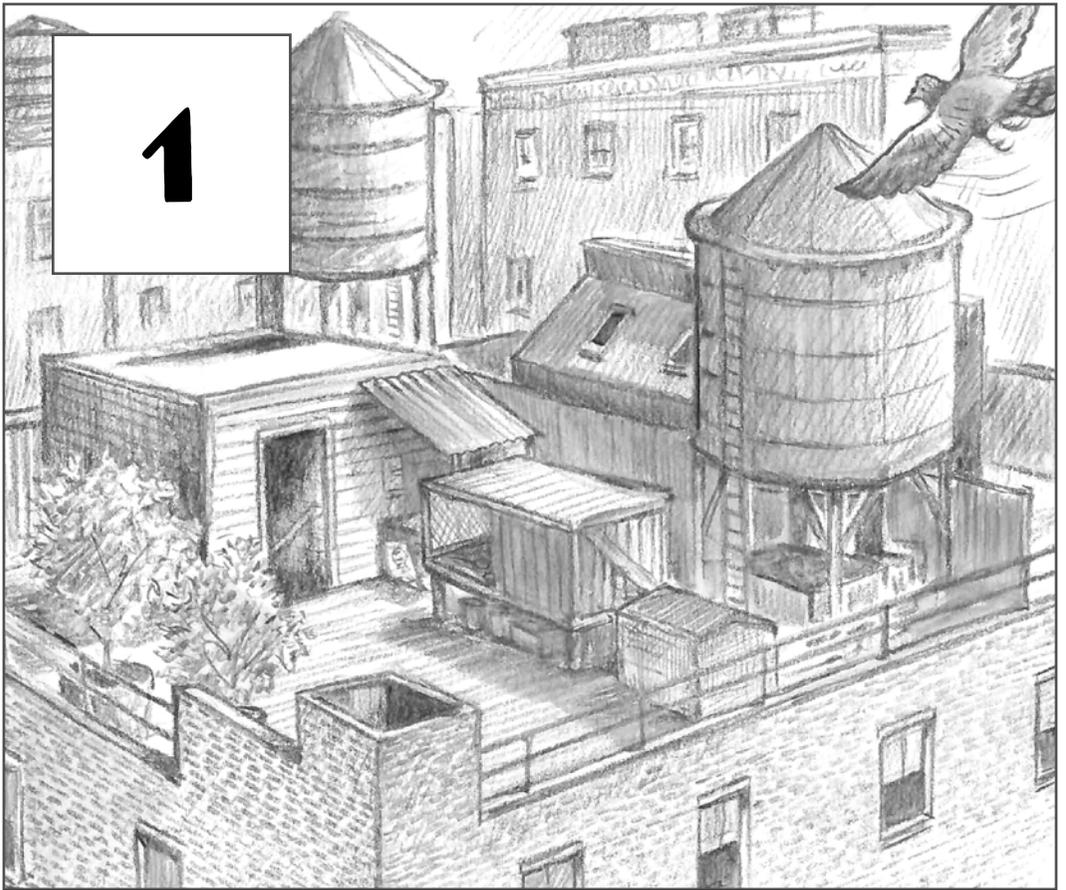


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CHAPTER ONE

At the risk of sounding clichéd, I'll tell you that the fog I was flying through was thick as soup. And not like consommé, more like cream of cauliflower.

I know...you're thinking just how would *I*, a typical homing pigeon, know about things like *soups*?

Because I pay attention, that's how! I read things. Every day, in the newspaper. News! Weather! Advice columns! Recipes!

But I'll explain that later.

Being a homing pigeon means lots of flying. Racing, then finding your way home. I can find my way back home through instinct alone, without any map or compass...just the one in my head.

And flying is serious business, especially in fog: I have to be careful.

I reduced my speed to 35 miles per hour, nearly half my normal racing speed, but even at reduced speeds things can loom suddenly out of dense clouds.

I veered left to miss colliding with the huge Bridgetown water tower. My wing tips were just a caterpillar's length away from the sides of the iron tank. *Close one*, I thought.

With the tower behind me, I looked carefully for a slate-covered spire. In a flash it was there: St. Marco's Church.

A starling gazed at me blankly from his perch on top of the lightning rod as I shot by. "Where's the fire?" he snickered.

I just ignored him and zipped past. When you're racing, seconds count.

I was really breathing heavily now. My pectoralis major was starting to burn. I set my beak to 7 degrees west of north and pitched quickly to the left, and just in time: the needlelike talons of a sharp-shinned hawk roared by, barely missing my chest muscles. I felt a sharp pain at my tail and an invisible push of air as I tumbled in space.

With no time to think, I maneuvered into a series of dives left, right, and down, and landed on a narrow ledge of an apartment building. I was hidden in the fog.

Two tail feathers—my own!—slowly drifted past. The hawk, once again a part of the gray mist, disappeared, disappointed.

“Luck was with me this time,” I whispered to myself. All three of my heart chambers were thumping wildly. I took a moment to cautiously look up, then down, left, and right...and then I took off again.

I passed over the tops of some trees, ghostly and vague down below. *Keeler Park*, I thought. *Getting close. But dang it! I'm late!* I knew my time wouldn't be great, thanks to being sidetracked by the hawk.

Soon I saw the familiar red-brown brick of home appear. It was a five-story apartment building. Humans lived inside, but I lived on the top. I could make out my owner Otto down below on the roof. Grandad was standing with him as usual, smiling.

I folded my wings, and with one final thrust I plunged beak-first from the sky, swooping to my landing platform just as the gray-shrouded dawn was turning into a golden, summertime sunrise.

Also as usual, Otto had the gold pocket watch at the ready. I heard him calling even before I landed. “Atta way, Homer! You made it!” He smiled proudly as he clicked a button on the watch. Otto always gave me a hero's welcome, as if I *were* a hero, not just another homing pigeon doing what I do best: coming home.

“How’d he do?” Grandad asked.

“Seventeen minutes! Last time was nineteen. Not your best time, Hom—Homer! Something happened to you! No wonder you’re two minutes behind your best time!” He picked me up and held me up to his chin, giving me tiny kisses, as if kisses would help me regrow tail feathers.

This was a little embarrassing, but Otto was prone to overreacting wherever I was concerned. Call it being overprotective. Or get mushy and call it love.

“Looks like Homer might’ve had a run-in with a hawk,” Grandad said. “And looks like it was a close one! But don’t worry, Otto. He’ll grow new tail feathers in no time.”

Otto looked alarmed. “Poor Homer,” he said. “Here: I’ve put down fresh newspaper, a little bit of cracked corn, and your favorite millet mix. Nice clean water. All for you.”

I heaved a big sigh and gazed gratefully at my rooftop world. It consisted of a large cage with three sides made of chicken wire and the back covered in wood planks to keep the north wind out. I had a cozy wooden box inside the cage to sleep in, lined with soft, sweet-smelling hay.

The cage had a huge swinging door that was almost

always open. Otto kept it closed with a wooden peg at night, to keep the occasional city raccoon from getting in and stealing my food. But most of the time I was a free-ranging pigeon. I could come and go as I pleased. I think Otto wanted me to have a little freedom, and he trusted me to return to my rooftop. That's one good thing about being a homing pigeon: we always know how to get back home.

I pecked hungrily at the food and gratefully let some of the water trickle down my throat.

Otto grabbed the pencil and clipboard that were kept hanging on a peg. I couldn't help but notice how he always beamed proudly as he carefully recorded my flight times. Even times when I was a minute or two late.

Grandad noticed the cage door wide open. "You know, Otto, you really should keep that cage door closed, 24-7," he said.

Otto gave me another gentle caress. "I know, Grandad. But Homer wouldn't like being cooped up all day. He can come and go as he pleases. He knows where home is."

Grandad gave a little grunt. "Well, he's your pigeon, Otto. Your responsibility. What happens to Homer is on your shoulders. Just remember there are things like hawks out there."

“I know.”

The two of them headed down the rooftop ladder. Otto gave me a wink. “See you later, Homer!” he called out.

I felt contented. I had flown well, I had avoided being ripped to shreds by a hawk, and now I had a crop full of cracked corn and millet.

I sighed and stretched my wings, then stepped across the freshly laid-out newspaper. Second only to a morning race, this was the part of the day I enjoyed the most: catching up on world events.

I usually started with the colorful pages. My favorite was a continuing story called *Dick Tracy* about a really smart detective.

Today Tracy was once again trying to foil some crooks. This time, some jewel thieves. The alarm bell over a store went *CLANG!* A voice bubble over Dick’s head said “*This is the third jewelry store looted this week! I hope I solve this one before the next store is hit!*”

I cooed contentedly. Dick Tracy was smart. He’d figure it out.

After I looked at the pages with the bright colors I began the serious stuff. I usually went from big headlines to smaller headlines, down each page, story by story. It

seemed like the bigger the letters, the more important the story, at least to humans. And sometimes that didn't make sense to me: a story about weapons got big letters, for example, but something about bird populations got tiny letters.

Anyway, I started my morning perusal of the news.

PRESIDENT OFFERS NEW BUDGET PLAN

Here we go again, I thought. Yet another new budget plan.

DRAMA IN THE MIDDLE EAST ESCALATES

“Enough with the drama!” I cooed.

The size of the headlines—and apparently the importance of the news—got smaller and smaller as I walked down and across the pages.

YANKEES SLAM RED SOX 2-1

MISS POWELL WEDS MR. MCGEE

So Miss Powell and Mr. McGee finally got married, I thought absently, glancing at the picture of the newlyweds. I remember their engagement photo. Gee, they look happy... but then again, they always put happy-looking pictures on this page.

There were the usual ads for things that humans buy, bargains on ladies' and men's shoes, and sales on lawn chairs and hot dog buns.

NEIGHBORHOOD STREET FAIR

The Marion Street Vendors Association is sponsoring a Street Fair this Saturday. Local shops will offer food and wine tastings, cooking demonstrations, and special discounts.	Various artists will be on hand. The band Mangled Scrunchie plays at noon. Fair begins at 9am, rain or shine.
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I thought that sounded pretty good. Especially the “food tastings” part. Nice way to spend a Saturday morning. And I bet Carlos would be there.