



*Pigeon
Summer*

ANN TURNBULL

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PIGEON
SUMMER
TRILOGY:

Pigeon Summer

ANN TURNBULL



WALKER BOOKS

AND SUBSIDIARIES

LONDON □ BOSTON □ SYDNEY

For Linda

I should like to thank everyone who helped me with my research into pigeon racing, especially Angela Harris and Wilson Stephens.

CHAPTER ONE

“He ... that ... h-h-he—”

“Heareth,” said Miss Lidiard. “Start again, please, Arnold.”

“He that ... heareth ... you ... h-h—”

“Heareth.” Miss Lidiard’s fingers drummed on her desk top.

The class sighed and shifted. Mary hid the crossed fingers of her left hand in her lap and turned the page of the Bible with her right. She glanced over her shoulder at Arnold Revel. He sat hunched over the undersized desk, his face furrowed in concentration, mumbling as he traced the words with a finger.

“Speak up, Arnold,” said Miss Lidiard.

The class tittered. Olive Jennings, who was sharing the Bible with Mary, leaned forward. Her plait tickled Mary’s cheek. “Dopy,” she whispered, enjoying the diversion.

But Mary wriggled with impatience. She wasn’t in the mood for Miss Lidiard’s Arnold-baiting. It was the last lesson of the day. The last few minutes. She’d had her fingers crossed all afternoon. All she wanted now was to hear the bell.

Miss Lidiard tired of tormenting Arnold. “Doris Brown,” she said.

“Hethathearethyouhearethme...” gabbled Doris.

Show-off, thought Mary.

“ ... And he that despiseth you despiseth me and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me—”

The bell clanged.

“Thank you, Doris,” said Miss Lidiard. She closed her Bible. Benches scraped as the class stood up.

“Hands together, eyes closed,” said Miss Lidiard.

Mary obeyed, keeping her fingers still furtively crossed. The familiar words came to her tongue unthinking while her mind prayed. *Please: let me get home in time to see it hatch.*

“Goodbye, children.”

“Goodbye, Miss Lidiard.”

They were free. Out through the doorway into the playground.

“Want a pear-drop?”

Olive passed Mary a paper bag. Inside were a few yellow sweets, stuck together. Mary prised one free, bringing bits of paper with it.

“Thanks.”

She sucked the sweet slowly, spinning it out, feeling its cough-medicine smell going up the back of her throat. She didn’t get many sweets, not now Dad was out of work, but Olive’s family owned the sweet shop in town.

“There’s your sister,” said Olive.

Mary removed a fragment of paper bag from her tongue. “I’d better go. See you!” She ran to join Phyl.

“Only three more days!” said Phyl.

Next Thursday, the ninth of May 1930, would be a special day for Phyl. It was her

fourteenth birthday and she would be leaving school for ever.

Mary was jealous. She breathed pear-drop scented breath at her sister.

“Get off!” giggled Phyl, pushing her. “What have you got your fingers crossed for?”

Phyl never missed anything. Mary hid her left hand behind her back.

“I haven’t.”

“You have. *I* know! The squeaker.”

“I want to see it hatch. I always miss them.”

“You and your pigeons,” said Phyl.

They walked home fast. Both were hungry; they’d had only a hunk of bread for the dinner, and that was hours ago.

They ran down Lion Street and turned in at the arched passageway between their house and the Lloyds’.

The fragrance of soup drifted from the kitchen.

Mary was tempted to stay with Phyl and follow the smell to its source. But the possibility of seeing the squeaker hatch was too exciting. She ran down the garden path, between the line of damp washing and the rows of leeks, to the loft.

Dad had built the loft. It was a good one, strong and roomy and clean-smelling. It faced south, side-on to the house, so she couldn’t see the pigeons until she turned the corner. But she heard their cooing. The front of the loft was slatted to let in air, and behind it she saw the birds moving about.

It felt strange not to find Dad here, checking the food and water, talking to the birds, making notes in the book that hung on a nail inside the door. But Dad had gone to Midhope today, looking for work, and wouldn’t be back till late. Today it would be Mary’s job to let the hen birds out for their exercise while the cocks were sitting.

She opened the door and went in. The birds knew her, and she caused only a slight shifting and ruffling of feathers. She moved softly, as her father had taught her. At the end of the row was Lenin on his nest-bowl. And she was too late! The eggshell lay broken on the floor, and underneath Lenin’s breast feathers she caught a glimpse of down.

“Come on, let’s see you,” she said. She lifted Lenin, who fluffed up his feathers and looked outraged, and there it was, a tiny thing with sealed eyes and an oversized lump of a beak. The down was still not quite dry.

“Only missed you by half an hour, I reckon,” said Mary.

There was a tapping at the loft door: Lennie, her little brother.

“I want to see the squeaker.”

Mary let him in, shushing him, slowing him down.

“Can I hold it?” Lennie’s hands reached out longingly.

“Not now. When it’s older.”

“Can I hold the Lennie one?” Lennie was convinced that Lenin was named after him and he had a special fondness for the bird.

“No. He’s getting cross.” Mary put the struggling bird down by the nest-bowl. Lenin climbed back in and spread himself protectively over the newly-hatched bird and the second egg which would hatch in a day or two.

“You can hold the Gaffer,” said Mary.

The Gaffer was the oldest bird in the loft, and the tamest. He didn’t race any more because

he had once fractured a wing and it had healed crooked, but he had been a great racer in his time and Dad kept him for breeding.

He was sitting on a ledge now, close to Mary, watching. Mary picked him up, feeling the weight of him, nearly as much as the one-pound bags of sugar Mum sent her to fetch from Greenings. She passed him to Lennie.

The Gaffer sensed Lennie's awkwardness and struggled. Mary showed her brother how to hold him, with one hand curved round his breast, the other round his rear, and the legs held between two fingers.

"Your hands are a bit small," she said.

"I like him," said Lennie. But the Gaffer fluttered, and he let him go.

Mary heard Phyl shouting outside. "Mum says do you want any tea or not?"

Mary opened the door a crack. "I've just got to let these hens out."

"Hurry up, then. She's in a mood."

"That egg's hatched," said Mary.

Phyl pulled a face. She didn't like pigeons, especially newly-hatched ones.

Mary opened up the loft, talking to the birds, urging them to fly. A few came out. She didn't stay to see them all off, but ran indoors behind Phyl and Lennie.

Mum said, "I'd have thought you'd want your tea before messing with those birds."

She had put out bowls of soup and was checking the potatoes in the oven. The heat from the fire reddened her face.

Baby Doreen was whimpering. Phyl picked her up and shushed her.

"Get your soup, Phyl," said Mum. "I'll see to Doreen."

"Aren't you having any?" Phyl asked. The girls knew that sometimes their mother missed meals to save money. She had always been thin, but now the scraped-back hair showed hollows under her cheekbones.

"I'll wait for your dad," she said.

They turned to the food, and there was silence, except for Lennie's slurping and an occasional hiccup from Doreen.

The potatoes had been cooked in the slow oven. They were soft, so that the skins just broke. Mary ate hers and scraped the plate. She felt she could have eaten ten more.

"If you're still hungry," said their mother, "there's bread and jam. But go easy on the bread."

Guiltily they spread jam on slices of bread and wolfed them down.

Their mother went off to feed and change Doreen, and Phyl collected the dishes and fetched water from the shared tap in the yard.

Mary went back to the pigeons.

There were eight breeding pairs in the loft, ranging in age from the Gaffer down to the yearlings. The flock was circling overhead. Mary counted eight birds. Good. That meant the cocks were still sitting, and all the hens were out.

Mary loved to watch them. She heard the whirr of their wings as they flew overhead. They passed behind the chimneys of the houses opposite and over towards Springhill Pit, where Dad had worked until it closed last year. The sun came out from behind a cloud and caught their light undersides and they all flashed together as they cornered and swung back.

They were beautiful. A team. And separately they were good, too. Ruby, named for her

dark red eyes, was a strong little bird, plenty of stamina, never gave up; Lavender had won from Exeter last year. But there was one in particular that Dad had great hopes for – Speedwell. Speedwell was destined for Rennes, Nantes, maybe Bordeaux. There were other good racers in the loft: Bevin and True Blue had both won short-distance races last year. But Speedwell was a granddaughter of the Gaffer, a long-distance racer. She was the one he would send to the south of France.

It had begun to rain while Mary stood watching the birds: a few spots at first, then heavy soaking rods. Vaguely, above the sound of the rain and the cooing from the loft, she became aware of her own name – “Mary! MARY!” – shouted in increasing exasperation.

Mum was standing at the back door, Doreen screaming in the crook of her arm. With her free hand she held the laundry basket.

Mary ran up the path.

“Get the washing in, for heaven’s sake!” snapped Mum. She thrust the basket at Mary. “Couldn’t you have grabbed it when it started to rain? Standing there gawping up at those birds. You never *think*.”

She went in, slamming the door.

Mary snatched pegs from the line, tossing the clothes unfolded into the basket. They had been damp anyway, but they were getting rapidly wetter as she worked her way along. The rain soaked into the shoulders of her cardigan and trickled down the back of her neck.

The line cleared, she backed in through the door with the heavy basket. Her mother was ironing.

“Hang them round the fire,” she said.

Mary began draping towels and nappies over the rack.

“You never *think*,” said Mum again. “There’s Phyl putting Lennie to bed, and I had Doreen and what are you doing? Standing out in the rain staring up at those damn pigeons.”

She banged the iron down, folded a pillowcase and picked up a blouse.

Mary hung the last nappy on the rack.

“I’ve got to shut them away,” she said.

“Yes, and when you’ve done that you can take this lot upstairs,” said Mum.

Mary went to the door.

“The washing was wet any road,” she said, and flounced out before her mother could answer. She was angry because she knew she should have noticed; somehow she could never do anything right for her mother.

The shower was over. Light glinted on the pigeons’ wings. She filled the feed tin and shook it, whistling. They came at once, swooping down to the loft. She took a last look at the squeaker, then shut them in.

Back indoors, she had scooped up a pile of ironed clothes from the table and was on her way upstairs when familiar footsteps sounded in the passage. Dad was back!

She dumped the clothes on the top step and ran downstairs. Phyl followed her.

Dad shut the door and hung his coat on the hook. They could see from his face that he’d had no luck.

“Sit down, love,” said Mum. “I’ll warm the soup.”

Dad sat in his chair by the fire.

“Nothing,” he said.

Mary felt apprehensive. This voice, this slump of the shoulders, were not like her father, not the Dad she knew. Dad was always so full of enthusiasm. She'd seen him standing up at pit-head meetings, "sounding off", as Mum would call it, his voice ringing, his shoulders thrown back. And in the loft, with the pigeons: he was gentle – you had to be – but he was confident. He knew his system was right. He knew his pigeons were winners. And in a crisis he was always the one who knew what to do.

Mary, wanting to make things right again, said, "Dad, we've got a squeaker! Lavender and Lenin's. I found it when I got home. And Dad, the hens are flying so well—"

"Mary!" her mother exclaimed, swinging round on her. "Your dad's got more important things to think about than pigeons!"

But Dad's eyes had brightened, as Mary hoped they would. She shot her mother a look of triumph.

"That's good, Mary," said Dad. "I'll go down later."

Mum ladled out soup for herself and Dad – a few spoonfuls for her, a bowlful for him.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

CHAPTER TWO

Mary knelt on the mat by the fire, watching her mother and Phyl clearing the table and putting the dishes in the sink. All through the meal Mum had talked, in a low anxious voice about the expenses they faced: shoes for Lennie and Phyl, medicine for Doreen's cough, the rent going up next month...

Dad still sat at the table. He hadn't said anything, but Mary guessed that he had come to a decision, even before he reached home. He stood up, scraping his chair on the floor, and everyone turned to look at him.

"I'll have to go and look for work," he said. "Up Stafford way. Plenty of pits there. I'm sure to find something. Then I can send money home."

"So it's come to that," Mum said.

"It won't be for long. Things are sure to pick up around here soon. We've got a Labour Government now—"

"Labour!" Mum clattered the dishes in the sink. "The pit bosses will do what they want. Labour or no Labour."

"Things will change," said Dad. "It'll take time."

"They won't get time," said Mum. "They were out in eight months last time. What good do they do?"

There was silence. They had had this argument before.

Then Mum said, "How will you live, while you're looking for work? Where will you sleep?"

"I'll find somewhere."

"Doss-houses."

"Most like, yes." He turned to the girls. "You must help your mother while I'm away."

Phyl said, "But, Dad, I'm going away, too, remember?"

Phyl was leaving home on Saturday and going into service as a maid at a big house out in the country, eight miles away. It had all been arranged several months ago.

"I hadn't forgotten," said Mum. "Oh, Phyl, I'm glad you've got a job, but I could have wished you'd got fixed up at the china works or in a shop – something local. It would have been a help, to have you here."

Meaning I'm not a help, thought Mary.

There were times when Mary resented Phyl. Phyl was her mother's girl. She even looked like Mum: thin and quick moving, with straight dark hair and grey eyes. Phyl always managed to do the right thing: always noticed when the baby needed changing or the washing bringing in. She wrote neatly and could sew with neat, fast stitches. Mary's sewing invariably ended up dirty, uneven and spotted with blood. Mary had once overheard Mrs Lloyd, next door, saying of Phyl, "She's a little treasure around the house, that one." She wondered what people said about her. They wouldn't call her a little treasure. They might say, "That Mary that's always round the pigeons" (disapprovingly, because girls weren't supposed to like pigeons) or, "That big dreamy lump – you'd never think she was Phyl Dyer's sister".

Mary said, in an aggrieved tone, "I can help."

Mum looked at her. "You'll certainly need to buck your ideas up once Phyl's gone."

Mary glowered.

Her mother sat down and began unpicking the hem of a dress. It wasn't her own; she did alterations and mending to earn a few extra shillings.

"Leave that now, Lina," Dad said.

"I can't. Mrs Miller wants it tomorrow."

Dad looked irritated. Mary knew he hated her having to work.

"Well, Mary," he said, "let's go and see that squeaker, shall we?"

Much later, when Mary and Phyl were upstairs in bed, they heard their parents talking, the talk rising to an argument. The voices were sometimes clear, sometimes muffled, as they moved between the two downstairs rooms.

Phyl sat up. "Listen," she said.

But Mary couldn't catch the words, only the feel of what they meant: her mother's voice sharp, accusing, her father's defensive rumble.

Phyl got out of bed and padded barefoot to the stairs. Reluctantly Mary followed her. She didn't like to hear her parents arguing, but Phyl never wanted to miss anything; she had to know.

Phyl was crouched on the bend of the stairs, just out of sight of the kitchen.

"And how long?" came Mum's voice. "How long will this go on?"

"I don't know, Lina. I don't want it, any more than you do."

"That Union," said Mum, spitting the word out like a swear-word. "If only you'd stayed out of it."

"We're all in the Union, Lina."

"Not like you!" she retorted. "Running things, speaking out, organizing. They won't forgive you for that, Tom."

Oh, Mum, leave him alone, thought Mary.

"It was a time to speak out," said Dad.

"But not – not always at the front of things. A ringleader. Your picture in the papers..." Her voice cracked as if she were on the brink of tears.

Mary glanced up at the picture on the wall at the top of the stairs. It was a newspaper photograph, yellowing now, but preserved in a glass-fronted frame. It showed a group of miners outside the pit. Several held banners. The biggest banner read, NOT A MINUTE OFF THE DAY: NOT A PENNY OFF THE PAY. One of the men holding it up was Dad. Underneath was a date: 4TH MAY 1926.

Four years ago, almost to the day. But now that pits were closing and work was scarce, the bosses hadn't forgotten the General Strike, nor who the local leaders had been. Most of the men laid off in Culverton last year had found work in other pits, but not Dad.

The voices became indistinct again. And then came the sound of someone making the fire up. That meant they were coming to bed. Mary tugged at Phyl's arm. Phyl strained to hear more, but when the voices drew nearer the stairs she gave in to Mary and they scuttled back to bed.

Neither could sleep. They whispered for a while, till Dad called out from across the landing "Go to sleep, you girls." Then each lay silent with her thoughts.

Mary wondered what it would be like at home without Dad or Phyl, just Mum and the little ones. She was always in trouble with Mum over one thing or another, but Phyl would cover

up for her and defend her. She'd miss Phyl. And Dad. She'd enjoyed the time he had been on work; they'd spent a lot of it in the loft, looking after the pigeons.

Well, we've got a few more days all together, she thought.

But Saturday soon came. Phyl was up early, too nervous to eat breakfast. She pulled back her hair into a knot on the nape of her neck, and put on a dress of dark blue cotton with a white collar and pin-tucked front. Auntie Elsie, Dad's sister, had made her two dark blue dresses and two white aprons and had found her a hat with cherries on it and trimmed it with a blue ribbon.

Mary sniffed the new cotton of the dress. She was jealous. She'd never had a dress that wasn't an old one of Phyl's with the waist let out, or one of Auntie Elsie's cut down. And the hat! Phyl put it on, and was transformed into a grown-up.

Mary said, "Oh, Phyl! Can I try it?"

She took the hat and darted into her parents' room to look at herself in the flecked mirror. Mary's face was rounder than Phyl's, and her hair was a lighter brown and sprang about in curls. The hat hovered on top of them.

"It's too small," said Mary. But the ribbon was silky, and the cherries trembled as she turned her head. She felt beautiful.

Phyl took it back and minced around the room. Mary put on a gentrified voice. "Phyllis! Bring in the tea things!" They both giggled. "Some chance!" said Phyl. "I'll be scrubbing the passage, more like."

Mum called up the stairs, "Phyl! Do come and eat something, love. You'll be an hour on that bus."

At ten o'clock they were all at the bus stop in the square: Dad, Mary holding Lennie's hand, Mum carrying Doreen wrapped in a shawl, and Phyl holding a brown paper parcel of spare clothes and a purse with her bus fare in it.

Her employers had sent the bus fare with a letter saying that someone would meet her on the bus at Wendon. Dad would have liked to go too, to make sure she arrived safely, but there was no money to spare for the journey.

The bus was already quite full when it arrived. Dad took Phyl's parcel and settled her in a seat, and then they all watched and waved as the bus pulled away and Phyl craned to look back.

Mum was a bit weepy, and Mary felt tears coming too. She wouldn't see Phyl for at least a month; Phyl would get every other Sunday off, but she wouldn't want to squander her wages coming home every time.

And tomorrow Dad was going, and no one knew for how long.

That evening Dad went to the pigeon loft with Mary to say goodbye to his birds. A deep, soft, comfortable cooing came from within as they approached.

"I'll miss that sound," said Dad.

He went along the row, talking to all the birds. The Gaffer flew down and perched on his shoulder.

Monday's squeaker was growing big, and Lavender's other egg had hatched.

"Number Fifty-eight's will be next," said Dad, pointing out a sitting hen.

“Queenie’s,” said Mary.

“Queenie. That’s right.” Dad smiled.

Dad would never have bothered with names if it hadn’t been for Mary. Mary insisted that the birds should all have names as well as numbers. When she asked Dad to choose names his mind went to politics, as usual – to his favourite political figures, his heroes. So they had Bevin and Lenin and Ramsay Mac and Mrs Pankhurst. Mary thought Dad’s names were silly, she liked to choose a name that suited each bird. She was especially pleased with Speedwell, the blue chequer hen, whose name had a double meaning: the blue of the speedwell flower that grew wild in the garden, and the hope that the bird would fly fast.

Dad was handling Speedwell now, stretching out her wing with its long dark-tipped feathers.

“She’s a lovely bird,” he said. “Lovely condition. I wish I could be here to race her this summer.”

“I can race her,” said Mary.

“No. We’ll just have to miss a year.”

“We won’t!” exclaimed Mary, startling the Gaffer, who flew up on to a high perch. “I can race her, Dad! I know how. And Uncle Charley would help me.”

“Oh, he would,” agreed Dad. “But it’s a big job, Mary, studying the birds, working out which ones are on form, and which one to send where, and when. It’ll be enough for me if you just take good care of them – keep them exercised.”

Mary felt hurt. Why didn’t he believe she could do it?

“It’ll be a waste,” she said, “if she doesn’t race this summer.”

“There’s always another race, another year,” said Dad.

Another year. That sounded like eternity to Mary. They said no more about it, but Mary had made up her mind: she was going to look after the birds *and* race them. Dad would be proud of her. Even Mum would, if she got some winnings. She visualized the coming summer as a pale blue line growing bluer through May and June till it reached a deep sapphire colour in late July. And in the midst of that deep blue was a place she knew only from maps and her imagination: the south of France.

CHAPTER THREE

“You’re bursting out of that frock already,” said Mum. “I’m sure I was never so big as eleven.”

“I’m nearly twelve,” said Mary.

“Pity you’re not nearer.”

Mum was thinking of money. At twelve Mary would be able to get a part-time job – an hour after school helping in a shop. Phyl had helped at the draper’s. She had sold elastic ribbons and pins, but she hadn’t been allowed to cut lengths of cloth.

“Don’t you want to?” Mary had asked, picturing Mrs Coleman’s scissors shearing through the width of the material; rayon was the best: a swift, swishing cut. “I’d want to cut cloth.”

Phyl had shrugged, not understanding the question. She wasn’t allowed to, and that was that.

Mary thought she’d like to do a delivery round: milk or groceries. But it was always the boys who got those jobs. The bicycles they used were designed for boys, with a straight crossbar that was awkward if you wore a skirt.

Dad had a bike like that, with a basket on the front like a delivery boy’s. He used it for taking the pigeons on training tosses, and when Mary was smaller she had often gone with him, sitting in front on the crossbar, bumping along the lanes, past pits and quarries and spoil-heaps, out to the countryside.

I’ll get the birds out there somehow, thought Mary, if I have to walk. You could send them by train, but that wasn’t the same. When you took them yourself you had a sense of how fast they had flown. She remembered the bright air, the big sky, the fields stretching out, the quiet; and then the rush of wings as the pigeons took off, circled a few times, and made for home.

Dad had gone on his bike to Stafford. He had taken True Blue with him in a basket and released the bird when he arrived; he had no money for postage stamps, and True Blue was quicker. So they knew Dad had arrived safely, but they had heard nothing since – not for nearly three weeks.

“Mind you,” said Mum, “he’d have to find a job, then work a week before getting paid, and then it’d be a day or two, wouldn’t it, getting the postal order and sending it off? I wonder that maroon one Aunty Elsie gave us would do for you?”

Mary was used to her mother’s thought processes. They were back to Mary and the too-small frock. Mary remembered the maroon frock and winced. It was dark and droopy with an old-ladyish look about it.

Mum had whipped out a tape-measure. “Hold out your arm. Stand still... You know, you might do. Cut down.” She tut-tutted. “You’ve got your Aunty Elsie’s figure, and no mistake.”

Mary visualized Aunty Elsie. Her figure was not much in evidence since she usually wore shapeless cardigans over skirts that had not yet risen to the fashionable shorter lengths. But there was an impression of solid bosom, thick waist and sturdy legs. Very different from Mum.

She looked across at a photograph on the mantelpiece. It showed Mary’s mother as a young

woman: a studio portrait with a backdrop of painted trees. Her mother wore a high-necked lacy blouse and a long narrow skirt and she carried a parasol. A hat with roses on it was balanced on top of her piled dark hair. At the bottom of the photograph was her name, neatly printed: MISS ADELINE HILL.

Mary had always loved that photograph. Her mother was so slim and pretty, and Mary had dreamed of one day looking like her. Phyl would, of course – she'd seen that look in Phyl when she pulled back her hair and put on the hat with the cherries. But not me, she realized now. I'll never look like Mum. I'll look like Aunty Elsie.

She turned to her mother. "You don't like Aunty Elsie, do you?"

"What?" Her mother blushed, startled. "Don't be silly. You know how good she's always been to us."

She put the tape-measure away.

"Now, I want you to go to Greenings and get some groceries. I'll write a list. And you can call in at the drapers and see if you can get some dark sewing cotton for that frock. Don't bother matching it. Black or brown will do..."

Resignation crept over Mary. Saturday was Mum's cleaning day and that always meant extra chores for Mary: do the shopping, hang the washing out, peel the potatoes, mind Doreen, mind Lennie. She'd be lucky to find much time for the pigeons today. Still, shopping was better than helping with the cleaning.

"And can you pop in and see Uncle Charley? He might need something."

Mary went to see Uncle Charley first. She liked him. He was her mother's uncle, retired long ago from the pit with dust on the lungs. He couldn't get about much, although he managed to creep the few yards to the Rose and Crown every night. Dad often met him there. The pub had a meeting room at the back where the pigeon club met. Dad and Uncle Charley both went to the meetings, although Charley didn't race any more; he just kept a few of his favourites.

They were soon out in the garden, looking at the pigeons and the few chickens that were scratching around amongst the nettles. Uncle Charley found four eggs and gave them to Mary to take home.

"All of them?" asked Mary.

"One each."

"Doreen doesn't eat proper food yet."

"Well, two for your mum, then."

"Mum wouldn't eat two."

"She should. Tell her."

"But she won't. And what about you?"

Uncle Charley laughed. The laugh turned into a cough, and he coughed and coughed; his face was grey. When he got his breath back he said, "Don't worry about me. A pot of tea and some bread and jam. That'll do me fine. Now, tell me about your pigeons. Nice flying weather. Are you training them?"

Mary pulled a face. "Trying to. I want to take them out on a toss. Not just a mile or two. I've done that – but a real one, five miles, or seven, out in the country. But there's never any time. It's school all week, and then after school and on Saturdays Mum says do this, do that and I don't get a minute."

“Well, you must help your mother.”

“I *know*, but...”

Mary paused. An idea was forming in her mind, but she daren't tell Uncle Charley about it. He'd be shocked. She was a bit shocked herself. She changed the subject.

“Dad thinks Speedwell's a winner. Best long-distance bird he's had. I want to put her in for Bordeaux in July.”

“Bordeaux! That's over seven hundred miles, girl.”

“She could do it. She won last year from Nevers, didn't she?”

“That's true. She did. She's a lovely bird. Try her on four hundred-odd later this month. There's Le Mans, or Nantes. I'll put her in for you.”

“Thank you.” Mary wished she could go to the club herself, but Mum had forbidden it. The pigeon club was a man's place, she said; she wasn't having Mary hanging around a public house; besides, there was enough for her to do at home.

“But the races,” Mary had protested.

“Your father asked you to look after them, not race them.”

“But that *is* looking after them!” Mary exclaimed. “I might win some money,” she added.

“And you might lose some. You'll get no money for pools from me.”

“Dad puts them in. He pools them,” said Mary.

“Yes.” Her mother was tight-lipped. “More's the pity. But I decide where the money goes now, and it doesn't go on pigeons. If your Uncle Charley's daft enough to put them in for you, that's his affair.”

Uncle Charley was daft enough.

“I'll find out the dates for you – tell you what's best,” he promised.

He put the four dirt-spattered, precious eggs into a paper bag. Mary took them straight home, for fear of breaking them.

“Oh, bless him!” said Mum, and her face softened with relief and gratitude. “I couldn't think what we were going to eat today. You know, Mary, if that postal order doesn't come on Monday we'll have to go to the Assistance and ask for help. Now off you go, and get those bits of shopping.”

Mary went, her mind full of her audacious plan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mary woke early on Sunday morning, as she had planned. She sat up, willing the bed springs not to squeak. The bed was an old double one with a lumpy mattress. Mary had slept on one side of it; she still could not get used to having all that space to herself.

She slid her feet out on to the cool cracked lino and began putting on her clothes. From behind the screen which gave her the illusion of being in a room of her own, Lennie was snoring gently.

The window was in Mary's half of the room. She looked out. It was going to be a beautiful day – too good to spend in chapel. Behind the roofs of the houses opposite rose the headframe of the pit; the sunlight sparkled and she had to squint to see, over to the left, pits and mounds and scarred earth giving way in the distance to green hills. That was where she was going: right out of Culverton, with its pits and brickworks and streets, out into the distant green countryside.

With her shoes in her hand she crept past Lennie, flat on his back with mouth open and arms flung up, on to the landing, past the closed door of the room where Mum and Doreen slept, and downstairs.

In the kitchen she got a drink of water. Then she cut two thick slices of bread and wrapped them in a paper bag. She found an empty vinegar bottle and filled it with water. Under the teapot she pushed the note she had written last night.

Outside the back door, she looked up at Mum's window. There was no sound, and the curtain was drawn. Mum wouldn't wake easily; she liked a lie-in on a Sunday.

The pigeons, on the other hand, were wide awake, all glossy feathers and gleaming eyes. There was one she noticed particularly as she handled the young birds: a dark chequer cock with a bold eye; he sat beautifully balanced in her hands.

Mary gave the birds a drink and got out the basket. She put in six of the young birds, those hatched that spring. She wondered about taking some of the yearlings, too, to help keep the flock together, but when she lifted the basket she knew that six was plenty. Besides, Uncle Charley had come round last night with the race dates, and had promised to put some birds on the train to Gloucester on Tuesday, to give them a longer run.

Mary put her food and her vinegar bottle in the pockets of her dress, heaved up the basket and went out through the back garden gate.

It was not until she reached the end of Lion Street that she began to think about the consequences of what she was doing.

No decent person flew their pigeons on a Sunday. Sunday racing was forbidden. Even Sunday visits to friends' lofts were frowned upon; and Mary's place on a Sunday was in chapel in the morning and at Auntie Elsie's for tea in the afternoon. She'd be in trouble, for certain, when she got home.

She should have asked, she thought; but then, justifying herself, if she had asked, Mum would have said no. There would be trouble, but it seemed to Mary something she could not avoid, since the young birds needed a toss and she was determined to be the one to take them. Anyway, at this early hour, the afternoon and its retribution seemed a long way off.

She was more concerned now about the weight of the basket and the way it scraped and banged her leg. She stopped, and changed hands.

The rows of terraced houses began to thin out and she found herself trudging along a lane of rutted earth with only an occasional cottage here and there. The headframe of Old Hall Pit came in sight to her left, and the spoil heaps rose all around, blocking the view.

Mary stopped by a stile, put down the heavy basket, and ate one of the slices of bread. The pigeons shuffled in the basket and cooed softly. The mine was motionless in the Sunday silence, and from the cottages there was no sign of life except a cat which was eyeing her from the top of a wall. Perhaps its ears had caught the sounds from the pigeon basket.

“You keep away, cat,” said Mary. She didn’t like cats; they were always prowling around the loft.

She climbed over the stile and walked on. She was getting tired; the basket was too heavy. But gradually the pit mounds were giving way to fields and hedgerows. The air was clear and there was a scent of flowers.

When she stopped at midday she was surrounded by fields; all she could see of Culverton was a distant church spire. She put down the basket and sat on a stile, then ate the second slice of bread and drank the water.

Young green wheat was growing in the field on one side of the stile, and clover in the other. Beyond a hedge was some bright green crop that she couldn’t recognize at that distance. Far away, across several fields, there was a line of people bending, weeding. There was no sound except the rustle of wheat and, high up, the faint summery sound of skylarks calling.

“Time to go,” said Mary to the birds. She got down from the stile and began unfastening the straps on the basket. The pigeons fluttered and cooed. They would be hungry now, keen to get home; she hadn’t fed them this morning. They ought to be all right, but she was nervous. You could never be sure with young birds, and they hadn’t been taken this far from home before.

The lid was down; a couple of birds ventured out. For a second or two they stayed. Then one, the bold-looking dark chequer cock, took off. The others came out and followed with a whirr of wings, and Mary knew it was out of her hands now; they were away. They circled round for several minutes, not as smoothly as her flock of older hens, but connected, moving as a group. Then, suddenly, they veered off. They were heading towards home. Mary felt both relief and apprehension. Her one desire now was to return home herself and be sure that they all got safely back. She bent to fasten the basket.

When she looked up again the birds had vanished. And then she saw one dropping down towards the field beyond the hedge.

“Oh, no – you mustn’t!” Mary was panic stricken. If they stopped to feed they might never come home. She’d have to chase them off. She seized the basket and ran awkwardly with it along the edge of the field and over the next stile. They were all down. What was it – the bright green? Of course. Peas. Young peas – the first crop almost ready for harvesting. Pigeons couldn’t resist them. If only she’d noticed; Dad would have done.

She jumped down from the stile, and as she did so a gunshot rang out, followed by a rush of wings. A man had appeared at the bottom of the field. Pigeons were circling above in panic. Had he got one? Mary couldn’t see. The gun was pointed skywards again.

“No!” screamed Mary. “No!”

The man fired again, and the flock scattered.

Mary ran down the side of the field, yelling, “No! Don’t shoot! They’re going! Look, they’re going away!”

The man ignored her. He aimed, and fired a third time. Mary saw a pigeon plummet. She threw herself at the man.

“You didn’t need to kill it! It was flying away! You only needed to scare them off. Why did you kill it?”

The man lowered the gun and turned to her. She quailed at the sight of his anger.

“Because dead pigeons don’t come back,” he said. “I’ll shoot every one I see. You people with your damn pigeons are a menace.”

“I didn’t know,” said Mary, sniffing back tears. “I didn’t realize it was peas.”

She started forward to retrieve her dead pigeon, but the man caught her arm and flung her back.

“Off my land, miss!”

“I want my pigeon!”

The man’s face darkened. “Just get off my land. Get off! Go! And don’t come back!”

Mary backed away, terrified. The man looked so angry she feared he might turn the gun on her. She ran back to the stile, grabbed her basket, and climbed over into the next field, out of his sight. She ran, gasping for breath, until she reached a gate with a stile in it and knew she was on the footpath that would lead her home.

She stopped then, put down the basket, and stared up at the sky. They had all gone. But had they gone home or were they scattered? They had been frightened and might lose their bearings. Once they were separated they could be picked up by other flocks. And then there were hawks, and telegraph wires, and, if they came down, cats. It was miles home to find out if they were safe, and Mum was going to be so angry, and if she’d lost the pigeons then Dad had lost all his new season’s birds.

“That bloody farmer!” said Mary. She beat her fist on the gate and began to cry in real earnest, hating the farmer, hating herself for being so stupid, hating the thought of going home.

She was not aware of anyone’s approach until a voice behind her said, “What’s up with you then, Mary Dyer?”

Mary looked round, trying to control the trembling of her chin.

She saw a boy – a rough-looking boy, dark haired and dark eyed, with a bruise on one cheekbone and an air rifle over his shoulder. He was swarthy with a darkness that was more dirt than nature and he wore a ragged shirt and trousers and shoes that had split open at the sides.

Arnold Revell. Just about the last person Mary could have wanted to meet.

CHAPTER FIVE

All the girls shrank from Arnold Revell.

“He smells,” Doris Brown would say, wrinkling her little nose. And it was true that a fustiness of unwashed odour, sometimes mixed with a rank smell of goat, emanated from the corner where Arnold sat at the back of the class. His nails were usually black and his neck grimy. He was not exactly badly behaved, but school didn’t interest him and he brought an air of disorder into the classroom.

Further down the school were more Revells. Nearly every class had one. Arnold was the eldest. He had been kept back at least a year because he was so slow, and he was bigger and older than everyone else in his class. The Revells lived on a smallholding and scrap-yard on the edge of town out beyond the railway station. Whenever there was petty thieving, scrumping or fights, the Revells were blamed.

Mary sniffed back her tears and steadied her chin. She didn’t want to cry in front of Arnold Revell. Had it been Olive, or, better still, Phyl, she would have burst into tears again and enjoyed their sympathy. But not a boy, especially this boy.

“I heard shooting,” said Arnold. He looked at the pigeon basket. “Someone shoot your birds?”

“Yes,” said Mary. She picked up the basket, but it seemed rude to turn her back on him and go, so she explained about the peas and how angry the farmer had been.

“I heard the shooting and dived into the hedge,” said Arnold. “Best keep out the way, thought. Don’t get on with farmers, see. Course, if I’d known it was you,” he added gallantly, “I’d have come out and had a go at the bugger.”

Mary thought it was just as well he hadn’t.

She began climbing over the stile, hampered by the basket. Arnold took it from her, then swung himself over with practised ease. Mary thought how much better he fitted into the countryside than he did into the classroom. There, he looked stupid and clumsy; here, he seemed to belong.

“Going home?” asked Arnold.

“Yes.” Mary didn’t want him walking along beside her, but the footpath was bordered by hedges and there was nowhere else to go.

“What were you doing back there?” she asked.

Arnold shrugged. “Nothing much. Looking around, like. Get a few rabbits sometimes.”

The thought of meat made Mary aware of how hungry she was.

“How many of your pigeons got shot?” asked Arnold.

“One at least. Maybe two.”

“Pity he stopped you getting them. Makes a good meal, a couple of pigeons. Nice with a bit of gravy.”

Mary wondered how many racing pigeons Arnold had shot in his time; she doubted whether he would make much distinction between ringed ones and wild ones.

“Mum might have forgiven me if I’d brought them back,” she agreed. She explained to Arnold what she had done. Arnold did not seem shocked about the Sunday flying, or about

not going to chapel; the Revells rarely attended, and when they did nobody sat near them.

"I'm scared to go home," confessed Mary.

"Come to our place, then. Got some stew. Chicken."

"Wouldn't your mum mind?"

"Mum? She's took off again. There's only Dad and the little 'uns."

Mary thought of chicken stew and was tempted. After all, Arnold seemed all right. But the Revells had such a bad reputation in the town; she wasn't sure she ought to go there. And Mum found out... I'm in enough trouble already, Mary thought. Besides, there were the pigeons; she had to see if they had got home.

"I'd better not," she said.

It took them over an hour to walk back to Culverton, but the time passed quickly. Arnold told Mary about scrapes he and his brothers had got into. They mostly involved air rifle trespass or thieving. Mary was mildly shocked, but the stories made her laugh; she suspected that her laughter was making Arnold exaggerate them.

Then they entered the fringe of the town, and Mary stopped laughing and chatting and began to worry. First, she worried about the time. Mum and the little ones should have got up to Auntie Elsie's by now, but they might be waiting for her at home. Then she worried about being seen with Arnold. It was bad enough being seen with any boy – the girls always teased one another – but Arnold Revell: she'd never live it down if anyone saw her with *him*.

They came to the parting of the ways: Lion Street for Mary and Station Road for Arnold. Mary paused.

"I've got to go now."

Arnold was still carrying the pigeon basket. She reached for it.

"Heavy, after a few miles, that is," said Arnold, handing it back.

"You didn't have to carry it," said Mary ungraciously.

"I meant for you. With pigeons in. You need a bike."

Mary laughed. "Some chance!"

"See you, then. Tomorrow."

"See you."

Mary turned away and ran up Lion Street. Tomorrow! She hoped he wouldn't speak to her tomorrow at school. She'd die.

She went along the alley and in through the back garden gate. Now her thoughts were all for the pigeons. She wanted to fling open the door of the loft and rush inside, but she restrained herself and approached it calmly so as not to disturb the birds.

Three of them were back. Three out of six. Two had probably been shot. One was lost; it might find its way back, but it was young and the outside world was full of dangers. The beautiful dark chequer cock was missing. Had he been shot? She'd never know which one she saw fall. She imagined him stiffening in the field of peas, his bloom gone, his blood red eye dulled.

Sorry, Dad, she thought.

Indoors, the house was empty. They hadn't waited. Auntie Elsie would be laying the table now, with the pretty plates painted with birds and flowers – seconds that Uncle Arthur used to bring home from the china works. There would be sandwiches, and currant cake, and a small bag of sweets for Lennie. Mary felt almost sick with hunger. If she went up there no

she'd be in time for tea. But it meant walking in, feeling everyone staring at her, confronting the anger of both women... She couldn't face it.

I should have gone to Arnold's, she thought. Who cares what anyone thinks?

She searched the larder, found a crust of bread, and spread it with jam. Then she went up to her room to await her mother's anger.

CHAPTER SIX

Mary's mother was angry. What would the neighbours think, she asked? What would the minister think? How did she think Aunty Elsie felt? Mary became aware that her mother had been subjected to an afternoon-long lecture by Aunty Elsie on how to discipline her children. "And on top of all that, I was worried the whole time. Didn't you realize I'd worry?"

Mary was sorry but she wouldn't say so. "It's the only time I get, Sundays," she muttered, hanging her head.

"You won't take those birds out on a Sunday again," said her mother.

Mary decided not to mention Arnold Revell. However, she told her mother about the shooting. She was hoping for sympathy, but got none.

"You can't blame the farmer. He's got his crops to protect. He's probably driven mad by the pigeon fanciers. I know I am. And if you think I'm letting you off on Saturdays, you can think again. I won't have a girl of your age running around the countryside when she ought to be helping at home."

"Well, I'm sending three birds to Le Mans on Wednesday," said Mary defiantly. "If they win us some money you'll be pleased, won't you?"

"If," said Mum.

But next morning everything was changed. The postman came, bringing a letter from Dad. Mary and Lennie watched as Mum tore it open. Inside was a postal order for four pounds, one shilling coin, and a letter.

"Four pounds!" Mum scanned the letter quickly. "That's two weeks pay ... he's got a labouring job ... temporary, but he'll keep looking around, like ... he'll send more next week... He says, Mary, the shilling is for pigeon feed. He doesn't say where he's sleeping. I hope it's somewhere decent."

She stood holding the postal order and staring at it as if afraid it would disappear.

Suddenly she laughed and hugged both children to her. "We'll have fish and chips tonight, shall we? Here, take your shilling, Mary, for the pigeons. Don't lose it."

Mary took the shilling and put it quickly in her pocket. She had half expected Mum to keep it, but the postal order had made her generous. That, and Phyl coming next weekend. It was her Sunday off, and she would bring her wages.

Mary went to school. To her relief, Arnold Revell ignored her, not even catching her eye. When she got home there was a warm, greasy fish and chip smell in the kitchen. What was more, Mum had bought an orange. She gave it to Lennie and Mary to share.

Mary broke her half into segments and ate it slowly, savouring the sharp, fresh taste. She pushed half the pieces to one side and said to her mother, "You have some."

Mum shook her head.

"Go on," insisted Mary.

"All right, just one." Mum took one segment. Mary ate the others with a guilty feeling and relief.

Mum smiled. "I've finished that frock. You can try it on after tea."

Mary had to admit, standing in her mother's bedroom in front of the mirror, that the dress fitted her; and it was more comfortable under the arms than the old, tight one. But the old one had been blue flowered cotton and she had felt pretty in it. She hated this one: the dark plain colour, the crêpy material.

Mum stood up from where she had been adjusting the hem. She looked doubtful. "What do you think?"

"It's sort of floppy," said Mary, trying not to be too discouraging, since her mother had spent time altering it.

"It doesn't flatter you," Mum admitted. She sighed. "But it fits. It'll have to do."

The maroon frock was the first bad thing that happened that week. The second was Arnold Revell speaking to her at school.

It was during the last break time on Wednesday. Mary was leaning against the wall in the playground with Olive, watching a skipping game and sucking a sherbet lemon. She had just bitten through the crisp shell of the lemon when she felt Olive nudge her. Arnold Revell was coming across the playground, heading straight towards them.

He stopped in front of Mary.

"Come round our place tonight," he said, "Got something to show you."

Then he turned away.

Olive exploded with laughter, spraying the scent of lemon around. "Hey, Mary, was he talking to you?"

"I don't know!" Mary exclaimed. She staggered against Olive, giggling, desperate to convince her friend that she had never spoken to Arnold before.

Arnold must have heard them, but he gave no sign. He just walked away.

Olive called to Doris Brown and Edna Johnson, who were standing nearby. "Did you hear that? Arnold Revell asked Mary out!"

"He didn't!" insisted Mary, as Doris shrieked with laughter. The girls began exclaiming about the cheek of boys in general and of Arnold Revell in particular. Mary joined in.

Afterwards, sitting in the classroom, she glanced at Arnold and felt ashamed. But he shouldn't have spoken to her, she thought, defending her betrayal; especially not in front of the other girls. And it was only then that she wondered: what does he want to show me anyway?

Mary didn't go to the Revells after school. She went home, had her tea, then hurried to the loft to get Blériot, Thunder and Speedwell ready for the race. First, she would take them to Uncle Charley's. He had promised to take them to the club to have the race rings put on at the clock set, ready for Mary to meet the train at half past five.

Mary thought Uncle Charley would approve of her choices. The birds were as bright and buoyant as she'd ever seen them. The two cocks both had squeakers to fly home to. Speedwell didn't, but Mary felt sure she would do well; she remembered how certain Dad had been about her. "I've just got a feeling about that bird, Mary. I reckon she'll turn out to be the best long-distance bird I've had."

Mary stood still in the loft, watching the pigeons. The Gaffer was on the floor. He tugged at her shoe lace. Mary picked up Speedwell. The hen sat calmly in her palm, rounded and warm. Her deep red eye was unafraid. Soon Speedwell would be flying back from Le Mans, over

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