

PIGEONS

by Robbin Thompson

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Ellen fought the hard fight for her window office on the 56th floor. She went from cubicle, to an inner office with real walls you could hang pictures on, to this, this spacious office with a large window, with a view of distant sky scrapers and a sloping ledge filled with cooing, dying and dead pigeons. Ellen tried to ignore the dead pigeons, some dead for days, some bloated with their legs up in the air. It was unseemly, she thought.

She wished she could open the window and sweep them off the ledge, but the window wasn't the kind a person could open.

Ellen wondered how healthy pigeons could hang around their molting, rotting relatives. The young ones strutted about, acting as if it was just another day, a walk in Central Park, just another peanut under a bench, and later, another feathery coupling, and then to roost, next to decaying relatives.

Forget the pigeons, Ellen told herself, you have work to do. She loved her work. She was good at it. One of the best. In fact, her latest brochure, the one distributed all over the world to people with DPS, the fatal clot condition, won her the DAMBIE. The highest award you could win in the medical brochure game. No one could do impending death the way Ellen could. She was the master at weaving unbearable side effects, pointless suffering, impending death with uplifting messages of hope and inspiration. Of course, the crayonola bright rainbow graphics and catchy designs added to the inspiring and informative product, but it was her words, her words that brought tears to the clients eyes.

Some days, well like today, Wednesday, Ellen had an assignment that, if handled right, could make the front page of the *Advertising Medical Review* magazine. It could be the brochure of the year.

It was a tricky assignment, writing about Sarcoma Z, a stage 8, total body cancer striking women in their late 20's and early 30's. It is an excruciatingly painful disease, and totally invasive. Not one organ is spared, not one cell left untouched. But, after a quick sip of her latte and a nibble at her biscotti, Ellen felt ready.

Now let's see, what are the perimeters of Sarcoma Z, she asked herself. First off, she decided to soft pedal the less than a month to live thing, and of course go easy on God. God used to be a help in the past, but now the boys upstairs were giving her grief: not only about God, but every writers' favorite stand-by, spirituality.

"Little comfort: spirituality," they told Ellen, "if you're a dying atheist."

No question, writing about Sarcoma Z was no walk in the park. What's a nice way to say there's the absolutely no hope you're going to survive, there's a zero, zilch, fininto chance of a medical breakthrough? And it's particularly tricky when you can't even throw out the red meat of hope. Doctors call it the curve, the curve that says, maybe you will be the exception. With Sarcoma Z, there's no curve because there's never been a survivor. One month, if you're lucky. Barely time for the patient to read Ellen's brochure.

But she always enjoyed a challenge. After she did a bit of stretching and after a quick roll around her office on her exercise ball: eureka, the weenie, the big enchilada, as the boys upstairs call it, hit her like a thunderbolt. She ran back to her laptop. Her fingers flew across the key board.

Women who have been diagnosed with Sarcoma Z, Ellen wrote, often tell us that this is one of the most positive and life-transforming experiences that they have ever had.

"Even though I may have my ups and downs and difficulties, I found the resilience to let go of my despair and...by letting go, I found peace," Mary Louise of West Orange, New Jersey said.

That's about enough of Mary Louise, Ellen said aloud as she got and wrapped her knuckles on the window. A noisy pigeon with half a wing was kicking up a fuss. It gave her a look, blinked, and limped on. Ellen dashed back to the keyboard and wrote:

It is a rare and beautiful thing to know at this very instant, while you are reading these words, you are about to achieve a great success. As you let go of your anger, your ambition, your life, the true meaning of success, of complete perfection, will flood your mind and serenity will enter your entire being.

Brilliant, just brilliant. Ellen leaned back in her chair and admired her work. As she took another sip of her cooling latte, she watched a dying pigeon struggle to the edge of the ledge. Oh please, she whispered to herself, please fall off.

But no, the pigeon teetered with one last bob and weave and then, with a heroic strut, made his way to the center of Ellen's window, shuddered, collapsed and died. His little body curved against the glass.

