‘An exquisite novel by a great new talent.’
M. J. Hyland



PIGEON

ALYS CONRAN



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Pigeon scuffs around the town, thinking of Gwyn, until the thoughts turn so smudged they're black like something burnt and ruined. When that happens, Pigeon starts peering in through people's windows, looking for light. He's a scavenger, a scavenger for comfort. Day to day to day, Pigeon drags his feet around his pebble-dashed kingdom. Non-descript, gloomy, at the wrong end of nowhere. Perhaps.

But below the grey domain of this hill, the patchwork fields stretch their expanse of emerald down, sloping to a silver sea of torn paper waves. And above, above the hill, there are the crouching mountains, with their lakes, like broken mirrors wedged between valleys, and along the tops of the plaited ridges there's that trembling, pencil-line horizon. It's worth a second look. Just briefly.

So here, here's Pigeon again. Here, grey. Just a sketch the boy. His face is sallow. There's a snarl at his lips, and his shoulders are delicate as eggshells. Pigeon, here on the hill, wanders the pebble-dash, pebbled ash, scuffing his feet up the hill, and then up between the houses.

Pigeon goes right up to the top of the hill. To where you can sit and look down at the town all spread out like a

handkerchief. Pigeon spits at it. He can spit a long way now, but still, the gob of spit lands on the grass just below him, and the town is still there. Pigeon sits on the hill, legs crossed, watching the day turning slowly. When his legs are cold through the school trousers, Pigeon stands, shakes out his legs and starts back down, for the town, the houses in their higgledey rows. He walks back into it. Into the pattern of the town, and scuffs along the streets between the shapes of the houses.

He stops at one that's off balance. It's skiw wiff. Crooked. Bits and pieces of it shoot out in all directions, like a peculiar, mangled space ship. It's Pigeon's house. Outside is Pigeon's shed. That's Pigeon's hole.

Pigeon avoids the house, and goes straight round to his shed.

Back in the good days the house was chaotic, a tangle of words and arguments, and conversations even, and even fun.

Like this very particular day, back then, in the house, in spring. It was her birthday, and Pigeon's mam had put on such a beautiful dress, and, in the dress, she was spinning and spinning in the kitchen, so that the pretty flowers on the dress streaked through the air, and a dish was knocked off the draining board by the spinning flowers on the dress. And that day she just laughed, that day, and her laugh, it was easy, like a soft breeze. So pretty, Pigeon's mam, like a ghost, but pretty.

Pigeon can remember that day. Pigeon can still remember, and he tells his mam about it, sitting on his bed in the shed in the falling night this Sunday. And she's quiet, but she strokes his hair as he lies his head on her lap, as he talks. And her hands are soft as feathers, so that Pigeon doesn't know if they're

there at all. Her hands are like fairies and so is she, so that she might disappear, fade, be taken somewhere else. Pigeon smiles at her, to keep her with him, and her hands stroking his hair feel a little more real, on the bed in the almost dark.

Pigeon keeps his mam there, and he's important, holding her hand now on the bed, smiling at her, and telling her about his day. And she asks him no questions. And he talks on and on, although she looks as if she doesn't understand, her grey look; the words evaporating away into the cloud of her eyes.

"At the bottom of the river there's a load of junk, Mam," he tells her in Welsh, painting a picture of what he's seen, the rubbish, the tipped, thrown-away toys and belongings clogging the river at the bottom of the hill, the things people have thrown away, as if they want nothing now, as if they need nothing.

Does she understand? Is she interested in him?

There are never any questions, never any explanations, but, as he talks, Pigeon feels her hand grow heavier in his, so he keeps talking until she kisses his hair, and it's time for bed.

Before He came, Pigeon's mam was a seamstress. She sewed, at home. She made dresses for other people. But now see the dresses, as they still hang in the dark lounge under plastic coats, like bodies, strangled. Underneath the plastic there are all the colours in the world: shiny, flat, soft, shimmery, see through, materials called beautiful names, chiffon, silk, satin. And Pigeon expected to see pretty girls in the dresses. Beautiful. But the ones who came to get them were always ugly, and never as pretty as his mam. No, never as pretty as she when she laughed. (Although it wasn't now so very often that she laughed.)

Before He came Pigeon was inside. Pigeon's bedroom was

upstairs before He came. He came bringing Cher and silence, and the shed.

When He first moved in, they got off to a bad start. Pigeon was sitting on the sofa, or rather he was draped over the sofa, lording over the room, his trainers kicked off, and strewn on the floor. He was reading a book. It was a book about aeroplanes. Back then that was what Pigeon liked, aeroplanes. Back then.

Pigeon's mam brought Him round.

At that time she still went out, at that freewheeling time still went for the shopping of her own free will, still took a bus into town. She had a friend, who she met once a week, to exchange dress patterns, have a cup of tea, talk.

Talk. Back then she did that too. Usually when she returned to the house, she'd come in through the back door. Like a lot of people they left the front door 'for visitors' although they never had any, and the ones they did, like Iola, came round the back too. So, usually, the front door was almost just a wall. Something that never moved, never opened. Pigeon sat upright when he heard a key turning in the front door that day. You knew it was trouble when it was the front. The police, the social worker, some kids playing pranks.

It took her a while to get her key into the lock, and even longer to turn it. Pigeon could hear her apologising, so there was someone there with her.

"I'm sorry. Oh, sorry," she said, fumbling with the key.

Then there was a man's voice saying "I'll do it. I'll do it."

And then Pigeon got to his feet, walked down the hall, and wrenched the door open, making the first crack in the door as he yanked it.

"O," she said.

"Oh," said the man.

"O," said Pigeon.

"Pigeon this is Adrian," she said in English

"Hi."

"What's your name again, son?"

Pigeon didn't like the way 'son' sounded.

"Pigeon."

"Hi Pigeon," He said. And when He smiled you didn't believe it.

"Can we come in, Pigeon?" asked his mam in English, smiling, motioning gently to the hallway he was blocking.

Pigeon wanted to say no. He wanted to say this is my house, no you can't. But he stepped back against the wall and let them pass.

The man went down the hallway making comments as if he was looking to buy the house.

"Nice location isn't it? Feels like heaven up here after the city. Clean air. Green views. I could do this. If there was work here, I could do this."

"What does He do?" Pigeon asked his mam. Walking behind them to the lounge.

"Why don't you ask me yourself, son?"

"What do you do?" Pigeon said without smiling.

"I work on the docks."

Pigeon didn't know what that meant, so he said nothing.

"How old are you, son?"

Pigeon shrugged.

"You'll be a bit younger than my daughter Cheryl I think. You'll like her. She's a lovely girl."

Pigeon didn't say anything.

He went back and sat on the sofa, he turned the TV on, loud.

"Pigeon," said his mam, and sighed a small, powerless sigh.

When Pigeon looked up at Him he was looking back at Pigeon, frowning. Pigeon turned the TV up two points, looked at the man, looked away and smiled to himself. You didn't let someone in through the front door, and then make them feel at home. And anyway Pigeon didn't like the way the man was looking all round the house, and saying "Nice light room this. This one could do with a splash of paint, love." He called Pigeon's mam 'love', but his voice sounded uncomfortable around the word. His hands were big, Pigeon had noticed that. They were the hands of a man who liked to limit things.

He started coming at weekends. He'd be sitting in the living room, on the sofa, when Pigeon came home. He'd be watching a programme He wanted to watch. He'd be getting Pigeon's mam to make Him dinner. He'd be telling them all things about the world. He'd not be listening to Pigeon's mam, nor leaving her space for an answer.

"Africa's a lost cause," He said, watching the black children with the empty eyes and round bellies. "It's just a useless country." He said.

"It's not a country," Pigeon said. "It's a continent."

"Same difference."

"No. There's lots of countries in it. Chad, Tanzania, South Africa." He'd got that from Iola's big geography book.

But He just looked at Pigeon, just looked at him.

What Pigeon didn't like was how his mam went so quiet when He was around. She was nervous. He made her feel as if everything was wrong. You could see it. It wasn't that He said so exactly. But He was always checking everything.

He checked the clothes she'd washed and ironed. Looking at each one for marks or creases. "Okaaaay. Okaaaaay," He said, going through the pile. When she brought out dinner, He'd look at his plate and just say, "Oh. I see."

"What's wrong?" she'd ask in that voice like a kid's.

"No, darling. Nothing." Then He'd hesitate, then hold her hand, look into her eyes, as if she knew nothing. "You just don't put parsnips with potatoes," he'd say. Or, "Too much gravy."

And then she'd say it. She'd always say it. "Sorry," she'd say. "Sorry."

You had to never say that word. It was like when a dog lies on its back, legs in the air, letting another dog growl over it. Sorry. She kept saying it. Sorry. And she got quieter and quieter, and He, He started to take her over.

Then He brought Cher for a weekend. Cher. She arrived through the front door too.

"Pigeon, can you carry Cher's case?" had been the first question. It was a pink suitcase. Cher was stood there, in a perfect blue dress. She looked like she'd come to the wrong house. Pigeon could see something else in her eyes. Fear. Pigeon took the case. Took it up to 'her' room.

His mam had asked him yesterday.

"Pigeon, we've only two bedrooms, and it's summer so, Adrian was wondering, if you'd mind us setting you up with a bed in the shed just for this weekend, so Cher can have her own room."

So this was the way it was going to be. Pigeon took his posters out to the shed straight away, his mobile of aeroplanes, all his clothes. It was better, when people tried to do something to you, to do it yourself, and worse. At school, when they tried to hit him, Pigeon'd punch himself in the eye, to stop them. They'd stare at Pigeon like there was something wrong with him. And now this was the same. People called it 'cutting off your nose to spite your face', but it put you back in the middle of things, so it was worth it. Even during the week Pigeon wouldn't go back to the house.

"You want me back? You'll have to get rid of Him," he'd say when his mam begged him. Why didn't she? Why didn't she? That was his mam, she couldn't make decisions on her own. She couldn't say no to anyone, or anything. But he loved her. Pigeon loved her.

She couldn't say no to getting married. In the photo on the mantelpiece, she wears a dress she made for someone else. She had to take it in. She's beautiful in it. But slight and pale. He stands behind her, holding her shoulders as if she's a steering wheel. In the photograph you can see that his hands are heavy. She looks at the camera, her eyes making blank lenses back.

Then He lost his job. They lost their house in Liverpool, and they turned up, at the front door, on a Tuesday in October. And after that it was all watching the house from the shed. It was all not being part of the house. It was all setting up a whole world in the shed. Making it into something big.

So tonight Pigeon's shed's like the moon. It keeps at a prudent distance. Pigeon's shed sits, watching from the edge of the garden, bent low and afraid. Pigeon's shed sits this Sunday night, as Pigeon curls on his bed, in the late night dull-mute dark of the hill. The shed is almost pitch. There's only the light from the house filtering down, and only the sound of the television in the off-balance house. The television's chatter echoes around the garden, and even into the shed.

In the house Cher and his mam are sitting still still still while He watches the television. It's important not to be noticed. Not to stand out. There should be no sudden noises. No opinions other than His own. There should be nothing but the news on the television, only these tears on the news, a house gone, a family, two children upstairs suffocated by the