

Maxine CASE
A short story

Homing Pigeons

Mr Peterson's body is small and wiry. People say that he looks like an angry, underfed rooster. His house is directly opposite Ma's. Although Ma and Mr Peterson have been neighbours for years, they are not what you'd consider friends. When they see each other, they greet politely enough; exchange the usual pleasantries, but no more than that. Ma says that Mr Peterson is not our class. When I ask her what she means, she just looks at me. But then again, Ma says that most people are not our class.

Mr Peterson had spent most of his working years toiling as a deliveryman for Sunrise Bakery. Every morning he would get up way before dawn, long before Ma's chickens would stir. You could hear him whistling "Pedro the Fisherman" in the dark as he pulled his old, faded green Datsun out of his driveway. He would drive all the way to Elsie's River to collect his huge bread truck laden with basket upon basket of hot loaves of bread.

Whenever I saw a bread truck passing I would crane my neck, hoping to catch sight of him. I never did see Mr Peterson in his truck since his route was far away in "the townships". By the time I came home from school in the afternoon, Mr Peterson would be at his usual place on the long, wooden bench on his *stoep*, sucking on his pipe, sipping his tea sweetened with Gold Cross condensed milk from his saucer.

Yes, he knew very well that Gold Cross cost a little more, but it was the one luxury he afforded himself. And so Mr Peterson sat on his *stoep* and watched the world pass by, every afternoon until five o'clock when Mrs Peterson summoned him to the supper table. On weekends Mr Peterson drove brides in their wedding cars. The extra money Mr Peterson made from the weddings he saved separately in a special account at the Post Office. Everyone knew that he was saving this money so that he could go overseas one day.

According to Ma, Mr Peterson didn't have many expenses as he had inherited his house from his late father. "Now there was a gentleman," Ma would say, "so unlike his son!"

"What do you mean Ma?" I'd ask.

"His father fought in the war," Ma would answer with a faraway look in her eyes. "In Italy. Some people say that he had a woman there. A *white* woman, mind you! Some people say that she had a child from him. A little boy."

"Really Ma?" I'd ask; thrilled every time I was privy to grown up secrets. But she would not tell any more than that.

Maybe Mr Peterson was saving so he could go to Italy to find his little brother, I mused.

Still, I thought it ironic that Mr Peterson would fly all the way to Italy to find a brother when his sister lived right next door and they had not spoken to each other for years. The funny thing about their fall-out is that no one can remember what it was all about in the first place. No one can remember a time when they were on speaking terms though. Only a low wall separates the two houses, yet it is never breached. Mr Peterson does not allow his wife and children to greet his sister and her family, which is really pathetic, according to Ma as the two families still attend the same church in which their parents married and in which they were both baptised. "... and that is not the way of the Lord."

Mr Peterson lives with his wife Mavis, his daughter Lizzie and his son Patrick. Also living in the house is Mr Peterson's mother-in-law, old Mrs Arendse. Ma says that Mr Peterson spends so much time outside the house because all the women gang up on him. We address Mrs Arendse, Mrs Peterson and Miss Lizzie as such, but Patrick is just Patrick. People say that Patrick is the spitting image of his father because he too is dark and thin and wiry. I think that Patrick can never look like his father since his face is smooth and not flecked with old acne scars like Mr Peterson's is. Also, Patrick is nice. He smiles and calls me by my name whenever he sees me. Sometimes he gives me a Mint Imperial out of the box that he carries in his pocket. Patrick is always sucking peppermints. Ma says that it is to disguise his breath because he smokes behind the bioscope. She says that it serves the Petersons right since they think they are so high and mighty.

By this, I think that she means that they are God-fearing. Very God-fearing. Our family does not attend church. Not since my mother fell pregnant with me and the minister refused to baptise me because my mother was not married to my father.

Mr Peterson's sister is Mrs September. She is a widow. Her husband died many years ago in a car accident. Her daughters May and June live with her. I call them Miss May and Miss June, just as Ma taught me. They used to give me Marie biscuits out of the biscuit barrel in their pantry whenever Ma sent me over with a message. On Sunday mornings before church, Mrs September plays hymns that wake the neighbourhood as the music cascades from her house. Sunday is the only day of the week that her front door is wide open. She fears that robbers, Moslems or black men will break into her house, so usually the door is triple-bolted against such threats. Her curtains too, are never open, except for a Sunday when the sunlight steams in as the gospel music streams out.

Once one of our Moslem neighbours complained about the loudness of the hymns, but Mrs September rightly countered that there was nothing that she could do about it. After all, did she complain when she was woken every morning by the *bilal* blasting from the nearby mosque? On this point both of the siblings agreed. Ma told me so. I thought that maybe Mr Peterson wanted to go overseas to escape the silent feud with his sister.

There is another sister. A legitimate one. Esther is the youngest child and the one with the looks, as Ma says. She lives in faraway London. Ma says that she left when she was very young. In those days if you wanted to go overseas you

had to go by ship and Esther left on the last voyage of the Union Castle. From this I surmise that she can't be that young after all!

Soon after she arrived in cold, "it rains all the time" London, Esther met a nice young man whom she married after a respectable time. "A *white* man, mind you!"

Maybe Mr Peterson wanted to go to London to see his sister. I had heard that not only was she beautiful, she was kind. Maybe Mr Peterson wanted to enjoy some sisterly kindness.

Not that he was a kind person. I'd greet him brightly whenever I saw him as I had been taught. Sometimes he'd reply with a forced, "good afternoon girlie." Most times, however, his reply was more like a snarl, "hernuff". The children of the neighbourhood knew better than to allow our balls to land in Mr Peterson's garden, which was not really a garden. It was nothing more than a bare patch of sand. Granted, a neat, meticulous patch of sand, but Ma said that Mr Peterson did not have the patience to tend a garden.

"When *old* Mr Peterson was alive, that garden had the tallest dahlias in the whole of Wynberg," Ma would say. "He used to give me bulbs to plant. That son of his," she said, gesturing in the direction of Mr Peterson sitting on his *stoep*, "dug up the garden after he died." With a cynical smile, she added, "Maybe he thought that it was a waste of water."

"Yes Ma," I agreed wisely.

Ma says that Mr Peterson is so rude because he is a miserable man. Maybe that is why he wants to go overseas where no one knows him and his ways.

It seemed that the only things Mr Peterson really had time for were his pigeons. He built a large, wooden pigeon coop at the back of his house. Every evening right after supper he'd go there to feed them.

Everyone knew that Mr Peterson hoped to race his pigeons one day. Some evenings my uncle Edgar would sit with Mr Peterson on his *stoep* listening to his stories of winning a great pigeon race and of course his trip overseas that he would take one day. Through the lace curtain covering Ma's bedroom window, I would watch the two men in animated conversation as they discussed the virtues of the various breeds. And the perils and wonder of overseas travel, of course. We got most of our information about Mr Peterson from Uncle Edgar. When he came home after sitting on the *stoep*, Ma would start asking him questions until she knew all there was to know.

The rest of the neighbourhood was pretty much united against Mr Peterson's pigeons and his pigeon coop. They made the most horrendous cooing cacophony. And the smell if the wind blew in a certain direction, or you happened to venture too close to Mr Peterson's driveway! And pigeons brought rats into the area. Everyone knew that.

The only thing that interested me about the pigeons was how they would unerringly find their way home after Mr Peterson let them fly free to exercise

their wings. From our front yard, I would watch Mr Peterson anxiously scanning the sky as he waited for his precious birds to return. I would silently marvel at the precise "V" formation in which the birds flew as they returned to the roost.

Watching the birds soaring in the darkening sky, I wondered whether they inspired Mr Peterson to fly away.

It took years and years, but eventually Mr Peterson had scraped together enough money for his plane ticket. Our entire neighbourhood was ablaze with the news. It was all everyone spoke about for a long time. The night before Mr Peterson was to fly away, you would have sworn that he was a Moslem man about to go on pilgrimage to Mecca from the amount of visitors he received! Even Ma went over with a plate of *kollewyntjies*.

"How come Mr Peterson is going alone?" I asked Ma. After all, he was still married; his wife was still alive. It was most odd.

"Who knows what that man is up to," Ma said obliquely, but from the keen look on her face, I could tell that she too was perplexed.

"Maybe you can ask Mrs Peterson," I suggested.

Ma just rolled her eyes. I should have known better. It was not done to ask such personal questions. Anyway, most people agreed that Mrs Arendse was getting very old and someone had to look after her. That was probably why Mrs Peterson would not be accompanying her husband on his much-anticipated overseas trip.

Mr Peterson's destination was a bit of an anti-climax. It was London after all. The neighbours — Ma included — made unkind comments about this. It had to be that Mr Peterson was too cheap to pay for accommodation in a foreign country. He would be staying with Esther in London. And the gifts that people pressed on him to take to her! Some people say that under the cover of darkness Mrs September left a jar of her famous watermelon *konfyt* on Mr Peterson's *stoep* with Esther's name on it. Other people say that it was jam. I still wonder whether it found its way into his suitcase and arrived at Esther's in London.

The air was still and stuffy the day that Mr Peterson left. A relentless summer's day, but beautiful too. Ma said, "Trust Mr Peterson to go from the heat of Cape Town to the icy cold of London." Flowers and people wilted under the burning sun as all the neighbours came out onto their *stoeps* when Patrick drove his father to the airport. We watched as Patrick hefted the heavy suitcase into the old Datsun. Smiled wryly when Mrs Peterson dabbed her ever-present handkerchief to her dry eyes. And of course we all noticed the slight twitch of Mrs September's curtains as she watched the spectacle. None of us could believe that Mr Peterson was finally about to realise his dream. We had to see it to believe it. With a jaunty hoot from Patrick, they were on their way.

As the weeks passed, Mr Peterson in faraway London was soon forgotten. Things were changing fast in our country. PW Botha of the wagging finger had been forced to resign a few months before, to Ma's glee. His position was now occupied by FW de Klerk — not that it meant much to us, Ma pointed out. The "Nats" were all the same, she pronounced. Yet, now in the new year, there were whispers and rumours that Nelson Mandela, whom Ma said had been in jail for over 20 years, was going to be released from prison. Other people said that our country was on the verge of a civil war.

Then unexpectedly, it was discovered that there was substance to the rumours after all, when it was announced that several political parties were to be unbanned and that Mr Mandela was truly going to be released. Ma said that it was a pity that Mr Peterson was not here to share the exciting changes. He was a strong supporter of the government. He had gone around to the neighbours to try to convince them to vote in the tricameral elections a few years back, much to Ma's disgust.

Everyone was in a buzz the day that Mr Peterson was due back. Since I was not due back at college yet, I would be able to witness his return. I swept and reswept the *stoep* and Ma kept on delaying watering the front garden until it was quite late. We waited and waited. In those days overseas travel was an occasion and those lucky few who travelled were treated like celebrities.

We all wanted to hear about Buckingham Palace and Big Ben and of course whether he had managed to lay his eyes on Princess Diana, whom we all loved. What were the British really like and was it as cold as people said? Of course Mr Peterson was not the kind of man to share such stories with his neighbours, but we knew that eventually all the details of his trip would get around.

I went inside to answer the phone, so I missed it, but Ma said that Mr Peterson barely glanced at his neighbours milling around their front yards. Patrick opened the gates and pulled the car into the driveway, instead of parking it in the street as he usually did.

"Something funny's going on," Ma intrigued.

"Maybe Mr Peterson's giving himself airs now that he's finally been overseas," I suggested, disappointed that I had not seen him myself. All I had was Ma's word to go by.

It was Uncle Edgar who told us the story, told to him in drips and drabs over the weeks following Mr Peterson's return. Apparently the overriding ambition in Mr Peterson's desire to travel was that he longed to sleep with a white woman. Just once, and at any expense. Snowy white was what he wanted. As snowy white as he was pitch black. Actually, not pitch black. He was more blue — navy blue. "Blue-black" is what Ma thought and she said as much. When he first thought about his desperate need to experience a white woman, it was still illegal to do so. The immorality act was around and was strictly enforced by young, white policemen with flashlights. And there was Mrs Peterson and the church and all that. It had to be overseas!

Mr Peterson had heard stories of women who could be chatted up easily and who did not discriminate against dark, scrawny men with pockmarked skin. Yes, it was easy to get a white woman if you went overseas. The men spoke about it on his bread-route; they spoke about it at the pigeon racing venues; they spoke about it after their tournaments at the dart club. This was the wild yearning that fuelled Mr Peterson through the early mornings as he drove his bread truck. This was what got him through one weekend wedding after another. Visions of creamy white or pale pink pudenda with sparse or prolific blonde or red hair got him through the derision of the neighbourhood, the critical glares of the three women inside his very house and his sister's silent scorn. What man more deserved his ambition to come true than he?

And did it happen? "Sort of," Uncle Edgar said with a smile.

"It either did or it didn't!" Ma scoffed.

"Well, the rand is not worth as much as the pound," Uncle Edgar smiled like the cat that got the cream, "and when you convert rands to pounds, there is not much and you have to pay for these favours as if they are merchandise displayed in the shop windows."

"Did he or didn't he?" Ma demanded.

"All he could afford," Uncle Edgar said wryly and I'm not sure whether he was enjoying this or not "was a look at the goods — what after converting rands into pounds."

"A look?" Ma shrieked indignantly. "Do you pay to look too?"

"Apparently so" Uncle Edgar said slowly, twisting his moustache in his fingers. "Apparently so."

And so Mr Peterson still goes about his business, ever since he has retired from Sunrise Bakery. He spends his mornings walking to the end of the road and back. He still sits on the *stoep* in the afternoons, sipping his sweet tea from his saucer and sucking on his pipe. He still gets dressed up in his navy-blue suit and white shirt to drive brides around at weekends, although sometimes Patrick does it when the arthritis in his father's knees gets the better of him. And Mr Peterson still has the countenance of an angry rooster, unless of course a plane passes overhead. He rises to his feet and stands to attention as if in the army. He sits only when the plane has passed. People say he is going mad.

The pigeons? The pigeons, yes. Some he sold; some he gave away; some died of natural causes. The pigeon coop is empty. These days the door creaks eerily in the late October winds that tease the Cape at this time of the year. The hinges have come undone. The empty pigeon coop is a dismal reminder of a dream that has ceased to be.