Small Town: Pigeon Fancy

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Abstract
There was pigeon shit everywhere. He'd had to lean hard on the door and push with his shoulder. It gave with a slow crunch and he slid through the gap. Like stepping into a ghost room, a room that was a plaster cast of itself—only not plaster, but bird shit. Oddly white at first, then grey, black and yellow. An ordinary, square, furnished room. The door he came in and a door out the opposite side, a settee, a thin-legged table, a broken chair. Net curtains on the window, a sink below, exposed pipes where the cooker once stood. Everything coated in a layer of shit one inch, two inches, some places as much as six inches thick. How many pigeons? How many years? How could such a room exist?
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I

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He could see what she'd be like as an older woman. She'd have her own house full of odd books, the classics, anatomy, art, mostly second-hand, sheaves of music piled up around the boxed grand piano. She'd go to Greece on her holidays, drink retsina and look at the sea. She'd have serious relationships with men who'd think she was one thing, one way, until they learned that, in fact, she was not. She'd be metropolitan, wear gold-rimmed glasses on a gold chain.

And he would be old and conventional and he'd live in a small town and he wouldn't have seen her for years, but he'd love her, he'd still love her, even then he'd love her more than he'd ever loved anybody.

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He arrived from Canada in the spring. It was part of the deal he had made with his dad – he finished his degree and worked for a year and was now having his summer of travel before heading home to start medical school. Peter was twenty-two. Twenty-two and still bargaining with his dad. He didn't know how he'd got so old – that was how he thought of it – got so old. But now he had escaped and, for a while, he was free.

London suited him. The Falklands War was on in the South Atlantic and the city steamed with fierce debate. He found a card pinned to a
board in a radical bookshop – everything was strange in this city, even the notion of a radical bookshop was exotic to him – ‘Come and Help Us Make a New City’. He took the tube under the Thames to Vauxhall. Across the wasteland next to the overhead railway line he could see a tenement building and he knew that was his destination. Peter had checked out of the youth hostel, he was carrying his backpack with him; once he arrived, he would be staying.

The building had five floors, centred round a large internal courtyard. He walked through an archway and into the bright space, dropped his pack and sat on the ground next to it. All around the noise of hammers and saws – through open doors he glimpsed people working. After a few minutes, a young man wandered over. ‘There’s room,’ he said, ‘at the top.’ He indicated a flight of stairs in one corner. ‘With George.’

Peter picked up his bag and shouldered it. Everything was strange in London, this was only part of it. He went to look for George.

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They took over two adjacent flats on the fifth floor. There were forty flats in the building, but the entire north side was uninhabitable, even for the DIY die-hards among the group. The roof had caved in and the rain had worn through, collapsing the floors and ceilings of the flats, storey after storey, right down to the ground. It reminded him of an old avalanche site in the Rocky Mountains near where he was born. In the early part of the century a ramshackle, hard-hewn mining town called Frank had been obliterated when half a mountain slid down onto it in the night. One person – a baby – survived, a little girl Peter had always imagined was thereafter known as Frankie. No one had seen the slide take place, there was no one to see, they were all asleep. These days the highway ran right through it, across it, the road lined with enormous ragged boulders. A small plaque on one of the rocks told the story; Peter and his family would stop their car to read it from time to time. Now, in London, Peter wondered if anyone had witnessed the slow-motion avalanche at Vauxhall Palace Buildings. Probably not, he thought, the place had been empty for years.

On the fifth floor the flats were one-bedroom: landing and sitting room at the front, bedroom and kitchen following on in the middle, narrow bathroom and, facing into the courtyard, toilet outside on a small balcony. Everyone had their toilet outside on the balcony. In the morning the courtyard echoed with flushing. George decided right away that this wasn’t enough room for them both; Peter stood and watched as he fetched up a sledgehammer and proceeded to knock a hole through the sitting room wall. ‘On the other side,’ he explained between bashes, ‘will be another sitting room, same as ours. We’ll only have to do the kitchen and bathroom on this side, but we’ll have all this extra space.’ Peter went back
into the kitchen, to escape the dust. In the week he’d lived in Vauxhall Palace he’d been taught, after a fashion, how to weld pipes, how to run wiring. He lay back down on the floor and continued attempting to plumb the sink.

By the end of the day George had knocked a hole the shape of Frankenstein’s monster through the wall. He called to Peter, who climbed through after him. The sitting room next door was identical to the one they already occupied, empty except for a large, pale, deco-style bureau that stood beneath the front windows. ‘Cool,’ said George, running his finger through the dust. Peter walked down the hallway towards the bedroom, which was furnished, the plain double bed neatly made as though expecting its tenant that night. At the window he pushed back the curtains, orange and blackened with age, and saw that the rear end of the flat was avalanche afflicted, collapsing into the ruin of the flats next door. It looked as though the kitchen was probably still intact, and he went to have a look. That was when he put his shoulder to the door and discovered the pigeon sanctuary. George, in his effete Australian way, was disgusted by the sight and the smell, although to Peter the room simply smelt old. When he was younger his father used to tell him he had an underdeveloped sense of smell, he was odour-blind, like some boys were colour-blind. But Peter knew his sense of smell was fine, he just happened to like tangs and aromas, a good whiff and you knew where you stood. A quick guide to intimacy. Now when his roommate shouted and rushed away from the room, Peter thought he heard a stirring – wings. From the corridor George called out, ‘You can have this side, Peter, you’re Canadian, you’re used to wildlife.’

So Peter was happy in his London flat, his bijou squatted London property. In the evenings he and George cooked together, weird and economical combinations of rice and beans, they’d both become sudden vegetarians. Afterwards they’d venture down the street to the off-licence to buy beer, which they’d carry to the ground floor flat that had been converted into a meeting place, a speakeasy. A sound system had been rigged up and the walls painted black where they weren’t knocked through to create more and larger spaces. Some nights people showed slides or films; everyone living in Vauxhall Palace seemed to be an artist, or at least, at art school, Goldsmith’s, Camberwell, St Martin’s, Chelsea. They all did things with their hands. There was a lot of talk about world politics, about the work on the flats, the best way of finding furniture, bathtubs, cookers and sinks, about the possibilities of a money-free economy. Peter didn’t say a lot, but he listened. Amanda, Simon, Katherine and Will, and then the ones with nicknames, Squeak, Ziggy, Baby. And Fancy, the girl called Fancy, Peter wasn’t sure whether that was her real name or not.
He slept between the sheets that someone had drawn up and corner-tucked years and years ago. The first night they smelt a bit musty and felt a little damp, but the double bed was luxurious compared to the youth hostel, compared to the floor of the sitting room on the other side of Frankenstein. Peter wasn’t used to hardship, even though he’d been a student for four years; he was soft in his North Americanness, central heating, dishwashers, microwaves, cars. He’d lain awake for a while, mulling over the plumbing he’d done, wondering if he’d got it right. They’d find out soon enough, when they turned on the mains tomorrow. He could hear music filtering up from the speakeasy. He’d left at three a.m., and people were still drifting around, talking, dancing, George in a corner with Amanda, both giggling wildly. The music died suddenly, and Peter was held close by the night.

He woke at first light with the sound of pigeons. It took a few moments to understand what he heard – at first he thought perhaps George had been successful with Amanda – were they having sex outside his door? It was a human sound, but then its humanity fell away – cooing. That breast-full bird sound, early morning. He got up and went out into the corridor. When he opened the door to the old kitchen he was met with sudden movement, the air filled with mad fluttering. He stepped forward, the crust under his bare feet like a rough beach of drying seaweed. The birds fled through a hole in the ceiling before he could see them. He went back to bed and dreamed of flying.

Once the kitchen and bathroom were plumbed in and functional, they got on with decorating. Peter had never been one to look at walls and consider colour schemes, but George went at this task with passion. ‘It’s got to look good,’ he said. ‘It’s got to be somewhere I would like to be.’ George was in a band, although Peter had never met the other members, never heard a strain of their music; he planned to turn his bedroom into a recording studio and spent his days arranging the wiring. Everything was legitimate in Vauxhall Palace, at least in their flat, the electricity and gas metered up, the appropriate boards notified, and they had every intention of paying their bills. They might have looked and talked like subversives, but Peter knew their souls – his soul – had a thick layer of small town underneath. Peter’s veneer of anarchy was very thin, thinner even than George’s, three weeks thin, the length of time he had been in the UK.

Fancy’s flat was on the second floor of Vauxhall Palace, on the opposite side of the courtyard. Peter knew this because as he was coming out of the toilet on the balcony one day, he saw her going into hers. She was wearing a long T-shirt, and her legs were bare, as were her feet. He was relieved when she didn’t look up – he didn’t like the idea of her knowing he’d just been to the toilet. But he didn’t mind knowing what Fancy was
up to – it made her seem more normal, more real. He had spoken to her several times at the speakeasy. Once they had a conversation about Canada. She didn’t know anything about Canada, except that it was part of the Commonwealth which had something to do with the Queen. She’d certainly never heard of Alberta, and she told him that her best friend in infant school had had that name. Peter wondered what infant school was – a school for tiny babies? – but he didn’t ask. He thought that if he asked for explanations every time he didn’t understand something in England he would become known as the Question Mark King.

Fancy had been to art school as well, she’d only recently graduated – textiles. She was a weaver. She told Peter she also did silk-screening and print-making on fabric and he noticed her thin fingers were always stained with ink. ‘They don’t have art schools where I come from,’ he said.

She looked at him blankly. ‘I wonder what happened to my friend Alberta? We lost contact.’

Peter found English people difficult to comprehend, but he liked them, with their quiet, convoluted ways, so unlike the folks back home. He got on well with George, but George was Australian and also new and confused. Peter made friends with another of their neighbours, Joseph, who was a Catholic from Belfast – Peter knew this was politically significant but didn’t quite understand how or why. Joseph declared an immediate sympathy with people ‘from across the water’ and he told Peter they’d be mates because they both pronounced their ‘r’s’ properly. ‘Those English,’ he said, ‘they let their r’s evade them. Smokah,’ he waved his cigarette, a roll-up, in the air, ‘filtah – it won’t do. A sure sign of moral laxity,’ and he laughed and laughed until Peter laughed as well, uncertain of what was making them so happy.

Peter got a job, which he hadn’t intended. This was meant to be his summer of freedom and fun, but he found having to think of something to do every day rather taxing and thought a job would help him structure his time. And it would be easier on his savings. He worked in a take-away patisserie, a vaguely unpleasant shopfront across the Strand from Charing Cross Station. He spent his four-hour shifts down in the airless basement filling croissants from a giant vat of béchamel that a frightened Argentinian – ‘Colombia, I come from Colombia,’ he insisted – cooked up. Peter knew Roberto was Argentinian because when asked that’s what he said every time, before growing Austered and correcting himself too emphatically. Peter did not press the point and only mentioned the Falklands once when he asked Roberto what he thought of the war. ‘Nothing,’ said Roberto, ‘I think nothing. I come from Colombia.’

The basement was hot, made hotter by the ovens, and they worked shirtless, their backs sliding wet. When Peter cycled home across the river after work he felt the breeze dry his underwear.

At night he and George would go to the speakeasy. Eventually George and Amanda got together and the early morning sounds of the pigeons
became mingled with the sound of the lovers who seemed to feel free to make love all over the conjoined apartments, with the exceptions of Peter’s bedroom and the ghost kitchen next door. At these times Peter felt lonely, and he was rather glad of the company of the birds. In the morning he would stand at his bedroom window and watch them arrive and depart from the eaves. He would draw himself up and think of the girlfriends he had had at university and tell himself he could do it again, there was no reason to think the only women who liked him were those in Alberta – and thinking of Alberta made him think of Fancy and her infant friend and he lay back down on his hundred-year-old sheets. He liked to think of them as hundred-year-old but, in fact, they were made of nylon – pink – and he knew they probably came into being during the synthetic 1970s, the last time Vauxhall Palace was inhabited.

He determined to try harder with Fancy. That night at the speakeasy he spotted her friend Katherine. ‘Where’s Fancy?’ he asked politely.

‘Off somewhere with Tony, I should think.’

‘Tony?’

Katherine looked at Peter sideways, as though his interest in Fancy piqued her interest in him. ‘Oh Tony, don’t you know Tony? He’s been in love with Fancy since she was four.’

Peter felt himself pale.

‘That’s what they say. Tony was mates with Fancy’s older brother and when he dandled her on his knee she gurgled and that was it for him.’

‘Do they go out?’

‘They’re practically married. But if you ask me – ’ Katherine leaned forward, ‘Fancy’s bored with him. He’s so old! Nearly thirty.’ She clapped her hands and laughed.

Peter shared his beer with her. Joseph stopped by for a chat, cadged a cigarette off Katherine, then wandered away. Katherine told Peter about her current project – she was painting a replica of Michelangelo’s Sistine chapel on the ceiling of her bedroom. ‘Those fingers,’ she said, ‘they’re very difficult.’

Just when Peter was beginning to wonder if he should concentrate on being ‘nice to this girl instead of the other, Fancy came along and sat on Katherine’s knee. ‘Hello,’ she said, leaning to one side, her arms around her friend’s neck. ‘Hello there,’ and she winked at Peter. She hauled herself upright and nuzzled Katherine’s cheek.

‘Leave it out,’ Katherine said, neatly sliding out and away from Fancy’s grasp. ‘I’m going to find Simon.’

‘Hi ya,’ said Peter, nodding his head, feeling as though he was coming over all cowboy.

‘Hello,’ said Fancy, carefully placing an elbow on the table to steady herself. She was a little drunk. ‘I’d like to get to know you. Alberta.’ She giggled.

Peter pushed his last can of beer towards her. He got up and moved
around to her side of the table. Fancy shifted nearer and they put their heads together. 'Britain has no rightful place in the South Seas,' she declared. 'Give back the Malvinas.' Her breath smelt of apples.

'I’ve got a friend who’s Argentinian.' Peter thought of Roberto working in the heat of the kitchen.

'You do?' she said, moving a little closer. 'I would like to meet him.'

'I’ll try to arrange it.'

They talked about the speakeasy – who was there that night, who was not – Peter’s job, Fancy’s work. They talked about the present, immediate things. She wore a sleeveless vest that hung off her thin shoulders, he glimpsed a white cotton bra underneath. No one interrupted them and the hour got later and the black walls moved closer, the music grew softer although it still carried with it a harsh edge – the Test Department, the Velvet Underground, Crass, Lee Perry. Fancy kept her hand on Peter’s thigh.

After a while he was desperate to take a piss. When he was drunk he found he couldn’t bring himself to use the word ‘loo’, it seemed too silly, undignified. Back home they said ‘john’ or ‘can’ but those words were no good any more either. He got up and told her to wait right there and almost wished he could tie her to the seat so she wouldn’t move away.

The toilet was outside in the courtyard and to get there he had to pass through a series of small rooms. He entered one that had been painted red since the last time he was through – the night before? – walls, floor, ceiling. People sat on decrepit stuffed chairs and sofas, Amanda and George in one corner. Peter stood in front of them and started to talk, but they looked at him as though he was speaking from the bottom of the sea. ‘Peace man,’ George said. He held up his hand, fingers in a Star Trek V. Amanda said ‘Shh,’ then closed her eyes and fell asleep.

He got back to their table and Fancy was gone. Peter sat down in despair. The room was full of cigarette and druggy smoke, and for a moment he longed to take a bath. A voice behind him began to sing. A song about going out to Alberta, where the weather’s good in the fall. It was Fancy and he stood up and danced a slow dance with her as she sang. He had hated that song as long as he could remember. But she knew all the words, and she led him out of the speakeasy, across the courtyard, upstairs to her flat.

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Nearly a week passed before Peter bothered to look inside the bureau in the sitting room on his side of Frankenstein. He and George used the other sitting room for lounging, drinking instant coffee, reading newspapers, this one relegated to thoroughfare. A footpath led from the hole in the wall through the dust down the corridor to his bedroom. In the middle of the floor, like a snow angel, was the imprint of a human body –
Peter guessed George and Amanda had made love there the night before. He strayed off the path, stepped onto the ghost bodies, and opened up the double front doors of the heavy yellowing piece of furniture. Inside sat a white china teapot with its own round and shiny chrome teacosy, and two white china cups and saucers. He took them out carefully. Both side cupboards and the drawers were empty. He carried the china through to the kitchen. After work he’d invite Fancy for tea.

George was lying in the bath. ‘Make me a cup of coffee, will you, mate?’ he called out.

‘I’m leaving for work.’

‘Oh,’ said George. ‘Dag,’ he added half-heartedly.

It was unusual for Peter to see George without Amanda now. Since they’d got involved George had become less animated, quieter, as though the two of them added together somehow made less than one person. Peter didn’t mind, although sometimes he felt as though his friend was disappearing. And he was a little envious. Fancy was proving elusive. There one minute, vanished the next, like something he had conjured.

George was not a tidy roommate. Peter didn’t mind, he washed the dishes and cleared the table but didn’t bother with much else. George had hung a black curtain in the bright bathroom and when he was on his own, he was often in the bath soaking. Peter had never been a big bather himself, at home he had always taken showers, but showers didn’t seem to be part of the landscape of the British bathroom. So when he came home after a morning at work, streaked with cream sauce and smelling of baked cheese, he learned to bathe, even though it felt to him like something one did last thing at night.

And this morning he had managed to find Fancy at home; he invited her to come round later for tea in the new teacups. He clattered up the stairs with his bicycle over his shoulder, trying not to bounce it against the wall on every landing. Inside the flat there was a peculiar smell. He leaned his bike against the wall and walked through the kitchen. George had boiled the kettle dry, there was water across the floor where he’d got out of the bath and flung the kettle from the cooker into the sink. The wall next to the cooker was blackened. Peter felt suddenly dismayed by the untidiness and, thinking he would mop the floor and clean the kitchen in preparation for Fancy, went into the bathroom to get the mop. They did possess a mop, George had found one in a skip.

The room was dark and fuggy and Peter drew back the curtain. When he turned, he almost lost his footing, there was so much water on the floor. George was still in the bath. His head rested on the rim and one arm dangled over the side and Peter thought he looked like David’s painting of Marat just after he was murdered by Charlotte Corday. Strapped around his arm was a piece of rubber tubing. An empty syringe lay on the puddled floor just out of his reach.

Peter stepped forward, unsure of his footing, unsure of how to view this
scene. It was beyond him, and he knew it, he felt his Albertan childhood all around and it did not include lying in the bath all morning, syringes, black curtains, speakeasies. He took another step. The water in the bath was cold. But George was warm, in fact when Peter moved closer he heard the faint sound of George snoring. Once Peter knew he was not dead, he realized his roommate looked happy, content, comfortable even. So Peter took the mop and went back into the kitchen. He concentrated on getting ready for Fancy.

They had slept together, just once, that night when Fancy sang ‘Four Strong Winds’ as they danced. They’d gone into the sitting room of her flat and she turned on the radio. ‘My stereo got nicked,’ she said. ‘I’ve got loads of cassettes –’ she pointed to the shelves – ‘but nothing to play them on.’

‘I’ve got a stereo at home,’ Peter said, and hated himself for mentioning ‘home’, for even thinking of Alberta when his new home was here, for bringing up his previous life. But Fancy didn’t notice. She sat on the cushions piled next to the wall. He sat down beside her.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asked, but he moved close to her, drawn in by her smell of apples.

In the morning Peter woke with sun on his face. He sat up and a piece of paper fell to the floor. ‘Good morning! Gone to market,’ it read. His arm had pins and needles. In front of him, taking up most of the room, was an enormous loom, a thick and complex piece of woven and patterned fabric emerging from it. It was as though the loom had materialized with the morning, he had not noticed it the night before. He got up and walked around it and was reminded of a piece of farm machinery, it was somehow pre- and post-industrial simultaneously.

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He finished cleaning up the kitchen in preparation for her visit and was wondering what to do about the burnt kettle when there was a knock at the door. On the way up the corridor he considered what he was wearing – he was filthy, his newest white T-shirt smudged and sticking. He suddenly realized it didn’t matter, this was what everyone in Vauxhall Palace dressed like. He felt happy; Fancy was coming to tea.

He opened the front door and there she was, and behind her a tall guy Peter didn’t recognize. He tried to stop himself from frowning.

‘This is Tony, Tony, this is Peter,’ Fancy said as she moved past. Peter stepped aside and let Tony pass as well. Tony who, according to Katherine, had been in love with Fancy since she was four.

‘Glad to meet you,’ Peter said, ‘come on in,’ but they were already in the kitchen, seated at the table. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

Fancy nodded. ‘Tony wanted to see your flat, didn’t you Tony? It’s always interesting to see what other people are doing to their places.’
'You live here Tony?' Peter had thought he knew everyone in the flats. Tony nodded. 'No milk in my tea.' Fancy was standing, moving around the kitchen, inspecting. 'Would you like a piece of cake?' On the way home from work Peter had bought a Jamaican bun loaf; they could eat it with butter. There were only two white china teacups – he tried not to worry. Tony shook his head. He turned to Fancy and said, 'We will be late.' 'I know,' said Fancy. Peter was boiling water in a saucepan. In Alberta, he thought, I would probably ask them to explain. Late for what? What are you doing? Who is this guy? Let's be frank. He remained silent, afraid to turn around in case he found them kissing. 'When can we meet your Argentinian?' Fancy asked. 'Roberto? I guess I could bring him to the speakeasy one night,' Peter said, uneasily. 'Yeah, he might like that.' Roberto would love the speakeasy but he would be unhappy to discover that Peter did not believe he was Colombian and had, in fact, been telling the world he was Argentinian. 'I'll ask him next week.' He poured the tea and cut the cake. No one spoke. After a while Fancy said, 'Where's George?' and Peter said, 'How's Katherine?' and the door to the bathroom swung open and George stood there in his towel, looking refreshed, smiling sleepily. 'Hello Tony,' he said, 'got anything on ya?' Tony shook his head. 'I'll be off then,' said George, 'people to see.' ** **

After that, Peter felt a little low for several days. He didn't know what to say to George about the syringe, and he didn't know what to say to Fancy. He felt he had found her and lost her already. He went to work and, afterwards, hung around with Roberto. Roberto was obsessed with the British Museum; he was viewing the collection room by room. Peter accompanied him to Ming Dynasty Chinese Porcelain. They progressed from display case to display case very slowly. Roberto didn't speak, he looked from item to item, reading all the text carefully. 'What is "pigment"?' he asked Peter in the middle of the room. Peter explained as best he could, and when he felt he couldn't look at another vase, he began to examine the tourists. All the women had characteristics – an ear, a hand, a smile – that reminded him of Fancy. He couldn't bring himself to mention the speakeasy to Roberto, and on Friday night he went along on his own. He drank a couple of beers and talked to people he suddenly felt he had grown to know rather well – Joseph, Simon, Katherine, Squeak. Around midnight Fancy emerged from the red room at the back. When she saw him, she came straight over. 'I
don’t know what those people see in that stuff,’ she said sharply.
‘What stuff?’
‘You know. Smack.’
Peter took a breath. ‘What people?’
Peter nodded.
‘Let’s go,’ she said.
They emerged from the speakeasy into the night, wandering away from the tenement onto the wasteland. The large empty space was ringed with streetlamps, but it was thick black and unlit in the centre. They headed into the dark. The night air was unusually warm, like summer nights back in Alberta. ‘If you close your eyes,’ he said, ‘and block your ears, and plug your nose, we could believe we were out on the prairie.’
‘It reminds me of Leamington Spa,’ she said.
Fancy turned and put her hands on his chest. He realized he was at least a foot taller than her. She pushed against him and they fell backwards slowly onto the hard ground. She lay on top of him and made small movements adjusting their clothing. A freight train went by on the overhead tracks. The breeze blew dust into Peter’s eyes, but as he raised his hand to wipe it away, she began to kiss him. She kissed him hard, with much more force than she had the night they spent together underneath her loom. She bore down on him and soon he found himself inside her. She rocked back and forth and he clutched her breasts and she moaned and later he would see with great clarity that this was the moment they conceived her pregnancy.