

# A Very Special Pigeon

Translated by Helen Wang. Read the Chinese [here](#).

1

Xiawang and Qiuhu lived in the same small town. They went to the same school, and were in the same class, and both of them kept pigeons. But their family circumstances were very different. Xiawang's family was rich, and Qiuhu's family was poor. Xiawang's family was not rich in the ordinary sense; they were the richest family in this small town. Qiuhu's family was not poor in the ordinary sense; they were the poorest family in this small town, so poor that people were embarrassed and looked the other way.

The two boys shared a love of pigeons.

These little creatures that spread their wings and soared

in the sky captured their imagination like nothing else. There were always a few of them flying up high, and it was so beautiful, so enchanting, to see them. The boys would watch to their heart's content.

People who know about pigeons naturally rated Xiawang's pigeons higher than Qiuhu's. They looked at Xiawang's pigeons with awe and admiration, and, when these birds raised their heads to the sky, could imagine them having magical qualities. But these same people had no time for Qiuhu's pigeons: they couldn't be bothered with such dowdy things.

There was nothing Qiuhu could do about it. He couldn't afford expensive pigeons. But he hadn't simply picked his pigeons off the ground; his dozen or so pigeons had all been paid for, albeit for very small sums. The most valuable was the grey male, the colour of roof-tiles, which he'd bought from an old man in town. It had cost him only three *jin* of rice which he'd nicked from home.

All Qiuhu's pigeons added together were worth less than Xiawang's least valuable pigeon. Xiawang had said as much, when he told the other children, in front of Qiuhu, 'I wouldn't swap a single feather from my flock for the lot

of them.'

Xiawang's most valuable pigeons were said to be worth three to four thousand yuan, and even the cheapest ones were about four to five hundred yuan each.

Xiawang's family was afraid that someone might try to steal these precious birds, and kept two fierce dogs specially to watch the yard, day and night.

Qiuhu's pigeons lived in what could only be called a pigeon cage. It was built from scrap wood that Qiuhu had gathered together, and was a rickety thing that hung at an angle on the wall. Xiawang's pigeons, on the other hand, lived in a specially commissioned two-chamber pigeon cote. It had taken three carpenters two weeks to build it from a stack of the finest wood. They were all master carpenters, but they had never built a pigeon cote before, and were excited to be working on something new. As it was the first of its kind, a groundbreaking project, they wanted to show off their craftsmanship, and create an eye-catching pigeon cote that would have passers-by purring with admiration.

Sure enough Xiawang's pigeon cote became a

landmark in this small town.

It was worth more than everything Qiuhu's family had put together.

Qiuhu was a good half a head taller than Xiawang, but when Xiawang was standing in front of him, he somehow felt a whole head smaller than him. And when Xiawang regaled the other children with stories about his pigeons, his eyebrows wiggling about all over the place, Qiuhu would stand quietly to the side and listen. Sometimes, while he was talking, Xiawang would roll his eyes and shoot a sideways glance at him, and Qiuhu would flinch as though a chill wind had blown over him. He would pull in his shoulders and turn his head away.

Qiuhu didn't get angry at Xiawang's cockiness. What was there to get angry about? Qiuhu's pigeons were special, and he had reason to be proud of them. Qiuhu wasn't jealous. If anything he admired them, and felt humbled.

Xiawang told the other children, 'Some people's pigeons can only fly in the sky immediately above the roof. You take their cages three *li* away – only three *li* – and they'd

never find their way home.'

When Xiawang talked about 'some people', Qiuhu knew he meant his family. And Xiawang was right: that's exactly how it was with Qiuhu's pigeons. You couldn't take them far and let them fly home like Xiawang's pigeons. Xiawang said they had one pigeon that could find its way home from over 5000 kilometres away, and Qiuhu believed him. Qiuhu might not be able to have pigeons like that, but he had been looking after pigeons for many years now, and he knew a lot about them.

Sometimes, Qiuhu found himself wandering over to Xiawang's to look at the pigeons, and as he was walking, he'd think up some reason for heading that way: 'I'm going to see a dog in a petshop in that part of town' or something similar. There'd be no suggestion in the way he walked that he'd planned to go and see the pigeons; it simply looked as though he was strolling along, passing by. And he would sing those nonsense rhymes that he knew, though he couldn't remember where from:

*When the moon was full, he sold the dog*

*And paid in silver for a bottle of grog*

*At every step*

*He took a sip*

*Filled with regret,*

*He could never forget.*

He'd walk along, singing to himself, until Xiawang's house came into view. Not wanting Xiawang to see him, he'd dart into a side street, from where, if he poked his head around for a bit, he could find a good view of Xiawang's pigeon cote.

Xiawang's pigeon cote was raised up on four tall posts like a little palace towering in the sky. It had doors and windows and a long ladder to climb up. Inside there were dozens of compartments, little homes for the pigeons. The pigeons were free to fly in and out. Some stayed inside, some stayed outside. Some of the ones that went outside perched on the roof of the pigeon cote or on the roof of the house. And there were always a

few pigeons walking about, or flying here and there.

The sound that Xiawang's pigeons made was not the same as ordinary pigeons. It was rich and sonorous, like the sound from a huge clay pot that resonates through your body. The individual pigeons looked big, with strong, fit bodies. Standing there on the ridge of the roof, against the blue sky and white clouds, there was a majesty about them. They seemed to know they were special. They were so still and serene that they looked like sculptures.

As Qiuhu looked at Xiawang's pigeons, he couldn't help comparing them with his own ones at home. By comparison, his pigeons seemed a bit small and squat, with none of the power and prestige that Xiawang's pigeons had.

Qiuhu would gaze at Xiawang's pigeons, and, appreciating every detail, would forget about the world around him.

Xiawang's pigeons were not like other breeds of pigeon that come in a variety of colours. Each bird was a single colour: some were grey, some were black, some were a

colour in between grey and black. The grey was a pure grey, the black was a pure black, and the so-called grey-black was actually a grey background with very regular black markings. Qiu hu knew that pigeons with this colouring were called 'raindrops', and that the fleshy ceres above their nostrils were bigger than on other pigeons and that there were fine creases in that grey-white mass. He could tell from the shape of their heads that they were intelligent and alert. Both the male and female had a collar of petal-shaped feathers that gave off the same blue sheen you see on high-grade steel, and it was especially bright on the male.

Every single pigeon captivated Qiu hu. He would watch, serenely, for hours.

One day, he was watching intently when someone patted him on the back. Startled, he turned to find it was Xiawang, who had appeared out of nowhere.

Xiawang looked at him suspiciously: 'What are you doing, standing here?'

'I... I'm on my way to ... to see ... to see ... a little dog,'



Qiuhu flustered, and hurried off to the petshop.

Xiawang watched him scuttle down the road, then went to stand where Qiuhu had been standing. When he turned his head to the side and saw his pigeon cote and the pigeons, he put two and two together. So that's what Qiuhu was up to, he assumed, and went home, curling his lip.

When Qiuhu went home, he looked at his family's pigeons. He could never forsake them. He loved his ordinary pigeons as much as Xiawang loved his special pigeons. He quietly acknowledged that he could only have pigeons like these, but they were still pigeons. He tried to encourage them to fly, but they didn't seem too willing, and would only circle a couple of times in the air before wanting to land. He longed to see them soaring in the sky, so he picked some broken bits of roof-tile from the ground and tried to keep them in the air. The pigeons finally realized what their master wanted and how stubborn he was prepared to be, and gave up any ideas of landing. They spread their wings and flew high into the sky. And the longer they flew, the further they were willing to fly.

Qiuhu looked up and watched them.

Some other pigeons saw Qiuhu's flock, decided to join in the fun, and flew up to join them. Then, another flock took to the sky, and another, until there were several flocks of pigeons circling in the sky above this small town.

Qiuhu felt that the flock that was flying so high and so beautifully to the south of the town must be Xiawang's.

He shifted his gaze from his own pigeons to the flock in the south. 'If only I had one of those pigeons...' he thought.

2

One day, Qiuhu was on his way home from school when he heard a bang. He looked up and saw a pigeon, out of control, hurtling towards the ground like a lump of mud. At the same time, he saw an eagle thrusting upwards,

and flying off high in the sky. He knew immediately what had happened: the eagle had attacked the pigeon and was about to swoop down and grab it, when Qiuhu had turned up and interrupted it.

As the pigeon was about to hit the ground, it flapped its wings to slow its descent. But it wasn't able to fly, and down it tumbled. It managed a vigorous flapping just before landing, and recovered just enough to land on its feet.

It landed twenty metres in front of Qiuhu. It staggered forward a few steps, then flapped its wings in a fluster, and tried to fly again, but it failed. It flew a few metres, then slumped to the ground.

It was a quiet little street, and Qiuhu was the only person in sight.

The pigeon seemed to have spotted him. It dragged its wing and struggled to walk. It tried a few times to fly, but without success. On the ground behind it was a trail of blood that had dripped from its wing, the same wing that had dragged along the ground as it tried to run. It looked

broken.

Qiuhu didn't rush over to the pigeon, but took his time, and approached it very slowly and carefully. He had already noticed that this was an exceptionally rare pigeon, the kind of pigeon he dreamed about – it was on a par with Xiawang's pigeons, and maybe, from the look of it, even more remarkable.

In fact, Qiuhu had never seen such a magnificent pigeon.

It was a black pigeon, so black that it seemed to be painted in black ink. Its claws and legs were a deep red colour. Qiuhu's eyes were sharp, and from a distance he had seen the ring around its leg. His heart raced when he saw the ring: it was definitely not an ordinary pigeon! The tin leg-rings were made and issued by a special organization, and only pigeons that had been examined and certified as exceptional could have one. Each ring had a serial number, which was the bird's individual registration number.

Qiuhu raised his hands to his chest and closed his eyes.

The pigeon kept falling over as it walked. Then, perhaps exhausted, or perhaps because of the severity of its injury, it stopped and lay on the ground, not moving.

Qiuhu kept still. Slowly, he lowered his hands from his chest, clenched them into fists, and inched himself forward. Then he broke into a run, and went for the pigeon!

As soon as the pigeon heard the movement, it flapped its wings. It ran a little way, and managed to get off the ground, but flew only four to five metres before falling to the ground again.

Qiuhu ran like mad towards the pigeon.

The pigeon flapped its wings as though its life depended on it, whipping up clouds of dust behind it.

Qiuhu's eyes were wide open, focused on the pigeon, as he ran closer and closer.

The pigeon paused for a while, then ran and tried to fly again. This time it managed to fly up to a boundary wall. But it was so slow that when Qiuhu leapt up and made a

grab for it, he almost caught it.

The pigeon had stumbled when it landed, and Qiuhu carried on jumping, trying to grab it. But it was too high, and he couldn't reach it. He bent forward, hands on his belly, panting and catching his breath, but he didn't take his eyes off the pigeon.

The pigeon knew that it was safe for the time being. It stood on the wall, and did not try to run or fly. But it was still terrified.

For a while, Qiuhu examined it at close distance. It truly was an exceptional pigeon.

There was only one thought on Qiuhu's mind: he had to catch the pigeon!

He took his eyes off the pigeon briefly to scan the street. He spotted a ladder by the door to one of the houses, ran over, and carried it back on his shoulder. The pigeon seemed to sense danger: it drew itself in and flew off again. It didn't fly far. It chose the nearest roof, and almost fell before reaching it. Qiuhu instinctively put his hands out to catch it. But the pigeon recovered its

balance and went scurrying up the sloping roof to the ridge. Qiuhu slapped his hands on his backside and sighed in disappointment.

Even on the ridge, the pigeon looked anxious. But, after a while, it seemed to realize that it was out of danger, and after checking every direction, it settled down into a squat.

There was a strong wind blowing over the ridge, and it ruffled the pigeon's feathers – Qiuhu could see that the black feathers were a grey-black colour down by the shaft.

The day drew on and the sky began to darken.

The pigeon was ready to go home. It started to fly, forgetting that its wing was damaged – and fell on to the roof. But the darkening sky and the evening breeze made it long to go home. It took off again, and this time managed to fly to the roof of another house.

Qiuhu followed it. He forgot about everything else and followed the pigeon. He wanted that pigeon with all his

heart.

It was a struggle for the pigeon, with its injured wing, to fly from roof to roof. When the street lights came on, it had already flown to the edge of the small town, and as the houses thinned out, the roofs were getting further apart. Although it was night-time, the sky had been clear all day, and the moon had come out early, and in the light of the moon and the streetlamps, it could still see quite clearly.

There was a large graveyard ahead.

The pigeon stood on the roof of a house, and hesitated. Should it fly?

Qiuhu was wondering if it would too.

The pigeon did fly, but it didn't have the strength to fly across the whole graveyard, and soon fell to the ground.

Qiuhu charged into the graveyard. In the grey dusk, he searched high and low, and eventually saw the pigeon, perching on a headstone.



He was careful not to startle it. If it flew off in this dim light, he might never be able to find it again.

He hid behind a headstone, and watched in complete silence.

By now it was just a black shape.

There were tombstones everywhere, of all different sizes. There was a light in the distance, but the graveyard itself was in darkness. There is something particularly eerie about graveyards, and Qiuhu felt scared. But at the same time, he also felt luck was on his side: it was so dark and so still here that the pigeon wouldn't fly off again.

He was right. The pigeon had no intention of flying off. It stood on the headstone for a while, and then slowly settled into a squat.

There was only one question on Qiuhu's mind: how could he catch it?

He was tired, so he sat down and leaned against a headstone. He wasn't looking at the pigeon, but working

out a plan in his head.

Finally, he made a decision: he would catch it in a net! He thought this would be the most reliable way.

Having made his decision, he quietly left the graveyard, went back to the lamplit street, and ran all the way home.

There was a fishing net at home. He took it, and ran back to the graveyard so fast that his feet barely touched the ground. He worried all the way: would it still be there on the headstone?

When Qiuhu reached the graveyard and saw the black shape on the headstone, he couldn't help patting himself on the chest. Quietly, he laid the net on the grass, and sat down. He told himself not to be impulsive, but to sit tight and wait until he was absolutely sure before casting the net.

He had to be patient. He had to wait quietly – for the pigeon to lower its guard, and fall asleep.

The small town became stiller and stiller.

The autumn wind rustled the dry leaves and grass in the graveyard.

As he was waiting, Qiuhu's thoughts wandered. He forgot about the pigeon and what he was doing in the graveyard. His mind was miles away, thinking about things that were totally unrelated.

All the other children were safely at home, but Qiuhu didn't particularly want to go home, and he didn't need to worry about anyone coming to look for him or calling out for him. His father was a hopeless gambler, and for all he knew was sitting at a gambling table, in some other dark place.

Qiuhu thought about his mother.

His father had been to jail because of his gambling, but what good did it do him? The very next day he was back at the gambling table. His mother walked out. What else could she do? She left Qiuhu with his father, and took his little sister with her. His mother told him she was too

little, and if she didn't take her, she'd starve to death.

The graveyard was no worse than home, thought Qiuhu.

And, of course, he thought about Xiawang, his pigeon cote, and his pigeons.

He looked up at the sky: it was a night sky such as is only seen in autumn – high and clear, with the moon and stars especially bright.

He hadn't eaten that evening, and there was a chill in the air. The graveyard was cold, and Qiuhu couldn't help shivering. He huddled up, then wrapped the fishing net around him.

The night grew deeper.

Qiuhu watched in the light of the moon – by this time the moon was already in the west – and he could see the pigeon resting perfectly still on the headstone. He was sure that the pigeon's eyes were closed, though he had no evidence to prove it.

The time had come.

He began, slowly and with the utmost care, to gather the edges of the fishing net in his hands, then he waited until he could throw it exactly as he wanted. He wrapped it like a scarf around his neck, and crept through the bushes, inching his way towards the headstone. As he crept forward, he kept stopping to look up and check that the pigeon hadn't moved.

When he reached the ideal distance, he held his breath and moved forward very slowly, gradually removing the net from around his neck. He took a long time – it seemed like a century before he stood up in the bushes.

The pigeon was right there in front of him, its tail pointing straight at him. He could even hear the breaths coming from its body.

He glanced at the moon, then roared and flung the net in front of him. It opened out beautifully, like a giant mushroom in the moonlight. As soon as it landed, Qiuhu heard the *gu-gu-gu* of the pigeon and felt the net trembling feverishly. It reminded him of the time they netted a big fish, weighing over ten *jin*, in the river outside town – it was the same kind of trembling.

There could be no doubt, he had the pigeon in the net.

He didn't remove the pigeon, but slowly pulled the net in, secured it with a big knot, put it over his shoulder, and ran out of the graveyard as fast as he could. The pigeon cried and struggled all the way.

When he reached the street, and turned on to the road that would take him home, there was no one else in sight.

It was so quiet and empty! His body rocked from side to side as he started to sing, in an exaggerated and distorted accent, which sounded more like a howl:

*One two, three off to market – A man goes to buy rice.*

*Four, five chimneys smoking – He brings the rice home.*

*Seven, eight bowls on the table – His rice goes in the pan.*

*Nine, ten sprays of flowers – He scrapes out the last spoonful.*

The shutters at a window suddenly swung open, and a

voice yelled out; 'It's the middle of the night, you idiot! Stop shouting!'

3

Xiawang often took a pigeon with him when he went to school. He would wrap it in a handkerchief, snugly enough for it to be comfortable, but without being able to move about. He didn't need a cage, just the handkerchief to carry it in this relaxed way to school. It looked easy, but it was not something that everyone could do. Xiawang's family had engaged a man, more or less permanently, to help look after the pigeons. This man had spent a lifetime looking after pigeons, and was an expert. He went to Xiawang's house every day, cleaned out the pigeon cote and put down new bedding for the pigeons to lay eggs in. When Xiawang wrapped a pigeon in a handkerchief, he was using a simple technique that the man had taught him.

Before going into the classroom, Xiawang would unwrap

the handkerchief, hold the pigeon in both hands, and gently release it into the sky. The pigeon, who had been used to this routine for a long time, would immediately spread its wings and fly off. Once in the sky, it would flap its wings noisily – flap! flap! flap! – perhaps because it felt free, or perhaps to say goodbye to its master?

Before raising the pigeon to the sky, Xiawang would make a show of tucking a letter inside its leg ring. The letters said things like ‘I’d like to eat red-cooked pork tonight’, or ‘I’d like to play out for a while after school.’ The letters themselves weren’t interesting, in fact they were quite dull, but Xiawang liked to do this in front of the other children. He made a point of telling them that his family’s pigeons had rings on their legs, that each ring had a serial number, that the rings were made and issued by a special organization, and that his family’s pigeons were not ordinary pigeons – their homing pigeons were also carrier pigeons.

Some of the other children had pigeons, and some did not, but all of them envied Xiawang.

One day, when Xiawang brought one of his pigeons to school in a handkerchief, Qiuhu, who had been



watching from the side, burst out, 'I have one of those pigeons too!'

There was a slight wobble in Qiuhu's voice.

Immediately, every face turned in surprise, and looked in disbelief at Qiuhu.

'I have one of those pigeons too...' With all those eyes on him, Qiuhu's voice went quieter, as though he were telling a lie.

The children looked at Qiuhu for a while. No one said a word. Then every face turned back to look at the pigeon in Xiawang's hands.

'You don't believe me?' muttered Qiuhu, 'well, believe what you like! But, I have one of those pigeons...'

This time, no one turned to look.

Qiuhu thought the children were ridiculous, but if they were ridiculous, then he was even more so. It was obvious that he had one of those pigeons, so why couldn't he speak up and tell them about it?'

‘I have one of those pigeons too!’ Qiuhu said loudly, compelling the children to look at him.

He pointed his finger at the pigeon in Xiawang’s hands. ‘I have one of those pigeons too!’ he said, righteously. He kept this pose for a long time, as though fixed to the spot.

Xiawang didn’t so much as glance at Qiuhu, but opened up his handkerchief. And while everyone was looking dubiously at Qiuhu, there was a loud flapping of wings in the sky. It was a loud, crisp sound, like someone clapping their hands in the open air.

The children turned to look at the sky.

The pigeon flew two loops in the sky above the school, then headed off to the south of the town.

As the children went into the classroom, in twos and threes, they whispered in each other’s ears:

‘What a boaster!’

‘His family’s so poor, how could they have one of those

pigeons? Do you know how much one of those pigeons costs?’

‘His father gambles. That’s how he lost his wife.’

‘That’s rubbish! Qiuhu’s mother divorced him, didn’t she?’

‘What’s the difference? Anyway, he can’t possibly have one of those pigeons!’

....

The next day, Qiuhu found a piece of cloth the size of a handkerchief, wrapped the pigeon in it and took it school. He’d known for a long time how Xiawang wrapped his pigeon, and had tried it out several times on his own pigeons. He wrapped it up, nice and neat, and very securely.

A child who knew about pigeons saw Qiuhu’s pigeon. He froze for a moment, then ran off and told the other children: ‘Qiuhu really does have one of those pigeons, and it’s stunning!’

The children hesitated, then ran over to Qiuhu.

Qiuhu waited until there was a large crowd of children around him, then lifted the pigeon up high.

The pigeon's head was so beautiful, the two fleshy ceres above its nostrils were almost as big as a broad bean, and around its neck was a collar of fine feathers, with a blue-ish, purple-ish, gold-ish sheen, and two little eyes as shiny as glass.

Qiuhu quietly held it up, and slowly turned around. He wanted all the children to get a look at his pigeon.

Written on his face was: Did I cheat you? Can you see now that I have one of those pigeons?

Xiawang shot a glance at the pigeon in Qiuhu's hands. One glance was enough to know what kind of pigeon it was. He didn't get angry, or jealous, but felt a little bit lost.

'Can it fly?' a child asked.

For some reason, Qiuhu's strong arms began to feel

tired, and finally, he lowered his arms and put the pigeon down.

‘Can it fly?’ another child asked.

‘Not at the moment,’ Qiuhu answered.

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve just got it, and it doesn’t know its way home yet,’ Qiuhu explained. Then he walked away, out of the school gate. He wanted to take the pigeon home. On the way, he felt so guilty. When he had found the pigeon it could still fly, but when he caught it in the net, it had struggled so hard that its wing had broken badly. Would it ever be able to fly again?

4

The news that Qiuhu had a wonderful new pigeon spread from one to ten, from ten to a hundred, and within a few days, it seemed to have spread throughout

the whole town.

When Qiu Shu, who kept pigeons in the west part of the town, heard about this extraordinary pigeon, he went straight to Qiuhu's house. But Qiuhu wouldn't let him see it.

'Do you actually have one of those pigeons?' he asked, patting Qiuhu on the head.

'Yes!'

'Then why won't you let Qiu Shu see it?'

Qiuhu didn't know how to respond. But, at that moment, the sound of a pigeon came from inside the house. It was Qiuhu's new pigeon, calling from inside a cage.

When Qiu Shu heard it, he nodded, 'So, you really do have one.' Qiu Shu understood pigeons better than anyone else in the town. He only had to hear a pigeon to know what breed it was.

'You know, I just want to see it. Are you scared I'll run off with it?'

Qiu hu hesitated, but in the end he still shook his head, and refused to let Qiu Shu see it.

Qiu Shu patted Qiu hu on the head, smiled, and walked off. But as soon he stepped outside, he turned back, and looked Qiu hu in the eye: 'Unless, of course, this pigeon has something wrong with it?'

They were devastating words for Qiu hu. His head hung low.

Qiu Shu went back inside. 'Let Qiu Shu take a look, eh? Maybe I can help.'

He followed Qiu hu inside the house. Qiu hu lifted the cage from the ground and handed it to him.

Qiu Shu's eyes lit up. He stared at the pigeon for ages, then opened the cage door, and pulled it out. He examined its eyes and nostrils, then opened out its wings and tail. He looked at it for the longest time, then nodded, 'This pigeon is magnificent!' Then he looked at the ring on its leg, 'Do you know where this pigeon came from?'

Qiu hu had only seen the serial number on the ring, and hadn't noticed its provenance. He looked at Qiu Shu and shook his head.

'It's written right there. Can you see? It's from Taiwan.' Qiu Shu tried to work out the distance from Taiwan, 'that's thousands of miles away!' I'm guessing that someone from Taiwan brought it over here and released it. To dare to bring it so far, and across the ocean, tells me that this pigeon's owner was very confident of its ability.' He had already noticed the pigeon pulling in its wings, 'I'm pretty sure an eagle got it. There's no way a pigeon like this would have landed in your hands otherwise!'

Qiu hu nodded.

Qiu Shu sighed: 'It's a wonderful pigeon, such a shame it's injured.' He inspected the broken wing. 'We need to get it flying again...' he said, but didn't finish the sentence.

As Qiu Shu was leaving, Qiu hu said to him: 'Please don't tell anyone it can't fly.'



Qiu Shu didn't fully understand why, but he had an inkling, and nodded.

From then on, Qiu Shu went to see the pigeon every few days, with admiration and sadness in his eyes. Then, one day, he said to Qiu Hu, 'Child, let Qiu Shu take the pigeon.'

Qiu Hu was a bit taken aback.

'Keeping it here isn't going to do any good. It's not going to fly again ... it will never fly again. And even if it could fly, you're not helping it to familiarize with your house. It's not as though you don't know about this kind of pigeon: you can have a pigeon for three to five years, and think it knows your house, but when you release it, it takes a while to fly, then off it goes to its original home. And you haven't found it a mate yet, so that it can lay eggs and have baby pigeons. There's not much point in keeping it here. I know you want to have a pigeon like this one, but do you really think this is a good way? This is a male pigeon, and I happen to have a female pigeon without a mate. I've no shortage of male pigeons, all pretty good male pigeons, but she's exceptional, and those males aren't up to her standard, and if they were

paired up, their offspring wouldn't be able to fly long distances. But this male of yours would be perfect! I promise, when they're paired up, to give you the first couple of eggs. If you let one of your pigeons sit on them till they hatch, very soon you'll have a pair of top-notch pigeons. And, if you raise them from birth, when they grow up, they'll only know your house as home. What do you think?'

Qiu hu didn't know how to decide.

Qiu Shu said: 'Just close your eyes and think about it. When you have two of those pigeons, who knows, you could carry on breeding, one nest after another, and after a few years, who knows, you could be the pigeon king of this town. That classmate of yours, Xiawang, well...!'

Qiu hu agreed immediately.

Qiu Shu pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, wrapped the pigeon in it, and put it inside his jacket: 'I won't tell anyone that this pigeon is at my place.' When he went out of the door, he looked back, 'Just wait for

those two eggs, eh.'

5

Three months later, Qiu Shu brought two pigeon's eggs for Qiuhu in a little cardboard box, packed with sawdust.

'Such a fine pair of pigeons!' said Qiu Shu. 'I want them to have lots of little pigeons! Here are the eggs I promised you. The hen laid two, and I took both, but she'll another pair of eggs in the next few days. If I let them hatch at my place, I'd have to wait longer for her to lay the next pair. So I've brought them for you now. When the eggs hatch, you'll have to look after the squabs yourself. If I looked after them myself and gave them to you when they were grown, they wouldn't think of your place as home. You'll need to find a pair of your pigeons that are broody, and swap their two eggs for these ones.'

Qiuhu had a pair of pigeons with two eggs that were due

to hatch soon – the second egg had been laid two earlier.

After swapping the eggs, Qiuhu watched that pair of pigeons and the eggs with great interest. The pigeons behaved completely as expected. They took it in turns to mind the eggs and go out for food. The male went out early to search for food, and when he came back at about ten in the morning, he swapped places with the female, who had been sitting on the eggs all night. Then, while he sat on the eggs, the female went out for food. When she came back at about five in the afternoon, she took over from him. He went out again to, and came back when it started to get dark. Then he stood on the pigeon cage and kept watch over the female in the cage all night.

Qiuhu counted the days, and right on time, the eggs cracked and two baby pigeons emerged.

Qiuhu was so excited. Although his father went out gambling for days on end, and neglected his son, Qiuhu didn't get angry or feel hurt. With these two little pigeons, that would soon be the envy of everyone in the town, he didn't care about anything else. He was so

wrapped up in this joy that he almost forgot his father existed.

A few days later, Qiu Shu brought two tin leg rings. He'd applied for them at the Pigeon Association, and their registration numbers were 0508 and 0509.

'Another week and you can take them out of the nest,' he said.

The sight of these two little fledglings was enough for Qiu Shu to be carried away by his imagination: when they grow up, they'll form a pair and lay eggs, which will hatch into little pigeons ... one generation after another ... and in a few years' time, I'll have lots and lots of pigeons like this, and they'll fill the sky ... I'll take them to races, and release them one by one, and whether it's 1000 *li*, 2000 *li*, 3000 *li*, it'll be my pigeons that fly home first ... I'll win first prize after first prize ... there'll be trophies on the wardrobe, on the windowsill, everywhere, and there'll be prize money time after time.

When Qiu Shu was imagining the future like this, his thoughts would always turn eventually to his mother and

sister. And then, his eyes would well up with tears.

After about seven or eight days, Qiuhu noticed that the mother pigeon seemed a bit distracted. She would go out to look for food, and not come home until late.

The father spent more and more time in the cage looking after the little pigeons, and on two occasions, it didn't even have time to go and look for food.

Very soon, Qiuhu noticed that a white male pigeon – he wasn't sure who it belonged to – kept flying above his house, hovering and spreading its tail over the mother pigeon, and making a lot of noise.

Although the mother pigeon didn't respond, when it was time to feed the little pigeons she stood on the roof-ridge and didn't move.

The white male pigeon was attractive, and its call was loud and clear. It circled the mother pigeon and called to her relentlessly, with a desperate heart.

Eventually, the mother pigeon nodded.

Two days later, she flew off with him, and never came back.

The father pigeon was left behind on his own. He fed the pigeons by himself. For the first two days, he put all his energy into finding food for the little pigeons. But on the third day, he flew out of the cage, stood on the roof-ridge, and cried out plaintively. He returned to the cage a few times to feed the little pigeons, but it was not long before he came out again. Eventually, in hurt and pain, he stopped looking after the little pigeons too.

Qiuhu was so concerned. He hurried to see the little pigeons in the cage, and discovered that one of them had died, perhaps from hunger or from cold.

Qiuhu started crying.

The father pigeon never returned to the cage.

Everything depended on Qiuhu now. He had to feed this little pigeon. It was his only hope. If this one died too, he would have nothing. Such a small pigeon could only eat very simple food. Under normal circumstances, the parents would eat first, and then feed their young with

the digested mush stored in their crop. Qiuhu knew all this. He had to be the pigeon's father now. He put beans and corn and wheat in his mouth and chewed it over and over, until it mulched into a paste with his saliva, and then fed it to the little pigeon.

For several days, he chewed non-stop.

Qiuhu put the little pigeon on a pile of cotton wadding. He fed it once before he went to school, came home at lunch time and fed it again. He fed it a third time in the evening, and a fourth time before he went to bed.

The little pigeon survived, and grew fast.

When its feathers started to grow, its pink fleshy body began to turn black. It recognised Qiuhu, and whenever it saw him, would call out and waddle over to him.

In no time at all, it seemed, it became a fully fledged pigeon.

She was a female pigeon, and was the spitting image of her father. But whereas her father's broken wing meant that he no longer took to the sky, she had a pair of



young, strong wings, and the blue sky was calling her. She was already flapping her wings, preparing to fly.

She had bonded with Qiuhu. She was always thrilled to see him, and when Qiuhu left for school, she would rush all over the house looking for him.

Qiuhu could not stop thinking about her. In the evening, when he went to bed, she would perch on his headboard.

Qiuhu chose a name for her: Feng, which means 'Phoenix'.

It was his little sister's name...

6

It was breathtaking to see Feng fly for the first time. She loved being up in the air! She flapped her wings so beautifully, and flew straight up, as though heading deep into the clouds. Qiuhu couldn't help feeling a bit tense:

she wouldn't fly away, would she? She flew without leaving trace or trail in sky. Qiuhu grew more and more anxious. Then, just as Qiuhu was beginning to give up hope, she reappeared before his eyes – a little black dot that gradually came into focus. She flew around in the sky once, and then once more, not wanting to land, as though she had been waiting hundreds of years for this day.

Qiuhu couldn't remember seeing a pigeon fly as beautifully as Feng.

Eventually she landed ... on his shoulder.

Qiuhu felt her tiny heart beating. He reached out his hand, and stroked her back. He chided her affectionately: 'Who said you could fly so high and so far on your first flight?'

Qiuhu took Feng to school. He didn't wrap her in a handkerchief – he didn't need to. When he called out her name, she would fly over to him, sometimes staying up in the air, and sometimes landing on his shoulder.

At school, Qiuhu was the centre of attention. The

children hadn't noticed that it was not the same pigeon he'd brought to school in the handkerchief – they thought it was the same one!

Qiuhu stood very still, and Feng perched on his shoulder, also very still. Last time, the children had only seen the pigeon's head and tail, but this time there was no handkerchief and they could see the whole bird.

They were overwhelmed by Feng's shape and colour, and by her alert and noble expression. They stood there, watching quietly, without saying a word.

Qiuhu saw the look in Xiawang's eyes – he was captivated. Xiawang was an expert on pigeons, and he knew exactly what kind of pigeon was sitting on Qiuhu's shoulder.

Just before the school bell rang, Qiuhu put his hands around Feng and lifted her down. 'Go home now', he said, throwing her gently into the air.

The children watched as Feng disappeared and kept looking at the sky long after she had vanished from

sight.

Within a few days, the children concluded that although Xiawang's pigeons were all excellent pigeons, not one of them could compare with Feng.

Qiuhu no longer dreamed about having a flock of amazing pigeons – he already had a flock, and although they weren't of the same calibre as Feng, they were still a flock. His flock, plus Feng, was enough – he only needed one pigeon like Feng.

Qiuhu was content. Almost every evening he was home alone. His father was out every day, gambling until sky and land were dark, without a thought for his son. But Qiuhu didn't care, he had his flock of pigeons, and he had Feng – and every night, Feng stayed with him, keeping him company.

A year later, Qiuhu entered Feng in the town's pigeon race for the first time. It was a five hundred kilometer race, and she came second.

'You wait,' Qiu Shu told him, 'one day she'll bring you the trophy, and the winnings! To win second prize on

her first race... oh, the future looks bright, young man!’

Xiawang stopped bringing his pigeons to school to show the other children.

Qiuhu discovered that he was, in fact, a head taller than Xiawang.

A fortnight after the race, Qiuhu came home from school one day and Feng was nowhere to be seen. He looked everywhere, inside and out, and instinctively called out to her ‘Feng! Fe-eng!’, but he couldn’t find her. There was only one possibility, he thought, that she had flown too far. She must be out looking for food or playing with another family’s pigeons. He stood on the street, looking up at the sky, and waited for her to return.

Evening drew in, and there was still no sign of a pigeon soaring in the sky, just a few scavenging crows that had flown into town to sleep in the trees in the park.

Sparrows chirped noisily, their last commotion before settling down for the night under the eaves or on branches.

The sky was black now.

'Feng' QiuHu called, with tears in his eyes. He had searched everywhere, several times. He searched the same places again. When he was sure she wasn't there, he went looking for her in the streets in something of a trance. He kept calling her name: Feng! Fe-eng!, trailing off after a while, until it seemed he was talking to himself. By the time he went home the streets had been empty for a long time. Without stopping to take off his jacket, or even his shoes, he lay on the bed like a dead man. The night wind blew outside the window, and every so often, one of the sleeping pigeons would wake and cry out, then realise that it was the middle of the night, and stop halfway through its call. QiuHu slept, but so lightly, as though floating on water. At some point he heard Feng's call and leapt to his feet. Moonlight streamed through the window. But the bedhead was empty, and there was no sign of Feng.

QiuHu lay down, but his eyes were wide open. He started to miss his mother and sister again...

The next day, in the afternoon, QiuHu heard that his father had lost a pile of money, about 1000 yuan. While

Qiuhu was out of the house, his father had caught Feng and sold her to Xiawang's family.

Qiuhu ran home. He was so angry that he lashed out at everything, and it was not long before the whole house was smashed up. He went mad, yelling and screaming as he rampaged through the house.

When his father came home, he looked tired and drawn, and his head hung sadly. He saw Qiuhu smashing everything up, and kept to one side, out of his way. A old chopping board with a crack in it flew through the air, almost slicing off his nose.

When there was nothing left to smash, Qiuhu rushed out of the house.

His father called out after him: 'If I didn't pay them, they would have torn our house apart...'

Qiuhu didn't bother looking back. He raced straight over to Xiawang's house.

Xiawang's family raised pigeons, not only because Xiawang liked them. His father also liked them, really

liked them. He had had his eye on Feng for a while, and Qiuhu's father knew it. So when Qiuhu's father lost his money gambling, and there was no way of paying what he owed, and the people he owed threatened to tear his house apart, he went to find Xiawang's father.

Xiawang's father didn't need asking twice. He paid the asking price, and the exchange was completed within the hour.

Qiuhu arrived at the gates to Xiawang's house, and peered in through the crack. He saw Xiawang's father standing in the middle of the yard with two friends, admiring Feng.

Feng was inside a beautiful pigeon cage. Perhaps sensing that Qiuhu had arrived, she squawked and flapped her wings frenetically, desperate to get out. Fine, soft feathers were flying from the cage.

Qiuhu was so distressed that he pushed the gate open with some force. It wasn't locked, and swung open easily. He staggered forward a few steps, then rolled into Xiawang's yard, taking the men by surprise.

Qiuhu picked himself up. He rubbed his grazed cheeks,



and found they were bleeding.

The two guard-dogs rushed up to him, but he wasn't scared, and marched towards Feng.

At first, the dogs were confused that little Qiuhu ignored them, then they went for him. They were just about to bite him, when Xiawang appeared and, quick as a flash, grabbed them by the collar, one hand on each collar. They were big, fierce dogs, and Xiawang used all his strength to keep a tight grip on the collars. When they tried to leap forward, he jerked them back till their front legs were off the ground.

Qiuhu pointed to Feng: 'That's my pigeon!'

The two men looked at Qiuhu, then turned to look at Xiawang's father.

Xiawang's father was facing towards Qiuhu. 'But I paid 1000 yuan to buy it from your father,' he laughed.

'It's my pigeon!' shouted Qiuhu, charging forward. He wanted to snatch the cage out of Xiawang's father's

hands.

Xiawang's father turned round. He blocked Qiuhu with his back, and his two friends each grabbed one of the boy's arms.

Feng was squawking and struggling, desperate to get out of the cage.

Xiawang had not looked at Qiuhu once. He had his back to Qiuhu, and was leaning forwards, holding on to the dogs, and from time to time kicking them hard.

Feng was struggling so much she had lost the feathers from the top of her head. She was bald and bleeding. Qiuhu was heartbroken. He squatted on the ground, and gave up trying to grab the cage.

Xiawang's father quickly took the cage inside.

The two men spoke to Qiuhu: 'You're right, the pigeon was yours. But now it belongs to him. He didn't steal it, he bought it. Young man, you need to be realistic.'

Xiawang's father came back outside. 'I could give the

pigeon to you. But I'd want my 1000 yuan back. Bring me 1000 yuan, and I'll give you the pigeon – whenever you're ready.'

The two men, who were squatting on the ground beside Qiuhu, added: 'He's being reasonable. Maybe you'd better go home.' When Qiuhu didn't move, they grabbed his arms, one arm each, and hauled him up. Then they pushed and pulled him gently along, and led him out of the gate.

Qiuhu was sobbing quietly. He didn't put up any resistance.

'You can have the pigeon as soon as you bring me 1000 yuan,' Xiawang's father said loudly, 'I'm a man who keeps his word, as my friends here will confirm.'

'It's true,' said the two men.

As Qiuhu walked away, the two men closed the gates.

'That boy's father will gamble his life away,' said Xiawang's father, 'it'll be impossible for him to find the 1000 yuan to get this pigeon back. There's no way that

boy can find 1000 yuan!’

Xiawang had not so much as glanced at Qiuhu while all this was going on. When he heard the gates close, he let go of the two dogs, rushed inside to his room, plonked his backside on the chair, slumped his body over the table and burst into tears...

7

For three days in a row, Qiuhu did not go to school. And when he did go, it was clear that he hadn't been eating. He was so much thinner than before.

Xiawang stopped taking pigeons into the schoolyard, and stopped talking about pigeons too.

From then on, when Qiuhu was not at school, he spent all his spare time fishing. He would take a fishing net and walk out of town. There were rivers all around the town. He wanted to catch fish and sell them. He was

determined to buy back his Feng. He had looked after her since she was born. She wasn't just a pigeon, she was more like a member of the family, especially since his mother and sister were no longer there. But his father had gone and sold her. He might never get his mother and sister back, but he could get Feng back, he just had to earn 1000 yuan.

He didn't even question whether he, a child on his own, could earn 1000 yuan.

There was only one thing on his mind: to earn enough money to get Feng back.

He took whatever he caught to market to sell. He kept his takings in a clay cooking pot, which he hid under his bed. One day, he was so thirsty, and walked past a stall selling cold drink and ices. He longed to have an ice-lolly, and even took some money out of his pocket, but in the end he put it all back again.

Qiuhu didn't go back to Xiawang's house to see Feng. It had been so painful to see her that time, both for him and for her. It was better not to go, better to concentrate on earning money, and getting her back as soon as he

could.

It was taking Qiuhu a long time to earn the money. If he carried on like this, it would take him seven or eight years. But he wasn't worried, he would save it up patiently. As time went on, saving became a habit, and he almost forgot what he was saving for. He spent his time catching and selling fish, as though this was his interest now.

Gradually, he forgot about Feng.

Only occasionally did she fly into his dreams.

Qiu Shu gave him another two eggs. They were not from the same superb pair of pigeons that had produced Feng, but they were not bad pigeons by any means.

When Qiuhu's new pigeons started flying, Xiawang mysteriously stopped going to school.

A short time after that, Qiuhu heard the news: Xiawang's father had been arrested and locked up, because he'd been going round trying to raise funds for an enormous factory, luring people with the promise of high interest

rates, and had cheated almost half the town. His scheme was exposed. But it was not enough that he was led away in handcuffs, one morning hordes of creditors marched on his enormous house and cleared it out. Xiawang's family was left with nothing.

QiuHu felt very sad at this news. At school he kept looking at that empty seat. His concentration would slip, and whatever the teacher said blew straight past him, like the breeze past his ears.

Then one day, as soon as school finished, he walked over to Xiawang's house.

The huge pair of gates was gone, leaving an empty gap between the gateposts. QiuHu looked inside. The yard was empty. The pigeon house that was famous throughout the town was gone. And that large flock of pigeons? QiuHu could see three or four listless pigeons standing on the roof of the house, none of which was worth very much.

QiuHu was worried about Feng. He had already prepared himself mentally, and was afraid that Feng had been taken by the creditors. And he couldn't help

thinking that even if he had the money, he wouldn't be able to buy Feng back now.

Looking at the bleak scene in front of him, Qiuhu's eyes began to blur – he wasn't sure if the tears were for Feng or for Xiawang.

He was afraid of meeting Xiawang – what would they say to each other? So he walked away.

About a month later, Xiawang started going to school again. But he seemed smaller than before, and his eyes were less bright. There was a greyness about him. In class, Xiawang's eyes were open but there was no spirit in them. He was like a weary traveler sitting on a rock in the grasslands. In the past, when Xiawang went to school, he would wear a new pair of expensive shoes every few days, but now, he wore the same pair of shoes every day. His shoes were splitting, and his laces had snapped. The man from the bookshop set up a stall outside the school gates, and whereas in the past Xiawang would have bought a huge stack of books without even looking at them, this time he stood to one side, and fished around in his pocket, eventually pulling out a few coins. There was not enough for even the



cheapest book, so he hung his head and stepped aside.

Qiuhu kept glancing at Xiawang, and Xiawang kept glancing at Qiuhu.

Then one day, Xiawang waited for Qiuhu on his way home, and as Qiuhu walked past, said, 'We've still got that pigeon.'

'Feng?'

Xiawang nodded. 'When they came and took the pigeons, I hid her.'

Qiuhu gasped in surprise.

'I'll give her to you,' said Xiawang.

'I haven't saved up 1000 yuan yet, I'm a long way off.'

'I don't want your money.'

Qiuhu looked up at the sky, then turned his head and looked all around him: 'You can keep her.'

‘I’ll give her to you,’ said Xiawang.

‘I’ve got another pair due to hatch soon.’

The two boys didn’t say any more, and went their separate ways.

Half a year passed, and as autumn arrived, there was gold everywhere – the grass was gold, the leaves were gold. The sunshine did not dazzle as it had in the summer, but it was still very bright. The whole world glistened.

Qiuhu learnt that the Pigeon Association would be holding a race, a long distance race of 3500 kilometres. The race was sponsored, and there was a prize of 20,000 yuan for first pigeon to return home.

Qiuhu knew that it was too far for his two young pigeons to fly, but he still wanted to give it a try. He put the pigeons in a cage, and took them to the starting point. The workers checked the serial numbers on their rings, and registered them. So many pigeons had already been registered, and they were all cooing away. They were about to be transported to a place 3500 kilometres

away, and then released. Qiuhu looked at all these pigeons, and wondered how many of them would be able to find their way home, and which one would arrive home first?

He came out of the registration building, and went to the public toilet nearby. When he came out, who should he see but Xiawang! He was holding a pigeon cage, and was walking into the same building that Qiuhu had just come out of.

Qiuhu didn't call out to Xiawang. He went home. His mind was at sixes and sevens, and his thoughts were running all over the place.

He took the next few days off school, with the school's permission, and stayed at home waiting. 'There's no guarantee they'll be able to fly home' he told himself. But in his heart he was hoping for a fluke. While he was waiting, he kept thinking of Feng: would she fly back to Xiawang's house? She'd been living there for almost three years now; she had a new home. It was a bitter, sour thought.

Then, early one morning, when Qiuhu was still

dreaming, he faintly heard the call of a pigeon – but it wasn't one of his flock calling. He was so surprised that he sat up straight. He turned his head to listen carefully, and heard it again. 'She's come back!' He leapt out of bed, and ran into the yard.

He opened the gate to the back yard, where the pigeon cages hung on the wall, and heard the pigeon's call even more clearly. He froze to the ground, and started to tremble: it was Feng that was cooing!

He took slow careful steps forward. His legs were shaking.

Feng was in the cage! It was the same pigeon cage she had lived in before. After she'd gone, other pigeons had tried to sleep in it, but Qiuhu had shooed them out.

Feng seemed tense and unsettled, and when she saw Qiuhu coming closer, she looked ready to fly off.

'Feng...' Qiuhu called, 'Feng...'

Feng went quiet and looked at him, puzzled.

‘Yes, it’s me, Qiuhu! ...’

Feng took a few steps backwards, but he couldn’t help craning his neck to take a closer look.

She was so thin, thought Qiuhu, so thin she was almost skeletal. But her eyes were still sparkling. Perhaps it was because she’d been flying day and night for 3500 kilometres! He knew, of course, that pigeons can’t fly at night, but he felt she must have been flying at night – otherwise how could she be back so soon?

Feng seemed to know that she should let her master catch her, and hurry to let the race-people verify her return. She settled down, instinctively shook her wings, and cooed.

Qiuhu caught Feng, put her inside a pigeon cage and quickly telephoned the office in charge of the race: ‘No. 0508, a black pigeon, has come home.’

The voice on the other end of the line wavered: ‘Really? Are you saying that 0508 is home already?’

'Yes,' said Qiuhu.

'If this is true,' said the voice on the phone, 'then it's the first pigeon to arrive back. Please bring it to the office for validation. Be as quick as you can!'

Qiuhu picked up the cage and ran outside. But after running a little way, he started to slow down and then came to a standstill. He looked at Feng, and sat down on the curb.

Feng was calm in the cage, and occasionally cocked her head to look at Qiuhu.

The wind picked up and began to blow leaves all over the streets.

Qiuhu wrapped his arms round his head. He sat there for a while, then suddenly shook his head vigorously, leapt to his feet, picked up the pigeon cage, and ran as fast as he could down the road to Xiawang's.

Xiawang hadn't been to school either during this period. Qiuhu found him sitting on the threshold. Framed by the doorway, he looked so small and thin. When he

happened to look up, he saw Qiuhu running towards him, and slowly got to his feet.

‘Quick! Quick!...’ Qiuhu beckoned in the distance.

But Xiawang didn’t know what Qiuhu wanted, and stood there.

‘Come on! Hurry up!...’ Qiuhu beckoned him again, and indicated that he was going to turn round and run back the way he had come.

Xiawang ran over. When he saw Feng in the cage, he stopped, came over all stupid, and stood there blinking, as though trying to remember something.

Qiuhu ran over, and grabbed him roughly. ‘She flew to my house. Come on, you’ve got to hurry up!’

Xiawang was still stunned. Qiuhu kicked him, then gave up, turned round and ran on ahead.

When Xiawang finally came to his senses, he raced after him.

They ran shoulder to shoulder all the way, passing the

pigeon cage between them.

The autumn sunshine was so bright and clear...

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