

## WAITING FOR FRANK'S PIGEONS

David Swann

On a Sunday in spring too cold for cricket, with half the world hiding in girl-places, Dave and me tranced in his dad's rickety shed, stopwatch ticking for the working-man's racehorses.

Homers, those pigeons. And they *would* make it across the sea from Belgium, Dave was convinced. But first we needed patience. First we must name nine famous Belgians.

'Your dad couldn't face the wait, eh?' said the neighbour, digging.

Dave nodded, kept our secret in the loft. Frank was down with pigeon-lung, allergic to his own birds.

The afternoon swelled up bigger than a Test Match and we waited, throats tightened by dust and creosote.

'I'd kill to hear cooing,' I told Dave, whose quietened gaze went out through cracks to a sky made of suet.

Magpies, sparrows, a distant kestrel. One grey cloud the size of Afghanistan. I stared at cack, told old anecdotes, tried a bad handstand, said 'guano' in various accents and asked Dave about pterodactyls.

Dave adjusted his Echo & the Bunnymen coat and resisted hitting me, just. He told me about feuds in the pigeon-fancying fraternity, how the baddies razed huts and slipped poison to fledglings or smashed their enemies' chucky-eggs.

I admired Frank's guts, but that shed smelled of Sunday-things we ought to be doing: looking for girls in places they never went; kicking an egg-shaped ball at the substation wall.

Fantastic, the way those pigeons came home! The sudden clamour of wings, a whisper of claws over the hut's tarred roof. Then Dave snagged ropes and lifted flaps, the way his dad had taught him, until the timings had been stamped and the pigeons were free to strut around their coop while we scattered feed and stroked them, thrilled by the invisible paths they had followed.

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