

## Pass It On®...

### How a Community of One Grows to Include More

Richard is a quiet man with a gentleness that belies his height. He stands a good four inches over six feet but has a friendly-giant smile that embraces everyone around him. He makes a modest living that allows him time for a hobby he is passionate about---raising pigeons.

On Saturday mornings, you'll see his small flock rise out of his backyard and circle the neighborhood. It isn't long before a group of boys gather on Richard's front lawn. You see, Richard raises rollers, a breed of pigeon that flutters mid-flight and tumbles downward as if pelted by some unseen projectile. After dropping 10 or so feet, the pigeon regains its bearings, rights its wings and pulls out of the dive. The acrobatics draw gasps and cheers. Over and over again the pigeons tumble out of control and then, at the last minute, save themselves. Sometimes a red-tailed hawk will drift in on the summer currents, adding to the drama. The hawk flies in among the pigeons, who daringly escape by keeling over and tumbling toward the ground before flying off to safety.

Richard helps some of the boys build their own pigeon coops and shows them how to raise rollers and homing pigeons. Along the way, two boys named Dee and Miles become fast friends. Some days Richard, a group of boys, and a few dads load up the old station wagon with cages and drive out across the desert to release their pigeons. Richard and the group stop for burgers and then drive home to see whose pigeons made it back first. There's lots of time for conversation, mostly the boys asking Richard questions. But he doesn't miss the moment to teach them. "There is always a way home," he says. "You just have to look for it."

Miles listens intently. He struggles in school, hiding his learning disability behind a smirk. But he is the most willing to help Richard clean out the coop and lend a hand to the others as they build their own coops. As the years go by, the other boys go off to college, and Miles takes up a shovel to make a living. He saves his money and buys a backhoe, then a dump truck, and another, and another.

He works hard, but also drinks hard. His marriage falls apart, even though his business grows. He resists any call to come back to his childhood friends. More years pass. He is lost on a cloudless horizon. The image of pigeons tumbling out of the sky becomes his life. He is in freefall. Hawks circle, waiting for him to hit the ground.

But he doesn't. One friend never gives up. His old friend Dee reaches out over and over until Miles has the strength to right himself. They talk about their love for Richard, who brought them together—the quiet, simple man who made time to teach boys a little something about life. And they talk about how each of them has taken their turn freefalling for a time, tumbling until they could get their bearings. There is always a way home again.

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