

Years 11 & 12  
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## Flight

A small flock of pigeons used to live on the balcony of my apartment. At least, I *thought* they lived there. I never saw them arrive, never saw them leave, but every morning I'd wake up and they'd be perched there, waiting, watching.

I can't remember when I started to notice the pigeons, but I know I didn't see them until *after* it happened. Until after my life changed. I guess having them there was just another small reminder of how different everything was now.

Sometimes I fed the birds: crumbs from my bread, crushed nuts, sunflower seeds. I would quickly step outside my balcony door and scatter the food along the ground, waiting for them to come and eat. If I got too close, I was afraid they'd fly away. And something in me wanted them to stay.

Or I just watched them. I would sit on my chair by the balcony, my hands curled around a cup of tea, listening to their gentle murmurs, chuckling at the way they congregated together, like old men meeting to talk about the weather and their wives.

And they didn't seem to mind I was there. Sometimes, as strange as it sounds, I even thought they'd come there *for* me, to give me company, something to occupy me in those long hours that stretched into days that stretched into weeks that stretched into years.

But still those years didn't heal me. Not fully.

I thought about naming the birds, but something always held me back. If I did name them, it would make it almost seem like they *belonged* to me, like I'd caged them into my life with my whispered labels and handfuls of breadcrumbs.

But I *didn't* own them. These birds were still free, as free as the endless blue sky that stretches out beyond New York City, as free as the wind that blows wherever it wishes, bringing whispers of memories anywhere it goes.

Whereas *I* was trapped. Trapped in my memories, trapped in the city full of my past, a past that captured me in its death grip, reminding me I could never flee from what happened to me. It's engraved into me, into the world, something no one can ever forget.

I hadn't cried since that day. It was as if all the emotions from those terrible hours were trapped too. They were caged inside of me, clawing at the locks, and pushing to burst out. And I didn't know what would happen when I let them go.

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I remember once waking up at three in the morning and getting up to grab a drink. As I walked into the kitchen, I glanced outside and saw my balcony, illuminated by the lights of the city. And perched on the balcony were the pigeons. I had never seen them at night before, had never really grasped that these birds were there all the time. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week. Sometimes they felt like my only consistency, the only thing that was certain about my life.

I stepped closer to the window, pressing my face against the glass. My breath fogged up the cold, smooth surface, blurring my scarred reflection. And I just stood there, watching them, listening to their gentle coos. I stood there until I felt my eyes start to close, my head start to droop. Then I let myself limp back into bed, knowing that when I arose the next morning, the pigeons would still be there.

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My sister, Allison, told me I should move somewhere else, away from New York City. She wanted me to get a fresh start, to be able to begin again in a new place, where there were no memories. She'd even found a house for me, not too far from New York, and only a short drive from her place. But I only shook my head and told her I could never leave.

"New York City is my *home*," I would always insist.

And I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to the pigeons if I left. Would they find somewhere else to roost, or would they stay, no matter who lived in the apartment?

I didn't want to find out. Somehow, I felt like my life was intertwined with theirs, and if I left my apartment to move somewhere new, I'd be abandoning them.

I didn't ever think that they'd be the ones to move away first.

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It was on my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday that they left.

I was sipping my tea and watching the pigeons as I did every day. As I brought the cup up to my mouth, it suddenly tumbled from my grasp. With a loud crash, it shattered on the floor, splashing hot liquid over my feet. As I stood to clean up the mess, I heard the rustle of wings. I breathed in sharply and opened the balcony door. My breath caught as I stepped outside and watched the first few birds start to take off from the balcony. I stretched out a hand slowly, as if I could stop them from leaving.

"No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Please stay."

But they were already flying away. Their wings flapped as they rushed past me with gentle coos and murmurs, as if they were saying goodbye. And as I watched them go, watched them swoop into the sky, I suddenly was filled with longing. A longing to join them, to leave behind my past, leave behind my memories, and begin again.

The whites of their wings flicked up and down, painting a picture in the orange and crimson sky. My vision blurred as I watched the pigeon's wings flicker into ash and debris.

*Ash.*

*The air was thick with it, adding to the cloud of miniscule pieces of debris and cement that threatened to suffocate us. We were running, our feet pounding along the pavement as if we thought we could escape the veil of dust and danger behind us. All I could hear were screams, shouts from police officers, the terrified sobs of young and old.*

*I stumbled suddenly and collapsed to the ground. A sharp, stinging pain clawed at my face, and I glanced down to see blood dripping onto the pavement below. Allison grabbed my hand and pulled me up, and we staggered on. My lungs burned and I coughed and coughed, trying to dispel the taste of death that filled my mouth.*

*"Come on, you have to move faster." My sister's eyes were wild with desperation.*

*"We're – not – going – to – make – it," I gasped. I stumbled again but this time Allison was right there. She grabbed my hand and urged me on.*

*We were surrounded by death, destruction, and hopelessness. Screams and sirens swirled through the air in a cacophony of peril and fear. I could barely see more than a few feet in front of me, the air was so filled with ash and smoke. Blood ran down from the gash onto my forehead into my eyes, mixing with tears.*

*"Dad!" I stopped in the middle of the pathway, and someone swore angrily at me as they dodged me and kept running. "He's still in there! He's in the building." The world seemed to spin as the moment replayed in my mind again, that moment of impact when the towers exploded in a burst of fire and smoke. How could Dad have gotten out alive?*

*"He's okay, he's safe," Allison whispered, over and over again, as if repeating it could somehow make it true. We both knew it wasn't, though. But we had to keep running. Our lives depended on it. So Allison grabbed my hand and we kept moving forward.*

*My feet pounded heavily along the pavement, step after step. I gasped for breath. Then, as I ran, I turned suddenly and saw, next to me, a small flock of pigeons. There weren't more than 10 of them, gliding along next to each other, through the smoke and ash-filled air. They seemed almost graceful compared to all the destruction and devastation around us.*

*In that moment where they flew next to me, time seemed to slow down. I watched the birds as they soared along, following the same path that my sister and I were taking. Maybe they, too, were fleeing the danger that lay behind, hoping for a refuge ahead.*

The image faded away and I was left standing on my balcony, with nothing left of the pigeons except a few downy feathers and the memory of their beautiful flight into the distance.

And as I stood there, alone, I felt tears begin to well up in my eyes, then travel down my cheek, dripping onto the pavement far below. My shoulders started to shake with heavy, ugly sobs and I felt all the memories and hurt and brokenness that had built up since it happened come pouring out of me. I crumpled to the ground and leaned against the railing, finally mourning for that day, for all the lives – including my father's – that had been lost.

*Why did I survive, when so many others didn't?*

I looked out into the distance, in the direction that the pigeons had flown. Their absence seemed to call me, to urge me to follow their leading and go somewhere new. Maybe I could take flight, just as the pigeons had, and move on. Move on from the past, move on from the haunting memories that still shook me and traumatised me, move on from the city that was so full of reminders of death and fear.

"Okay," I whispered. "Okay. I'll follow you. I'll leave this place and start over, somewhere new."