

An illustration showing a vertical sequence of events. At the top, a pigeon is on a roof. Below it, a person in blue pants and a black hat is climbing a wall. Further down, a person in a purple shirt and green pants is holding a net. Below that, a person in a yellow shirt and blue pants is holding a tennis racket. At the bottom, a person in a red fire suit is holding a fire extinguisher. To the right, a person in a green shirt and brown pants is running with a blue umbrella. Pigeons are flying and on the ground throughout the scene.

The Great Pigeon Caper

By Charlotte Johnstone

Forbearance's pigeon caper began several weeks after Myra Kinney's son, George, presented his mother with a telescope—a fine, shiny thing mounted on a tripod. Myra lived in a sixth-floor apartment in a high-rise building on the other side of a small pond adjacent to Forbearance's parking lot and, as George reasoned, now that Myra's 84-year-old legs prevented her from getting out much, the telescope would add a new dimension to her newly confined life. Myra, an avid birder in her former years would, he thought, enjoy a close-up view of the pond's ducks and other assorted wildlife.

For her part, Myra was delighted with her new toy and spent many hours zooming in on ducks paddling, ducks nesting and ducks being, well, ducks. After several weeks, however, ducks being creatures of habit and therefore pretty much the same day after day, her duck watching began to pall. She figured out how the telescope's swiveling mechanism worked and discovered that she could, without detection, peer into other apartments across her courtyard for close-ups of wildlife of a different nature altogether. It was a revelation, this newfound ability to watch people as they cooked, laughed, argued, walked around, came and went, dressed and undressed, lived their lives—better than a soap opera. And it wasn't too long before she branched out to watching the comings and goings of Forbearance's members, particularly one day when she saw a small group gathered in the church parking lot, peering up at Forbearance's bell tower, a modified structure holding one large bell within wooden fretwork framing.

What Myra was watching was, in fact, Rev. Hustisford and five members of the building and grounds committee as they discussed Forbearance's pigeon problem, namely the large flock of birds that had, in the last several years, elected to roost and roam not only in the bell tower, but also across the church roofs and its sidewalks, with the occasional and upsetting strafing of Presbyterians who, as a result, were having to visit the dry cleaners more often than usual. They also—the pigeons, not the Presbyterians—cooed and gargled incessantly and, should anyone—the Presbyterians, not the pigeons—be so careless as to drop a piece of Sunday morning coffee cake in the parking lot, the entire pigeon herd wheeled as one to descend upon the morsel in a gabbling, fluttering competition. One time, Muriel Cormack put a chocolate cake, intended for a Forbearance cake sale, on the hood of her car while retrieving other items from the back seat, and then turned to find a pigeon beak embedded in the frosting—an incident she found quite disgusting.

Something had to be done, the parking lot group agreed, but what?

Someone had read that fake owls and snakes might do the trick, but someone else said that wouldn't work. Mack Lungren offered his shotgun and shooting range expertise as a solution until he was reminded that discharging a firearm within city limits was likely a felony. Bright lights in the tower were mentioned, laser beams and high-decibel dog whistles were discussed, until Bert Somerset quite sensibly said that they would simply have to climb up there, clean out the space, and install some sort of screening.

Myra, meanwhile, had beamed her telescope into the object of all this attention and had become quite charmed by the pigeon antics she observed—so much more interesting than ducks. She liked everything about them—a daily show of strutting, whirling, pecking and preening—and if those Presbyterians out there were planning some sort of pigeon mayhem . . . well, she'd just see about that. A lapsed Methodist, who remained suspicious of all organized religious activity, Myra looked up Forbearance's number and placed a call demanding to know the intentions of the parking lot pigeon watchers, resulting in a thoroughly unsatisfactory answer from Forbearance's administrative assistant, who claimed to not know what Myra was talking about.

Then, two days later, when she saw a ladder being snaked up to the bell tower, she feared the worst—a pigeon massacre, a bird butchery, a squab slaughter. More calls were placed to the church—"Thou shall not kill" was invoked, along with half-remembered lines about sparrows and hair counting—but up the ladder went nonetheless. The day of reckoning arrived, with Bert and Mack and a few others assembling, fully armed with gloves, shovels, nets, hard hats, boots and, improbably, a tennis racket wielded by Ted Martin, whose previous experiences with bats led him to believe it to be quite useful in similar circumstances. Myra's telescope zoomed in on them all and what she witnessed that day was man against bird, an epic battle that she wouldn't have missed for the world.

Bert was first up the ladder, with Mack close behind, mumbling words of encouragement and admonishments to not look down. The pigeons, of course, went flying in all directions, several straight at Bert's head, causing him to flail distractedly and, losing his grip, to slide down into Mack, resulting in primal bellowing as the two men cascaded to the tarmac in an undignified heap. Next up was Ted, a man more round than tall, racket shoved into his generous belt, hard hat askew, only

to become stuck headfirst in the wooden fretwork for such a prolonged time that a particularly large pigeon, perhaps mistaking him for some sort of permanent gargoyle, landed on his backside and deposited its opinion of his efforts into one of his boots, after which Ted seemed to lose some enthusiasm for the enterprise. Bert, a leaner man, tried again, managed to get within the tower's confines and promptly slipped on the copious bird droppings, sprawling face down and subsequently unleashing unholy oaths that sought to consign all pigeons to the outer regions of hell.

Meanwhile, several of the others not inclined to ascend to the front lines, ran around the parking lot armed with butterfly nets, looking slightly crazed as they made ineffectual swoops at wily birds long accustomed to outwitting non-winged creatures.

And then Mack, impatient with the whole thing and generally fed up, fetched his gun from his truck, took a hasty shot at an errant tower flyer and nearly winged the now descending Bert, prompting Bert to once again lose his grip, Ted to wildly thrash about with his tennis racket in a panicky reaction, and motivating several other pigeon hunters to dive under cars.

Rev. Hustisford, hearing the gun shot, bolted out to the parking lot, waving his arms and shouting for Forbearance's men to cease and desist. "That's enough, fellas!" he yelled. "We need to rethink this. Maybe call in some experts. We can't have people falling out of towers and maybe getting shot!" As for Forbearance's hunters, they slunk home temporarily defeated, nursing bruises and scrapes, but determined to try again another day, unwilling to accept that birds described by Bert as "rats with wings" could possibly get the better of them.

Myra watched it all through her telescope and, delighted with the debacle, called the church office to crow that the day's score was "Pigeons one, Presbyterians zero." She intends to stay alert and has been vastly amused to see some of Forbearance's people sporting umbrellas on perfectly sunny Sunday mornings. Serves them right, she snorts, and if they try another pigeon eviction, she vows to call the police and report gunshots, whether or not someone actually shoots again.

I must remember to thank George, she thinks, patting her telescope. Presbyterians versus pigeons—so much more interesting than ducks.

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