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## Instinct Takes Flight

by Nick Barrett

Instinct is a marvellous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored. I'll tell you why I first started to think it's so marvellous. Pal of mine when we were schoolboys, Pigeon Paul we called him, spent more time with his pigeons than with people. Had his own dovecote on some waste ground, all tarred black on the outside, keeping it nice and dry inside for the pigeons

Paul's dovecote was a handy place for a smoke away from adult eyes, almost a gang hut, where we could keep stuff like the copies of Playboy that came our way, along with other treasures like catapults and rusty knives.

We always liked to be there when he was bringing the birds in for the night. He rattled his tin with the birdseed inside and they flew down from telephone wires, roofs and wherever else, a couple of dozen of them, a bit cagey at first but getting closer and closer and finally hopping in to get fed. Paul said feeding them made sure they came back each day. We believed him; Paul knew everything about pigeons.

He enjoyed answering all our questions, even the stupid ones we tried to catch him out with. Stupidest one I thought at first was Fat Eddie asking if the pigeons learned to fly from their parents or just copied the other pigeons, or just knew how to fly anyway.

Paul didn't answer straight away, the first time he seemed stuck. "I'll have to think about that," he told Eddie, who was pleased at being the first to come up with a pigeon question that stumped Paul.

I had forgotten all about it a few months later when Paul told us to come round after school and he would prove something about pigeon instinct.

He brought out a pigeon with what looked like some sort of ladies stocking top around it, preventing its wings from moving. "I've been conducting experiments," he announced. "This pigeon has never flown before, I've kept it like this since it was born.

"It's brothers and sisters all flew today or yesterday for the first time, and they could have been shown what to do by their parents or by watching the other birds. But this one hasn't even seen any birds fly since it was born. Watch this."

Paul pulled the stocking top away and held the pigeon in his hand just above the ground. The bird stretched its wings to their full extent and pulled them in again. It hopped along the ground, stretched the wings again, gave them a couple of flaps, brought them into its side again as if it had given up, stretched them out a third time and with a couple of stronger flaps it was away, flying, just as high as the other pigeons.

"Pigeons have an instinct for flying," concluded Paul, "that's the third one I've done that with. Aren't they marvellous?" We couldn't have explained why, but we knew he was right.