

JAIMY GORDON

Private T. Pigeon's Tale

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Private T. Pigeon's Tale

Everyone has heard how the adventuress J. T. Pigeon-Longshears returned in triumph from a nine-month challenge of her professed sexual unsusceptibility by the Fraternal Order of Curious Inquiries: you will recall that she allowed herself to be marooned upon the Fraternity's palm-dotted Antillean island reservation in the company of 19 tall, perfectly-formed youths of Obworki extraction, all naked, all sexually capable, and all quite unsullied by an ethical bias towards chastity.

Nevertheless, as you have heard, Pigeon-Longshears returned as she was before.

Certain of her remarks at the garden-reception where the senior members of the Fraternity received her on her return are not so well-known. We shall repeat them here. The adventuress was asked:

— How is it possible?

— Could you aim your question a little more narrowly, sir?

— You have frequently denied, have you not, Ms. Pigeon-Longshears, that you entertain any trace of the Sapphic preference?

— That is substantially correct.

— Then how is it possible for one of your sound and adventurous young parts so incuriously to pass up every Tom, James, and Boris; Ohoto, Hasu, and Huné-Huné, under such trying circumstances, for nine months on end?

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Might we have at least a clue?

Pigeon-Longshears reflected for a moment.

—I will tell you a story that may have some bearing on the case. You see, my grandfather was a woman. This is how it came about.

In the last days of the Indian wars an old cavalryman, Private T. Pigeon, who was about to be sent home with back pay and a bonus, was shot in the breast by a stray ball from his own company. As he lay dying he sent for the Clerk of the Paymaster, and asked him to listen carefully:

He was from the township of Dogtown, he said, in the Maryland Blue Ridge, though he hadn't seen it in twenty-five years. He had neither wife nor family. But in his twenties he had loved a pulp-and-paper plant hand in a mill town near his camp in Indiana, persuaded her to trust him, and soon abandoned her. A letter had reached him, pleading and threatening by turns, and he understood that she had had a child. She had named it after him: Private T. Pigeon. But he had no proof of this birth, much less that it was his own, and, young and careless as he was, he thought to himself: the world is full of women, and hanged if I don't have a way with them. If the likes of Private T. Pigeon ever should take the trouble to marry, at least it will be to some jane with a store or a farm or a hotel or, anyway, something to offer. And he asked for a transfer to one of the forts in the Northwestern territories, where she could never track him down.

At first he forgot about the girl. But as the years went by at a stone's roll, he discovered that he had been charged a steep price for his bluebirding; for with that factory hand from Halltown, Indiana, his success with women had come to an end. In truth, they laughed

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at him. From the mayor's daughter of Bedrock to the piano teacher to the girl who fished the pickle barrel in the dry goods store, all, whether fine or coarse, fat or slender, laughed at his blandishments as though he had used the most ludicrous ploy in the world. Then his hair went gray, his teeth fell out, his beard turned yellow and stank like cheese, and he grew fat around the middle. He put away his lust for women. What was the use of it? The little tart who ran a stamping machine in the Halltown Paper Company had stolen from his manhood some invisible yet crucial part, which made every other woman turn away.

In his heart, though, he worried. It wasn't the wife he regretted as he entered his last stretch of duty — it was his son. His plan, first thing upon leaving Fort Fred Steele, had been to get on an eastward train with his bankroll, and look up his son, now about sixteen years old.

But for waiting so long, he had gotten what he deserved. Any moment now he would go above. His last hope was in the Clerk of the Paymaster, whom he charged as follows:

He was to write to Halltown for Private T. Pigeon the younger, and promise him a thousand dollars (for that was what the old cavalryman had coming) on the condition that he take himself direct to the town of Dogtown and put himself in the hands of Mr. Uncle-John Netz, his father's old friend and sporting companion, who would set him up in as decent a business as that money would buy, and find him a proper sort of wife into the bargain.

With that the old cavalryman sat up, snatched at the air, and fell back dead.

The clerk inquired by mail to the Halltown P.O.; and receiving word that a Private T. Pigeon still lived there,

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without much ceremony he wrapped the dead father's boots and his cavalry sword and dress jacket, with his yellowgold pocket watch and a money order for a thousand dollars; and at the last moment he added that note on Dogtown and Mr. Uncle-John Netz which he called the late Private T. Pigeon's 'advice'. For what was the use of a dead father ordering a live son to do this or that, thought the Clerk of the Paymaster, especially a son whom he had never in this life laid eyes on, never mind bought so much as a biscuit? Sever the generations! A man is at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother. So thought the Clerk of the Paymaster, as he mailed the whole business off to Halltown.

However, just as it had never occurred to Private T. Pigeon the elder that his son might be a daughter, likewise it was the farthest thought from the mind of Private T. Pigeon the younger that she might not honor the instructions of her dead father. It was something to have a father, dead or not, and a place to go, on anyone's say-so. And she cashed her thousand-dollar note into real silver money, which she put in a canvas bag; threw the blue jacket over her large shoulders, buckled his sword on over her overalls, pulled on his boots (which were tight, for her feet were no less than enormous) and rode the B & O to a siding seventeen miles from Dogtown. Whence she walked the rest of the distance.

The way in those days was a rain-watered dirt track on the westward slope of South Mountain: with the dogwood in bloom, the poison may-apples bobbing under green visors like so many dealers in a poker hall, and the wet-dog trillium dankly steaming in the bottom folds. The Private considered what business she might undertake as she walked along. She had always been partial to that stale feather smell of a feed store

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and the grit under foot; doctoring animals was a good job, but you might have to know how to do it; in the end, a little old ho-tel was best. Yes, she decided on a hotel: The New Dogtown Arts it would be — at least the Private thought so, until she started down the mud pike onto Front Street.

There, precisely in front of the gatepost and shingle of Uncle-John Netz, Poulterer, was this odd and discouraging sight: a man, or rather, the body of a man lay face down in the straw-choked gutter at the edge of the dirt road, where water and mud from every passing wagon were slung over him.

It was a portly soul who had fallen there, dressed dully and decently in black; his hat, too, lay in the road, squashed flat by a cartwheel.

A dead man, that was all. But around him stood a half dozen citizens of the town, jeering and shaking their fingers at the carcass. "What are you doing there?" the Private inquired. "You can't be talking to this gentleman. He's dead as McKinley."

"Exactly my point!" roared the one in a gray-striped suit, clearly a man of importance. "He has given us the slip. This was that larcenous vendor of short-weight gumps, Mr. Uncle-John Netz. And was it for a wife and little ones he fleeced honest Dogtown? No! — for kings, queens, jacks; aces, deuces, treys, do you see my point? A red-eyed plunger at all games of hazard, he sponged off Dogtown till he could sponge no more, when he up and died, as there you see him, owing half the town money; to wit, that half that had any."

"And we are that half," said another. "The welcher!"
And he spat.

"Deadbeat!"

"Spoiler!"

"Wastrel!"

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“Piker!”

“Chicken thief!”

“Cheat!”

And it was clear they would have gone on all day cursing the remains of Mr. Uncle-John Netz, Private T. Pigeon the elder’s old friend, but the Private raised a hand and opened the canvas bag. And of course all conversation ceased, and all six pairs of eyes went round at the gleam of money.

“Well?” said the Private. “What is the bill?”

“Four hundred dollars to the town of Dogtown for fines and improvements and twenty-five years of back taxes,” said the man of obvious importance.

The Private counted out his money.

“Three hundred dollars for a brace of mules,” said the next two — a pair of brothers in greasy buckskins.

The Private delivered.

“Two hundred dollars October to June, for miscellaneous victuals,” said the fourth fellow, who wore a floury apron.

The Private handed it over.

“A hundred for corn and hay,” said the fifth, the one with the old straw hat.

And the Private emptied the bag of its last hundred dollars. “I hope that’s all, gentlemen. It’s all I have.”

“Well, I think that will do very —” began the man of importance, but the sixth fellow pulled his coat and buzzed something in his ear. “Fifty dollars for piratizing the drawers of Puffenberg’s daughter, as good a girl as ever went endways,” he added, his face contorted in a wink from a brow to jowls, while Puffenberg glared at them blackly.

The Private pulled off the boots, the coat and the sword of Private T. Pigeon the elder, and laid them on the ground. Puffenberg snatched them up. And now

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she considered for a moment, brought out the yellow-gold watch of the late Private with a sigh, and laid it on the dead man's mud-spattered dummocks. "I guess this will bring enough to bury him," she said. The undertaker appeared and loaded Mr. Netz into a wagon, the citizens all went their ways, and the Private walked off barefoot, following the road out of town.

Of course the Private had no money now, but she had no great wish to stay in Dogtown either. She walked until the sun began to fade, when she noticed that she was at a crossroads, and that a stranger had fallen in step beside her. The stranger was tall and stout and walked with the deliberate step of one who had a long way to travel, but because of a long-brimmed hat which he wore low on his nose, it was impossible to see the fellow's face, and if he were young or old.

The Private was not sorry to have company, however. And when the sun had gone quite down, the stranger turned and opened the conversation.

"Going far, if I may ask?"

"I'm not going anywhere in particular," the Private answered.

"Then perhaps you'll keep me company," said the stranger. "I happen to know of a town a little ways from here where a fair is going on. And in the main tent at the fair is a table where men are at cards. Perhaps you would like to play cards?"

"I've never played cards in my life," said the Private.

"Never mind that," the stranger said. "The fact is — I don't know why — but you look lucky to me."

The Private shrugged. "I haven't got a penny."

"All the same, I feel you would be lucky. Suppose you start out with this?" And the stranger held out a silver dollar. "If you lose, so? — that's no loss to you. If you

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win, you're that much to the good, except, of course, that you'll have to give half of whatever you win to me."

The Private saw nothing wrong with this bargain, and followed the stranger to the townline of Lapin's Corner, where they saw the banners of a fair. All at once she was swept along by streams of people and animals, out of sight of the stranger. In a moment she stood before a large tent with a sign:

WELCOME
Ham & Oyster Plates
GAMES OF CHANCE

And so she went in.

A party of farmers sat in a circle around a wooden table, each holding a hand of cards. In the center was a litter of coins. The Private pulled up a chair, was dealt a few cards, laid down her silver dollar, and spread out her hand. Like grist from a mill chute, all the money on the table top tumbled into her lap. She played again, and won again, and so all night, until these farmers and the next set and the next after those had cleaned out their pockets, and the Private had won all there was to win.

She walked out of the tent as the first gray wash of daylight flooded the fields, jingling her money as she went. When she poured it out on the grass and split it into two piles, each was of no less, and no more, than a thousand dollars in silver. "Even after my partner takes his cut," the Private observed, "I'll have made back all I spent." Only one day had passed since she left Dogtown without a penny.

"Didn't I say you would be lucky?" said the stranger, appearing from behind a tree. Taking up their two shares, they began to walk again along the road. "And where to now, if I may ask?"

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“Wherever I end up, I suppose,” replied the Private.

“And what will you do with all that money? A young blood of your parts should have something to show for such a pot.” And the stranger pointed to a limerock hummock to their south. “How would you like to be cock of your own little dunghill? You see where I mean — a hill full of orchards, all your own and almost as big as you could ride around in a day.”

“But I can’t ride,” said the Private.

“Never mind that,” said the stranger. “I know talent when I see it. With all this rhino to bet, we’re going to run you in the Mousetown Derby and win that mountain yonder.”

“But I don’t want a mountain,” said the Private. “I want a ho-tel.”

The stranger stood back and displayed his palms to heaven. “Was there ever such luck in the world?” he asked, and then added, leaning over to the Private: “Did you say hotel? On the end of that ridgetop stands a hotel, the Old Mousetown Arms itself... Now look here: I won’t let you put up a penny. Because I know you will be talented, I’ll put down all I have for both of us. If you lose, what’s that to you? If you win, you get half the hill and half the hotel. Of course, the other half belongs to me.”

And hardly an hour later the stranger pulled the girth tight on a small and sad-looking yellow walking horse, gave the Private a leg up, and the gun went off for the Mousetown Derby.

The Private could not have guessed that riding a horse was so simple; painless, and in fact almost without sensation except for a vague deep rumble between the legs. Riding around the mountain on a horse was as pleasing to the body as floating in a pool. And fast as she went, hovering in that special plane, higher than per-

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sons, lower than trees, she felt nothing: as she banked over the nests of sparrows, the fledglings craned up at her unblinking.

And presently, she won. The stranger was waiting for the Private where an old strip of burlap marked

FINISH stop END of the MOUSETOWN DERBY

was stretched across the road, the deed to Mousetown Mountain dangling from his fingers.

Then together they started directly up the hill to the Old Mousetown Arms on top.

Soon the stranger turned to the Private and inquired: "Will this be all you need, if I may ask?"

"Please?" said the Private.

"One old fleabag hotel all to your own devices — is this quite enough to make you happy?"

"I don't know," said the Private.

"Then I will tell you," said the stranger. "It's not enough to make you happy. Anyone in business needs a wife. However, leave everything to me. For you I have in mind the old hotelkeeper's daughter, Crystal, an experienced young lady, named for the weather." The stranger pointed east, west, behind, before. Then the Private looked around at the sea of yellow leaves and the winding dog track they followed. And she noticed, though it had been June when she left Halltown on the B & O, sure enough, on Mousetown Mountain it had begun to snow.

"A wife," the Private said thoughtfully. "I will take Crystal for my wife. I can agree that I need a wife. But how do you think it will sit with my wife when she sees that her husband is" — she paused for a moment — "not a man."

"A man?" said the stranger, without even looking around. "Not a man! Well, never mind that. I feel you

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will be adaptable. And the hotelkeeper's daughter also has her imperfections. It happens she's been married before."

"Oh, I don't mind," said the Private.

"Ninety-nine times before," said the stranger crisply. "All of her bridegrooms have died. Rather quickly. On the wedding night in fact. But never mind that. I feel you will be — different."

"On second thought," said the Private. "I've about as much need of a wife as a toad needs saddlebags."

But the stranger raised his hands as if to bless: "— As a toad!" he said. "And have I ever given you a bum steer? And surely toad, like the rest of God's creatures, would see the great good sense of saddlebags, if he could but afford a horse? And haven't we seen how lucky you are? You shall have her. Leave everything to me."

And in barely an hour more, the Private and her bride — who was not only as beautiful, but also as mute, as the snow — faced each other with unfriendly glances in the hotel drawing room, as the stranger officiated, and the old treadle harmonium whined, and the chambermaids sobbed knowingly like mourners at a wake. The hotel was a ramshackle summerhouse affair: its low two storeys telescoped off crazily down the ridgetop in both directions. And the Private and Crystal, an inveterate bride, soon walked silently, almost sullenly, and without the slightest hurry, down miles of cobwebbed hallways towards the new bridal suite, Room 100, while outside door after door, Room 1 to Room 99, the Private observed a pair of men's shoes, always choked with dust, beginning with satin dress pumps, descending through patent leather, to ministerial black, to morocco, to plain brown, to riding boots caked with mud, to thicksoled brogans with pegs, to

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unmatched sets riddled with holes, to moccasins, to mere rag socks, till at last there was a door with no pair at all. It was Room 100. The Private looked down: she herself was barefoot, of course. And holding the door gallantly for Crystal, she beheld the bridal chamber.

In spite of the swarming snow at the window, it was warm; a smoky stove had been lit. A pitiful chandelier dangled unevenly from one wire: in it, a small electric candle was burning, and under its light, Crystal lay down with a yawn, arranging herself in the nest of her white-blond hair while dust flew up in the light. Her chin rested on her chest. Her eyes rolled up at the Private. But the Private just scratched at her elbow nervously and, not knowing what else to do, leaned against the green striped wallpaper. She had the urge to look at a watch, but of course, she had no watch. Still, a clock ticked somewhere — where? She looked around. This was how she noticed a familiar-looking set of feet below the window curtains: over dusty brown boot tips, the stranger peeked out, waving her back against the wall.

The night began to pass, at a snail's gallop, and soon Crystal opened her eyes rather wide and glared furiously at the Private. Still, not a word came out of her. The Private smiled back politely. Crystal rolled around on the dusty bedspread, and snatched her skirt and crinolines to her knee, then to the tops of her stockings, then to her waist. She rolled over and the white naked buttocks sailed high above her knees, as she bounced, voluminous, shining, up in the air again and again, like a toy woman, thought the Private, a woman made of balloons, full of helium and shifting ballast, tugging on her string without ever getting anywhere. She bounced up and down — all in vain — the Private stared; but came no closer. The clock ticked away,

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whereever it was, and finally, from out of sight, a tiny chime began to tell midnight.

Crystal sat up in the bed and opened her mouth at last. "Faint-hearted pigeon-livered panty-waist!" she shrieked. "Get in this bed!" But as soon as she opened her mouth a viper, with shining scales as pink as a rabbit's eye, streaked out of it and slid across the bed towards the Private. Now the stranger stepped out from behind the curtain, snatched it up to his mouth, and blew. The snake stiffened and began to play: notes — a *gigue*, *vivo*. Crystal lay on the bed, her feet helplessly dancing in air. And then the flute flew from the hands of the stranger and sprang to the thighs of the Private. It stuck there, rigid. The Private gasped, and hid it with her hands.

"You see? I said you would be adaptable," said the stranger.

Now, that was my grandfather, Private T. Pigeon; and that is how she was prepared for the job. But perhaps you are thinking that this story is not quite at an end. And indeed, the Private finding herself suddenly so grotesque, and yet able; and at the same time hoping vaguely to get rid of this glaring new male caparison by burying it in her wife, moved toward Crystal. But she felt a sharp yank at her overalls.

"I believe you have forgotten our bargain!" said the stranger.

Our bargain! the Private thought, yes! I had quite forgotten our bargain. And noticing how, with infinite slowness, the stranger moved toward the circle of bed and bride, with infinite heaviness the Private removed her own feet from that cincture. For yes! the Private perceived that it was quite proper to give the bride to the stranger according to their bargain to divide all things equally, and, again as though from a very great

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distance, she signalled her consent.

The stranger opened his clothes. The bride lay shining in a nest of white-blond hair, her limbs all outspread, her eyes rolled upwards, and the stranger fell upon her. And as he pressed his mouth to her mouth, he began to grow smaller and smaller, and even as the Private watched, he shrank so small that he fell into the mouth of the hotelkeeper's daughter. And that was the last they saw of him.

And the Private and Crystal were man and wife. Or woman and wife. However you please to understand it.

I will add that my grandmother, the hotelkeeper's daughter, was not clever; aged young, grew fat, lost her teeth, was a wretched cook, the dirtiest housekeeper in the world, and so lazy that rather than pick the worms out of the flour she baked them into the bread, where they could be counted any day of the week, curled up in the grain like raisins.

Many a worm-speckled slice the Private ate without complaining. After all! she thought. I could not live as anyone's wife — why should this poor ninny be any different? Meanwhile no more poisonous reptiles came out of the mouth of the hotelkeeper's daughter. And without complaint the Private bore with Crystal's other faults — her numerous indiscretions, especially with door-to-door salesmen — her contentiousness — her delicate health which must consult with extortionating quacks all over the territory — her weakness for playing the horses... such was their marriage, and it was as long as it was unlovely.

Then again, as you know, the Private had had a very haphazard education to stand her ground as a middle class husband. And even so, upon reflection, she would say that she still believed it better to have been the husband than the wife.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAIMY GORDON's fourth novel, *Lord of Misrule*, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2010, and was a Finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award; it also won the Tony Ryan Award for the year's best book about horse racing, and several other awards. Gordon's previous novels include *Bogeywoman*, *She Drove Without Stopping*, and *Shamp of the City-Solo*. She has been a Fellow of the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center and the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, and has also won an Academy-Institute Award for her fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has translated several works of Maria Beig from the German, most recently *Hermine, An Animal Life*. Born in Baltimore, Gordon formerly taught at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, and currently teaches in the Prague Summer Program for Writers.

Lord of Misrule, <https://tinyurl.com/yabsltwq>

She Drove Without Stopping, <https://tinyurl.com/yarxm5fe>

Shamp of the City-Solo, <https://tinyurl.com/y73o7wg4>

The Bend, The Lip, The Kid: Reallife Stories, <https://tinyurl.com/yco9kjc8d>