

CHER AMI



YOLANDA FAYE HOLDEN

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My husband was a keen pigeon racer. I cannot stand those wretched pink-eyed birds. They give me the creeps.

"Iguba, the Zulu word for pigeon or dove, sounds sweet when pronounced by the human tongue, but its meaning is horrific," Tumi cautioned as she took down the laundry from the washing line – her one eye gazing at me, the other watchfully scrutinising the brick-and-wire structure in the back garden. "The word means 'slasher' or 'to slash something with a sharp instrument'". She clicked her tongue in disgust. "The bird is known as a bird of murder. When two birds tussle, they fight to the death!" The white sheets fluttered their wings in the morning breeze.

The house was always spotless, but she refused to clean the coop. My husband did it himself – devotedly and lovingly.

My heels are burning like hot coals as I kick my sandals into a corner of the bathroom. I rub my tired feet. They are swollen and sweaty. It was a long day at the office. I light a candle and run myself a bath. After the bath, I'll rub some cream into my feet and slip my toes into a comfortable pair of slippers. I have never had the luxury of an intimate foot massage, but tonight I won't let bitterness ruffle my feathers.

Through the bathroom window I have a full view of the loft where my husband spent most of his free time. He adored those birds and tolerated me. He fed them, groomed them and even washed their feathers and feet after each race.

"The Greenspotted Dove is known as a bird of mourning and a symbol of loneliness," Tumi continued the linguistic tuition while folding the laundry. When this bird sounds – *Do Do Do Do Do* – it is saying: 'my family is dead, my lover is dead and my children are all dead!' It is said that, if one heard such a bird singing, your whole family would perish." Her nauseating narratives made me despise them even more. Just for a moment the grey and russet structure towered like a blockhouse from a war movie.

We found him that icy winter morning in the dovecote – flat on his back and covered in poop – the birds perching on his body like white-clad medics seemingly trying to resuscitate their fallen Colonel.

In the seventeenth century, King George I of England decreed all pigeon droppings the property of the Crown and their lofts were policed to enforce the law. Pigeon manure was a precious commodity, as it was used in making gunpowder. Was my husband perhaps assassinated by his feathered subjects?

They are still out there – watching my every move. Bobbing and strutting. "Who-woo, who-who will be worthy to take his place?" they constantly call and try to lure Tumi and me into their lair.

Some nights I drift off to sleep, dreaming that two pigeons come flying down from the hazel tree and place themselves on the window-sill, one on the right, the other on the left, and remain there sitting. Watching me attentively. After a few minutes of just sitting

there, they fly into my bedroom, through the open window and peck out my eyes. I wake up amongst sweaty sheets – with a throbbing headache and the area in the centre of me forehead, between my eyebrows, burning like fire.

What could this dream mean? I have consulted my best friend, Google, and read books on dream symbolism, but the answers elude me. Am I too stubborn to see what is right in front of my eyes? Could I be blinded by unforgiveness and feelings of resentment?

Sliding into the bath, I immerse myself in the soothing water. The wetness covers my face and my head like a baptism. I hold my breath until my nose burns and my lungs seem to explode. The bath water splashes onto the tiles as I shoot upwards – gasping for air. Strands of wet hair cling to my neck and face. Water could nurture or destroy, cleanse or drown.

A wicked grin plays around the corners of my mouth as I reach for the soap dish. I use Dove with moisturising cream. As I lather the arms, elbows and legs of my thirty-something body, I feel comforted by my own touch as I always have. My hands briefly caress my breasts and nipples before they examine the handles on the bath, the twin taps and even the structures that support the towel-rail. As I dry myself, I discover a curious coincidence: life is lived in symmetry!

Noah guided humans and animals into the safety of the ark when the Flood turned ominous. Two of every sort, male and female, they were symmetrically led into the sanctuary of the ship.

My husband and I were always mismatched and dysfunctional. Now that he has passed on and I'm alone, I continue to feel lopsided.

Pigeons are monogamous and, unless separated, pigeons mate for life. During courting, the male puffs out the feathers covering his neck. He lowers his head and bows several times while he encircles the female. He spreads his tail in a display known as tail-dragging, and runs closely behind the female in moving her away from his competitors. Once paired off, the female puts her bill inside the male's beak. In this pose, the two birds move together in rhythm, bobbing their heads up and down. Thereafter, the female bends down and the mate mounts her – flapping his wings to keep his balance.

Pigeons have been known to live for more than 15 years. My husband was only 35 years old when he died. We had been married for five years. Why does my life continue to be unbalanced and why do I still miss him?

After mating, the male flies upwards in a display flight – clapping his wings together over his back.

Noah's dove was most likely a homing pigeon. The bird was sent out thrice. The first time it returned as it found no dry place on which to perch and the waters were still covering the face of the whole of Mother Earth. The second time it returned with an olive branch. (An olive branch is a symbol of peace.) However, the third time the dove did not return as its mission had been completed.

Down the passage a Nick Cave song is sounding:

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