



Source: Hassan M. Fattah, 'Where pigeons rule the sky, troublemakers foul the nest', *New York Times* online, 07/05/07.

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When you die, what will you have: a burial or a cremation? When I was a teenager, my girlfriends and I used to take great pleasure in provoking each other with those kind of big speculative questions. I'll take cremation! Who wants their body to be eaten by worms! Who wants to be atomised! I want my body to disappear naturally into the earth! I never could decide. Now, forty odd years later, I'm lost in a Parisien cemetery on a hot Sunday in May, where I've spent the best part of the afternoon wandering the avenues between hundreds of gravestones.

I'm in the old bit now. I'm sitting in front of a gravestone belonging to a Mr and Mrs Pigeon. It must be the name that drew me here. I'm Mrs Bird. I can't stop looking at the grave. I'm thinking back to this morning, I'm trying to re-trace my steps, to when I first woke up. I think now it was the sound of the pigeons that woke me.

I couldn't remember where I was at first. I lay there in the gloom, unsure what had jolted me out of my sleep. I thought the tangled, slightly unpleasant dream I'd been having had probably woken me. I've always been a light sleeper unlike my husband, Mr Bird, who can sleep through anything. He could probably have slept through gunfire, earthquakes and floods, should those disasters ever have come our way.

Then I thought maybe it was because I was in a strange bed in an unfamiliar room. I did feel a bit at sea in a single bed after all this time. I hadn't really thought about it when I checked in last night. I just asked for the cheapest room, but everything was designed for single occupancy: the slim wardrobe, the solo glass on the shelf above the sink. The one towel folded neatly on the rail by the shower.

I could've checked in to a bigger room. I could've chosen the best hotel in town, asked for the honeymoon suite and drunk champagne all night. But I didn't. I ended up here in a tall thin hotel that jutted above the other buildings on the narrow cramped crescent, like a crooked incisor in an overcrowded set of teeth.

I lay there in that funny little bed, watching the shadowed walls and furniture lighten as the dawn broke. Then I heard them. The pigeons. Their cooing strangely amplified so it almost sounded like crying. I discovered that my room looked out into a kind of atrium made of peeling stucco walls and shuttered windows. The walls were so close it was hard to see the ground below or the sky above and all the pigeon sounds were trapped in this kind of funnel, echoing and reverberating. At home, I love being woken by birdsong. I love the beauty of the birds, the way they are equally at home trilling and chirruping

on branches, windowsills or telegraph wires; how this kind of noisy twittering contrasts so vividly with their lofty silence in flight, how there, in that huge canvas of the sky, they are defined only by a language of movement that we earth-bound people will never know: arcs, swoops, dips and curves but this morning I didn't love them at all.

I'm not sure how long I'm going to stay here in Paris, so I thought I'd better make the most of the day. It's very possible that tomorrow I'll move on, take another train further south perhaps, see what it's like down there. I haven't travelled in years. Not since the early days of our marriage when Mr Bird's research took us abroad sometimes. I've never really travelled alone and I'm no spring chicken, so it's understandable that I was anxious to get on. I packed some tissues, my glasses and the book I've been reading in my handbag. I paused at reception only to check my watch by the hotel clock. I didn't ask for a map. I didn't bring a guidebook with me because this trip was unplanned. I decided to be adventurous.

And this is where my walking brought me. To the resting place of Mr and Mrs Pigeon at the Montparnasse Cemetery. Their grave is marked by a sculpture of the married couple. They lie side by side in bed, fully clothed. She's sleeping. He's reading by the light of a safe gas lamp, Mr Pigeon's very own invention. It's not this frozen picture of domestic comfort and compatibility that makes me cry. Nor is it the frustration of not being able to find my way round Paris. I didn't stumble across any of the sights like I hoped I might. I didn't find The Eiffel Tower. I didn't see The Seine. I didn't find the Louvre with Mona Lisa's Smile or the Rodin Museum with The Thinker. I'd planned to get a bit tipsy in Montmartre and buy a little painting of a cobbled street to keep as a souvenir. But I didn't make it there either.

I'm not crying because of Mr Bird's unexpected end. I'm not crying because I don't know whether he'll be buried or cremated. I'm crying because of the way those pigeons sounded this morning. Because all of a sudden I miss the beauty of the birds, because it's the first time in a long time that I've been free to please myself and I think about the bedraggled birds in cities that seem to have forgotten how to fly. I will walk wherever my feet take me. I will make my own arcs and swoops, dives and loops on the city's pavements.

I didn't tell anyone where I was going. I didn't even know myself. But there I was yesterday evening on the train to Paris. I don't want to go back yet. There is still so much more to see.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Cathy Naden.*