

# First Flight

A flock of pigeons clustered around the park bench while the old man threw handfuls of popcorn on the asphalt. He wheezed, softly. The old man wore loneliness like an old hat.

His sunken eyes lingered on the birds, as if pigeons were fuzzy stuffed bedtime cuddle-friends who could keep him company until sleep came. Red-faced, the old man wiped dribbly sweat from his forehead in rhythm: wheeze, wheeze, mop; wheeze, wheeze, mop. The sun glared off his moist, shiny head.

Words were released: "You birdies...you birdies got it good, you know that? This is the life of Riley, birdies. Look at this! You got no job, and you'll never need one. Why? Because you get all the food you could ever eat from old saps like me. The best food in the park. I pay extra for the good stuff, you know, from the vendor up at Park Street Station, because he pops it fresh every day. Some of the guys get big bags of stale pre-popped crap and sell it like it's fresh. But I know better.

"I wonder how many of you are mommies. Or daddies." The pigeons cooed. Two tugged at the same plump kernel. "I bet most of you are. That's nature for you. Ever see your kids? Probably not. We got something in common there.

"Pigeons don't mate for life, do they? You just do your

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screwing and get the hell out of there. My wife mated for life." He straightened his back and scattered popcorn on the sidewalk. "A better place, that's what they tell me. She's in a better place."

Using a single withered finger, the old man spilled the whole bag of popcorn all over the pavement, sending the pigeons into a panic. Feathers rustled wildly. "Yeah, you got it good," said the old man. "Nothing to lose. Here's the sad thing: you're too stupid to know how good you got it."

The old man grunted to a standing position. The pigeons exploded into pandemonium, startled by the old man's sudden movement. He shuffled away, leaving the park bench empty and the popcorn strewn all about. As soon as he moved a few steps, the flock of pigeons descended on the popcorn, devouring it like unwitting prey. They cooed, as always.

The old man approached a phone booth, up near the loud street, and fingered change in his pocket. He hobbled in, pushed the door shut, and lifted the receiver. He raised his hand to clink a dime into the slot, but hesitated. Memories flushed away. He couldn't remember the number he planned to call. He couldn't remember whose number had been forgotten. Concentration didn't help. It all slipped away. Then he blacked out.

His eyes flickered open and blinked what must have been a hundred times. The beating of his heart was so rapid, so intense, that he felt certain he was in the beginning stages of cardiac arrest. Then he noticed: no pain. After countless years