FLASH NONFICTION

Pigeons

by Ailun Shi



"Behind the Scene" by Rayoung (Madeline) Lee

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A pigeon squawks from under our table, its wings brushing against my legs.

Mother rips off a bit of her bread bowl, tosses it down under the table for the bird. Beside me, Alden throws down his spoon and slides off his seat so he can crawl under to greet the bird. I laugh and sip a spoonful of my clam chowder soup.

The restaurant is a cacophony of noise. Displays of elaborate bread designs, from teddy bears to alligators, are displayed behind glass panels. The November breeze has blown the leaves indoors. My family is dressed in winter coats, long pants. Mother has a purple scarf wrapped about her neck, thick enough to smother out the cold.

None of us finish our bread bowls. It's too much, too filling. The leftover food goes in the trash. The plastic cups, recycling. The trays I slide onto the counter; they land with a satisfying *clatter*. We head outside. I zip my jacket to the crook of my neck and hold out my hand. My brother's smaller hand slips into it without hesitation.

The San Francisco air is fresh though the faint smell of fish lingers. The sea breeze is crisp, cold, a stark contrast to the desert taste of Sin City. Tourist shops line the path. A few people are gathered in front of a store advertising oysters — a bid to find pearls.

Fisherman's Wharf is infested with overfed pigeons, and my brother chases them, hands outstretched. The pigeons aren't spooked, and they don't fly off. Instead, they flock, as curious about him as he is about them.

Behind us, despite my best efforts to focus on the peaceful ambience, I overhear a quiet argument between my parents about the shattered car window, about insurance and rental car policies, about following up with the crime report. Their voices carry, a dissonant constant behind me.

They stole her backpack, Father says. We should let her teachers know, just in case.

Mother disagrees. We have time. Let them have fun for now.

My backpack, now long-gone, was full of my notebooks and homework that would now never be completed. It's not something I want to dwell on with Monday a day away.

We step around the outside seating areas and street artists, following the pigeons, tracing their paths to the pier bordering the edge of the sea. The skyline is clear — unusual for San Francisco; this, I know. The sea glitters from the harbor where we stand to the horizon, blue sky reaching down to touch the waters.

Sea lions bask on the wooden planks in the sea, their mix of barks an unusual harmony. A sign proclaims PIER 39. A large sea lion pulls itself out of the water onto the ledge underneath the sign, forcing a smaller one off.

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I pick up my brother and set him on the ledge. He points out the sea lions, gabbing with incoherent words. The sea lions crawl over each other, sometimes slipping into the waters, their fur dark and sleek. Others lie still; perhaps they'd been there for hours. Their fur is sun-dried — a mottled brown. Patchy. The sea lions' skin wrinkles and bunches. Every so often, their tails thump the boards, the sound of flesh whacking against wood occasionally accompanied by their sharp barks.

I lean against the railing, my hands around my brother. We watch the sea lions, basking and swimming, singing and fighting. They are carefree, I realize, in a way that my family is not.

We've been here too long, Father says. We should go before they close.

Will they even give us another car? Mother asks. This'll be the second time we exchange it in two days.

We're not fixing the window for them. Father sounds impatient.

Let's head back, Mother decides.

The railing is rough against my hands, and I press myself against it, trying to enjoy the way the water seems to sparkle and the faint scent of salt.

Come on, Father says. He's moved to stand next to me, his eyes unreadable behind his black shades. There's an undercurrent of frustration and a hint of anger as he tells me, we're leaving, before he turns away.

I let myself linger for another second, two seconds, three. I breathe a sigh as I wrap my arms around my brother, setting him back down on the ground. We take one last look at those sea lions, their sleek coats gleaming under the afternoon sun. And then we turn our backs on them, walk through the wharf again. Alden follows the pigeons, chasing them down stairs and up, and we weave about the pier, tracing our steps back, leaving the sharp barks of the sea lions behind.

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