bound to judge him anyway. They were human, after all, and he was bird. He raised his left foot onto the ledge and his balance faltered momentarily. He wobbled back and forth on the ledge, and when he teetered forward, he could see people clogging the streets, insignificant at this height, but below he knew that they

were all judging one another, measuring one another, and asserting to themselves that they were better. They were people. He was a bird.

“I’m afraid of you!” The words came out in a sudden burst. They surprised him and he nearly fell. He looked over his shoulder to the woman, and she had taken half a dozen steps closer without his knowledge. “I don’t think you’re crazy, but I’m afraid of you.” She looked away and bit her lip again. “When I met you for the first time to sign the lease to the apartment, you were sitting at a table in the lobby. I could see you through the glass doors of the building, waiting, and I knew you were watching me. When I got closer, I could see your eyes, and you were looking at me like I’d done something horrible to you. Like I had been offending you your entire life. You looked at me like I was scum. I don’t know what I did to offend you, what I might have done while I was walking in, but it’s just that...I’m afraid of you.” She swallowed, and took in a large breath of air. “I hate coming here. I hate that you look at me like that, that you’re judging me and I don’t know why. I don’t think you’re crazy. I’m sorry if other people do. I’m afraid of the hatred in your eyes, and what you must be thinking about me, but I don’t think you’re crazy.”

The two looked at one another for a long time. He looked into her eyes and he saw something that he hadn’t seen before. It wasn’t hatred, and it wasn’t judgment, but it was human. He felt it, and he imagined that it was in his own eyes. He wanted to apologize to her. He wanted to tell her that he was sorry, and that he had been wrong, but the words were caught in his throat and refused to come out. He stepped down off the ledge without a word and walked toward the stairwell. He walked past her, and soon he heard her following him toward it. He opened the door and waited for her and as she passed him they looked into one another’s eyes. He entered the stairwell behind her, closed the door, and left the pigeons cooing on the roof.