

Aaron Kandell had come to Tompkins Square Park to roller-skate, for the streets near Second Avenue were always too crowded with children and peddlers¹ and old ladies and baby buggies. Though few children had bicycles in those days, almost every child owned a pair of roller skates. And Aaron was, it must be said, a Class A, triple-fantastic roller skater.

Aaron skated back and forth on the wide walkway of the park, pretending he was an aviator² in an air race zooming around pylons,³ which were actually two lampposts. During his third lap around the racecourse, he noticed a pigeon on the grass, behaving very strangely. Aaron skated to the line of benches, then climbed over onto the lawn.

The pigeon was trying to fly, but all it could manage was to flutter and turn round and round in a large circle, as if it were performing a frenzied dance. The left wing was only half open and was beating in a clumsy, jerking fashion; it was clearly broken.

Luckily, Aaron hadn't eaten the cookies he'd stuffed into his pocket before he'd gone clacking down the three flights of stairs from his apartment, his skates already on. He broke a cookie into small crumbs and tossed

1. **peddlers.** Traveling sellers of goods, usually on the street

2. **aviator.** One who flies an aircraft

3. **pylons.** Posts or towers marking the flight path of an airplane

Aaron's Gift

A Short Story by Myron Levoy



Myron Levoy was born in 1930 and, like the main character in "Aaron's Gift," grew up in New York City. As a boy, Levoy took many trips to the city library, where he learned to love books. When he was older, he took a job at the New York Public

Library and decided he would become a writer. Levoy went to college for chemical engineering and eventually worked as a successful engineer, but he never stopped writing stories. His novels and stories for young people have won honors around the world.

some toward the pigeon. “Here pidge, here pidge,” he called. The pigeon spotted the cookie crumbs and, after a moment, stopped thrashing about. It folded its wings as best it could, but the broken wing still stuck half out. Then it strutted over to the crumbs, its head bobbing forth-back, forth-back, as if it were marching a little in front of the rest of the body—perfectly normal, except for that half-open wing which seemed to make the bird stagger sideways every so often.

The pigeon began eating the crumbs as Aaron quickly unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. Very slowly, he edged toward the bird, making little kissing sounds like the ones he heard his grandmother make when she fed the sparrows on the back fire escape.

Then suddenly Aaron plunged. The shirt, in both hands, came down like a torn parachute. The pigeon beat its wings, but Aaron held the shirt to the ground, and the bird couldn’t escape. Aaron felt under the shirt, gently, and gently took hold of the wounded pigeon.

“Yes, yes, pidge,” he said, very softly. “There’s a good boy. Good pigeon, good.”

He broke a cookie into small crumbs and tossed some toward the pigeon. “Here pidge, here pidge,” he called.

The pigeon struggled in his hands, but little by little Aaron managed to soothe it. “Good boy, pidge. That’s your new name. Pidge. I’m gonna take you home, Pidge. Yes, yes, *ssh*. Good boy. I’m gonna fix you up. Easy, Pidge, easy does it. Easy, boy.”

Aaron squeezed through an opening between the row of benches and skated slowly out of the park, while holding the pigeon carefully with both hands as if it were one of his mother’s rare, precious cups from the old country.⁴ How fast the pigeon’s heart was beating! Was he afraid? Or

did all pigeons’ hearts beat fast?

It was fortunate that Aaron was an excellent skater, for he had to skate six blocks to his apartment, over broken pavement and sudden gratings and curbs and cobblestones. But when he reached home, he asked Noreen Callahan, who was playing on the stoop, to take off his skates for him. He would not chance going up three flights on roller skates this time.

“Is he sick?” asked Noreen.

“Broken wing,” said Aaron. “I’m gonna fix him up and make him into a carrier pigeon or something.”

“Can I watch?” asked Noreen.

“Watch what?”

“The operation. I’m gonna be a nurse when I grow up.”

“OK,” said Aaron. “You can even help. You can help hold him while I fix him up.”

4. old country. Term that refers to the country from which family members or ancestors immigrated to America



Aaron wasn't quite certain what his mother would say about his new-found pet, but he was pretty sure he knew what his grandmother would think. His grandmother had lived with them ever since his grandfather had died three years ago. And she fed the sparrows and jays and crows and robins on the back fire escape with every spare crumb she could find. In fact, Aaron noticed that she sometimes created crumbs where they didn't exist, by squeezing and tearing pieces of her breakfast roll when his mother wasn't looking.

Aaron didn't really understand his grandmother, for he often saw her by the window having long conversations with the birds, telling them about her days as a little girl in the Ukraine.⁵ And once he saw her take her mirror from her handbag and hold it out toward the birds. She told Aaron that she wanted them to see how beautiful they were. Very strange. But Aaron did know that she would love Pidge, because she loved everything.

To his surprise, his mother said he could keep the pigeon, temporarily, because it was sick, and we were all strangers in the land of Egypt,⁶ and it might not be bad for Aaron to have a pet. Temporarily.

The wing was surprisingly easy to fix, for the break showed clearly and Pidge was remarkably patient and still, as if he knew he was being helped. Or perhaps he was just exhausted from all the thrashing about he had done. Two Popsicle sticks served as splints,⁷ and strips from an old undershirt

were used to tie them in place. Another strip held the wing to the bird's body.

Aaron's father arrived home and stared at the pigeon. Aaron waited for the expected storm. But instead, Mr. Kandel asked, "Who did this?"

"Me," said Aaron. "And Noreen Callahan."

"Sophie!" he called to his wife. "Did you see this! Ten years old and it's better than

Dr. Belasco could do.

He's a genius!"

As the days passed, Aaron began training Pidge to be a carrier pigeon. He tied a little cardboard tube to Pidge's left leg and stuck tiny rolled-up

sheets of paper with secret messages into it: THE ENEMY IS ATTACKING AT DAWN. OR: THE GUNS ARE HIDDEN IN THE TRUNK OF THE CAR. OR: VINCENT DEMARCO IS A BRITISH SPY. Then Aaron would set Pidge down at one end of the living room and put some popcorn at the other end. And Pidge would waddle slowly across the room, cooing softly, while the ends of his bandages trailed along the floor.

At the other end of the room, one of Aaron's friends would take out the message, stick a new one in, turn Pidge around, and aim him at the popcorn that Aaron put down on his side of the room.

And Pidge grew fat and contented on all the popcorn and crumbs and corn and crackers and Aaron's grandmother's breakfast rolls.

But his mother told Aaron to stay away from those boys, or else.

5. Ukraine. Country in eastern Europe on the Black Sea

6. all strangers in the land of Egypt. Refers to the Bible's command to the Hebrews, "Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19)

7. splints. Materials or objects used to hold a broken bone in place

Aaron had told all the children about Pidge, but he only let his very best friends come up and play carrier-pigeon with him. But telling everyone had been a mistake. A group of older boys from down the block had a club—Aaron’s mother called it a gang—and Aaron had longed to join as he had never longed for anything else. To be with them and share their secrets, the secrets of older boys. To be able to enter their clubhouse shack on the empty lot on the next street. To know the password and swear the secret oath.⁸ To belong.

About a month after Aaron had brought the pigeon home, Carl, the gang leader, walked over to Aaron in the street and told him he could be a member if he’d bring the pigeon down to be the club mascot.⁹ Aaron couldn’t believe it; he immediately raced home to get Pidge. But his mother told Aaron to stay away from those boys, or else. And Aaron, miserable, argued with his mother and pleaded and cried and coaxed.¹⁰ It was no use. Not with those boys. No.

Aaron’s mother tried to change the subject. She told him that it would soon be his grandmother’s sixtieth birthday, a very special birthday indeed, and all the family from Brooklyn and the East Side would be coming to their apartment for a dinner and celebration. Would Aaron try to build something or make something for Grandma? A present made with his own hands would be nice. A decorated box for her hairpins or a crayon picture for her room or anything he liked.

In a flash Aaron knew what to give her: Pidge! Pidge would be her present! Pidge with his wing healed, who might be able to carry messages for her to the doctor or his



Aunt Rachel or other people his grandmother seemed to go to a lot. It would be a surprise for everyone. And Pidge would make up for what had happened to Grandma when she’d been a little girl in the Ukraine, wherever that was.

Often, in the evening, Aaron’s grandmother would talk about the old days long ago in the Ukraine, in the same way that she talked to the birds on the back fire escape. She had lived in a village near a place called Kishinev with hundreds of other poor peasant families like her own. Things hadn’t

8. oath. Serious promise, usually in front of a witness

9. mascot. Person, animal, or object chosen to represent a group symbolically

10. coaxed. Persuaded or convinced someone, usually through flattery

been too bad under someone called Czar Alexander the Second, whom Aaron always pictured as a tall handsome man in a gold uniform. But Alexander the Second was assassinated,¹¹ and Alexander the Third, whom Aaron pictured as an ugly man in a black cape, became the Czar. And the Jewish people of the Ukraine had no peace anymore.

One day, a thundering of horses was heard coming toward the village from the direction of Kishinev. *The Cossacks!*¹² *The Cossacks!* someone had shouted. The Czar's horsemen! Quickly, quickly, everyone in Aaron's grandmother's family had climbed down to the cellar through a little trapdoor hidden under a mat in the big central room of their shack. But his grandmother's pet goat, whom she'd loved as much as Aaron loved Pidge and more, had to be left above, because if it had made a sound in the cellar, they would never have lived to see the next morning. They all hid under the wood in the woodbin and waited, hardly breathing.

Suddenly, from above, they heard shouts and calls and screams at a distance. And then the noise was in their house. Boots pounding on the floor, and everything breaking and crashing overhead. The smell of smoke and the shouts of a dozen men.

The terror went on for an hour and then the sound of horses' hooves faded into the distance. They waited another hour to make sure, and then the father went up out of the cellar and the rest of the family followed. The door to the house had been torn from its hinges and every piece of furniture was broken. Every window, every dish, every stitch of clothing was totally destroyed, and one wall had been completely bashed in. And on the floor was the goat, lying quietly.

Aaron's grandmother, who was just a little girl of eight at the time, had wept over the goat all day and all night and could not be consoled.¹³

But they had been lucky. For other houses had been burned to the ground. And everywhere, not goats alone, nor sheep, but men and women and children lay quietly on the ground. The word for this sort of massacre, Aaron had learned, was *pogrom*. It had been a pogrom. And the men on the horses were Cossacks. Hated word. Cossacks.

And so Pidge would replace that goat of long ago. A pigeon on Second Avenue where no one needed trapdoors or secret escape passages or woodpiles to hide under. A pigeon for his grandmother's sixtieth birthday. *Oh wing, heal quickly so my grandmother can send you flying to everywhere she wants!*

But a few days later, Aaron met Carl in the street again. And Carl told Aaron that there was going to be a meeting that afternoon in which a map was going to be drawn up to show where a secret treasure lay buried on the empty lot. "Bring the pigeon and you can come into the shack. We got a badge for you. A new kinda membership badge with a secret code on the back."

Aaron ran home, his heart pounding almost as fast as the pigeon's. He took Pidge in his hands and carried him out the door while his mother was busy in the kitchen making stuffed cabbage, his father's favorite dish. And by the time he reached the street, Aaron had decided to take the bandages off. Pidge would look like a real pigeon again,

11. assassinated. Murdered for political reasons

12. Cossacks. Soldiers loyal to the Russian czar

13. consoled. Comforted

and none of the older boys would laugh or call him a bundle of rags.

Gently, gently he removed the bandages and the splints and put them in his pocket in case he should need them again. But Pidge seemed to hold his wing properly in place.

When he reached the empty lot, Aaron walked up to the shack, then hesitated.¹⁴

Four bigger boys were there. After a moment, Carl came out and commanded Aaron to hand Pidge over.

“Be careful,” said Aaron. “I just took the bandages off.”

“Oh sure, don’t worry,” said Carl. By now Pidge was used to people holding him, and he remained calm in Carl’s hands.

“OK,” said Carl. “Give him the badge.” And one of the older boys handed Aaron his badge with the code on the back. “Now light the fire,” said Carl.

“What...what fire?” asked Aaron.

“The fire. You’ll see,” Carl answered.

“You didn’t say nothing about a fire,” said Aaron. “You didn’t say nothing to—”

“Hey!” said Carl. “I’m the leader here. And you don’t talk unless I tell you that you have p’mission. Light the fire, Al.”

The boy named Al went out to the side of the shack, where some wood and cardboard and old newspapers had been piled into a huge mound. He struck a match and held it to the newspapers.

“OK,” said Carl. “Let’s get ’er good and hot. Blow on it. Everybody blow.”

Aaron’s eyes stung from the smoke, but he blew alongside the others, going from side

to side as the smoke shifted toward them and away.

“Let’s fan it,” said Al.

In a few minutes, the fire was crackling and glowing with a bright yellow-orange flame.

“Get me the rope,” said Carl.

One of the boys brought Carl some cord and Carl, without a word, wound it twice around the pigeon, so that its wings were tight against its body.

“What...what are you *doing!*” shouted Aaron. “You’re hurting his wing!”

“Don’t worry about his wing,” said Carl.

“We’re gonna throw him into the fire. And when we do, we’re gonna swear an oath of loyalty to—”

“No! No!” shouted Aaron, moving toward Carl.

“Grab him!” called Carl. “Don’t let him get the pigeon!”

But Aaron had leaped right across the fire at Carl, taking him completely by surprise. He threw Carl back against the shack and hit out at his face with both fists. Carl slid down to the ground and the pigeon rolled out of his hands. Aaron scooped up the pigeon and ran, pretending he was on roller skates so that he would go faster and faster. And as he ran across the lot he pulled the cord off Pidge and tried to find a place, *any* place, to hide him. But the boys were on top of him, and the pigeon slipped from Aaron’s hands.

“Get him!” shouted Carl.

In a few minutes,
the fire was crackling
and glowing with a bright
yellow-orange flame.

14. **hesitated.** Held back because of uncertainty



Aaron thought of the worst, the most horrible thing he could shout at the boys. “Cossacks!” he screamed. “You’re all Cossacks!”

Two boys held Aaron back while the others tried to catch the pigeon. Pidge fluttered along the ground just out of reach, skittering¹⁵ one way and then the other. Then the boys came at him from two directions. But suddenly Pidge beat his wings in rhythm, and rose up, up, over the roof of the nearest tenement,¹⁶ up over Second Avenue toward the park.

With the pigeon gone, the boys turned toward Aaron and tackled him to the ground and punched him and tore his clothes and punched him some more. Aaron twisted and

turned and kicked and punched back, shouting “Cossacks! Cossacks!” And somehow the word gave him the strength to tear away from them.

**Aaron thought of
the worst, the most
horrible thing he could
shout at the boys.**

When Aaron reached home, he tried to go past the kitchen quickly so his mother wouldn’t see his bloody face and torn clothing. But it was no use; his father was home

from work early that night and was seated in the living room. In a moment Aaron was surrounded by his mother, father, and grandmother, and in another moment he had

15. skittering. Moving in a jerking way

16. tenement. Urban apartment building, usually overcrowded and unsafe

told them everything that had happened, the words tumbling out between his broken sobs. Told them of the present he had planned, of the pigeon for a goat, of the gang, of the badge with the secret code on the back, of the shack, and the fire, and the pigeon's flight over the tenement roof.

And Aaron's grandmother kissed him and thanked him for his present which was even better than the pigeon.

"What present?" asked Aaron, trying to stop the series of sobs.

And his grandmother opened her pocketbook and handed Aaron her mirror and asked him to look. But all Aaron saw was his dirty, bruised face and his torn shirt.

Aaron thought he understood and then, again, he thought he didn't. How could she be so happy when there really was no present? And why pretend that there was?

Later that night, just before he fell asleep, Aaron tried to imagine what his grandmother might have done with the pigeon. She would have fed it, and she certainly would have talked to it, as she did to all the birds, and...and then she would have let it go free. Yes, of course. Pidge's flight to freedom must have been the gift that had made his grandmother so happy. Her goat has escaped from the Cossacks at last, Aaron thought, half dreaming. And he fell asleep with a smile. ❖



Aaron doesn't realize until the end of the story what his grandmother truly might have wanted as a birthday gift. When have you ever realized that a mistake you made turned out to be better for you—or for others—in the long run?

Analyze and Extend

1. Why did Aaron want to give Pidge to his grandmother for her birthday?
2. What does Aaron's reaction to Carl's invitation to join his group reveal about Aaron's personality?
3. Aaron falls asleep thinking his grandmother would have wanted Pidge to go free, and that Pidge's freedom was ultimately his gift to her. (a) Do you think Aaron gave his grandmother any other gifts that day? (b) What else might she have been happy about?

Expository Writing People are motivated by many different thoughts and feelings, and some are not always clear or obvious. Use details from the story to write a **literary response** reflecting on Aaron's grandmother's feelings about Pidge and why she may have wanted him to be free.

Lifelong Learning The word *Cossack* has different meanings for different characters in this story. Research the history of the term *Cossack* in the Ukraine. Who were the Cossacks? What did they stand for? What did they stand against? Based on what you find, what do you think was Aaron's grandmother's position in history?



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