Pigeons

Pigeons are everywhere. Those pigeons are the clock of the city. No creature gets up as early as them. You can always see the pigeons over those old Shanghainese's alleys and hovering around the sky from 5 o’clock to 10 and those suffering old men use their old pale hands to feed their pigeons some leftover bread crumbs from the bakery. All the pigeons know their old way home, too well. They know this city too well, Oriental Paris’ prosperity and its romantic vicissitudes, every edge of the roof and every corner of the house. So you never hear a pigeon break into a stranger's house, nor get lost in the bustling world.

The wind swung by the pigeons is subtle, just like the wind in the alleys is subtle. Shanghai’s alleys are always thin and narrow, only allowing two people to walk side by side. Walking amid, sometimes you feel water drops overhead. You think it’s rainwater, but it’s not. It’s not. It’s either the water from the wet clothes on the laundry lines outside the windowsill of the household or pigeon droppings. But you never get apologies from the pigeons or their owners or the hostesses living above. Because when you realize what it is, they’re already gone and men never win when arguing with women. So don’t do it. Just don’t.

Among all those different tall window sills, there is a wooden one. And the eyes of this woman inside always follow the trail of the pigeons. They always fly in a formation. One followed by another. She watches them everyday. She watches how they eat at dawn after waking up and watches how they fly in the rain after picking up the laundry. She imagines how it’s like to fly so high and she seems to grow wings and beak. As if she’s flying at an elevated point, overlooking the whole city.

The woman stares at the sky for a long time until her husband wakes up and calls her.

“Where’s the teacup? I want to have some tea before going to work.”

“In the cupboard.”

Her husband rummages through the cupboards and finds all the bowls and plates but the teacup.

“Where? I can’t find it.”

“It’s in the cupboard at the corner of the kitchen.”

She leaves the window and goes to the thin narrow kitchen. She opens the first cupboard on the left side of the kitchen and finds the teacup in front of all the other glasses. Then, she boils the water on the stove and takes the tea box out of the shelf. After the water gets hot, she takes out some black tea from the tea box, spills them into the cup, and pours some boiling water.

“Here.” She hands over the tea to her husband.

Her husband nods as a response. He sits at the table, eyes fixed on the newspaper. Seeing that he doesn’t speak, the woman puts the tea on the table and goes to the kitchen to make breakfast.

She made some sandwiches today. Sandwiches have never been a local food, however, since this neighborhood became the French Concession after the war, Western culture has become popular. Her son’s school has hired a British man as the English teacher, and her son has been clamoring for cupcakes and sandwiches. So she just learned how to make sandwiches.

“What’s that?”

“Sandwiches.”

“Sandwiches? Sandwiches, Mrs. Wu? You let me eat this cold thing in the morning? ”

Chinese people never eat cold breakfast!

“I have some milk too.”

Grace takes out milk from the refrigerator to pour out. She gives one cup to her husband and puts the other in front of the seat of her son.

“Milk? Cold milk in the morning?”

The man puts down his newspaper. He seems to be exerting a great deal of strength when putting down the newspaper, for she hears the banging of the glasses and the table.

Her son runs out of the bathroom like a merry little whirlwind. He looks at this morning’s breakfast with surprise and says:

“Mom! You’re the best! My classmates must be jealous if they know I have sandwiches for breakfast.”

Grace smiles at her son.

“I know you’ll like it. Go and eat. Don’t be late for school.”

The couple watches their son having the first bite of the sandwiches. The man stops saying anything. He started to eat, and Grace went back to the kitchen for cleaning.

Before going out, the man asks, “Where’s my necktie?”

Grace hands over his suit jacket and helps him to tie his necktie. The suit just got ironed yesterday and it looks neat and nice. She put the freshly picked jasmine flowers into the pocket and just took them out this morning. Perfume is a luxury to their family. This’s the only way to make sure it smells nice so as not to embarrass her husband since he works in the bank. Her husband looks at himself in the mirror, making sure he looks smart today, just like yesterday and the day before yesterday and every day before. Then, he leaves the house.

“Mom, where’re my books? I cannot find them.”

After another moment of chaos, her son finally gathers all the school supplies and leaves the house too.

The house is quiet again. The woman goes back to the windowsill and stares at the sky. All pigeons have flown to the neighborhood nearby. She can't see them at this angle from her windowsill. Five minutes later, the woman leaves the window and then starts doing the housework for the day. Pigeons will be back an hour later, she thinks, just like yesterday and the day before yesterday and every day before.

After wrapping the table, she gathers up the crumbs on the table and puts them on a small plate. That should be good enough for the pigeons, she thinks. Then, she leaves the house for groceries.

The big fresh market three blocks away only opens in the morning and it has everything a housewife would need to make a nice dinner for the family: locally grown vegetables and fruits, lively seafood and shrimp, a wide variety of meat including poultry, eggs and milk, soybean milk or fried dough stick for breakfast, and even hot baguette and apple pies from the French-owned pastry shop. This’s the most commonplace in the city, containing yells, cries, haggling, and noise. This’s the encapsulation of life, where its bright coat is stripped, revealing the most plainest nature of daily necessities.

Grace goes out in a hurry. Both her husband and son love shrimp, and she has finally managed to save up some money to buy some. She can’t help but worry that the river shrimp would be sold out. That’s how the fresh market works—everyone wants something over there, and the best will be picked out first, leaving the bad ones for the people who’re late. She needs to be quick.

On the way back, when nearing home, Grace sees the boy, who used to sell ice lollies at the crossroad, sitting on a small chair at the entrance of the alley. From here only the slender back of the child could be seen, trembling, as if he is crying. She steps forward, patting him on the shoulder, and asks: “Are the ice lollies sold out?”

The boy wipes the tears from his face with his sleeve and picks up the icebox that lay on the ground. Refrigerators are too expensive for ordinary people. This kind of kid selling ice lolly is usually employed by some big apartment stores. The managers of those stores would knock some ice out of their refrigerator, then place the ice into a wooden box with cotton clothes lying at the bottom. This movable insulation box allows the kids to sell ice lolly at any corner of the city.

“Yes, madam.”

The French style of addressing a woman suddenly becomes very popular these days in Shanghai.

“What was going on?”

“My dad. He hasn't come back yet. The boatload of men who fished with him hasn't come back.”

On the far horizon, the pigeons pass through the lunch smoke. One of them that seemed extremely little has been stumbling along with the flock. What a poor bird. The whole flock faded into her view.

“Do you have any ice left? I want to buy some.”

“I only have a little.” As he opens the box, there’s only water and some crushed ice left—most of the ice has melted.

“Deliver the ice to my house and I’ll pay you two cents.” She points at her house.

When she gets home, it’s about noon. Grace puts the ice into a glass container and gives the boy two cents as said.

Before she has some leftover sandwiches for lunch, she takes out a small glass cup and the homemade bayberry liquor she got as her birthday present from the neighbor. She only pours half of the cup because there’s not much left. Then, she places that little glass of liquor into ice.

She lets that cup of liquor sit in the ice while she does the housework so that the liquid will get cold. That little bayberry wine reds beautifully in ice, like pomegranate flesh.

After laundry, she shuts the cupboard door, but a few seconds later, she reopens it and takes out that white shirt she put in at the last minute. This’s a cheap white shirt. The cuffs are slightly yellow from too many washings. She wants to put on that white shirt because she bets she looks good in it. So she did. She wants to button it carefully since it’s something important. So she did. And she wants to tuck the shirt into the trousers, just as all the schoolgirls and female teachers do walking down the street. So she did.

She comes back to the window, with her husband’s shirt and that glass of red liquor. The collected crumbs of bread are sprinkled on the windowsill. Pigeons smell the food and crowd around. Their eyes have the same color as her liquor. Holding the liquor in her hand, Grace feels nice about its icy cold, and she opens the letter she has received when she went to the post office on the way home. The more she reads, the more her brows furrow. Right after reading, she quickly changes her clothes, goes downstairs in a hurry, and takes the rest of the money she has in her purse to buy twenty man-fist-size steamed buns that’s enough for her family for three days. When she’s back, all the pigeons are gone, leaving a glass lying on the windowsill and a pool of red liquid.

Then, she goes to the kitchen to make dinner. Twenty minutes later she hears “Click” from the door.

“How come you get home this early today?”

“My boss gave everyone a half-day off. It seems like we'll have a Japanese boss from tomorrow.”

“Japanese boss?” Grace keeps working in the kitchen. She doesn't come out to meet her husband as usual.

“Yeah.”

“That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“I thought all the Japanese were in the north.”

“North?”

“Yes. I guess even pigeons with their little white wings can’t make it through.”

“What pigeons are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Forget about that. In the letter of my cousin, it’s said that the Japanese defeated the warlords in the north, and Beiping’s under martial law. The mail cannot arrive there now. ”

“When did that happen?”

“Yesterday. The post office worker said the roads have been blocked since yesterday.”

Grace’s voice comes from the kitchen and seems a little bit distorted. Her husband walks to the kitchen and pokes his head behind the door.

“What’re you doing?”

“Picking out the shrimp line.”

“You got shrimp today, Mrs. Wu! Oh, Mrs. Wu!”

“I knew you would like it. Both you and our son love shrimp, just like I love pigeons.”

“How much is the shrimp? Do we have enough money for that?”

“Forty-seven cents per kilo.”

“What? Are you kidding me?”

“Just for today.”

“Your spendthrift!”

“It was twenty-six cents two days ago, and our boy wants shrimp.”

“Double in two days? It’s crazy.”

“Who’s to say not. Everything is so changeable. The father of the boy who sells ice lollies didn't come back today from fishing.”

“Too bad. I feel sorry, but the weather is fine this morning.”

“Who knows. Things are so changeable, the unstable weather and pigeons’ poop from the sky. Who knows where they might happen.”

“Wait.” Her husband suddenly stops, and asks, “What did you say?”

Grace knows her husband is smart.

“Who knows where they might happen, the unstable weather and pigeons’ poop.”

Grace repeated. Her husband’s getting there.

“How many people didn’t come back from fishing?”

He might not be smart enough to deal with people.

“Everyone on that boat didn't come back. Sounds like the ship just disappeared. That might be why the food price is so high today.”

But he’s smart enough to deal with numbers and price, which she knows from the first day of the wedding.

“Wait! Wait! Beiping’s the capital and Shanghai has all the ports. Shanghai’s their next target. The Japanese are coming! What should we do?”

Grace comes out of the kitchen and hugs her husband to calm him down. For just a moment, his face turns pale with beads of perspiration running down his forehead. She puts her arms around her husband. The scent of jasmine from her gently envelopes him as she pats him on the back. He feels a sudden sense of safety and security because she pats him in such a gentle way as patting a baby bird. It’s an embrace of a wife and a mother, soft, warm but strong at the same time. At that moment, he thinks that women would embrace anything if needed. She softly says, “We should leave Shanghai.”

“Yes, we should leave.” His sanity comes back, “Grace, I'll go get our son from school, and write to my friends inland to arrange transportation. I need you to pack up some clothes and buy enough food for a couple of days. Can you do that?”

“Yes, my dear. I’ll do it for you.”

“I’ll probably be back in an hour. Do you get enough time to do all of these? Should I buy the food as well?”

“No, I got this. Don’t worry. I’ll buy steam buns.”

Her husband puts on his shoes quickly, and before leaving the house, he kisses his wife on the lips.

From the windowsill, Grace sees the back shadow of her husband as he goes out. In the background, the pigeons begin their second flying of the day in the sky, hovering above the city in a different direction from this morning. The first pigeon often decides which direction to fly, yet the rest of the pigeons can influence the decision too. This is probably the case.