

Akash and the Pigeons

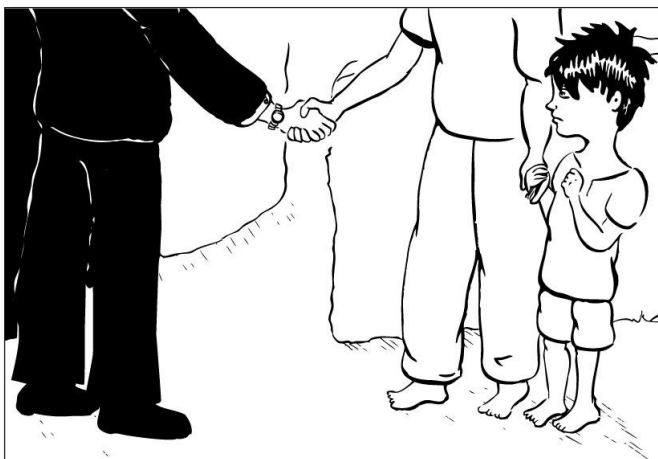
A short story for children by Penny Reeve, illustrated by Alex Hammond.

There was once a little boy named Akash. He lived in a village beside a river with his mother, his father, his two older brothers and two younger sisters. His house was very small, maybe as big as your lounge room. It had walls made of mud and sticks, and a roof of leaky straw. At one end of the home was his mother's kitchen area. At the other end was a wooden bed and four mattress rolls. Under the eaves of the roof nested a family of pigeons.

Every day Akash's father worked in fields that didn't belong to him and most days Akash went with him. As they worked the pigeons flew above them or gathered seed from the ground beside them. *Coo, Coo,* chattered the pigeons. *Coo, Coo.*



One day Akash's younger sister got sick. Very sick. She no longer played on the edges of the fields. She no longer danced in front of their home. As his sister grew weaker and weaker, his parents grew more and more worried. His father took on extra work, in the fields and in the village, but there was not enough money to buy the medicine Akash's sister needed. His mother visited all the big houses in the nearby area and asked for work – washing clothes or cleaning – but there was still not enough money for the medicine Akash's sister needed.

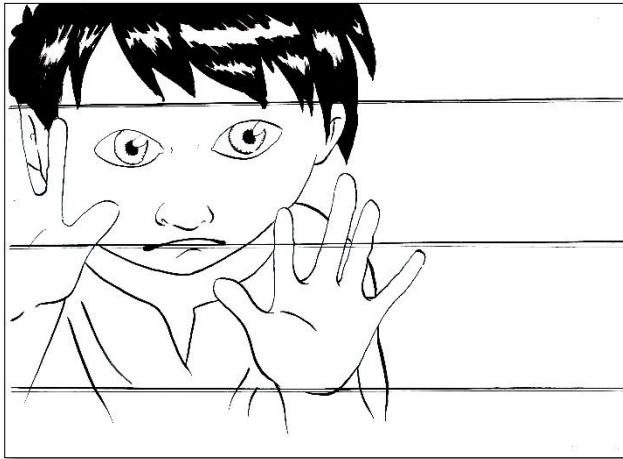


He spoke with Akash's father for

The, one afternoon a tall man arrived from the city. He wore shiny black shoes and a shiny gold watch. He spoke with Akash's father for

a very long time. Then Akash's father spoke to Akash's mother for a very long time while the pigeons chatted on the roof. *Coo, Coo, Coo.*

The man handed Akash's mother some money. Enough money to buy the first lot of medicine for his sick little sister. Akash's father told Akash to go with the man. He told him there was a good job in the city for boys like him. Boys who worked hard. And he would earn enough money there for the rest of the medicine his sister needed, and maybe even – if he worked hard – a soccer ball.



So Akash left the village by the river and waved goodbye to the house about as big as your lounge room, and the pigeons that nested underneath its leaky roof. Then he went with the man with the shiny shoes and caught a bus, followed by a train, that took them away from the fields to places where houses were much bigger than your

lounge room, and some even grew up close to the sky. On and on and on they travelled until the air smelt trapped and dirty.

When eventually the train stopped, the man took Akash's hand and led him through the city. There was no grass, there were no trees and the river they crossed was thick and full of rubbish. They came to a building with grey green walls squished up against many more exactly the same. The man took Akash inside where another man was waiting. This man gave the man with shiny shoes some money. Lots of money. More money than Akash had ever seen. Far more money than it would cost to buy medicine for a sick girl. And the man with the shiny shoes put all this money in his pocket and walked away.



Akash was taken to an upstairs room and told to work. But this was not like working with his father. It was not like working in the fields with the sun and the pigeons. In this room with boarded up windows there were forty other boys. Tired boys. Dusty boys. Boys with unsmiling faces.

They sat on the floor with fabric in their laps and needles in their fingers. They didn't even look up when Akash entered the room. They were busy sewing, embroidering patterns and flowers and sparkly sequins onto T-shirts and dresses.

The man pointed to a space on the floor between two older boys. They taught Akash how to thread his needle. They taught him how to sew lines and circles and attach sequins as he stitched.



All afternoon Akash sewed. When it was late he was given a bowl of tasteless food. Then he sewed some more. When it was very late he was told to lie down and sleep. When it was still dark he was told to wake up. Then he sewed some more.

All day long, every day that came and went, Akash sewed. He pricked his fingers many times, but was told to keep working. If he was too slow he got in trouble.

He sewed sunshine but never felt it. He sewed flowers but never smelt them.

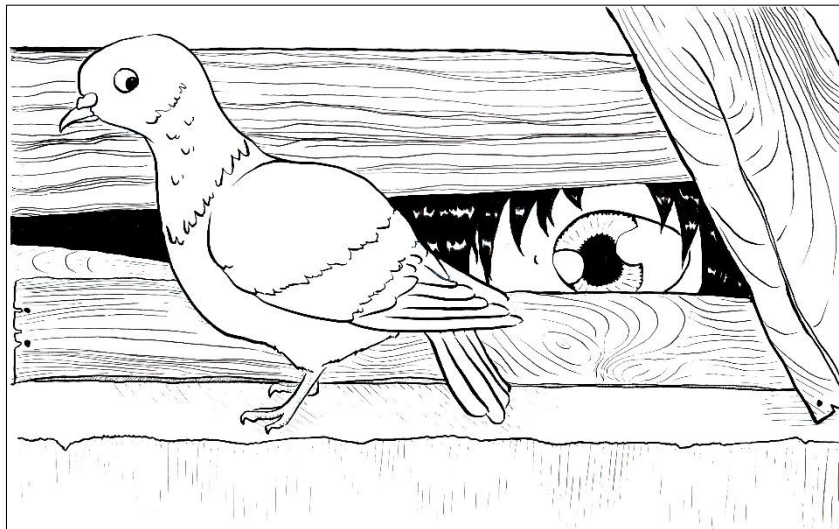
He even sewed pigeons flying across the fabric. He wished that they were real and could travel home to tell his family where he was. But the pigeons he sewed on fabric were always taken away at the end of each day and new fabric given to him to sew. Over and over and over again until he no longer felt his fingers when they were pricked, and no longer dreamed about what he was stitching.

One day, after Akash had been in the grey green house for more than a year, he heard a sound at the boarded up window. It was a soft sound. A gentle *Coo Cooing*. It sounded to Akash like something he'd heard once before. Somewhere far away, in a village beside a river, under the roof of a small house about the size of your lounge room.

Coo, Coo, Coo.

Akash stopped sewing. None of the other boys seemed to hear it and the manager was asleep in another room, his stick quiet on the floor. *Coo, Coo, Coo.*

Akash put his sewing down. He tiptoed from his spot on the floor over to the wall. He put his eye against the crack in the boarded up window. He saw a grey beak. He saw a little round eye dart quickly to look at him, as though it recognised him. It was a pigeon.



Akash poked his finger as far out the crack as it would go, out into the sunshine, out to freedom. And the pigeon pecked him.

Ouch!

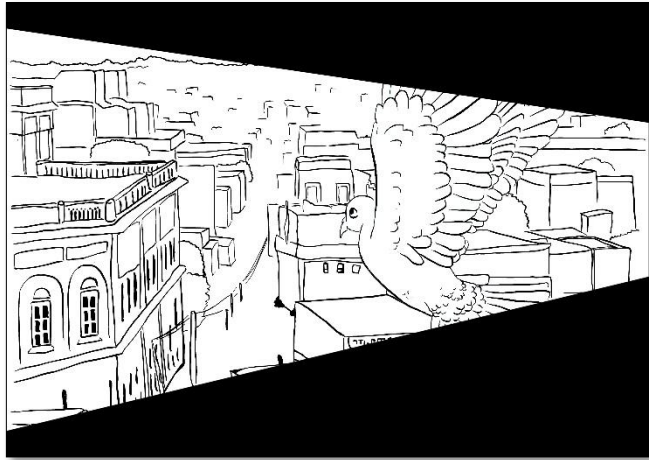
Akash laughed. It was the first time he'd laughed since he'd left his village.

All the other boys were watching him now. Their needles still, their sewing stopped and a tiny smile tugging at the corners of their tired lips.

'Tell my mother,' Akash whispered to the pigeon. 'Tell my father, tell my brothers at school and my sisters at home. Tell the children on the other side of the world – the ones who might one day wear the clothes we are sewing. Tell them we are here. Tell them so we can be free.'

The pigeon pecked his finger again. More gently this time. *Coo, Coo, Coo*. It chattered as if it understood everything Akash had said. Then there was a flutter of wings and it was gone.

That night at dinner time, Akash saved three grains of rice and placed them in his pocket. He'd give them to the pigeon next time it came to visit. But until then, he'd keep sewing. Sewing sunshine and flowers and pigeons on t-shirts for children on the other side of the world.



About the author:

Penny Reeve is the award-winning author of more than 25 books for children and young adults. She loves sharing her stories with children and encouraging them to respond to the complex, fascinating and sometimes difficult world we live in. For more information, or to sign up for her newsletter, visit www.pennyreeve.com

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