PIGEONS

The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird

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Introduction: Pigeonholed

Some days you're the pigeon. Some days you're the statue.

—Anonymous

For much of my life, I didn't have a strong opinion about pigeons. At best, I found their incessant bobbing and waddling mildly charming to watch as I walked through the streets of New York City. It was my college girlfriend who first alerted me to their nefarious lack of hygiene. They may *look* harmless, she informed me, but they're actually insidious carriers of hidden filth—"rats with wings"—that eat garbage off the streets and crap in their own nests.

Lamenting the city's lack of wildlife, I hung a bird feeder from the fire escape outside my barred windows in an effort to attract songbirds to my apartment. The feeder didn't attract robins or cardinals, but it was popular with pigeons. They flocked to my fire escape, landing in friendly, cooing clusters. They were animated, fun to watch, and they kept me company as I looked out onto an otherwise drab urban vista.

A few days later, I noticed my superintendent standing on the sidewalk contemplating the sudden rise in bird droppings around the building's entrance. I suspected I was in trouble when he looked up at my window and spied the bird feeder. He bounded up the fire escape, gave me a look

of enraged incredulity, and promptly pitched my feeder onto the sidewalk below, where it exploded into a cloud of birdseed shrapnel. My nature experiment was clearly over.

Months after, I got a taste of pigeon prejudice first-hand. I was interviewing for a job outside Rockefeller Center when I felt a splat on my head and then, seconds later, several oozy drips down my ear and onto my freshly pressed white shirt. I was at a complete loss, too embarrassed to survey the damage. Could I just pretend it had never happened?

I sat there motionless, unsure what to do, and keenly aware of everyone else around me. It was as if the whole plaza had suddenly gone silent, all eyes focused on me—the crap-covered stooge. I reached for a napkin, but we were eating falafel sandwiches, and mine was already covered in tahini. My interviewer looked at me in stunned silence, face frozen in horror, eyes fixated on the gooey mess. "Oh, my," he managed. "Oh, my."

Then I met José Martinez. It was a dreary day, the sidewalks covered in graying slush. I was waiting in line at the corner bodega to pay for a tuna sandwich when I struck up a conversation with the man next in line. I have no idea how we started talking about pigeons, but this was New York City, after all, where pigeons are not an altogether unusual topic of discussion. He told me about his brother Orlando's loft of racing pigeons.

"Racing pigeons?" I asked. Did he mean like the scruffy pigeons in the street that crap all over the city's buildings? Had I misunderstood him? People don't race birds—do they?

"My brother's pigeons are like thoroughbreds," José replied. Pigeon thoroughbreds? The following day, armed

with a pen and notebook, I journeyed to Orlando's home in Brooklyn to meet the pigeon man myself.

Alternating between enthusiasm for my project and frustration with my seemingly endless stupid questions, José's brother nonetheless opened up his pigeon-centric world to me. I spent a year with Orlando, tagging along with him to the very first stirrings of a new racing season and all the way to one of the biggest races of the year. The Bronx-based Main Event is the Kentucky Derby of the New York pigeon-racing community. At stake is over $15,000 in prize money for the first-place finisher (plus tens of thousands more in side bets) and a year's worth of bragging rights for winning one of the metro area's most competitive races.

Orlando put it to me this way: "To walk into your racing club, knowing that your bird beat out a thousand others because you put in the time, bred it right, fed it right, and trained it right, well, few things compare."

But the Main Event was nearly a year off. First Orlando would spend an anxious year earnestly preparing for the big race. Orlando had won it once before, and consequently, he had a lot at stake this time around, including his cocky reputation.

These were my first steps into the pigeon universe and its shaggy patchwork of obsessive subcultures. As I've journeyed through the world of pigeons, I've found that this seemingly unremarkable bird routinely evokes remarkably strong reactions. While most animals trigger universally similar emotions—puppies are "cute and cuddly"; cockroaches are "disgusting"—the pigeon somehow spans both extremes.

No animal, I discovered, has developed as unique and continuous a relationship with humans as the common

pigeon. Nor is there any animal that possesses such an unusual array of innate abilities seemingly designed for our utilization.

The fanatical hatred of pigeons is actually a relatively new phenomenon. Far from being reviled, pigeons have been revered for thousands of years. After all, whom do we celebrate as Noah's most loyal passenger if not the white dove bearing an olive branch and bringing hope? ("Pigeon" is merely a French translation of the English "dove.") Although now scorned, those so-called filthy and annoying pigeons in your local park have an unparalleled history and an unmatched intelligence.

Consider this:

They've been worshipped as fertility goddesses, representations of the Christian Holy Ghost, and symbols of peace;

They've been domesticated since the dawn of man and utilized by every major historical superpower from ancient Egypt to the United States of America;

It was a pigeon that delivered the results of the first Olympics in 776 B.C. and a pigeon that first brought news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo over twenty-five hundred years later;

Nearly a million pigeons served in both world wars and are credited with saving thousands of soldiers' lives;

And although it is often overlooked, it was upon the backs of pigeons that Darwin heavily relied to support his theory of evolution.

Pigeons are athletes of the highest caliber. While racehorses receive all the glory, with their 35 mph sprints around a one-mile racetrack, homing pigeons—a mere pound of flesh and feathers—routinely fly over five hundred miles in a single day at speeds exceeding 60 mph, finding their way home from a place they've never been before, and without stopping for food or water.

Pigeon racing is an internationally popular sport that counts the queen of England among its enthusiasts. Winning birds can bring home millions of dollars in prize money and fetch tens of thousands of dollars at auction.

Then there's the bird's culinary reputation as one of the world's finest meats—the milk-fed veal of the sky—treasured by chefs the world over and served nice and rare at many of the finest restaurants.

Although we all share a universal bond with this ubiquitous bird, there are some of us whose lives revolve around the pigeon in more profound—and often humorous—ways. I met trainers who ran around their backyards with whistles in tow, barking orders at their racing pigeons as if conditioning a team of professional soccer players; militant members of a New York City pigeon underground who prowl city streets in search of pigeon poachers; and backyard geneticists who toyed with the cellular composition of pigeons, in their quest to create a bird more akin to a Dresden figurine than a child of nature. I was fascinated by their obsession with what I believed to be a scruffy looking bird with a brain the size of a lima bean.

For better or worse, the lives of man and pigeon are inexorably intertwined. Like dogs and cats, they are a product of our own domestication and follow us wherever we go. From a farmer's fertile fields to an urbanite's concrete cities, the pigeon is our constant and inescapable companion. Wherever humans go, they're likely to find a flock of pigeons loafing nearby.

Frankly, I didn't know chicken scratch about pigeons when I started this book—I mistook the call of a mourning dove for an owl because it went "who, who, who." My quest for all things pigeon was surprisingly peripatetic and landed me in a variety of unusual situations. I found myself hesitantly scaling the dung-riddled walls of a medieval English dovecote; eating tacos outside a Phoenix "titty bar" in the hopes of scoring an interview with pigeon enthusiast Mike Tyson; and blasting away at live pigeons with a hefty shotgun in a Pennsylvania sportsmen's club.

And yet, until I accidentally stumbled into the passionate world of pigeons, I barely noticed them. Like many urban dwellers, I viewed pigeons as just another fact of city life—so common, so ubiquitous—that I often looked right past them.

The domestic pigeon lives both in the relative luxury of the queen of England's racing lofts and feeds off discarded pizza crusts and doughnuts on the streets of New York City. They are both descendants of *Columba livia,* the rock dove. Very loosely translated, the Latin name means a "leaden-colored bird that bobs its head." The rock dove (the name "rock pigeon" is becoming increasingly popular among ornithologists) is a member of the family *Columbidae.* Other members of this family include the mourning dove, the turtle dove, the wood pigeon, and the ill-fated passenger pigeon. If you trace your finger a little further back along this family tree, you'll see that the rock dove is even related to the extinct dodo bird.

All members of *Columbidae* share several distinct attributes. They generally have plump bodies, small (often

bobbing) heads, and stubby legs, as well as short slender bills with a fleshy covering, or "cere." All of these birds make distinctive cooing sounds, live in loosely constructed nests, and lay two white eggs at a time that are incubated by both parents. Both sexes also produce a milklike substance in their throat, or "crop," which they feed to their newborns. While all other birds collect water in their beaks and tip their heads back to drink, pigeons suck their water like a horse at a trough.

Although a pigeon and a dove are the same bird, the more delicate members of the family are called doves, while the seemingly less graceful members of *Columbidae* are also called pigeons, hence the old adage that all pigeons are doves but not all doves are pigeons. "Dove" has come to mean petite and pure. Colloquial usage of the word "pigeon," on the other hand, emphasizes the bird's docile nature and places it in a negative light. "Stool pigeon" is synonymous with stooge, and to be "pigeonholed" is to be arbitrarily stereotyped in a disparaging manner. Pigeons themselves, it would seem, have been pigeonholed as dimwitted. Such is the linguistic discrimination that a large pigeon will nevertheless be called a dove simply because it is white. This lack of pigment is often confused for virtuousness—a characteristic that few are willing to link with an ordinary pigeon. Perhaps we can pin the linguistic confusion on William the Conqueror, whose Norman victory at the Battle of Hastings ensured that the English language would be peppered with French synonyms.

Despite this linguistic bias, the unassuming pigeon is truly special. It doesn't live in trees but prefers nesting on rocky ledges (although a window ledge will do just fine). And unlike its distant relations, it will never abandon

its nest, developing a keen sense of homing to ensure its return. It breeds enthusiastically in captivity and is naturally gregarious, enjoying the company of its own kind, even in close quarters. In the wild, a pigeon lives only about three or four years. But in the relative safety of captivity, a pigeon can live over twenty years.

With hollow bones containing reservoirs of oxygen, a tapered fuselage, giant breast muscles that account for one third of its body mass, and an ability to function indefinitely without sleep, the rock dove is a feathered rocket built for speed and endurance. If an average up-and-down of the wing takes a bird three feet, then a racer is making roughly 900,000 of those motions during a long-distance race, while maintaining 600 heartbeats per minute—triple its resting heart rate. The rock dove can reach peak velocity in seconds and maintain it for hours on end. One pigeon was recorded flying for several hours at 110 mph—an Olympian feat by any measure. Clearly these birds aren't designed to jump around branches or glide on warm air currents; they're designed for rapid yet sustained flight. Their fuel? Richly oxygenated blood, just one ounce of birdseed a day, and a hardwired need to return home.

Athletic prowess aside, *Columba livia* is also an inexplicably obliging bird and incredibly easy to domesticate. If you hold one in your hands, it won't struggle or bite. And if you let one go, it will always return home. It is these qualities that have led to the rock dove's unique and unrivaled relationship with humans, making it the world's first domesticated bird.

Cultural reminders of this connection are abundant. The bird's holographic form graces many of our credit cards. Its outline is used to sell soap, chocolate,

greeting cards, and world peace. Rock doves have graced films: Marlon Brando found solace caring for them in *On the Waterfront,* and "Mr. Smith" even brought his pigeons with him to Washington. For years, dramatically circling pigeons were a celebrated attraction at Walt Disney World. Picasso painted them frequently and named his daughter Paloma—Spanish for pigeon.

The rock dove has been our companion for thousands of years. Like most birds, the pigeon is basically a feathered reptilian dinosaur and has roamed the earth in one form or another for over 30 million years. By comparison, we've been walking about for a mere 130,000 years.

As a particularly successful species, the rock dove has come to populate every continent on earth, with the exception of Antarctica. In the early 1600s, French settlers imported the rock dove to the New World for meat. Now they populate nearly every city in the Western Hemisphere, from the arid deserts of Arizona to the frigid climes of Alaska. The pigeon does not migrate but rather adapts to its chosen location year-round.

Fossil evidence suggests that the pigeon originated in southern Asia and made its way across northern Africa and Europe, much like the Muslim conquerors and the Mongol hordes of yore. Skeletal remains found in Israel confirm the rock dove's existence there for at least three hundred thousand years.

When did human fascination with the pigeon arise? Most likely with our earliest days as cavemen. Although the rock dove generally prefers sea cliffs with protective ledges, it probably made itself at home in the outer nooks and crannies of our shallow caves and then scavenged for

our crumbs. It's also quite likely that humans ate the tasty little bird whenever possible.

This somewhat symbiotic relationship progressed along with human civilization. As we learned to domesticate grains and cereals, we inadvertently domesticated the pigeon as well. As any farmer knows, a small portion of every crop never makes it to the granary. Rather, bits and pieces of it spill to the ground during harvest. These leftovers make for easy pigeon pickings. Crevices in our mud and stone farmhouses also made for good nesting places. It could be said that the pigeon domesticated itself and humans merely met it halfway, often with a healthy appetite.

Research suggests that the pigeon was domesticated perhaps as early as ten thousand years ago, not long after we tamed our other "best friend," the dog. While the bird remains somewhat cautious, it is inherently unafraid of humans. As anyone who has befriended a pigeon will tell you, it doesn't take much effort to train the bird to eat out of your hand. In fact, a pigeon will happily walk through your front door if it knows there is birdseed inside. Conversely, given that pigeons can be bred all year long and are naturally docile, they were ideally suited to become a domesticated food source.

Eventually, early humans built homes for their pigeons, called dovecotes, and harvested the bird for food on a regular basis. They were crude structures at first, but by the late Middle Ages, dovecotes were built with great architectural flourish. Thousands of these spectacular dovecotes still dot the European countryside, often attached to country manor houses and estates.

The vast majority of today's feral pigeons can be traced to the proliferation of these dovecotes across Eurasia.

Wealthy Romans were particularly fond of pigeon meat, so dovecotes were introduced throughout their empire (as were garlic, asparagus, and other delicacies). Since dovecotes are designed to allow pigeons to come and go as they please, some pigeons inevitably wandered off. Roman buildings and monuments were also populated with feral pigeons, much like the pigeons of St. Mark's Square in Venice and London's Trafalgar Square today.

Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets mention the domestication of pigeons over five thousand years ago, as do Egyptian hieroglyphics. In human terms, the pigeon's most useful skill—its innate ability to "home"—was perhaps first recognized and utilized by ancient Mediterranean seafarers. Although the bird often dwells on coastal cliffs, it has an aversion to large bodies of water and always flies inland in search of food. A bird released from a ship will quickly orient itself to land, and early sailors undoubtedly followed suit.

It was only a matter of time before humans learned to further manipulate the bird's homing skills and use them for delivering messages. Egyptians may have been the first to use pigeons as carriers when they sent birds in the four cardinal directions to announce the ascension of a new pharaoh to the throne. Likewise, messages regarding flood levels were sent up and down the Nile by means of an early pigeon post. King Solomon is said to have made use of a pigeon post for critical messaging, and archaeologists have found underground pigeon coops in Israel from this period that held an estimated 120,000 birds.

By the eighth century B.C., pigeons were used regularly by the Greeks to carry messages, particularly results of the Olympic games to the various city-states. As

impractical as the use of birds in relaying messages may sound, consider the alternative. According to Greek legend, it took most of a day for the news of the Persian defeat at Marathon to reach Athens—a mere 26.2 miles—and then the runner died from exhaustion.

By 500 B.C., the emperor of China was regularly receiving messages in Beijing from outer provinces. A bird could deliver a message in as many hours as it took a horse and rider days. Hannibal employed pigeons during his siege of Rome, and Julius Caesar utilized them to relay messages from his military campaigns in Gaul. Genghis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan created a pigeon post that spanned one sixth of the world. For thousands of years, the fastest way to send a message was by pigeon. They were the avian equivalent to today's Fed Ex, and the governments and militaries of every major historical power exploited them as such.

Throughout history, the bird's unusual talents and fecundity earned it respect. But it was probably the bird's affectionate nature that earned it adoration and made it integral to religious worship since the beginnings of human civilization in Mesopotamia.

In many ways, pigeons exhibit the tender traits we most admire in ourselves. The Jewish Bible's Song of Solomon speaks of the bird lovingly, in anthropomorphic terms: "O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely."

When two pigeons court, they link beaks in a manner that looks a lot like kissing. The birds are actually exchanging food. The female playfully places her beak inside the male's beak to signal that she expects the male to care for her and, soon, their children. By accepting the female's beak—and this is where we humans differ—the male is accepting his impending responsibility and not just recreational nookie. When pigeons mate, they mate for life.

The sexual act itself is relatively gentle and completely consensual. A duet of affectionate cooing follows, as well as a careful preening of each other's feathers. In a demonstration of true gender equality, the parents share domestic duties and spend an equal amount of time sitting on the eggs and feeding their young. A happy couple can raise as many as twelve to eighteen babies a year. This cooperative behavior and frequent mating, coupled with the bird's ability to live peacefully in large flocks, led to its reputation for fruitfulness and purity of spirit.

One of the earliest known mother-goddesses was the Sumerian, and later Babylonian, goddess Ishtar, "queen of heaven and earth and of the evening star." She is often depicted either holding a pigeon or as the winged bird herself. The Phoenician goddess of love and fertility, Astarte, was also symbolically represented as a pigeon, as were the Greek goddess Aphrodite and the Roman goddess Venus.

In the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh,* which predates the Hebrew Bible by hundreds of years, there is also a great flood in which the pigeon plays the role of messenger. The rock dove's message—of subsiding waters and thus new beginnings and new hope—lent the pigeon its role as the bird of peace.

Although the pigeon was cherished for its innocent and gentle nature, these same attributes caused the bird to bear the brunt of brutal ritual sacrifice in humans' quest for spiritual atonement and divine appeasement. It is recorded that Ramses III offered 57,810 pigeons to the god Ammon at Thebes. Besides a talent for assembly-line slaughter, the offering also reveals an Egyptian knack for domestication.

The Jewish Bible describes the bird as a poor person's offering at the Jerusalem temple. If you couldn't afford a heifer, goat, or lamb, then the sacrifice of two pigeons would do just fine—one for a sin offering, the other for a burnt offering. According to the Gospels, when Mary and Joseph visited the temple after the birth of their son Jesus, they made an offering of pigeons. Thirty-three years later, pigeon sellers were among the vendors that Jesus berated when he marched through the temple.

The Hebrew God nonetheless appreciated the pigeon offerings. In fact, when sealing His covenant with Abraham and his descendants, He specifically asked Abraham to sacrifice (along with a collection of larger domesticated animals) a young pigeon, or squab, particularly prized for its tender flesh, as the baby is eaten before it ever has a chance to spread its tiny wings.

In Christian writings and art, the bird is given the pious honor of symbolically representing the Holy Spirit, in much the same way a guiltless lamb represents Jesus. When the Holy Ghost visits the Virgin Mary to impregnate her, he does so in the form of a pigeon. The bird is often depicted in Christian art as descending from heaven in a bolt of light that ends in Mary's stomach or head.

The pigeon is also present for Jesus' ritual immersion into the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Writes Luke,

"And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." A pigeon attends Jesus' crucifixion, perhaps as a reminder that God has not abandoned his son. Muhammad is also said to have been fond of pigeons, and to this day the bird continues to hold a protected place in Islamic society. Chinese society also reveres the pigeon. One tradition, hundreds of years old, celebrates the bird in a most unusual manner: intricately carved gourds are attached to specially trained pigeons. The gourds act as whistles of varying octaves and notes, playing music as the birds circle above.

Throughout history, the bird has been treasured as a source of companionship (and protein), admired and utilized for its unique navigational and athletic abilities, and even worshipped as a timeless symbol of God's grace. We release them as offerings of hope at our weddings and civic ceremonies, and as a representation of the soul's final journey at our funerals. Yet we have brutalized them at the sacrificial altar, slaughtered more than one species to extinction, and continue to heap daily abuse onto the ones still in our midst.

As I threaded my way through the peculiar world of pigeon people, I found this ambivalence magnified. Although I still had no firm opinion on the bird's place in the avian pantheon, there were plenty of people out there who did. Their minds were made up. Some coddled and preened them; others pulverized them for sport. It was a winter that thrust me onto the front lines of extreme eccentricity and fierce brutality. Like the bird, I was caught in the middle. Passive participation and detached indifference were no longer possible. I would be sucked into the pigeon's universe in ways that I never could have suspected nor embraced.

1
Old Cocks

IT'S ANOTHER BRUTALLY COLD AND WINDY DAY, THE SKY A lifeless dull gray. José's brother, Orlando Martinez, parks his truck outside a small run-down cinder-block building beneath the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and warms his hands on the dashboard vents. A sign reads BOROUGH PARK HOMING PIGEON CLUB, EST. 1924.

It's the first club meeting of the new race season. Orlando had suggested I attend this meeting, but now he's starting to regret bringing me along. He takes a deep breath and removes his keys from the ignition. "I have to warn you. All we do at these meetings is fight. We should have come wearing hard hats and bulletproof vests."

Inside there are a few battered benches, discarded school chairs, and a Coke machine that sells Budweiser. A collection of gold trophies capped with regal-looking pigeon figurines sits on a shelf just beneath the water-stained drop ceiling. A few dozen men, ranging from their early twenties to their late seventies, mill around an old feather-encrusted kerosene heater. One man chews on an extinguished cigarette butt, flipping it around with his tongue. It's a rough-looking bunch, and they eye me suspiciously.

Orlando, with his natural buoyancy, easy charm, and boyish smile, stands out from the crowd. His boisterous enthusiasm and loud wisecracks are generally out of step with the club's pervasively dour mood. Despite being in his mid-forties, Orlando shows few signs of traditional maturing. His olive skin is smooth and nearly unwrinkled; he regularly dresses in sneakers and jeans, works erratically, and lives with his mother as well as his chatty young wife, Omayra, more than twenty years his junior.

He struts around the room as if running for political office, playfully slapping backs, throwing fake punches, and showing off his custom-embroidered jacket depicting a gray pigeon with red feet and the words "OJ Loft" (for Orlando and José's racing team, or "loft"). He gets into a discussion about pigeon feed with his friend Sal. "Don't get me wrong, it's clean feed," Orlando says. "But I still think it's garbage."

John Ferraro, the club's large and occasionally ill-tempered president, sits behind a picnic table and calls the meeting to order. He's in a particularly foul mood today, perhaps owing to the facsimile of him that Orlando is passing around: "John Ferraro, wanted for molestation of pigeons. Last seen with a red-checker hen between his legs."

The first order of business is termites. The club's basement is full of them. After some rancorous debate, the members agree to hire an exterminator. Next item is the scheduling and cost of shipping birds. Shipping dates can be a tempestuous topic, because they form the framework upon which the entire racing season is built. The birds are typically dropped off at the club on a Friday night; trucked overnight to a destination, say, three hundred miles away; then released in the morning.

When members check over the shipping schedule, they see that the Northeast Union, an organization that represents all the area race clubs, has scheduled a shipping the same night as the Viola—another popular autumn race with a guaranteed first-place prize of $30,000. That means club members are stuck preparing their birds for one race while welcoming birds home from another. The "fucks" start flying. "I'm tired of us getting fucked up the ass," says a voice in the crowd. "We've done everything but bend down for these motherfuckers," says another. Orlando winces.

To the uninitiated, it may seem like a minor problem, but shipping day is critical. Any racer worth his bag of pigeon feed will spend hours prepping his birds for the Viola, let alone the Main Event. Shipping is a full-day project for Orlando. He spends the morning monitoring the winds aloft and other weather data online so he can judge his birds' nutritional needs. "If it's a hot day, I'll feed them accordingly. For tough race days, I load them up like marathoners on fats, proteins, and carbs. I'll feed them peanuts and safflower seeds. Sometimes I'll give them B-12, amino acids, and brewers yeast. If it's a short race, I'll give them plenty of corn and peas. Picture a boxing trainer. That's what I am."

After the feeding, Orlando concentrates on heightening the birds' motivation with intimacy. Two hours before shipping, he sets out clay nesting bowls and removes a partition in his rooftop coop separating the cocks from the hens. After mere minutes of romance, the birds are again placed into separate compartments, so Orlando can capitalize on their sexual frustration.

"Coming home to food is a big motivator, but pussy's even bigger," Orlando informs me. "I've given up

a lot of meals for pussy." As he packs the birds one at a time into the shipping crates, keeping the cocks and hens separate, Orlando gives each bird eye- and nose drops to help clear their nasal passages.

It's obvious that few club members flying birds in the Viola are willing to ship birds that same day. So club members are stuck footing the cost of an additional shipment. "Look around," Ferraro says. "Everybody's on a fixed income. We got to keep our costs down. We're here to make money. That's what it's all about." Members ask Ferraro to look into the matter.

Ferraro wants to talk about technology next. He is trying to convince club members to buy electronic clocks. Currently, when a bird comes home from a race, its owner takes a numbered elastic band off its ankle. The band goes into a capsule and is then placed into a tamper-proof clock, where it is time-coded and stored for safekeeping. The system makes cheating all but impossible, a vital consideration given the fanaticism of racers and the high stakes of some pigeon races.

"Last year I told you electronic clocks were the system of the future," Ferraro says. "Now they're the present. The Maspeth club's using them. So are the Triboro, Long Island, and Nassau clubs. Suffolk is going to start using them next week. These new clocks are unbelievable. They work like an E-ZPass. You put a chip on the bird and the clock scans it as soon as the bird comes in. It even has a built-in master timer that automatically updates using satellites. Next thing it'll be online. No mistakes, no cheating."

The new clocks automate many of the tedious but necessary tasks performed after the races. When the pigeons come home, everyone has to bring their clocks and

time-stamped racing bands to the clubhouse so they can be manually entered into the club books and then into a computer that calculates a bird's average speed. Because lofts are located at varying distances from a race's starting point, the first bird home isn't necessarily the winner. As the saying goes, it's a sport with one starting gate and thousands of finishing lines. A certified aerial survey is performed on each loft, and its distance from the race's starting point is precisely calculated to the thousandth of a mile. The winner is the bird with the fastest average speed.

It's a time-consuming process performed by a dwindling membership. Waiting for your pigeons to come home is fun. So is being declared a winner. Entering race data isn't. "Nobody wants to do the work, and there aren't a lot of us left to do it," Ferraro tells me after adjourning the meeting. "Not too many years ago, we used to fill this place up. Now there's nobody—just twelve active members. It's a dying sport."

A week later, many of the Borough Park club members gather at another racing club—a low-slung battleship-gray building in Queens called the Triboro Club. Inside, fifty men munch on six-foot hoagies and macaroni salad while inspecting row upon row of caged pigeons to be auctioned. It's a cross section of blue-collar New York: Puerto Ricans, blacks, Poles, Italians, and other eastern European and Caribbean nationals all milling around, trading breeding tips and pigeon gossip. Skin color is not an issue here; breeding winners is.

Although the Mafia's presence isn't necessarily felt, it's no secret that its members enjoy pigeon racing as well.

Reputed Genovese crime captain Anthony Federici was arrested several years ago for climbing onto the roof of his popular Queens restaurant and shooting his shotgun at hawks circling near his pigeon coop. Be that as it may, the guys here today are mostly plumbers, carpenters, and mechanics.

Today's gossip revolves around one breeder who won a series of big races the year before. Several folks suspect he drugged his birds—performance-enhancing steroids are not uncommon. Few are impressed with the birds the breeder has put up for auction. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see something's wrong with these birds," says John Ferarro, pointing to a shit-covered pigeon and his three shivering pals. "They're not even getting proper nutrition."

An auctioneer stands on a folding table and starts the bidding with a healthy-looking pair of gray-and-white homers. "This pair comes from Johnny Russo. Need I say more? He flies a dynamic bird. Do I hear fifty dollars? Okay, fifty-five? Sixty? Seventy? Eighty. Sold for eighty!"

Another set of birds is placed atop the makeshift podium. They waddle to the edge of the cage and stare blankly into the audience. "This man's got the finest birds around. You can't beat Don Pepe's pigeons. These birds are incredible. Do I hear a hundred? One-twenty-five? Okay, let's stop the B.S. . . . I want one-thirty . . . Sold to Ralphy!" Ralphy wears jeans, a union cap, and a Jets jacket. He retrieves the birds, holding them upside down by their feet, and walks away proudly.

"All right, fellas, listen close. These next birds are from John the Greek. We all know what kind of bird he

flies. Now, this is one nice pigeon. You won't be sorry. Do I hear sixty?"

Orlando loses interest in the auction. He raises his own pigeons and often gives away his extras for free. He's here to gossip and trade tips. He gets up and walks around the perimeter of the room, inspecting the birds. "What's most important at this age is their health," he says. "You look at the droppings in the cage, making sure they're solid and not too green—that can mean salmonella or E. coli. You can smell when something's not right. You know what you feed them, so you know what should be coming out. These over here probably come from a dirty coop . . . A coop should be vacuumed once a day, minimum, and the water cans should be bleached weekly."

It's a rare moment of undistracted discourse with Orlando. Usually, he fidgets with boredom and interrupts when I ask him to explain the basics of pigeon racing. Other times he fidgets for no apparent reason. Regardless, the interviews are inevitably disrupted by the constant ringing of his cell phone. Whenever I ask what he considers a stupid or repetitive question, I'm treated to a small repertoire of expressions for impatience and frustration: "I've already explained that to you"; "It's too complicated"; and my personal favorite, "Don't make me kill again."

Orlando continues down the wall of pigeon cages. "A healthy bird should never have shit on his feet. That bird over there, he's slouched over too much. He's probably got a weak back. He's not a winner. This guy over here, his legs are too far apart. Remember, they're essentially landing gear."

He reaches into a cage, picks up a bird, and spreads one of its wings. "You always got to look at the tips of the feathers. They're like the rings in a tree. You can tell if a bird missed a day of feeding or if it didn't get enough water. Look here. You see that little line across the top? I'll bet you he was a little sick that day." A missed day of feeding, and it shows up on a feather like a ring on a tree? It's hard to tell if Orlando is a shrewd observer of all things pigeon or simply a wily bullshit artist.

Orlando opens the bird's beak and inspects for cankers and excess mucus, then holds the bird in one hand, inspecting its breastbone, or "keel," which he says should be about five fingers across. "The bird should be well proportioned. You don't want a big head or something."

Some breeders study a pigeon's eyes for pupil size and coloring, which they claim is a predictor for a bird's homing instinct. Orlando says "eye sign" is a load of crap, akin to judging an Olympic athlete by his eye color. "I'm more interested in how a bird feels in my hands and how it handles itself. He should be as curious about me as I am about him."

A bird in the next cage catches Orlando's eye. "I like that bird. Why? I wish I could tell you. Sometimes it's just the way they look at you."

A teenager approaches Orlando for advice. "My birds are sick," the boy says. "They're not dying, but they're, like, in junkie comas. Burned out. Fucked up."

Orlando quickly sums up the situation. "Give them grit, and after the grit, give them a bath and a lot of light. They should also get some acidophilus. They'll come out of it. Just don't give them antibiotics. They'll have no liver left. And they'll get immune anyway."

Orlando's fascination with pigeons dates to early childhood, shortly after his family moved to Brooklyn from Puerto Rico. "As a kid, I always looked up and watched them flying around. I just liked being around them. I still do." As young teenagers, he and José made a coop in the window of their bedroom using milk crates. "We had sixteen birds. They weren't homers; they were flights. We'd let them out the window and watch them fly in circles and come back. All the kids had them. The idea was to catch and keep another guy's bird and sell it back to him for a dollar."

A few years later, Orlando and his brother built their first rooftop loft and spent much of their time protecting it from pigeon burglars, or "tappers." "When you're living in an apartment building in the ghetto, having a coop is different," says Orlando. "The hard part is making sure no one steals your birds. We couldn't have a big coop for our flights because wood was expensive, and so the construction had to be reinforced using tar paper and tin. The coop was more like a crawl space, so no one could break in."

Before he began racing homers, Orlando used to go out drinking most nights. After a stint in jail on Rikers Island, he sobered up and rediscovered his love of pigeons. Now he's too busy with his pigeons to get in trouble. His choice of friends has changed, too. "I find myself associating mainly with other pigeon racers," he tells me. "If you tell most people you're one of the best pigeon racers in New York, they won't be impressed. But other racers? They know."

It wasn't until Orlando was in his twenties that he could actually afford his first loft of racing homers. "José and I always wanted homers, but they were beyond our

reach. We were just kids. To have homers, you need a car for training and someone to guide you through it. We didn't have the knowledge, roof space, or the money."

Orlando's racing mentor was a Queens pet-shop owner by the name of Frank Klein, who learned the sport from his father. It was Klein who gave Orlando and José their first four homers. But the brothers struggled with the sport's complexity. "If we came in next to last in a race, we were happy because we weren't last," Orlando says. The next year Klein took the brothers under his wing, and OJ Loft won its first race.

"Franky saw that we had potential, that we could be contenders. He taught us everything. We were inseparable, always together. Franky's the Grand Master. There is no better. Every time I visit him, I think I should bring a tape recorder."

Klein, who's now retired and spends his time racing pigeons from his home on the Jersey shore, remembers the young Orlando as a "nice boy, a little on the wild side.

"One day Orlando comes into the store—it was called Tuttie's pet shop—and he sees my homers," Klein tells me. "He gets crazy on them. You know what I mean? He's insistent. He has to have them. He had the interest right away . . . But he didn't know anything about them. I set him straight. I got him on the right foot. You know what I'm saying?"

A few years later, in 1994, the brothers won the Main Event for the first time. "Orlando's one of the top guns in the sport right now," Klein says. "José lost interest. But Orlando? He puts the work in. You understand? It don't come from nothing. No matter how good the

birds are, if you don't take care of them, nothing happens. Like racehorses. You know what I mean?"

I do know what he means. While Orlando seemingly neglects even the rudimentary tasks of daily life—such as work—he doesn't mess around with his pigeons. He cares for and trains them obsessively. To him they are little heroes capable of performing astonishing athletic feats, and they deserve to be treated accordingly.

While some might not view sports figures—avian or otherwise—as heroes, pigeons have actually saved lives, thousands of them. These intrepid birds have played a pivotal role in human history, ferrying information that helped shape the world we live in.

2

Through Rain, Sleet, and . . . a Hail of Bullets

UNTIL THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, MOST INFORMATION traveled excruciatingly slowly, basically at a horse trot. But by 1850, the telegraph had altered expectations and quickly became the backbone of our information exchange. Information is, of course, a commodity. He who gets the information first has a distinct advantage over his competitors. But as nations and entrepreneurs raced to string cables across Europe, gaps in service still remained.

One man, an obscure failed German businessman by the name of Israel Beer Josaphat, had the critical insight to exploit one such gap between Brussels and Aachen, Germany. The distance was just seventy-six miles, but all the news from across France and Belgium bottlenecked at this juncture before it could once again be whisked across Germany by electrical transmission. The train between Brussels and Aachen took about eight hours, which proved a critical delay in the relay of important news and stock market prices. A pigeon could fly the distance in under two hours.

Josaphat contracted the services of an Aachen brewer who fancied pigeons, to fly his pigeons between the two cities. The news in Brussels was hung from tiny bags under the birds' wings and then flown to Aachen. The pigeons returned to the brewer's loft, where he removed the news and placed it in sealed boxes, which were then raced to an office by young boys. Josaphat, who would soon rename himself Julius Reuters in an effort to hide his Jewish origins, turned the scribbles into proper telegraphic messages and relayed them to Berlin and beyond.

Reuters didn't invent the use of pigeons to speed the transmission of information. The Rothschilds' own private pigeon post delivered news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo twenty-four hours before the rest of London learned of it. But for six months in 1851, after which the gap in telegraph service closed, Reuters parlayed the use of pigeons into what would become the world's largest news-gathering organization. He had created an empire literally on the backs of pigeons.

If you visit Aachen today, you might see pigeons loafing around the cathedral where Charlemagne was crowned the Holy Roman emperor in 800 A.D. But you won't see much identifying their role in early news gathering—just a small plaque on a nearby building that once served as Reuters' offices and now houses an Italian restaurant.

Although pigeons have been used as messengers in warfare since the beginning of recorded history, it wasn't until the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 that use of the rock dove entered the modern martial era. After the defeat of Emperor Napoleon III, the

Prussian army encircled Paris and cut off its inhabitants from the rest of France. The besieged Parisians, desperate to communicate their predicament, tried numerous ways to get messages out to their countrymen. Postal smugglers were captured and shot by the Prussians. Five sheepdog messengers were never seen again. Zinc balls filled with letters and floated down the Seine went unrecovered.

In an act of desperation, the city turned to its humblest inhabitants, and with great success. Pigeons easily carried messages from Paris to the rest of France. The use of pigeons coincided with the invention of microphotography, enabling one bird to carry as many as thirty thousand communiqués. By war's end, the birds had carried more than a million messages out of Paris.

The lesson wasn't lost on Europe's militaries, most of which established a pigeon corps of winged warriors. Their use was pivotal in World War I. As the young men of Europe set out for the muddy trenches of the Western Front, many shouldered wicker baskets filled with rock doves. Telegraph messages were often impractical during battle. The pigeon, with its 98 percent success rate, proved the most reliable way to speedily transmit critical battlefield communications. Hundreds of thousands of birds were used to deliver messages through rain and fog as well as the brutal trappings of modern warfare: barrages of artillery, poison gas, and targeted rifle fire. Twenty thousand pigeons lost their lives in combat.

Tales of pluck and valor are legion. But the story of Cher Ami is particularly memorable. Deep in the Argonne Forest, the U.S. Army's 77th Division (later known as the "Lost Battalion") was trapped behind enemy lines. In one day, heavy fighting reduced their ranks to two

hundred men. Then things got even worse. Twenty-five miles away, American troops were unwittingly unleashing a massive artillery barrage on the last remnants of the battalion. With ammunition and medical supplies running low, the soldiers turned to their small flock of rock doves.

A plea for help was placed inside a canister attached to a bird's leg, and the bird was then released. The Germans spotted it, and the feathered courier was shot down before it could even orient itself above the trenches. A second bird was sent up. Once again the soldiers watched in horror as it, too, fell to earth in a cluster of blood and mangled feathers.

A third message was written: "Our artillery is dropping a barrage on us. For heaven's sake, stop it!" A soldier attached it to the third and final pigeon, a little bird by the name of Cher Ami. The soldier uncupped his hands and watched the bird flap its wings and gain altitude. The Germans also saw the pigeon and trained their rifles on it. A hail of bullets whizzed through the air and several hit Cher Ami. He quickly lost altitude and plummeted toward the ground. But moments before crashing, the bird somehow managed to spread his wings again and start climbing, higher and higher, until he was out of rifle range.

Twenty minutes later and back on friendly terrain, Cher Ami landed at headquarters. A soldier ran to the bird and found him lying on his back, covered in blood. One eye and part of the cranium had been blown away, and its breast had been ripped open. A silver canister containing the Lost Battalion's desperate plea dangled from a few tendons—all that remained of the bird's severed leg. Bewildered, the soldier rushed the message to his

commanding officer. The American artillery fell silent, and the last remnants of the Lost Battalion were saved.

For his courageous persistence, Cher Ami was awarded the French Croix de Guerre. General Pershing shipped the bird back to the United States (in an officer's berth), where he received a hero's welcome. The bird died from his multiple war wounds less than a year later. His stuffed but tattered body—carefully balanced on the one remaining leg—can still be seen on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Although technology rapidly advanced, pigeons were still a viable means of communication during World War II. After all, transmission lines can be cut and radio communications intercepted. The U.S. tripled its pigeon corps to 54,000 birds, which were trained and cared for by more than 3,000 soldiers, or "Pigeoneers."

These birds were even more carefully bred and highly trained than their World War I predecessors, able to fly much faster and twice as far. They were trained to reorient themselves to mobile lofts, fly at night, and fly with miniature cameras to take aerial reconnaissance photographs. They were secretly released from surfaced submarines to fly critical communications back to land, and parachuted from airplanes into occupied Europe. Inside each parachute harness was a message asking partisans to send back reports of enemy activity (via pigeon) to England. As dangerous as the mission might have been for the partisans, it was more perilous for the pigeons. Many were never located by partisans and remained trapped in their harnesses, fated to die an anonymous death of thirst and starvation. Others were captured by Germans and most likely eaten.

Allied forces employed pigeons across the globe, from the deserts of North Africa to the jungles of Burma. As with World War I, the number of avian heroes is too many to list. But some do stand out. A rock dove by the name of Gustav fought fierce headwinds as he flew across the English Channel to deliver first news of the D-day landings: "We are 20 miles or so off the beaches. First assault troops landed 0750. Signal says no interference from enemy gunfire on beach . . . Steaming steadily in formation . . . No enemy aircraft seen." Although feted for his historical contribution, Gustav met an inglorious end when a caretaker mucking out his loft stepped on him by accident.

Another dove by the name of Winkie escaped from a downed British bomber after the plane crashed into the North Sea. Although covered in aircraft oil, Winkie managed to fly 130 nighttime miles to Scotland with the stranded crew's coordinates tied to his ankle.

Perhaps the most famous pigeon of World War II was G.I. Joe, credited with saving the lives of more than a thousand British soldiers in October 1943. When a British brigade attacked and won back the Italian city of Colvi Vecchia from the Germans ahead of schedule, they were unable to call off a planned American air raid by radio. As a last resort, the soldiers cast a glance at the wicker basket they had carried into battle. Inside, G.I. Joe waddled about pecking for food and staring around blankly at the harried soldiers. Roused from his habitual reverie by an anxious hand, Joe waited patiently in the soldier's fist as a message was affixed to his leg. Moments later, he was tossed into the sky. The soldiers watched with a mixture of disbelief, hope, and trepidation. Once again the fate of hundreds of men rested upon the wings of a small pigeon.

Joe arrived at the American air base mere minutes before pilots took off to unwittingly bomb their British compatriots. For his gallantry, the lord mayor of London awarded G.I. Joe the prestigious Dickin Medal, the animal equivalent of the Victoria Cross. G.I. Joe was allowed to retire in style at the army's Pigeon Hall of Fame, in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, where he lived to be an elderly eighteen years old. His feathered remains are mounted in a glass display case at the fort's museum.

The Nazis were well acquainted with the use of pigeons as well. Heinrich Himmler, a former chicken breeder, was also an avowed pigeon fancier. After the Nazi Party assumed power, Himmler declared himself head of the German National Pigeon Society and seized control of the nation's private pigeon lofts, confiscating the best racing birds in preparation for war. German spies used the birds to send secret messages back to Germany. The English, however, had some success deploying peregrine falcons, a natural predator of pigeons, to intercept the clandestine communiqués.

Occasionally, the Germans intercepted Allied pigeons as well, as was the case with a bird by the name of Lucia di Lammermoor. She was captured by German troops in 1944 in the central Italian town of Cassino. A day later, she returned to the Allied forces with a message: To the American troops, herewith we return a pigeon to you. We have enough to eat. When the Allied Forces began rolling across Germany, the Army instructed its Pigeoneers to seek out and destroy the German homing pigeon population. I spoke to one veteran who explained to me how he circumvented the order.

"When we went to see the German birds, we were stunned," says Stanley Mehr. "They were magnificent. We were poor immigrant kids from places like Brooklyn; a lot of us had never seen thoroughbreds like these. The stature, the bearing, the appearance; we knew these were premier-quality birds. We were in awe of them. The last thing we would have done is kill them.

"We came up with a better idea. We procured some scissors and clipped one wing feather off each bird—the one that's responsible for flight. It didn't harm the bird in anyway. We figured the war would be over in six months, and by that time, the feather would grow back."

The behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner stumbled upon a rather unique use for pigeons during World War II. He taught his pigeons, which he kept in a backyard dovecote, to work as primitive missile guidance systems by pecking at a video screen with crosshairs. Although preliminary trials were relatively successful, "Project Pigeon" was a hard sell to the military. The Pentagon found the endeavor more bird-brained than practical, much like Skinner's efforts to teach his pigeons to play a crude form of Ping-Pong using their wings as paddles.

Years later, the Coast Guard experimented with pigeons on search-and-rescue missions, an avian equivalent of the time-honored canine function. The pigeons were placed in helicopters alongside human spotters and trained to identify orange life vests adrift at sea. Because of their vastly superior vision and unusual ability to concentrate for long periods of time on visual tasks—boredom doesn't fatigue pigeons—the birds outperformed their human counterparts by a margin of three to one. Although

the birds were willing to work for birdseed, officials once again had difficulty taking the birds seriously, and the program was abandoned.

Many scientists remained in awe of the bird's uncanny ability to recognize visual patterns. They continued to train pigeons to perform important tasks, such as scanning airport baggage for security violations and spotting defective drug capsules on a manufacturer's assembly line. These projects, too, were met with skepticism.

Yet intelligence agencies continued to explore uses for the rock dove. According to recently declassified files from the Cold War years, the British military briefly considered arming pigeons with biological weapons. The plan was to attach small explosive capsules containing biological agents to a thousand pigeons and unleash them on the enemy. The CIA also made use of pigeons for clandestine operations, and even today the agency's Web site includes several child-friendly pages featuring a gleeful sibling spy team of pigeons: "Hi, kids! I'm Harry Recon, and this is my twin sister, Aerial . . . My family has always supported the Agency . . . We love being up in the air because it's so much fun and we take great pictures from up there as well. We love flying so much that Mom has a hard time keeping us on the ground to do our homework and our chores!"

With their use dwindling after World War II, the United States Army officially closed its pigeon courier program in 1957. Other countries such as China, France, and Spain continued to use them as messengers as the pigeon's method of delivery remains impervious to modern eavesdropping devices. American military use of pigeons surfaced again during the Gulf war and the Iraqi

war, with the rock dove serving as the proverbial canary in a coal mine, accompanying troops as an early-warning sign of a chemical attack. It is rumored that Saddam Hussein relied on pigeon couriers after the U.S. tapped in to—and then decimated—his modern communication capabilities. Several stories have surfaced of army personnel finding flocks of homing pigeons in abandoned Iraqi bunkers. Their use continues well into the U.S. occupation, as Iraqi insurgents rely heavily on pigeons to ferry clandestine information.

As their use in guerrilla warfare continues to rise, so does their involvement in smuggling operations. Pigeons have been used to smuggle cocaine, heroin, and marijuana from Bogotá, Bangkok, and Berlin. Workers in South Africa diamond mines have used rock doves to sneak out rough-cut gems for sale on the black market. They taped diamonds onto the birds' legs and chests and watched them fly home.

Given the bird's innate athletic and navigational abilities, one might think that all fanciers would concentrate on these attributes. To my surprise, I found an entire subculture devoted to nothing more than the bird's looks, which they parade at annual pigeon pageants. I decided to attend but feared that it had all the makings of a shallow pursuit. It was, however, far more than that, and it opened my eyes to a fanciful and improbable world hiding in plain sight.

3
Drs. Frankenstein

THE WESTMINSTER KENNEL CLUB DOG SHOW IS THE PINnacle of dog shows and attracts animal lovers from everywhere. Founded in 1877 and held every subsequent year at Madison Square Garden, the show outdates every other annual American sporting contest with the exception of that other princely competition, the Kentucky Derby.

Over the years, the show has attracted the attention of the world's most powerful men: J. P. Morgan entered his collies in the competition, and both the tsar of Russia and the German kaiser entered Siberian wolfhounds. In 1938, the Westminster made the cover of *Time* magazine. Today it is attended by tens of thousands of spectators and shown live on national television to millions more.

The pigeon world's equivalent, the Grand Nationals, attracts fewer than a hundred spectators and isn't televised. The media generally ignored the eighty-third Grand Nationals, which were held at a hotel in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with its own convention space. The local newspaper covered the cattle competition at the Pennsylvania Farm Show in Harrisburg ("Maybe the drool overflowing below Vinnie the bull's nose ring turned off the judge . . .") and even the postponement of a planned poi-

soning of local crows. But there was no mention of the bird show.

Pigeons may have helped Noah find land. They may have saved thousands of lives during the two world wars. And they may be remarkable athletes with the homing abilities of a GPS satellite. Yet most people still consider them feathered rats. They have little interest in admiring the best efforts of champion breeders, who have spent years—often decades—patiently perfecting their pigeon stock.

These breeders represent an entirely different subculture of obsessed pigeon people. Although competitive, they have little in common with the likes of Orlando and his racing pals. For them, it has nothing to do with athletic performance or gambling; rather, it is about the dogged pursuit of a perceived platonic ideal through the painstaking application of genetic manipulation. Some of these fanciers have traveled to remote corners of the world in search of exotic breed stock to give themselves a competitive edge. Conversely, the Grand Nationals is partially filled with Middle Easterners and Asians shopping for genes.

I arrive in Pennsylvania Dutch country on a cold winter's day and check in to a motel across the street from the pageant. I am lucky to find a room on short notice, given that more than five hundred pigeon breeders and their families have planned for a year to inundate the area.

Once inside the hotel hosting the pageant, I veer across the lobby and head for the exhibit hall. Before me is a room, nearly the size of a football field, stacked with thousands of pigeons. Row upon row of cooing, pooing pigeons. I count twenty-four rows of large folding

wooden exhibition tables, each double lined with double stacks—more than twenty-five hundred birds, each in its own cage with its own colorful Dixie cups of feed and water and red rosin paper flooring. I soon learn that there's another show arena, the hotel's twenty-five-thousand-square-foot expo center, stacked with *twice* as many birds and breeders.

The exhibit hall cackles with excited breeders attending to their avian dependents and greeting fellow hobbyists in warm fellowship. Wafting around the lights is a dusty haze of fine particles containing the deeply organic smell of birdseed, bird droppings, and molting feathers. Breeders move about the cages in white lab coats designed to protect their clothes from bird droppings and the hovering particulate matter. Some wear surgical masks to protect their lungs.

I have never seen so many birds in one place. It is as if someone has taken all the birds from Venice's St. Mark's Square and placed them indoors. But one thing is decidedly different: There are no ordinary street pigeons here. These pigeons are some of the strangest-looking feathered beasts I've ever witnessed.

There are pigeons with giant fanned tails much like a turkey's, pigeons with beaks so small they have difficulty eating, and others whose throats extend into balloons the size of grapefruits. Some have feathers that curl like corkscrews, while still others have giant feathers jutting out from their feet like Oriental fans. There are dozens of breeds of pigeon, each grouped by club so members can compete against one another for Best of Breed. Unlike at Westminster, however, there is no climactic Best in Show

category. (Nor, for that matter, is there a central staging area where breeders trot in circles before a large audience with their pigeons on leashes.)

The caged pigeons come in a multitude of sizes, from the curiously named giant runt, which is the size of an oven roaster, to the palm-sized pygmies. And they come in a multitude of colors and hues: whites, browns, blacks, blues, grays, and iridescent purples, reds, and pinks, some spotted, others speckled or striped.

One gentleman stands out from the rest of the breeders. He's wearing fashionably thick black glasses and slick metro wear—black jeans, boots, and blazer. Steve Gaskin is a hairdresser and a breeder of Jacobins from Dallas, Texas. He's attending the conference with Bonnie, a coworker and friend for twenty years. The pair met when Bonnie interviewed at his salon wearing nothing but leggings, a sweater, and big red boots. "I just *had* to hire her!" Gaskin recalls. "Can you imagine that outfit?"

Growing up in rural Arkansas, Gaskin bred all sorts of animals. "I had quarter horses, peacocks, monkeys, you name it. My parents were *very* indulgent." But it was the pigeons, Jacobins in particular, that caught his eye as soon as he was old enough to hightail it out of cotton country. "I left as soon as I could drive. My family had been there for generations, but the country life wasn't for me. Even my mother told me so. She said, 'Steve, this isn't for you.' Now I live in the city, in Dallas proper."

They say breeding pigeons is an art form, a perfect blend of beauty and form. If that's the case, then Jacobins are surely the work of masters. In the world of pigeons,

they are perhaps the most extravagantly stylish breed. Jacobins are also one of the oldest breeds, tracing back over a thousand years to India. They are believed to have made their way to Europe by way of Cyprus, birthplace of Aphrodite. The birds have delicate bodies with rich, dense feathering. Their most distinctive feature is their reverse-feathered hood. From a distance, their heads look as if they've been replaced with pom-poms. On closer inspection, you see that the head is completely surrounded by a regal-looking mane of soft feathers, like Greta Garbo snuggled in a fur coat. It is said that England's Queen Elizabeth I was particularly fond of breeding them and that they may have been the inspiration for her outlandishly high collars. The effect comes from feathers around the neck that are naturally reversed. They point toward the head and the sky instead of resting smoothly on the back and pointing toward the tail.

Gaskin's flock is in a handful of cages around all the other Jacobins. He points out his birds' droppings. They look like hard little balls on the rosin paper. It means his birds are healthy, he says. A splattered green crap means illness.

"My birds aren't necessarily winners, but I've got some pretty good birds. Like this one, he's pretty good." Gaskin taps his finger against a cage, and a hooded pigeon scurries to the other side. "And this one is pretty good, too. But come over here. These are exquisite!" Gaskin approaches a nationally famous breeder of Jacobins and his birds. "Hi. I'm Steve Gaskin, from Dallas, and I just noticed your birds. They are beautiful, beautiful birds. Would you be willing to sell me one?"

"No."

"Well, I had to ask!" Gaskin walks back to his birds. "His are the best, but he never wants to sell. Jacobins are so hard to breed that most breeders won't sell."

He stops to point out a few more exemplary Jacobins. "Why do I like this one?" he asks rhetorically, singling out an elegant bird. "Number one, his station. And his neck feathers stand up nicely." He moves on to another bird. "This one here has a slight imperfection. It's called 'shingling'—a feather falls down instead of sitting upright. The competition doesn't allow gels or trimming. If there's a flaw, it will show, and you just have to live with it."

Farther down the exhibition hall is Larry Reifsnyder, a fifty-six-year-old carpenter from nearby Reading, Pennsylvania. His pigeon club is sponsoring the event. He spent the previous Sunday setting up hundreds of tables and thousands of cages with the help of a Boy Scout troop. "Our club is getting older and smaller these days, so we need the help—there's just nine of us. The older guys are dying, and there aren't any new youngsters joining. We can't put on a show like this without help."

Although the convention hall is full, the average age is probably in the mid-fifties. "Kids today want instant gratification, and pigeons take too long," Reifsnyder says. "Used to be everything revolved around the backyard—your fraternal lodge backyard, your church backyard, your own backyard where you kept pigeons. These days zoning ordinances make is difficult to do anything in your backyard. But in the day, you bred pigeons in your backyard, and they were your life . . . People just don't join clubs anymore. Hobbyists are a dying breed. Nowadays

all kids want to do is hang out at the mall, watch movies, watch television, and play Nintendo. And yet they're still bored. Imagine that."

Like many of the fanciers, Reifsnyder started breeding pigeons as a youngster and stopped for a dozen years or so after he discovered girls, only to start up again as an escape from the stresses of family life. "Breeding gives me pleasure. It's a diversion from what I'd ordinarily be doing. It's satisfying to start with a pair of birds, mate them, and then see how the babies turn out. It's a lot of work, but it's also relaxing." Reifsnyder's ex-wife was less enthusiastic about the hobby. "She'd say to me, 'You just like manipulating birds, that's why you like it.' Well, in a sense she was right, that's why we all do it—to see what we can get out of our birds."

Reifsnyder raises Oriental frills, a pigeon with a pronounced forehead and minuscule pug-nosed beak. Like the Jacobins, the Oriental frills have reversed feathering, but theirs is small and located on their upper chests, resembling a European cravat. They also have a handful of feathers that stick up on the back of their heads and give their skulls a crest. The birds' mouths are so misshapen that they have to eat out of a cup; their beaks are too small to peck at the ground. Nor can they feed their babies, which, incidentally, can't even peck their way out of their shells. These basic biological tasks are left to the breeder.

"The better ones have a harder time eating because they have less beak," says Reifsnyder. "They certainly wouldn't survive in the wild, but then again, they're not bred to live in the wild. They're bred to be pretty to look at."

To me they all look brown and white. But Reifsnyder points out subtleties of color with racy names like "Blondette" and "Black Lace Satin." I may be daft or color blind, but they all still look the same to me. Reifsnyder points to a Black Lace Blonde that looks more like a brunette to me. "This is a real good one. See how she has a full head and how it rolls back real well, too?"

He picks up another bird, cups it in his hand, and effortlessly flicks open its wing as if it were a cigarette lighter. "See the edging around the feathers? If you look real close, it's a bit smutty, blurry. What you want is a good white background and a darker, vivid outline."

He hands the bird to me, and I grasp it awkwardly. I can feel the bird's heart beating furiously. "He doesn't much like being held. This one's always been nervous. He tries to hide in the corner from the judge. It's a shame, because he's got excellent traits, and that's what he's supposed to do—show them off.

"I've worked with numerous breeds—English trumpeters, Russian trumpeters, Lahores, magpies, tumblers, pouters. I don't know why I stuck with Oriental Frills. Why do you like a certain girl? She just catches your eye . . . They're a stupid but generally calm breed. If you let them out of their cage, they can't even find their way home. Whatever direction they start out in, they just keep heading in that direction. But I really like this breed's colors and color patterns. I like the lace pattern. Oh yeah, I really like the lace. If Jacobins had lace, I'd probably raise them. But it could take a lifetime to inject a stencil pattern into that breed. It's really hit-and-miss."

I remain perplexed. Why pigeons? He says, "Why do people like dogs? I'm not particularly fond of dogs.

I guess I like pigeons because they're pretty. Actually, that's a good question. I never really thought about it. Honestly."

He selects another bird. "This one has a nice wide head, but there's a break in its mane. Its head is crested, but it's not needle-pointed. That's a point reduction, but it's not a disqualification. It could still win if there's not a better young cock. But put it up against an old cock, and it'll probably lose because he'll have more powerful frills. Frills don't fully mature until two to three years of age. Now, if you have a young cock that beats an old cock, well, that's one hell of a cock." Reifsnyder shakes his head knowingly. Even the thought of such a bird leaves him speechless.

Cocks, as you might suspect, are male birds. A young cock is any cock under the age of one. All the rest are old cocks. Female birds, or hens, are classified similarly. Reifsnyder says, "I'd rather win with a hen than a cock because it's harder. And hens are the key to breeding anyway. Cocks just give color. Hens pass on type and power." "Type" is the way the carriage is formed and how the bird stands. "Most of the points in this breed are in the nose; that's where the power is. It's like a bull's-eye area . . . But the fact is, you'll never have a perfect bird."

Reifsynder suggests that I seek out a gentleman in the expo center who goes by the moniker "Dr. Pigeon." "He knows a heck of a lot more than me. He's a walking encyclopedia about pigeons."

Befriending Dr. Pigeon, I soon learn, will help open doors for me that I otherwise would have found slammed in my face. Dr. Pigeon has clout, particularly in the shady underworld of live pigeon shoots.

But before meeting more breeders, I want more background on just what's going on around me. I need to reacquaint myself with two guys I haven't thought about since high school—Darwin and Mendel. Only then will I get a clear picture of how breeders think and work.

4

Evolution, Peapods, and Pigeons

Believing that it is always best to study some special group, I have joined two of the London Pigeon Clubs. The diversity of the breeds is something astonishing . . . Such are the variations that an ornithologist would certainly rank them as well-defined species. Yet I am fully convinced that the common opinion of naturalists is correct, namely, that all have descended from the wild rock-pigeon (Columba livia).
—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS ARE A SMALL VOLCANIC ARCHIpelago about six hundred miles west of Ecuador. The oldest islands are several million years old, and the youngest are still being formed by lava flows. The first recorded sighting of the islands was by the bishop of Panama, whose boat was blown off course in 1535. For hundreds of years afterward, the islands were rarely visited, except by pirate vessels and whaling ships.

The young naturalist Charles Darwin would make them famous following his monthlong sojourn there in 1835. It wasn't the harsh geography that seduced Darwin. "Nothing could be less inviting," he wrote in *Voyage of the Beagle,* describing the islands as "a broken field of

black basaltic lava, thrown in the most rugged waves, and crossed by great fissures." What attracted Darwin was the remoteness of the islands and their uncommon animal inhabitants.

Born into a well-to-do British family in 1809, Darwin rarely excelled at his studies and was an academic disappointment to his father. He was first sent to the University of Edinburgh to study medicine. When that didn't pan out, Darwin transferred to Cambridge University with the intention of becoming a clergyman. But Darwin soon fell under the spell of a natural sciences professor who recommended him for the position of naturalist on the H.M.S. *Beagle.* Prone to seasickness, Darwin spent much of the two-year voyage nauseated and, once home, never set foot on another oceangoing vessel.

As he surveyed the Galápagos Islands, Darwin was repeatedly struck by the variations among seemingly similar species. Not only did the animals vary from known species on the west coast of South America, they differed from island to island. As Darwin sailed around the archipelago, he identified thirteen different species of finches alone. The greatest physical variation was in the bird's beak. Some finches had developed long, slender bills to extract pulp from a prickly pear cactus. Some had large beaks for cracking hard seeds. Others had small, thin beaks for extracting grubs.

Darwin surmised that the finches had somehow made their way to the Galápagos from the mainland and had developed different physical attributes over time. He hypothesized that the birds had adapted different beak characteristics to better exploit their food source. Darwin was relatively certain these birds had evolved, but it would

take several more years to develop his thinking. His writings about the Galápagos tentatively speculated about evolution but did not address how it occurred.

Darwin did not invent the theory of evolution. Fossil evidence had already cast doubt on the creation myth of Genesis. Darwin's great contributions would be the how and why of evolution. And it wasn't the Galápagos and its finches that led him to his theory of natural selection. In fact, he rarely addressed either of them again. Instead, it was his work with pigeons that focused his thinking and sharpened his arguments.

The theory of natural selection maintains that animals will adapt over time to survive better in their environment. Those who are better adapted will thrive and pass on their traits to successive generations. The healthy will leave more descendants than the unhealthy.

Natural selection occurs over huge expanses of time. In today's world, we can witness it happening more rapidly, such as with antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Darwin didn't have the luxury of modern microbiology. But while he may not have been able to see natural selection at work in the wild, Darwin suspected he could see it under controlled conditions with the breeding of domestic pigeons, thereby imitating in years what occurs in nature over eons.

Darwin soon filled his backyard with fancy pigeons from around the world and set to work breeding them. In time, he was convinced that although some of the birds had large fanned tails, and others strangely feathered feet, they all shared a common ancestor, *Columba livia*—the humble rock dove. Darwin speculated (correctly) that if the different fancy breeds were allowed to mate freely in the wild, the offspring would eventually lose their distinc-

tive traits and resemble the rock dove. Darwin termed this phenomenon "reversion."

In Darwin's time, it was generally believed, even by breeders, that each fanciful breed of pigeon was a separate species with little or nothing in common. "I have never met a pigeon fancier who was not fully convinced that each main breed was descended from a distinct species," wrote Darwin in *The Origin of Species.* "When I first kept pigeons and watched the several kinds, well knowing how truly they breed, I felt fully as much difficulty in believing that, since they had been domesticated, they had all proceeded from a common parent . . . in nature."

Reversion was a revolutionary idea, one that many breeders still marvel at today. Could all their unusual and weird-looking birds really be descendants of one bird—the rock dove?

Difficult to imagine, perhaps, but as Darwin argued in *The Origin of Species*—he devoted the whole first chapter to the domestication of pigeons—there is no other reasonable explanation for the profusion of fancy pigeons. If they all came from separate stock, then where is the aboriginal stock? Why have they not been identified anywhere in the known world? And why, unlike the rock dove, are there no feral fantails or pouters? Why is it that when two birds of distinct breeds and colors are crossed, their offspring show the markings and coloration of an ordinary rock dove?

As Darwin noted, pigeons have been bred for fanciful characteristics since the beginning of recorded history: "It is in human nature to value any novelty, however slight, in one's own possession." The Roman historian Pliny observed that his countrymen paid exorbitant prices