



# *The Letter O*

Jelena Borojević

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By Jelena Borojević

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Cover photo by Matt Hoffman

Mr Brealey hobbled through the familiar paths of his town park as he did nearly every morning. The park was deserted in these early hours, but he had a long habit of feeding the park's pigeons, and he did so as often as his body allowed him to. Unless it was raining. His bad hip wasn't keen on any adventures in the rain, and the pigeons didn't enjoy those gloomy days either, since wet wings are difficult to fly with. So, they made a mutual agreement to skip the rainy days, or at least that is what Mr Brealey believed. But he did come very often. Not because the pigeons actually needed to be fed, but because they were his morning companions, who ate the familiar man's food because their instinct led them to do so.

There was never anyone around to accompany Mr Brealey on his walk. Over the years he managed to convince himself that he preferred it this way. The silence became comforting, and it drew out memories from good times long ago. Memories that were beginning to lose their detailed images more and more each time they were recollected, as he strolled the park in silence. Complete silence.

His wife never understood his love for pigeons, but she remained supportive of his morning walks throughout the years until she passed away. The rest of his family seemed to have forgotten him altogether. The occasional promise of future visits was always accepted with a small nod in the telephone handset, even though he had learned by now never to expect a knock on the door.

But today, unlike so many of the other days, would turn out to be a little different, because the bench that Mr Brealey usually sat on to feed the pigeons was now occupied by a young man.

Mr Brealey approached the bench with a little caution, still intending to feed the pigeons from the same spot so as not to break his well-developed routine. The young man was wearing a suit and eating a poorly stuffed sandwich.

"Morning," said Mr Brealey. "If you don't mind, I sit on this bench every morning and I would like to do so today as well."

"Oh, sure!" said the young man, and moved to the other side of the bench so that the old man could sit down. Mr Brealey took his usual seat, although a little more to the left, removed his hat, and prepared the plastic bag of seeds for the pigeons.

He glanced around and was disappointed to find that the pigeons hadn't

immediately come to his bench as they usually did. They huddled together in the trees, and were giving the young man weary sideways looks, much the same as the look on Mr Brealey's face. He could see them eyeing up the seed bag from a safe height, but none would yet dare to approach. As is the case with most of life's adventures, it always takes one silly bird to jump into potential danger first before everyone else follows suit. Mr Brealey wasn't happy about this, but there was no good reason to ask the young fellow to leave. Benches have an awful trait of attracting unwanted company, and no freedom of getting rid of said company if they prove to be disappointing.

"So, what is the name of the fellow who is scaring my pigeons?"

The young man didn't expect a conversation to start between the two, although old people had a habit of freely starting conversations without being prompted to do so, and he certainly wasn't expecting it to start in the middle of a sandwich bite.

"Shom."

"Shom?"

The young man swallowed a dry piece of bread. "Tom."

"Oh yes, that does sound more like a real name when you aren't salivating all over it."

This is why he didn't like it when old people started conversations uninvited.

"And what's the name of the man who interrupted my salivating and sitting alone on my bench, contemplating life?"

Mr Brealey looked at the young man and thought him a little scruffy, a little rude, and in perfect sync with his ego. A 21st century child.

"Martin. But I am too old to be called that, so you can call me Mr Brealey."

"I am not scaring your pigeons Mr Brealey. I don't even know which pigeons you are referring to."

"The ones in the trees and around this park. I want to feed them but your presence is making them uncomfortable."

"Your presence is starting to make me uncomfortable Mr Brealey."

"Oh! Quick with your wits are yah? Someone sits next to you and suddenly your whole world falls apart. What will the old man do? Why is he speaking to me? What is that smell? Why didn't he choose another bench?"

Tom decided against continuing a conversation with someone who did

indeed introduce an aroma of old tobacco and even older books to their cramped little bench. So, he continued to eat his sandwich in silence, and wondered how sharp a pigeon's sense of smell is.

"How long will that sandwich be keeping us company? Perhaps an hour at most?"

Tom didn't understand why the old man insisted on continuing this uncomfortable conversation, but since ignoring him would be even worse, he decided to respond.

"Shes. Ish my brefasht."

"You know, you are making it very hard for me to hold a conversation with you with all that saliva. I will not wish to speak with you any more if you continue."

Tom swallowed a strange piece of salami.

"That would be great."

"When will you be leaving this bench?"

"Seven o'clock."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an intern."

"For who?"

"For the local newspaper."

"Ah."

Mr Brealey allowed another uncomfortable silence to fall between them as he kept an eye on the pigeons. Some were starting to come down from the trees, but none were yet brave enough to approach the two men or the seeds that were scattered on the ground.

"So you are sitting here contemplating life you say?" asked Mr Brealey. "What wondrous, magical thoughts sprout from your young little brain?"

"Mr Brealey, I do not feel particularly comfortable sharing my life story with a stranger. I would like to finish this poor-ass sandwich in peace without choking on it and then leave for work. Could you spare a few minutes of silence for me to accomplish that, please?"

And so Mr Brealey complied and kept quiet. Silence. Always with the silence. It had become a familiar setting for the old man, but in the way that a mouse sits in silent shadows; peaceful, yet waiting for a strike. But he granted the young man's wish nonetheless. For now.

After about a minute, the old man started producing strange noises from his throat.

“Ghhmmmmmm.”

Tom tried to ignore the sounds, but it seemed as if they were being made on purpose.

“Hmmmmmm.”

Don't react, thought Tom. Just eat the sandwich and don't react.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMM.”

“Oh fo' zh lav o'!!!”

“Why do you never swallow your food?!”

Tom swallowed a long chewed bite. “Why do you insist on talking to me?!”

“What's the first letter of the alphabet?!”

Tom fell silent and blinked in confusion. “What?”

“The alphabet. What's the first letter?” said Mr Brealey.

“You are insane!”

“What is it?!”

Tom stared at the old man in an atmosphere that was slowly starting to resemble a very bad elevator ride. “A.”

“Why?”

“I don't know why! It just IS!”

“Yes, but why? Why do you accept that fact so easily? If you said all twenty-six letters in different order would that not still be the alphabet?”

Tom squinted at the old man and wondered if it was indeed time to leave the bench and finish the sandwich somewhere else. But he knew that he was emotionally trapped. Too much time had passed, too many words were spoken. And now that there were clearly a few departed pigeons from the old man's head, he was sucked into a very uncomfortable emotional outburst. He found himself trapped in a bubble that would not pop easily. A part of himself was already left inside it.

“Ok look, Mr Brealey. I have this problem where I am mentally preconditioned to be polite and whatnot and I cannot just leave, ok?”

“That is not a problem, that is called courtesy. I wonder why you have immediately associated it with a mental illness.”

Tom stared at the old man with his hand hanging in mid air, interrupted during a flailing gesture. He blinked, and continued.

“I don’t like this, but I become very anxious when things aren’t following a certain track, certain rules.”

Tom began to breathe heavily and felt himself becoming a little dizzy. Anxiety was slowly creeping in.

“I don’t know why the alphabet is the way it is Mr Brealey. I don’t know.”

Heavy breathing.

“What I do know is that I like it that way. I like that everyone knows that particular order and that everyone follows it. I also like the fact that I have exactly one hour for lunch and that I always sit on the same chair and at the same desk at work. I like that my boss always arrives at 10 o’clock sharp, because I am emotionally prepared for his entrance into the office. I like schedules Mr Brealey, I like ORDER!”

Tom tried to compose himself.

“Don’t you like it too? You feed pigeons on the same bench every day, don’t you? Why wouldn’t you move to another bench and feed them? Pigeons can fly and they can walk, they would come to the other bench if you went to it. Why are you bombarding me with questions?”

“I don’t know! I don’t have anyone else to ask!”

Tom and Martin stared at each other, and the bench felt awfully crowded.

The silence continued, and neither one of them knew how to continue. Tom tore a small piece of his dry bread and threw it in front of their bench. A dozen pigeons quickly flew down and began fighting over the bread. Eventually they spotted the seeds as well and proceeded to wrestle for them.

“So... have you got a family?” asked Mr Brealey.

“Yes.”

“Close by?”

“No” answered Tom. “I moved out to get a job. Pursue a dream. All of that sugar coated crap.”

One of the pigeons, with evidently poor landing skills, had plopped in the middle of the bunch and used its wings to steady itself. To Tom, it first looked like a young pigeon that was only just grasping its ability to fly. But upon a closer look of his haggard beak, greasy feathers and wobbly legs, he realized that it was in fact a very old pigeon with likely very little time left, and he felt pity for it. To Mr Brealey, it was Old Spotty. An experienced old-

timer. A pigeon who had obviously made the most of its wings, and who was still eager to fight and to be part of the world.

“So how’s the dream going?”

“Oh fantastic yes. I will become a real journalist as soon as I finish washing every salivated coffee cup, filing and organizing every paper under the Sun, and when one of the elders dies. Hopefully not a nasty death, but you know. There’s only so much room and money for all of us to fit.”

“Hmmm. That’s quite the depressing view you have young man. Well, let me assure you that there will be plenty of awful, gut wrenching, heart attack causing events to come in the future! You have so much more depression to look forward to! Hoorah!”

“That is such an inspiring speech. You sir have made my day. I am now forever grateful for your presence this morning.”

“Ha ha ha! Ah, young man you know nothing of the world.”

“And you know nothing of privacy.”

Tom gave up on the sandwich and, to Old Spotty’s delight, began to use all of its dry goodness to feed the pigeons.

“My life has been a little too private lately”, said Mr Brealey, more to himself than to Tom. “It would be nice if someone bothered me once in a while.”

“Have you tried talking to humans instead of pigeons?”

“Oh I have indeed young man! But you see I seem to be too old to talk to humans. Or rather, too old for humans to talk to me. It took a whole lot to get you to say something.”

“That’s just because I’m having a bad day.”

“No. It’s not just because you’re having a bad day. It’s because you are on your own on this day, and on every other day. Because you are fighting with other people in your mind. Fighting for a promotion, for recognition, for friendship, for purpose, for love. Fight. Fight.”

Tom didn’t really know how to respond to that, but he was sure that the conversation would continue regardless of whether he participated in it or not. And it did.

“I feed the pigeons because I enjoy watching their simple, simple lives. Get the stick. Fly with the stick. See the seed. Eat the seed. Repeat. What other thoughts could they possibly have in those tiny heads? Do you think they understand anything beyond the rising and setting of the Sun? Do they

know when one of them has been run over? Can they feel the emptiness that follows the loss of one of their own? Do they even care? Sometimes I wish I was a pigeon.”

“Well... uhmm... I suppose that there would be... positive things to being... a pigeon. Why are we discussing pigeons?”

“You asked me why I talk to them.”

“Why on Earth did I ask that...”

The birds had already eaten all of the seeds that were on the ground and were now slowly starting to fly away on other business. Old Spotty was still hanging around on the ground in front of them. Still hoping that there were a few forgotten crumbs left behind.

“I wish people were more willing to help others,” said Tom. “To contribute to this world! To give up their time for others. We live in such a selfish world! No teamwork, no mutual support, just a constant battle to see who will float on top the longest. Such selfish people. No compassion. No empathy. That’s the problem! Empathy has died!”

“Empathy dies with the death of hope.”

Tom turned to look at the old man. His profile didn’t reveal much beyond his old age, but his eyes seemed distant, and trapped in another time. Certainly not one that correlated with the current time and space of their bench.

“What do you mean?”

“We all wish what you wish for, somewhere deep inside. This is no revelation. You have not conjured up a new idea. You have conjured up an echo. A mimic of other people’s thoughts; but no action, no bravery, no movement, just one copy of a thought.”

“I have a feeling that I should be offended by what you’ve just said.”

“If you are offended then you have found yourself in my words young man.”

The old man folded his empty seed bag with much precision and care, and Tom only now noticed that the same bag had been used many times over for the same purpose.

Mr Brealey continued.

“We are not allowed to be happy. Not in the sense of happiness that you are thinking of. We are not allowed to help others. Not on the scale that is needed for true change. When your own home suffers, there is very little

that you can do about the homes of others. They become distant, blurry. Strangers, trapped in the walls of their own miseries. Occasionally they come out to water some plants, offering a smile to the neighbour as a sign that they haven't forgotten them, and then return to their own anxious kingdom. You can help a few, for a short time. But with your detached attitude, your depressed view of life, your poorly-stuffed sandwich, your singularity, and your uncertain job, there is very little that you can do to help. So you lament on how beautiful the world would be if a brighter light shined on it. But you don't move, you fantasize. You yearn to succeed, and at the same time yearn to help. In many ways that concern our world, those two things have become mutually exclusive. Others will suffer for your success, or you will suffer for theirs. The world doesn't change because you are a good person."

Tom shifted his view to the old pigeon in front of them. Old Spotty hadn't moved for a while, but instead scrunched himself into a raggy little ball, and stared at Tom. In a bizarre sideways glance at the young intern, he seemed to be echoing the old man's words.

"There are many good people in this world, all waiting for justice to take over and punish the evil ones. But there is a crucial difference between the two. Evil knows how to hide, how to slither in shadows unnoticed, how to charm, how to tempt. It moves. The good shines bright, positive and beautiful, but remains still in one place like the Sun. Like you. The light reveals everything; the darkness next to nothing. We are drawn to it. We are curious creatures. Always have been. But curiosity and exploration have no limits, and no clear direction other than the one you choose to take. And we certainly don't all choose to go the same way in life."

He was convinced that he had a good argument going about the world and how awful it had become, or perhaps how awful it had always been. He was so set on being part of the change. Part of a new generation that would finally stand up for their rights and for the birth of a new, better world. But as much as he wanted to scream it all at the top of his lungs, there was no one around to hear him. Apart from one old man and one old pigeon. Silence.

He turned back to look at Martin. He didn't seem fragile. Worn out and a little rough around his edges, but not a weak old man. Tom noticed that his hands were not trembling because of old age. The old man's hands had no problem with delicate movements or coordination. They were not trembling because they had been used up. They trembled because there was rage inside

them.

In a mousy voice, with what little strength he had to defend his own words, “surely justice will prevail,” Tom whispered.

He was not looking directly at him any more, but he saw the smile crack on the side of the old man’s face.

“Justice, is a very subjective term.”

Old Spotty stretched his left foot and wing in unison, as much as he could, and stood on his wobbly legs to prepare for take off. The first little jump was not strong enough to begin his flight, and he plopped back down again. The second one was much better timed, and off Old Spotty went towards the grey sky.

Mr Brealey straightened his coat and placed his hat on feathery white hair.

“I suppose that will be it for today. I have done what I come here every day to do. And it’s almost seven o’clock as well. Off you go.”

“I could still spare about twenty minutes before I head back. So... uhmmm... if you do feel like talking Mr Brealey I would be happy to listen.”

“It’s not the actual talking that I miss son. It’s the presence. Not much use comes out of me simply talking, especially not to you young ones. Those who I grew up with and who I called my friends are now gone, and so is my lovely wife. Well, not even me telling you this is going to change anything. All that I lost I cannot get back, and they sure as Hell aren’t coming back from the dead. But what am I supposed to do until I join them?

You think you have problems in life. You think you don’t know what to do with your career, or whether or not you will be hired as a real journalist, but you have years ahead of you to think, to try, to make mistakes, and to start again. I thought the same when I was your age, but I didn’t realize that the greatest confusion about my purpose and place in this world would come near the end. You may think that the elders have done everything they ever wanted to do in life and that they now spend what is left of it bossing others around and lecturing them on how life once was. Limping around on badly healed hips, wisdom hidden deep in their wrinkles, dry eyes judgemental and slow to react. But the real question, the real heart-aching, gut-wrenching question, is what do I do with my life now that I am so close to the end of it? How do I live my days? Repetitively? Do I try something new? But I cannot try something new because I am in too much pain to do so. So what do I do?

What do I do?"

"Well you could... uhm... "

"Yes?"

"Well..."

"Climb Everest? Write a book?"

"No. Well... perhaps you could..."

"Yeeeeees?"

"Try... to..."

"Mhm?"

"Find... a... hobby... of sorts..."

"A hobby. Perhaps I should knit my way to the Pearly Gates?"

Tom shifted his weight.

"Well, is there anything that you would like to do? Something you haven't done before? I mean I don't exactly have much experience in life and I am not a particularly exciting person myself, but I'd be happy to help you out if I can. What can I do for you?"

"How do you feel about feeding some pigeons?"

"That I most certainly can. If I didn't choke on my own sandwich they probably won't either. Although I can't guarantee them a pleasant experience in either case."

"Jolly good! Why don't we continue this conversation tomorrow, young lad?"

And they did. And the next day. And the one after that.

But the new season brought change. Autumn turned into winter. The air became piercing, the people colder, the trees bare, and the pigeons hasty.

Tom sat on his side of the bench and watched as his bread crumbs merged with the snow, becoming soggy, cold and looking even more poorly than they already were.

"You know I was thinking about the alphabet the other day."

Old Spotty was evidently fighting his last winter. He tried his best to grab what was left of the crumbs. But every time he hopped for one, he would have to sit down to eat it.

"I don't know why it is in that order. If it had been up to me I would have chosen O as the first letter. I dunno I just think it has more significance than A. Reminds me of the Sun. The Circle of Life. The shape of a face. Just seems like a better introduction to the importance of the alphabet and the

human race.”

A cold wind pierced through him, and Tom had to clench his coat to stop from shivering. The sandwich had barely been touched. Picked at the sides to feed a few lucky pigeons, but otherwise uneaten.

“One of the elders died last week. Suffered a heart attack at work. The position is now open, possibly for someone else to suffer the same faith. I wonder if you think I should apply?”

The young man looked down at the old pigeon and watched his eyes barely try and focus on Tom. In his cuddled, shaky form, Old Spotty was not convincing in his ability to fly. But it fought with what strength it had left, hoping that its only source of food would be kind enough to unclench his coat and throw a few more crumbs its way.

“I don’t know. I don’t have anyone else to ask.”

Tom bent over his knees and began to draw the letter O in the snow with his finger. It was such an effortless motion, so natural to the human hand. Easy. No interruptions, no stops, no sudden strokes. He took his time, watching the snow part into the final shape, and noticed how his finger stopped at the same place where it had started.

Silence.

## About the Author

Jelena Borojević is a PhD Candidate of English Language and Literature, writer, screenwriter, and full-time professional editor. Her writing mainly focuses on the human condition, mental illness, childhood, and the impact of paracosms on adult life. She grew up in Athens, Greece, and London, the United Kingdom, and now lives in Serbia where she continues her writing and literary research.

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