

BLACK MAN

WHITE COP

Keith Kreuz

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Thank you for seeking to be a vessel through whom the Light shines, the Creator of all life. That One is all-knowing and everywhere present at all time ... so be encouraged to know that our Source is with you and me right now, as always ... a loving Presence. May the love of God be felt through me ... and may the love of God be manifest through you, enlightening all.

Peace and Namaste.



To everyone who has given me inspiration, hope, and love – thank you!

I hope you receive the same from God in me by reading this story about the triumph of LOVE.

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Friends

At midnight two friends left the Lambda Lounge to go home.

When it opened many years ago, this bar was on the edge of town and visited only by the gay and lesbian community. However, over time as the city grew, it was surrounded by townhouses, upscale restaurants and big box stores, and it got even busier when it became a popular gathering spot for the local college crowd.

John had moved to Big Rock a year earlier to escape the anti-gay taunts he experienced daily in the small midwestern town where he grew up. He hated to leave his family and friends, but he felt he had no other choice. He had been called “faggot” way too many times. Big Rock was now his home, and he loved living in this part of North Carolina.

Alan was born and raised in the city of Big Rock. He was straight, but he had made many gay friends through work and other connections. Alan’s girlfriend, Brooke, had been at the bar earlier that evening, but she left at 9:00 PM because she had an early class the next day. Medical school kept her busy.

As John and Alan walked toward their cars, they started talking about Alan’s plans to propose to Brooke. John was the only person who knew about it, and he started to joke with Alan about how best to propose marriage. As they walked along, John suddenly exclaimed, “I know exactly what you should say and how to say it,” and then he threw himself onto one knee, and looking up at Alan, professed loudly, “You are the most beautiful in all the world, and I will always love you ... and if I might have your hand in marriage, I would be delirious!” Alan laughed at the sight of John on one knee in front of him in mock proposal, but with equal sarcasm Alan threw his arms wide saying, “If I can make you more deliriously nuts than you already are, I accept!” They both laughed, and after Alan helped John up, they continued walking down the sidewalk while chucking about their goofiness.

Across the street, two police officers sitting in a patrol car had their eyes fixed on John and Alan as they walked along. The previous night, a drunken brawl had spilled into the street from an apartment nearby, and the Lounge was blamed for the trouble. As a result, tensions were high in the neighborhood, and the police had increased their patrols.

The two cops got out of their car and walked briskly toward John and Alan.

One of them was a sergeant who had been in law enforcement for 20 years, and he detested the gay and lesbian community. His patrol mate, Percy, spent 4 years in the Marines, and he had graduated from the police academy 3 months earlier. Percy had his heart set on becoming an FBI agent, and so he was eager to make a name for himself in the Big Rock Police Department.

Percy walked up to Alan and angrily asked, “Do you like it when your boyfriend professes his love for you?” Alan said, “What do you mean?” Percy grew angrier, and asked, “Why don’t you give your boyfriend a kiss right now?” Alan froze, beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and he just stood there silently shocked at the cop’s hatred ... but before he could explain that John

was just a good friend who was joking around, Percy got up in Alan's face and screamed, "I asked you a question, Queer!"

Alan was shaking, and as he motioned back toward the Lambda Lounge to explain where they had been that evening, he accidentally brushed Percy's chin.

Percy flew into a rage and threw Alan to the ground, and then he knelt on Alan's neck. "You damn queer! ... How dare you hit a police officer!"

The sergeant moved forward nervously, and said, "Easy, Percy, easy."

Blood was streaming out of Alan's nose, and Percy turned him over and cuffed his wrists behind his back. Then Percy jerked him off the ground and threw him against a jagged stone wall. Alan's head snapped back and hit a protruding stone, opening a gash on the back of his neck. Alan struggled to keep his balance, and while he was still dazed, bloodied, and confused, Percy began to read him his "rights."

The sergeant and John stood side-by-side in the darkness, both shocked at what they had just seen. Then the sergeant told John to, "Get your ass outa here!"

John fled down the street, but as soon as he was out of sight he turned back to watch.

Percy walked Alan to the patrol car while the sergeant followed. Since Alan's shirt was bloodstained, the officers spread plastic over the back seat of the car.

After they stuffed Alan in the back, the sergeant pulled Percy aside by the arm and asked, "What the hell was that?!" Then he muttered, "I've got a few more months before I can retire – so don't be getting me in trouble and screwing up my retirement."

Percy replied, "You saw him hit me ... he's nothing but a fucking queer!"

Graduation

Sammy was 25 years old and getting ready to graduate from college – finally!

As he neared graduation, Sammy would often joke about being on the “seven-year plan” because his path through school was anything but direct. Many circumstances had delayed his progress toward finishing his degree.

He had quit after just one year of college to work full-time in a sporting goods store. He stayed there for 2 years, working his way into management, but he hated the retail hours and was tired of picking up after lazy customers. So, one day he just quit without having a plan for what he would do next.

Then his drinking buddy got him a job at the local steel factory. They both worked the afternoon shift, which was the perfect shift in their minds because when they got off work at 11:00 PM, they’d hit the bars until about 2:30 AM, and not have to get up the next day for work until the afternoon.

Somewhere along the way, Sammy started to come to his senses, and he decided he would quit the factory job and go back to college. He came up with a good plan for finishing school ... he decided that he would enroll every quarter no matter what, even if it meant he could only afford to take one class.

He took a job at a campus coffee house, sometimes working full-time while taking a few classes, and at other times he would cut back on work hours and take a full load of classes.

His habit of changing majors also slowed his progress toward finishing the degree, for he had changed majors several times because he had so many interests. But he kept plugging along.

And no one was able to help him pay for school, so he had to pay for it himself.

It seemed to him that it took forever to finish his degree, but now graduation was only a few days away. And on this Sunday at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Sammy would be honored for getting his college degree.

Sammy’s grandparents were founding members of the congregation. They had moved to North Carolina back in the 30’s, and together with 5 other families, they started the congregation in the basement of their home.

The church now had over 100 members, and they worshipped in a beautiful brick building that was meticulously maintained. The tall white steeple with the wooden cross on top could be seen from several miles away.

“I’d like to ask Mr. Samuel L. Marshall to come forward please,” Pastor Jones said beaming with pride. Sammy rose-up with a big grin on his face, and then he walked up to the large wooden pulpit. His father also smiled broadly, and his mother began to cry. Everyone became quiet as the pastor continued by saying,

“I have known Sammy since he was a baby. In fact, as I recall, he cried all the way through the very first sermon he heard me preach.”

The congregation burst out laughing, Sammy smiled sheepishly, and his mother turned red with embarrassment at the remembrance of that first Sunday she brought him to church.

The pastor continued to speak at length about Sammy’s life and character, relating many funny and poignant stories about Sammy’s role in their congregation. But the pastor’s tone grew serious when he said,

“I cannot say that he has always been an angel ... there was a time when he ran with the wrong crowd and put all kinds of crazy drugs in his body.”

The congregation suddenly became so quiet that you could clearly hear the birds singing through the open windows. Pastor Jones continued,

“He turned his back on God and walked for a while in the other direction. But God never lost sight of Sammy. God continued to pursue him as a shepherd pursues that one sheep that wanders away. God stayed with him in the dark places, in the lonely places. Sammy thought he had friends, and in fact he was surrounded by people just like him, doing the same things, looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places.”

The congregation nodded silently, and so did Sammy and his parents.

“But he made the decision to turn,” the pastor declared, “and when he turned back to God he did not have to reach far because God was right there with him the entire time ... and God welcomed him home with a great big hug.”

A chorus broke out with everyone proclaiming, “Amen!” Sammy nodded in gratitude.

Pastor Jones proceeded to preach for a full hour about the story of the prodigal son that is found in the Bible, about the son who left his father’s home and squandered all his wealth on wild living and fast women in a foreign country. Having spent all his money, the son took a job as a swine herder, and he was so hungry that he craved the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything to eat. Finally, he came to his senses and decided to return to his father and beg for mercy, to beg his dad to make him a servant so that he would at least have something to eat. But while the son was still a long way off, the father spotted him and ran to him and gave him a great big hug, and then they had a big party to celebrate the return of the lost son.

After Pastor Jones finished his sermon, he presented Sammy with gifts from the congregation – a blue leather Bible, some clothes, and a brand-new laptop computer.

Sammy was overwhelmed by their generosity, and he gently cried as the congregation gathered around to give him hugs, well wishes, and hearty pats on the back.

Then they laid hands on him to pray.

Good Ol' Boys

Percy quickly became one of the good ol' boys on the police force, and he also formed friendships with some of the corrupt local politicians.

When he applied for a vacant sergeant position only 3 years after becoming a cop, there were several other police officers who had more experience and were more deserving of the promotion.

But Bob Cranberry got him the job.

Bob came from a family with a long history in local politics. His grandfather owned the city newspaper and was a devout man who did many things to improve the community.

Bob's father Jim was swept into political office on the tails of the grandfather's influence, but after the grandfather died, Jim started accepting bribes from contractors who wanted to build office buildings downtown. Over time the bribes kept getting bigger and bigger, and Jim got in over his head trying to cover his tracks. Jim also started to drink a lot, and when he drank, he got angry and would take out his frustrations on his wife and kids. When Jim's wife had bruises on her face, she just stayed at home. The kids always got whipped on the backside, but at least they could wear clothes over the welt marks and never missed a day of school. They did not dare stay at home with their dad.

One day Bob found his dad hanging from a rope in the garage.

Then Bob was drafted into the Vietnam War. When he was not (in his words) "killing gooks," he was doing all the drugs he could find and spending all his pay on prostitutes. In his heart he wanted to die in the jungle just like all the people he had killed, with a bullet to the head. But he did not want to pull the trigger and kill himself, so he constantly put himself in harms' way to rescue fellow soldiers who had been hit by gunfire. Repeatedly he left his troop against orders in order to rescue fellow soldiers, and he kept hoping that he would die ... but he did not get killed. He got shot 3 separate times – once in the shoulder, once in the left arm, and once in the thigh – but each time they patched him up and sent him back to the front lines.

When he came back from the war, he was bitter and full of hatred. On top of everything that happened to him, he never received a Purple Heart for his heroics because each time he had saved a fellow soldier it was after he had left his troop against orders. And since his lieutenant was a self-righteous, arrogant ass, Bob was never recommended for the award.

He started doing heroin, and the guys he did drugs with started to call him "Red" because when he was high his skin got red like a cranberry. And because he needed more money to feed his ever-increasing drug habit, he started dealing heroin ... and he got busted. He spent 4 years in jail, which kind of helped him out because he ended up getting completely off drugs.

Finally, he was paroled, and while looking for a quick buck on the outside, he remembered how much money he had spent on women in Vietnam, so he started an escort service. His business grew quickly.

Amazingly, he entered an election as a candidate for local council seat ... and won. Most people did not know that he had spent time in jail, but they voted for him because they remembered that his grandfather was a good man. His reason for wanting to get elected was simple – he could build up his business under the guise of being a community servant, and then wield his influence by defusing any heat from the police.

Bob Cranberry filled the pockets of leading law enforcement officials with money he extracted from the escort services he owned. Not only did some of the police officers receive payments for leaving Cranberry Enterprises alone, but they also received sexual favors from the escorts.

There were many principled men and women on the police force as well, but Cranberry was so careful about who he targeted that none of the shining lights who worked as police officers knew what he was doing. Or, if someone did suspect that Cranberry was up to no good, they soon found themselves either demoted or out of a job.

Percy was a faithful customer of Cranberry Enterprises, and after Percy was promoted to sergeant, Cranberry became even further entrenched in local law enforcement. With Percy as sergeant, conditions got even worse for the shining lights on the police force.

One day officer Jeffrey Selah noticed a police car parked in a dark alley between Pine St. and Maple Ave. When he pulled up behind it, two heads appeared in the rear window. Not sure what to think, Selah brightened his lights on the back of the parked car. He approached the parked car, and when he was about to shine his flashlight inside a red-faced fellow police officer quickly exited the back seat of the car leaving one of Cranberry's escorts inside.

Selah recognized him immediately and asked, "What are you doing?"

The other officer replied, "None of your damn business."

Selah shot back, "What do you mean? If you are doing something illegal, it's my business to do something about it."

"Go to hell!" was the response, and the officer added, "Keep your mouth shut ... because if you say anything about this, it will be your word against mine."

When Selah got back to the police station, he reported the incident to Percy, his new supervisor. Percy said, "Thanks man. I need to know that stuff."

Two weeks later Selah's yellow Labradors, Mindy and Mandy, were never seen again.

Interviews

Sammy sent out hundreds of resumes, and he landed interviews with several companies. Along the way, he noticed certain patterns in the way companies do their hiring.

One pattern that he noticed while job prospecting was that he did not get any interviews with companies he had called and spoken to on the phone. He wondered, "Am I saying something wrong? Do I need to be more pleasant? ... Be more upbeat? ... Be more direct in asking for an interview?"

In contrast, the interviews he did get were with companies who received his resume by email or postal mail, and that had scheduled an interview with Sammy without even speaking to him first. Although some of these companies had indicated that people with his type of college degree were greatly needed, each face-to-face interview seemed to end quickly. Suddenly, they were "not hiring at this time."

Sammy refused to think that racism might be playing a part, but the reality was that he was being rejected because of the color of his skin. The companies who had spoken to him over the phone could detect that he was African American by the sound of his voice, and then they were no longer interested in hiring him. Those who had brought him in for a face-to-face interview rejected him immediately after laying eyes on him.

The racism was bad enough, however even if his skin had been some other color, many potential employers would have rejected Sammy because of his birthmark. He was born with a large blotch of pale colored skin under his right eye.

When Sammy was an infant, the doctor assured Sammy's parents that the birthmark was not cancerous or anything to be worried about, but his parents still quietly hoped that the birthmark would fill with color over time. His mom even applied ointment to it for several months, hoping that the skin would become darker or at least not appear so obvious, but the ointment did nothing to change the appearance. The birthmark extended from his right eye almost to his jawbone and covered much of his right cheek.

As a child he was often ridiculed and shunned by other kids, but he never used his birthmark or the ridicule he suffered as an excuse to feel bad. He held onto the belief that God is sovereign, and that God knows best, and that everything that happens for a good reason. He believed that there is something good to be found in every challenge we face. He trusted God's administration of the universe.

Sammy could have applied makeup to darken that part of his face, and maybe that would have been the more socially acceptable thing to do. But he reasoned that God chose to give him a big pale blotch of skin for a reason. Besides, there are thousands, even millions of other people in the world who cannot hide their scars, such as people in poor countries who have leprosy, or elephantiasis, or cleft palates, or severe facial burns, or limbs that have been hacked off by madmen with machetes.

Sammy knew that God loved him, and Sammy's self-esteem was intact.

So, Sammy kept sending out the resumes, he kept answering want ads, and he practically lived in the college Career Resources Office doing online research. He started out seeking professional positions only, but gradually he started lowering his targets. He would carry stacks of resumes with him and go to the mall and go from store to store asking to meet the manager. He walked up and down the street, entering each shop and introducing himself. He received one “no” after another ... he was rejected time and time again.

After months of trying, Sammy finally got a job ... as a security officer.

Police Chief

Ten years later Percy became the Police Chief of Big Rock. Considering the power that he wielded and the questionable privileges he enjoyed, one would think that he would have been content to stay in Big Rock as Police Chief.

But he often worked with members of the FBI while doing police work, and his goal was to join the FBI. As a result, he did everything he could to ensure that the FBI had free reign in his jurisdiction.

As luck would have it, he met a regional recruiter for the FBI at a large police executive conference in Las Vegas. They met at a magazine store down the street from the conference.

After coming out of the restricted area in the back of the store where the raunchy sex magazines are displayed, Percy saw someone he had seen at the conference. As the man perused a news magazine, Percy walked up and asked, "Are you reading anything interesting?" The man raised his head and gave Percy an icy cold stare, then returned his eyes to the page.

"You're at the executive conference, aren't you?" Percy inquired.

Harold Cohen had joined the FBI right out of college thanks to his father who got him the job just before retiring. As a child, Cohen was taunted for being Jewish ... he was called just about every name you could imagine, but mostly he was called "Jew" or "Jew Boy."

It hardened him emotionally, and he fought back by dedicating himself to weightlifting. Eventually, his muscular physique started to strike fear in the hearts of those who once taunted him, and they quit calling him names. But since he was proud of his Jewish heritage, he exacted a bit of twisted revenge against those who had taunted him by demanding that they call him "Jew."

Thus, when Percy tried to get Cohen to acknowledge that he was at the conference, Cohen had had plenty of practice at shutting off his emotions and not responding to people he thought were too nosy. And 30 years at the FBI made him even more emotionally detached.

Percy just stood there waiting for a response to his question. After what seemed like an eternity, Cohen raised his head again and coldly replied, "I believe you are mistaken."

Percy turned away and walked out.

Servant

Life as a security officer was more than Sammy expected. He took the job because he was desperate for work, because his student loans would soon become due, and because he needed the money. He thought it would be a boring, dead-end job, and that he would be sitting for hours and hours watching people walk by.

The company who hired him, Nation's Best Bank, was a large regional bank with dozens of banking offices throughout the Southeast. Headquartered in Piedra, NC, they had two large downtown buildings that needed heightened security. Every employee was issued a green employee badge with gold trim, which served as a keycard for gaining access to all parts of the complex.

The entire security team was highly trained, and was required to take courses in First Aid, CPR, customer service, fire alarm systems, physical fitness, conflict management, pistol marksmanship, and more. They were trained how to spot suspicious behavior, how to approach suspected troublemakers, and they were constantly on the move throughout the corporate complex.

Sammy was treated kindly by his supervisor, Jarvis Johnson, who everyone called "J.J."

Sammy grew to really enjoy being a security officer, and it gave him many opportunities to help people. Most of the time he helped people find their way through the maze of offices, and sometimes he would use a special tool to get into a locked car, and still other times he would use one of the security cars to jump start a car with a dead battery. He enjoyed helping people feel safe at work.

Although he felt that there was something more for him to do in the world of work, that perhaps being a security officer for the rest of his life was not his calling, he nonetheless dedicated himself to be a trustworthy and dependable employee. He had no idea that he would ultimately work for many years in this position.

This job sure made it easy to afford clothing, for all Sammy had to do was worry about keeping clean and pressed his company issued uniforms.

But Sammy also loved to dress well, and, having to wear a security uniform all the time messed with his pride a little bit. He would have preferred to come to work every day in dress slacks, a freshly starched shirt with tie, and highly polished dress shoes.

When out on the town away from work, everyone thought Sammy had spent a fortune on clothes. But he readily admitted where he got his clothes – at yard sales and at various thrift stores. Goodwill. Salvation Army Thrift Store. Union Rescue Mission Thrift Store. St. Agnes Thrift and Gift. Worldly Treasures, a thrift store run by the Mennonites. In fact, he rarely bought anything in a department store, because virtually his entire wardrobe was secondhand.

On a day off from work Sammy would go shopping for clothes, and sometimes he would hit it right and find a rack of clothes in just his size. He thought that maybe some rich dude had just

passed away, and that the widow had given all her husband's clothes to charity. Other times, Sammy could not find any clothes that he liked after visiting several thrift stores.

But Sammy was always thankful for what he found. And when his own closet started to get a little too full of clothes, he would go through all of them and pull out everything he had not worn in a while in order to give some clothes away to charity.

Recycle. Reuse. Replenish. Keep things in circulation so that the next person will get a blessing too, this was Sammy's motto.

One day, all Sammy's hard work as a security officer – the long hours he put in, the dedication with which he did his work, day after day, for many years – finally paid off.

J.J. called him into his office and said, "I've been promoted to Security Manager, and I'd like you to take over my position as Security Supervisor."

Sammy was ecstatic. Of course, the company had to follow protocol and post the position internally and interview other candidates, and Sammy had to apply for the supervisor position just as others who were interested in the position. But the choice of Sammy was a no-brainer, he had been with the company 5 years longer than any of the other security officers ... and frankly, he was the best, most qualified candidate.

J.J. was happy too, for he had been with the company 25 years (15 of those years as security supervisor) and had finally been promoted to the next level. J.J. had just turned 55, and he figured that even if he stayed at that level for the next 10 years, he could retire at age 65 with 35 years of service and enjoy a comfortable retirement.

Sammy immersed himself in his new supervisory position. He was now eligible for management courses provided by the company, and he took every course that he could. He started taking night courses in order to earn an MBA degree, and the company paid 75% of the cost of each course (including books).

Sammy had no debt whatsoever because he had paid off all his student loans over the last few years through thrifty living and responsible management of his finances. Sammy's car was nothing fancy, it was an "antique" Dodge that was almost 20 years old with 136,000 miles on it, but it too was paid for.

Sammy was loving life.

Hatred

When Percy returned to the police conference, he made sure that he avoided going near the FBI booth where Cohen was shaking hands and actively recruiting.

As much as Percy wanted to be an FBI agent, he felt that his encounter with Cohen at the magazine store might hurt his chances now.

Percy did notice that Cohen was very muscular, and therefore Percy decided that he would dedicate himself to weightlifting as well.

For the next several months Percy was in the gym nearly every day ... one day he would concentrate on building up his legs, the next day on his arms and back. He lived on protein shakes and energy bars, and he would read muscle magazines constantly to learn new body building techniques.

The stronger Percy became, the more time he spent in front of the mirror. In fact, he decided to have all the walls in his bedroom covered in mirrors so that he could look at his growing physique from every angle.

Percy was considered by some to be a handsome man, and combined with his increasingly muscular build, he became quite an imposing figure. The women on the police force would practically swoon when he walked into the room, and Percy enjoyed the attention very much.

As much as Percy enjoyed the attention of women, he seemed to loathe the presence of gay men.

His buddy Cranberry was particularly hateful toward gay guys. In fact, it was rumored that Cranberry's bodyguards would drive by gay clubs and "flirt" with those who mingled outside. If a gay man made the mistake of sticking his head in the window of Cranberry's vehicle, a bodyguard would spray him in the face with pepper spray.

Then Cranberry and those in the car with him would drive away, laughing as they sped off.

Cranberry was always hidden behind darkened windows, so no one ever recognized him. (As a politician, his face was well-known). Moreover, there was a switch in the car that darkened the license plate, so the tag number was not readable nor was it ever reported.

Cranberry was in Percy's office one day when one of Percy's favorite patrolmen walked in. The patrolman said, "I guess we got a fag on the force now."

Percy looked at Cranberry with a surprised look and said, "You have to be kidding me! Who?"

"The new guy ... Hughes," was the answer. Jeremy Hughes had transferred from a nearby community because once it had become known that he was gay, the other officers became increasingly hostile toward him. Jeremy had transferred to the Big Rock police force because he thought that it would be more tolerant in this city that was supposedly known to be gay-friendly.

Cranberry looked at Percy and asked, "Are you going to put up with that crap ... a fag on your team?"

Percy exclaimed, "Hell no!"

Jeremy

On his days off work, Jeremy would often volunteer at the local Union Rescue Mission. Many people would bring clothing and furniture to the thrift store, and Jeremy worked 4-hour shifts with several other men helping to process the donated goods.

He also visited with those staying there, and he encouraged those who were alcoholics or did illegal drugs to get straight if they could.

The residents knew that Jeremy was an off-duty police officer, but they never felt threatened by him. In fact, some of them felt so comfortable around him that they would threaten to light joints and smoke them in his presence.

In response, Jeremy would only say something like, "If you are going to use medical marijuana, make sure that you enjoy the medicinal benefits as prescribed by law." And then he would simply walk out of the room.

Jeremy's work among the homeless became well known in the community, so much so that the local newspaper decided to do a feature article on him.

Percy read the article with great interest ... and devised a plan. He directed one of his undercover men to dress as a homeless man and seek shelter at the Rescue Mission.

The undercover cop befriended Jeremy by claiming to be gay, and he said that he was HIV positive as a result of being raped. Jeremy felt compassion for him and counseled him about where to seek proper medical care.

One day Jeremy had taken his coat off in the room and walked down the hall to use the restroom. The undercover cop slipped something into Jeremy's coat pocket, and then quickly left the facility while sending a text message.

Jeremy returned and visited with the residents awhile longer, and then said goodbye and left the facility since he had to be at work early the next morning.

Before Jeremy could drive away, a police car came roaring down the street with lights flashing and sirens blaring. Jeremy got out of his car and walked across the parking lot toward the police car, but while he was trying to identify himself as a fellow police officer, the patrolmen used a megaphone to order Jeremy and the others nearby to stand with their arms raised. There also just "happened" to be a local television reporter with a video camera who was on assignment with the patrolmen.

Jeremy again tried to identify himself as a fellow police officer, but he was told to shut up and turn around. The officers frisked Jeremy and found 5 grams of cocaine in his coat pocket.

Heather

Heather used to romp and play for hours. Her sweet nature survived for a long time, but it gradually diminished, and she became withdrawn and fearful over the course of two years due to the abuse she was suffering.

Percy got his kicks out of shooting her with a BB gun.

Heather would dart back and forth in the back yard, trying desperately to get out of firing range. Inevitably, Percy could see her through the bushes, and took aim at her while he sat on the back porch.

Every time a BB met its target, Heather would cry, and Percy would chuckle as if he did not realize that it hurt.

That was entertainment to him, sitting on the back porch, drinking beers, and shooting his dog with a BB gun.

Heather sensed that she would not survive there. Her legs were swollen from being pelted with BBs, and she walked with a limp.

One day she heard Percy come home from work, cursing as he walked in the door. She knew this would be a bad night for her.

She could hear Percy open the fridge, then start walking toward the back door. Despite the pain in her legs, she darted off the porch and ran toward the back of the yard.

When Percy opened the door and hollered "Heather!" she leaped with all her might toward the top of the five-foot-high fence. But her collar got caught on the top of the fence, and while her front paws were barely on the other side, the rest of her body hung inside the fence.

Percy sprinted to the back of the yard with fire in his eyes.

Thankfully, Heather's collar got caught on the top of the fence, for it was the only thing that was holding her from falling back into the yard. She struggled and tried desperately to push herself over to the other side.

Just as she was about to push herself over, Percy reached out and grabbed her hind legs. He jerked her back, screaming "I got your ass!"

But when he pulled her back, the fence was still caught on Heather's collar and the fence snapped back. Her legs slipped out of Percy's grasp, and she tumbled headfirst over the fence. She yelped as she landed flat on her back, and then she rolled over.

Percy quickly climbed over the fence and reached down to grab her. But she slipped through his grasp and scurried away.

She didn't know where she was going, all she knew was that she needed to keep running. She was so scared that she did not feel the pain in her legs, although she was limping all the way.

She ran down streets that were unknown to her, past people she had never seen before. Percy, and the backyard where he had kept her, was all she had ever known.

Finally, she stopped running. She was tired, thirsty, and hungry ... and her legs could bear no more.

It began to rain, and she spotted a downspout that trickled with water. Her mouth was like cotton, her tongue was practically white. She limped toward the downspout and lapped up the water furiously.

She lied down and fell fast asleep.

An elderly man emerged from his front door who was on his way to synagogue for Friday night services. He walked to his car and opened the door, and, just as he was about to position himself in the driver's seat, he looked down the side yard and saw Heather asleep on the grass.

He didn't recognize her, so he decided not to approach her. Moreover, since he was running late for services and in a hurry to get there, he drove away and pulled out his cell phone to call 911.

"Emergency Services," said the dispatcher.

"I realize that you don't handle these calls, but I am in my car and I don't have the number to the dog pound," replied the elderly man. "There is a stray dog in my yard, and I was wondering if you could tell Animal Control to come to my house."

The dispatcher explained that 911 should only be used for emergencies but took down his address and agreed to forward it to Animal Control.

When Animal Control arrived, Heather was still sound-asleep. She stirred when the van door slammed shut and became frightened when the officers approached.

The fence between the two houses blocked her way backward, and the approaching officers blocked her way forward.

She was stuck.

The officers quickly ensnared her with a net. Poor Heather was so weary she could barely resist.

New Friend

Toward the end of the second shift at the security desk, there wasn't much activity inside or outside the building. Sammy got off at 11:00 PM, and for the last few hours of each shift he could do a fair amount of reading. Sammy was covering for one of the security guards who had called in sick.

Sammy and his fellow security guard would take turns doing hourly perimeter checks, and at the desk they watched monitors that displayed images from the cameras placed around the building. However, they would take turns watching the monitors since it was rare for anyone to be walking around the building late at night.

Sammy enjoyed reading the newspaper, and the dog shelter would regularly place ads in the paper showing dogs and cats that would be euthanized if not adopted by a certain date. Sammy had never married, and his second shift schedule tied up many of his nights. His birthmark also made it difficult for him to get dates with women, so he was sometimes lonely.

When he saw the dog shelter advertisement, compassion swelled up in his heart because he had a great love for all animals. He thought it would be nice to have a companion, and that it would be a blessing to rescue some dog or cat from being euthanized.

The next day he paid a visit to the dog shelter, praying beforehand for guidance.

He had no preference for a cat or a dog, and he was not looking for the best-looking or best-behaved animal. He decided to simply follow his heart, hoping that he would sense some sort of bond with one of the animals.

One dog seemed different from the other animals. Many of the others were agitated and/or pacing around in their cage, but one dog stayed curled up in the back of its cage, peering out with fragile curiosity.

It remained motionless, occasionally looking downward, but then looking out again. When Sammy heard from the attendant that the dog acted that way probably because it had been abused, he was hesitant to learn anything more about it because he did not want to risk getting a troublesome pet.

He continued to go from crate to crate, and some of the animals seemed very happy to see him. He enjoyed watching them press up against the cage and acting as if they wanted to play. Sammy would put his hands up to the cage to feel the furry paws.

But Sammy kept thinking about that one dog, the one that barely moved. He went back to the attendant and asked, "What about that dog that stays in the back of its crate ... are you sure it was abused? Why do you think that?"

"She is very afraid of people and hides anytime someone gets near ...and she won't let anyone pick her up."

"But does she bite?" Sammy asked.

“Oh no, she just squirms away from you if you try to hold her,” replied the attendant.

Sammy went back to take another look. He couldn't help but feel compassion for the dog, but he also wanted a companion, someone to be his friend. He asked, “May I open the crate.” The attendant said, “Of course.”

Sammy opened the door, and slowly moved his hand toward the squirming dog. He could see her body shaking, so he simply placed his hand on the floor of the crate near the dog's head.

The dog looked at the hand, and then looked at Sammy for what seemed like a full minute. Finally, she sniffed Sammy's hand ... and then looked back at him with what seemed like a smile.

Sammy turned to the attendant and said, “I think I would like to take her home. Does she have a name?” “Well, you can name her anything you want, but she did have a name tag on when they brought her in,” replied the attendant.

Sammy looked at the tag, but he could not make out the name on the tag.

“So, do you have a name you would like to call her? – I have to write something on the paperwork,” asked the attendant.

“Hmmm ... I haven't really given much thought to that. My Aunt Margaret is a beautiful and loving soul who goes by 'Maggie,' my Aunt Maggie ... Maybe I'll just call her Maggie. That sounds like a cute name,” replied Sammy.

“Maggie it is,” she said.

Sammy put Maggie on the blanket that he had placed on the floor of his car on the passenger side. She whimpered and shook all the way home, but she did not take her eyes off Sammy.

When they got home, Sammy opened the passenger side door and reached down to pick her up, blanket and all. She again whimpered and cried, but she remained curled in a ball.

Sammy carried her inside and placed her on a bed of towels that he had made, and then brought her a bowl of water and some dog biscuits. She sniffed at the biscuits but did not eat anything ... and she completely ignored the bowl of water.

After an hour or so she fell sound asleep, and Sammy just sat there in his recliner and watched her while wondering about what kind of life she had experienced up to that point.

Sammy remembered that he had a magnifying glass in his desk drawer and went to get it. He pulled out the dog tag he had received from the dog shelter and looked at the tag under the magnifying glass.

The name on the tag was “Heather.”

Operation First Strike

On Monday morning Percy walked into the office in a foul mood.

“What’s the matter with you?” someone asked.

“My dog ran away over the weekend,” Percy replied.

As strange as it may sound, Percy did care about Heather. He always bought her plenty of dog food and biscuits and made sure that her water bowl was full. He even used to take her for walks around the neighborhood, and every month took her to a dog groomer to be bathed and brushed. He only abused her when he was drinking, and he had started to drink more frequently.

So, Percy decided to take his anger out on the local homeless population, and he ordered his administrative assistant to call a meeting with all his sergeants on the police force. He also invited to the meeting the President of the local Chamber of Commerce, his friend Bob Cranberry, and several members of the local news media.

Percy walked into the packed room with a big smile on his face as he headed toward the podium, and here is what he said:

“I love the community of Big Rock, and I want to do everything in my power to make it a wonderful place to live. Well, I should say, it already is a wonderful place to live, and I want to make it even better.”

“As Police Chief of Big Rock, it is my job to make sure that the law is upheld and that everyone who lives here feels safe. That’s not just my job, that is my duty ... and I am honored to be able to serve you in that way. Whether you live in downtown or in the suburbs, you have the right to feel safe ... and by golly, I am going to work to make sure that you feel safe.”

“Our city continues to grow, and every year more and more businesses are relocating here and bringing jobs to our community. We need to make sure that our community remains attractive for businesses, especially in the downtown corridor. Tourism continues to grow, and the downtown area continues to grow. Just in the last year, 5 new restaurants have opened downtown.”

“However, one problem that we have is our growing homeless population. I understand that everyone needs a home, and our city operates at least 3 homeless shelters currently. But the research that my department has been doing indicates that most of the homeless people in the downtown area are homeless by choice, and that many of them spend all day panhandling for change in order to get drunk and do drugs.”

“We get calls every day from businesses that are downtown – restaurants, clothing stores, hotels, gift shops, everyone – complaining about the problem of the homeless, complaining that the homeless are everywhere panhandling and driving away

customers. As a result, I am asking that the City Council pass an ordinance that prohibits all panhandling downtown.”

“Moreover, I suggest that everyone who is downtown should have a verifiable local address. Obviously, we cannot go around checking everyone’s ID to verify a personal local address, for that would be absurd and unenforceable, and of course would not apply to tourists. But when we find the same homeless person sleeping on the sidewalk here one night, sleeping on the sidewalk over there another night, sleeping wherever ... at some point our police force should be able to do an address check in order to verify whether that person should be hanging around downtown. If they don’t have a verifiable downtown address, then we should be able to transport them to one of our homeless shelters and/or arrest them for loitering. Likewise, I think the City Council should pass an ordinance along these lines, that if someone is going to be hanging around downtown, that person needs to be able to prove that they have a downtown address. I’m not a politician, and I don’t know how this ordinance should be written, so I will leave that up to the City Council.”

“If we could clean up our downtown area, it would make our city a more attractive business environment, and tourism would continue to grow, and our city would continue to grow and prosper. As a result, today I am ordering the commencement of ‘Operation First Strike.’ My entire management team is here today, and I am ordering each one to begin cleaning up our downtown area immediately by ridding it of the troublesome homeless people who are just drunk and doing drugs. Follow the law, but within the limits of the law I want you to approach every person who appears inebriated and/or on drugs to find out who they are and what they are doing there. If you can verify that they are drunk, arrest them for public intoxication. If you can verify that they are on drugs, it is your duty to enforce the law and arrest them on the suspicion of being a drug dealer.”

“I pledge to work with the City Council to create these two new city ordinances that I have suggested, and once they are created, I will work with the Council to see that they are passed into law. And in the meantime, my entire team will be committed to the enforcement of ‘Operation First Strike.’”

When Percy stopped speaking, several people began to applaud ... some applauded vigorously, others timidly, and still others not at all.

Maggie

After Sammy awoke, he went to the kitchen to check on Maggie. He found a puddle of pee in three different places. After cleaning them up, he noticed that she had somehow chewed her way through the doggie gate that was designed to keep her from getting into the living room. So, he put her outside while he prepared breakfast.

He walked into the living room with his breakfast on a plate in order to sit in his recliner and watch the sports channel. He was excitedly watching last night's highlights while enjoying his breakfast, but he kept on smelling something strange while he was eating. He got up and looked around the room, and finally discovered behind his recliner a pile of poop.

"I can't believe this," he uttered with a heavy sigh of frustration.

He no longer felt like finishing his breakfast, so he took his plate to the kitchen and began looking for something to clean up the poop. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. He got angry at the person or people who raised Maggie first ... and he got angry at himself for choosing a dog that had been abused. He kept stewing about this, running several scenarios through his mind. He thought about the possibility of returning her to the dog shelter, reasoning that no one should have to go through the burden of caring for an abused dog. After all, he had no idea how badly she was abused ... this could be just the start of many more incidents. Maybe she'll never be able to be around other people or other dogs. What if she tears up the house? What if she gets into clothes and other stuff? And, it is kind of expensive to have a dog, what with all the food that she will need, not to mention leashes and other stuff, as well as veterinary care. Maggie could turn out to be a very expensive, troublesome pet that Sammy would have to deal with for as long as she lived.

Sammy kept ruminating in his mind about all these scenarios, meanwhile the pile of poop was still sitting on the carpet.

Sammy stopped his train of thought, and then said out loud, "There is something good in everything that happens to me. The world is what it is, and I cannot control everything that happens to me ... but I can control how I react to everything that happens to me."

So, Sammy cleaned up the poop, and then shampooed the carpet. He opened the windows in the entire apartment to bring in some fresh air, and then he went looking for Maggie.

She was lying on the doormat just outside the sliding glass door, looking up at Sammy. He stopped to look back at her through the glass pane. She was on the ground peering up at him through the glass, and he was standing up peering down at her through the glass ... they just looked at each other. While he was looking at her, he could feel the love swelling up in his heart, and then he felt bad about having thought about returning her to the dog shelter.

Then he opened the sliding glass door, but Maggie got spooked and darted away. "It's okay," he said. "It's okay, Maggie, don't worry," he pleaded with tears in his eyes. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She lied down again under a bush about 10 feet away. Sammy got down on his hands and knees in order to appear non-threatening. Slowing he inched toward her, stopping every few feet to give her time to size up the situation. She kept glancing left and right, as if to plan her escape ... but she also kept looking back at Sammy to discern his intent.

“Honestly, Maggie, I’m not going to hurt you ... I’m really a good guy. I try not to hurt anyone, ever, including animals ... especially dogs that are as cute as you. Have I told you how cute I think you are? Really, you are precious ... you are my precious, wonderful, beautiful doggie ... and I think that you are going to do great things in this life. Not that you should feel any pressure to accomplish great things, I’m just saying that I think that you are going to be a wonderful friend to me and many other people in this world.”

Maggie seemed to settle down, and Sammy continued to inch his way closer to her. He was about 4 feet away and he had the urge to reach out and gather her up in his arms, but something told him to slow down. So, he stopped to lie flat on his belly, and with his head on the ground he looked sideways right at her.

She didn’t know what to think, or whether to run, or what. He seemed harmless enough, but she could not be sure ... at least not yet.

Sammy continued to remain motionless, lying on his belly looking at Maggie. He wondered whether the neighbors could see him, but then he thought “Who cares?” He stayed there for so long that he began to get sleepy ... he kept looking at her, and she kept looking at him, but his eyelids kept getting heavier and heavier. And then he fell asleep right there on the ground.

When he woke up, Maggie was lying next to him. He started to pet her, and Maggie did not resist nor try to run away. He petted her head, and scratched her neck, and gently rubbed all along her spine, and she even rolled over for a belly rub ... and Sammy’s eyes started to moisten once again.

FBI

As you can imagine, there was quite a buzz around the city of Big Rock following Percy's announcement of Operation First Strike. Many in the business community, especially those that do business downtown, were excited. In contrast, the advocates for the homeless were livid.

The discussion raged for several months, but gradually the opinion of the majority in the community who were in support of the changes prevailed over the opinion of the small, but vocal, minority that were opposed. The ordinances were passed into law, and indeed few homeless people risked going into the downtown area again.

Many people ended up in the city jail, and several of them were facing serious drug charges. The 3 homeless shelters were bursting at the seams with residents, so much so that the homeless merely looked for other places to bed down. In the end, no real positive changes were achieved ... the jail became overcrowded, and the people who were jailed were not getting the help that they needed. And the problem of homelessness merely shifted from the downtown area to the neighborhoods that surround the homeless shelters.

Nonetheless, the city of Big Rock started to become known as a model for urban planning, and it was written about in various articles that appeared both in national and international magazines. Tourism continued to increase, and the city continued to grow and prosper.

Percy, of course, was lauded as the central figure in bringing about these "positive" changes to Big Rock. He became well-known in the police community, and he started to speak at various police and municipal conferences across the nation. Everywhere he went he was received warmly and showered with praise.

Then one day he was approached at a conference by none other than Harold Cohen, the FBI recruiter that he had met at a conference in Las Vegas some time ago.

"I'd like to speak with you for a moment," Cohen said.

They found a quiet place to sit down at one of the large tables on the perimeter of the conference room.

"I've been reading with interest about the things you are doing in Big Rock" ... and Cohen went on to say, "and I'd like to talk to you about the possibility of joining the FBI."

Percy's eyes brightened, and he gushed, "I've always wanted to join the FBI."

"Don't tell me that," Cohen replied, "we tend to be suspicious of those who yearn to join our team."

"Well, I should say, I've worked with various members of the FBI in the Big Rock area, and I've always appreciated the professionalism and thoroughness with which the FBI works ... and I feel strongly that I would be a tremendous asset to the organization," Percy said a little sheepishly while trying to appear not too desirous.

Cohen continued, "The first thing we need to do is put you through an extensive background check. Do you have anything in your background that I need to be worried about?"

"Not a thing," Percy declared. "I was captain of my high school football team, and then I served 4 years in the Marine Corps. Immediately after I completed my military service, I entered the Police Academy and graduated with honors. I joined the Big Rock Police Department and quickly rose through the ranks to become Police Chief. And as you undoubtedly already know, we have done some great things in Big Rock to reduce crime and to make it into a model community."

"I'm not impressed," Cohen said coldly. He then observed how Percy's heart sank, and he looked for other clues as to Percy's emotional makeup. He went on to ask Percy about Percy's past friends, about Percy's management style, about Percy's track record in law enforcement, and among the many questions that Cohen asked, he even asked Percy about any pets that Percy might have had in the past. All of Percy's responses seemed to satisfy Cohen.

Then Cohen got out his business card and handed it to Percy, saying, "Here is my card, and on it is the address to our web site. You need to complete the online application ... and by the way, it is an extensive process and it will take you about 6 hours to complete it. Moreover, after you submit your application, it will take us at least 6 months to complete the background investigation. At that point, if we would like to proceed to the next step in the hiring process, we will contact you. Any questions?"

"If I don't hear from you in 6 months, may I contact you to follow-up?" asked Percy anxiously.

With another cold stare, Cohen replied: "Don't do that."

Super Mag

Sammy slowly inched his way into Maggie's heart, just as he had inched his way toward her along the ground on his knees that very first morning so as not to scare her.

Gradually she adapted to her new environment, and she even felt at home. She learned that she was not permitted to be in the carpeted areas of the house, and that when she was in the house, she was to stay on the vinyl kitchen floor. She learned that she got two biscuits for breakfast in the morning, that dinner was two cups of kibbles at about 5:00 PM, and that she got a bedtime biscuit accompanied by 4 ice cubes that she would chomp with her teeth in order to wash down her bedtime biscuit. And oh, she learned to do her business outside.

There were some things that she didn't enjoy, like the time she was taken to a strange place and later woke up groggy with a sore belly and a plastic cone fastened to her neck. Not only did she spend most of the time in her crate with that cone on, but when she was let out that stupid cone would bang into everything she walked near. Some people said that wearing that cone was like having to wear a satellite dish.

Sammy took her once a month to the local pet store for a bath and brush, which felt pretty good and reminded her of the only times in her life that she felt safe prior to coming home with Sammy. Everyone at the pet store was so happy to see her each month that she almost felt like a celebrity. The only thing bad about going to the pet store was that just before leaving they would put this ugly ass bandana around her neck ... something Sammy took off just as soon as they left the store.

He regularly took her on walks around the neighborhood, and occasionally took her to a local dog park. The dog park was not that great, it was just okay ... it always felt kind of strange at first because as soon as she entered the fenced-in area, the entire pack of dogs that were already there would rush to check her out since she was the "new dog" – it was a bit overwhelming. But eventually the initial excitement wore off and the other dogs left her alone, which was good because then she could sniff the place out.

Sammy became quite the proud Papa, and he frequently referred to Maggie as "my girl." He also gave her various nicknames over time, such as Sweetness, Magster, Mag-a-Million, Mag-Time, Mag-a-Muffin, and SuperMag.

Eventually he decided that he would put Maggie through "therapy dog" training so that he could take her to visit hospitals, nursing homes, and even schools so that many other people could benefit from her gentle and loving presence.

Suffice to say that Maggie became the true friend that Sammy was looking for in a pet.

Buzz

Percy liked to get buzzed.

He stayed sober throughout the week, but every Friday on his way home from work he would pick up a case of beer. He didn't buy beer in public because he did not want anyone in the community to see him buying beer, especially not a full case every weekend. Instead, he would drive down a secluded alley and into an old warehouse where he picked up the case provided by Bob Cranberry. All he did was pop open the trunk, and after one of the escorts had loaded the case in the trunk, Percy would drive away.

Although he was a public figure and was a pretty eloquent speaker, when he wasn't in the public eye, he was pretty much a loner. He'd get his case of beer on Friday, and then go straight home in order to pound down several of them that night. Then he'd get angry and look for something or someone to abuse, like the dog he used to mistreat, or the unsuspecting customer service agent who answered his complaint call ... but mostly he would spew his invective toward the TV while he was watching some sporting event, particularly football. He had wanted to play college football, but no one offered him a scholarship, and he was still angry about that to this day.

After he had about 4 beers, he'd pull out his stash that he kept carefully hidden. It was an old wooden cigar box with a metal latch on the outside and red felt lining on the inside. In it he kept all his paraphernalia, as well as his prized possession ...

Cocaine.

He would make sure that all the drapes were closed, and he would lay out as much as ½ a gram of cocaine on his glass kitchen table. He had an old-style razor blade that he used to separate the cocaine into 6 lines that were each about 6 inches long. Then he pulled out a small red straw, like the kind that is used to mix cocktails, and he would snort one line of cocaine at a time. After he had snorted all 6 lines, he would pound down about 4 more beers and then he felt like he was ready to rock.

Percy's drug habit was very affordable. He regularly pilfered from the drug seizures that his department was making, and since the crime lab always did tests of the drugs that were seized, he only stole the purest cocaine.

He had been hitting the beer and cocaine pretty hard the last few weekends, but he didn't want to put off any longer the online application required to work for the FBI, so one Friday he took the day off from work in order to complete the application.

"What a pain in the ass," he kept saying as he finished one section only to find still another section that needed to be completed. "How in the hell do they know that I worked at a steakhouse for one month when I was 16 years old?" ... "How am I supposed to remember every speeding ticket that I've ever had, and does that include the ones I had erased from the books?" ... "Who the hell knows the birthdates of all their aunts and uncles?"

On and on he went, pissing and moaning the entire time while filling out the application. What made matters worse for Percy is that many questions could not be left blank, they required an

answer ... and Percy would have liked to have left several of those blank. He also assumed that it would be stupid to lie and get caught, so he ended up bending the truth on several occasions, and making up information that he felt could not be disconfirmed, and in the end he hoped that his deceptions would not cost him.

Percy started the process at 8:00 AM and submitted the application that night at about 6:00 PM. "That idiot Cohen told me it would take 6 hours to complete, but it bloody took me 6 hours plus 4 more," he grumbled.

Six months later he still had not heard anything from the FBI. Another month passed, and no word. Two more months passed, and still nothing. At that point Percy started to get really pissed, and he took it out on all the people who were working for him. Eleven months passed, and he was thinking, "What a damn waste of time." So finally, he decided to forget about it, and assumed that he would never work for the FBI.

A year and a half after he had submitted his application, he received a call from Harold Cohen. "We would like to proceed to the next step in the hiring process," Cohen said calmly without offering the hint of any apology for the delay in processing Percy's application. In fact, there was no delay because the process was proceeding normally.

Percy really wanted to bitch about how long it was taking, but he bit his tongue and said, "Okay ... what's the next step?"

Cohen replied, "The next step will take about 6 months, and there is nothing that you have to do."

Confused, Percy said, "I'm not sure I understand."

So, Cohen explained, "For the next 6 months there could be an FBI agent in your life at any moment, and if we are doing our job well, you'll never know it. We could be the Pakistani cashier at the middle eastern market ... or the kindergarten teacher ... or the bicycle repairman ... or the nurse ... or even the police officer. We could be anyone in the neighborhood. We will be observing you to see if you are a good fit for the FBI. Any questions?"

A bit stunned, all Percy could say was, "Nope."

MBA

Sammy continued to shine as a security supervisor for Nation's Best Bank. He supervised a team of about ten security officers, and he had just enough time outside of work to take one course every term toward his MBA degree.

Graduate school was hard ... much harder than he had anticipated. A typical course met two times every week in the classroom, and outside of class he often met with fellow graduate students while working on research or doing team projects. There was generally both a mid-term exam and a final exam, and depending on the class, there could be periodic quizzes as well. But the requirements that were "killing" Sammy, the requirements that proved to be the most difficult were the reading and writing assignments.

For each class he typically had to buy 2 or 3 textbooks, and these weren't anything like tidy 150-page novels. These were exhaustive technical works that were several hundred pages in length, and each book cost anywhere from \$30 to \$60.

Regarding the writing requirements, Sammy wished that he was back in college working on his undergraduate degree where the required class paper was generally no more than about ten pages. In graduate school the research paper required for most classes was at least 25 pages typed ... and for one course, Organizational Communication, Sammy submitted a paper that was 60 pages typed.

One course! Thus, for that one course in Organizational Communication, Sammy had to read three textbooks, take four quizzes, pass the mid-term exam, do all the research required to then write a 60-page paper, and then take a final exam that counted for 35% of his grade. Whew! Graduate school was hard!

After completing 2 years of graduate studies, Sammy figured that it would take him about one more year to earn his MBA degree ... maybe two years.

But Sammy focused on the present moment. He knew that it was easy to get overwhelmed by life and get discouraged, and that he could lose sight of the present moment while focusing too much on the future. He realized that it is possible to become apathetic and not do anything if you focus too much on all that needs to be done. He knew that every person does well to embrace the present moment and all that it provides.

In addition to everything else going on in Sammy's life, he spent as much time as possible reading and listening to self-help and personal development materials. He felt strongly about being dedicated to putting good things into his head whenever possible, and so he was always reading and listening to positive messages about how to live happily, how to eat well, how to listen to your spirit, how to be successful ... in short, about how to live a better life. For example, here is what Sammy might say about living fully in the present moment:

"This present moment is the working unit of my life. All I have is now. The past is past, it is already gone, and there is nothing I can do to bring it back. The future is not yet here, and though I can plan and prepare for the future, there is nothing I can do to fast-forward life and bring it into the now. I can only live in harmony with the nature of God, and God

is always present in this present moment. It is a waste of time and energy to worry about what was, or to worry about what might be. All I have is this present moment, and I want to be fully alive and creative and grateful and loving and wise ... right here, right now.”

Sammy always tried to stay positive, but sometimes he had to struggle against feelings of doubt and discouragement just like many other people. Sometimes he felt that no one understood him, and that his “row to hoe” was harder than anyone else’s. He sometimes had to overcome overt racism. He did not always feel handsome when he looked in the mirror and saw his birthmark. He felt that he had not accomplished much in life, although he had graduated from college and was working on an MBA degree while holding down a supervisory position. He didn’t always feel spiritual and blessed.

Sammy had indeed overcome many difficulties in life and accomplished much, and he was a good man who had many admirable qualities, but honestly, he did not always feel good about himself.

That’s why he felt that it was important to always be putting good things in his head, and to be focused on living a positive, grateful, and giving life.

Paranoia

Percy's conversation with Cohen was enough to put the fear of God in him – well, sort of. At the very least he realized that if he had any chance of getting hired by the FBI, then he had better clean up his act.

The next 4 weeks were hell for Percy. He quit drinking beer and doing cocaine, and he did this cold turkey – he no longer touched the stuff. After that first weekend without his fix, he had the shakes ... and people at work would ask him why he was so jittery. Usually he would respond by saying something like, "Your poor performance is putting this community at risk, and that would make anyone a little nervous."

He also became rather paranoid, never knowing who he might be talking to. Outside of work he had always worn a public persona – public servant, community leader, dedicated professional – but during this time he found himself being overtly friendly to everyone he encountered. At home he kept the drapes and the blinds open all the time, as if to invite the world into his life. He even planted some flowers near the front door of his house.

He replayed that conversation with Cohen repeatedly in his mind. "There could be an FBI agent in my life at any moment," he thought ... "And I will never know who that might be." He got so paranoid that he regretted putting in his application for the FBI. He asked himself, "Why did I invite such scrutiny into my life?" He wondered if listening devices had already been planted in his office and home. He intentionally started to say things out loud while alone in his office or home that he never would have said in the past, things like, "I am a strong leader, and my police force will be the best police force in the nation." He said these things thinking that someone was eavesdropping and listening to him. He remembered that Cohen told him that an FBI agent could be a police officer, and Percy took that to mean a police officer working in Big Rock, and so he started to treat all his employees well. One day he provided sub sandwiches to his entire staff on all three shifts, and many were thinking, "What gives?"

Percy became a model citizen and a model boss. It was as if someone else had been incarnated into Percy's body. Moreover, since he was no longer drinking or doing drugs, he felt much better physically, and he amped up his exercise routine. He became hard as nails and extremely confident by the end of 6 months. He felt that he possessed what it took to be an FBI agent.

Cohen called Percy 6 months to the day after their last conversation and told Percy that he would begin training at the FBI in about 6 weeks.

FBI man ... Percy had made it.

Preacher Man

Just as they had celebrated Sammy's graduation from college, the members of Ebenezer Baptist Church gathered to celebrate Sammy's MBA degree.

But there was at least one celebrant at this MBA party who was not present at the college graduation party – Maggie. She was excited to be part of today's festivities.

Once again, Pastor Jones asked Sammy to come forward and stand before the congregation, but this time because Sammy was older and more mature, he was not so overwhelmed by the moment. He confidently strode up to the pulpit as if to declare to everyone, "Did you expect anything less?" Again, Pastor Jones talked at length about Sammy's life and character, and then asked the congregation to come forward in order to lay hands on Sammy to pray. But this time Sammy asked if he might say something first, and he asked that everyone remain seated so that he could address the congregation ... and though got off guard by Sammy's request, Pastor Jones willingly conceded the pulpit. And here is what Sammy said:

"I want you to know how much I appreciate growing up in this congregation. Some of my earliest memories are of going to Sunday school and of sitting in the sanctuary to hear Pastor Jones preach. I became grounded in my faith here, and I have many friends in this congregation that I will have for the rest of my life. Mom and Dad, thank you for your unfailing love and support, and for showing me how to live with integrity, and for raising me in this community.

There is a part of me that will always be a Baptist, for I have been a member of this congregation for so long that the Baptist faith is woven into who I am. However, I want you all to know that I am much more than a Baptist, and in many ways, I no longer resemble a Baptist. What I am trying to say is that I am also a Methodist ... and a Catholic ... and Jewish ... and a Unitarian ... and a Hindu ... and a Buddhist ... and many other things. I am all these things, and yet not one of them fully defines who I am.

God does not reside in any one religion ... nor does God favor any religious group or culture over another. This is a multi-cultural, multi-color, multi-religion, multilingual, mixed bag of a world that we live in ... and God made it all, and God is sovereign over all. We live in God, and all are loved by God ... every moment of life is a gift from God ... and that is true of everyone who has ever lived, who is alive today, or who will ever live.

The truth is that you can call God by any name you want, you can call God "Universe" or "Spirit" or "Being" or "She" or whatever you want because it does not matter what you call Him ... or It ... or Her. There have been many names used throughout history in thousands of languages to point to the Source of our existence, but no name defines that One. God is love, and love is God, and God is all-knowing and everywhere present at all time. Commune with the Lord in a loving interchange and continual conversation, using whatever name fills your heart. Thank you, Amor! Thank you, Love! You are Creator and you are amazing! How thankful I am that I live in you, and you in me." God is love, and as we love ... we live in God, and God in us ... in every country, language, tradition, and culture for all time.

The blood of Christ is not a FREE PASS into heaven, nor is salvation a one-time decision that secures our eternal state regardless of how we live. Grace is not a BLANK CHECK that we can spend liberally. We show in every moment, in every word, in every deed whether God is alive in our lives.

The Apostle John writing 60 years after Christ as an old man reminds us in 1 John 4:16 what Jesus came to teach us, and that is ...

God is love, and those that abide in love, abide in God. PERIOD.

Those that do not abide in love, do not abide in God, and choose to leave God intentionally through their behavior. God is no fool! God is all-knowing and everywhere present at all time! Our infinite God knows every detail of each one of our lives, and God knows who has love in their heart and who does not. It is easy to love people that are like us, people in our church, people in our culture, people in our country. But how do we treat God's creation who are different than us?

When we die, each of us appears before God to give account of our life and of our deeds done in the flesh, and no group of any kind is involved – it is a face-to-face encounter with God, our Source. Each of us appears before God face-to-face.

God loves everyone equally, and the fact that you are alive means that you have God's stamp of approval on your life. The impoverished boy who is living on the streets of Mumbai, the fact that he is alive means that he has God's stamp of approval on his life. The Chinese factory worker ... the elderly Samoan ... the Russian orphan ... the child prostitute in Thailand ... the Chilean farmer ... the Mexican drug trafficker ... you name it, all of these people have God's stamp of approval on their life by virtue of the fact that they are alive. God made everyone and everything, and God loves all.

Now I realize that some behavior makes God happier than other behavior, and I am not saying that people can live any way they damn well please. (Some members of the congregation cringed when Sammy said the word "damn"). And I realize that society cannot allow people to do whatever they want, to break whatever laws they want, etc., because then we would have chaos. But what I **am** saying is that each of us would do well to be less judgmental toward our neighbor, and particularly toward people of different cultures. How do you know how someone else thinks or feels? How do you know what makes a person do the things they do? How do you know what someone has been through, what influences they have experienced, what teachings they have received? Do you really think that you can judge another person having never walked in their shoes, or lived their lives? Well, do you?

God is sovereign over all. Nothing happens in this world that God does not either directly cause or allow to happen. God is all-knowing and everywhere present at all time – now, what does that leave out? Nothing! God is love, and God is sovereign over all!

It seems to me that the only thing that we can do is ... do our best to love as God loves. Let me say it again! God is love, and the one who dwells in love, dwells in God. Life does not get any simpler than that. Do you hear me!? God is love, and the one who dwells in love, dwells in God. We have studied that in Sunday School, correct? But do we live that? It seems to me that it is one thing to study a message, but it is another

thing entirely to live that message. Do we really live the LOVE we learn about in our church, or do we study the Bible just to give the appearance of being devout?

I don't know about you, but that's what I want to do ... that's what I want to be ... to live to be love. To have earned an MBA degree is great, but if I cannot love like Jesus loves, if I cannot love like Buddha loves, if I cannot love like Guadalupe loves, if I cannot love as Parvati loves, then I still have some work to do, then I still have some loving to do.

Thank you all for coming here today, and I want you to know that I love each one of you."

When Sammy finished speaking, the entire congregation remained seated in stunned silence. Pastor Jones' jaw had dropped wide open. Sammy's parents kept looking at each other, not knowing what to think. Sammy had a big smile on his face, and Maggie's tail was wagging furiously.

What to Think?

The FBI is a mysterious organization to most Americans, and probably to most people in the world who have heard of it.

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation. What do they do there? Do we really want to know? How big of an organization is it? Are they operating both in the USA and throughout the world?

Why does it seem that no one ever talks about what goes on in that organization? Is it because they make it financially worthwhile for every FBI employee to keep quiet about anything and everything, or is it because an employee will forever regret spilling any of the beans?

Does anyone know all the FBI's secrets? Is the organization so large that it is impossible for anyone, including the Director of the FBI, to know everything that they are doing?

Does everyone who works for the FBI follow the laws of the United States while engaged in FBI business? Or, are they allowed to bend or break the laws while they are working to enforce the laws? Is that one of the perks of working for the FBI, especially for someone who has worked for the organization a long time in clandestine operations and, perhaps, risked their life in the process ... have they earned the freedom to bend and break laws in order to enforce the laws and protect the country? It seems that if someone were in the practice of feeling above the law while working and enforcing the law, that that same person would feel above the law during non-working hours. For example, have you ever seen a police car run through a stop sign or pass through a red light? Are police officers dressed in uniform and driving police cars always on official business, or could it be that sometimes they are not actually working but, in a hurry, to meet their buddies for breakfast at the donut shop? Is this one of the perks of being a police officer or of working as an agent for the FBI? Or, should we assume that everyone who has ever worked for the FBI is completely above board and honest and law-abiding at all times? Certainly, no FBI agent would ever think of setting aside confiscated drugs for personal use or confiscated money for personal financial gain? Every ounce of illegal drugs that has ever been confiscated has been incinerated, and every illegally gained penny that has ever been confiscated has been submitted to police headquarters for processing – is that how it is?

How about the CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency? Do we really know what the CIA is up to? Do we want to know? Has the CIA always acted with integrity in the world? Has it always operated honorably before God in Central America, in Asia, in the Middle East, or wherever? If everything that the CIA has done or is doing were somehow revealed to the world, what would that do for U.S. diplomatic relations in the world?

The FBI and the CIA ... two organizations that are cloaked in secrecy and that every American should appreciate if they value their standard of living and want to maintain their personal security. It is indeed possible that the U.S. could get overrun and taken over if not for the existence of the CIA and FBI, although any invading army would also have to get past the massive American military as well. That seems like a fat chance for at least the next 100 years, the big unknown being any super-destructive mega-bomb (built by those who hate America) that could somehow sneak through untold hundreds of barriers and protective systems. For now, terrorist groups as well as organizations and countries that hate the USA must be content with inflicting little pockets of death and destruction.

CIA. FBI. Police. Drugs. Terrorists. War. Pandemics.

It is a big and scary world out there ... and perhaps, dear reader, it feels like a big and scary world to you right where you are right now.

So, what is a person to do? Given your situation right now, wherever you happen to be, whoever you happen to be ... what should you do? What can you do? What will you do?

You are free to choose. It seems that some people enjoy more freedoms than others, but even if you are enslaved in a country or place where there are no personal freedoms, you are free to choose how you think right now. So, what do you think?

Your mind is your own personal refuge. You are free to choose how you think, and no one can change how you think without your consent. And the mind is a powerful device, the most powerful device that ever existed. Many people believe that the mind is beyond the physical, beyond a brain that is housed in a skull, that the mind is in fact meta-physical. The mind exists beyond the physical life of existence, and you can think of it as energy that extends way beyond wherever you carry your brain. With your mind you can be anywhere you want to be, do anything you want to do, and in fact – here is the weird part – with your mind you can materialize something in the physical universe. (At least I warned you that I was about to say something weird). We are not talking about magic here, but about your ability to manifest something that you keep fixed in your mind ... it may not happen instantaneously, but it may very well happen eventually. God is sovereign over all ... and with God, all things are possible. The power of the mind.

Take for example a young woman who is living in poverty but who can see in her mind becoming a medical doctor, or a teacher, or a store owner, or whatever she feels drawn to be. She keeps that vision in her head, and in spite of the circumstances of her life, that vision becomes the driving force in her life, leading her, and bringing to her everything and everyone she needs to manifest her vision. She can use her mind and the power of her thought to manifest in the physical world what was once only ... a thought.

So, what will you do with your mind today?

Will you use it to make a better world? Will you use it to become healthier? Will you use it to learn something new? Will you use it to improve your relationships? Will you use it to create peace? Will you use it to feel good about yourself and your place in the world? Will you use it to give and serve? Will you use it to love?

May we all use our mind well.

Now back to our story.

Leticia

J.J. had planned to work 10 more years until he was 65 years old, but he ended up working until he was 70 before he finally had enough. J.J. had played football all his life, including 4 years in college on scholarship, and 2 more years on practice squads trying to make it in professional football. He was an offensive lineman, and a man can get pretty beat up working in those trenches. As a result, when he was 70 years old his hips were really starting to bother him, made even worse by the fact that he had put on an extra 50 lbs. over the years. So, he decided to retire from Nation's Best Bank with 40 years of service.

After the retirement party, Sammy went to J.J.'s house to visit with the family and to talk with J.J. about their long history of working together. As if he hadn't said it enough over the years, Sammy told J.J. how much he had enjoyed working for him, and then thanked him for everything he had done to support Sammy's career at the corporate offices of the bank.

"The company needs to make you the next Security Manager – you know that don't you?" J.J. told Sammy.

Sammy had not even given that a thought ... and now that J.J. had brought up the topic, he just figured that J.J. could never be replaced. Moreover, the economy was down, and the company had put a freeze on hiring, so Sammy assumed that the company would not even staff the Security Manager position again.

"Well J.J., I appreciate your confidence in me. Even if the company decides to fill the position, I don't envy the person who must follow in your footsteps," Sammy shared.

"Nonsense," declared J.J. "The company needs to fill the position, you are the best man for the job, and with your knowledge of computers, you'll do far more in that position than I ever could," J.J. said reassuringly.

Sammy was humbled by J.J.'s encouragement and kind words, and he told him that he would wait to see what the company does.

After their conversation in the living room, the entire family gathered around the large oak dining table to enjoy a hearty meal of ham, mashed potatoes with gravy, green beans, and dinner rolls, followed by apple pie with vanilla ice cream.

All of J.J.'s children had returned home for the celebration, including his oldest child Rodney who worked in New York as a lawyer, and who rarely had time to come home for a visit. Vanessa the middle child was there too with her husband and their two kids – they had travelled all the way from New Mexico. And the youngest, Leticia, was always around because she was an RN who worked at the local Baptist hospital.

Leticia had been a pimply-faced kid with a mouth full of braces when Sammy and J.J. first started working together, but now she was a beautiful 25-year-old woman. At one time Sammy felt like an uncle to her, but he hadn't seen much of her in the last 7 years.

“Leticia,” Sammy interjected, “I remember when you were getting your driver’s license. For two months straight your dad’s face was almost white when he came to work,” and everyone laughed at the memory of Leticia’s trials behind the wheel.

Then Leticia said, “And I can remember when you first brought Maggie home ... you didn’t know the difference between a kibble and a biscuit,” and everyone cracked up laughing again.

They visited around the table for a long time, and eventually everyone headed off to bed ... all except Sammy and Leticia, they were the last ones to stay up and were watching football together in the living room.

“So how do you like working at the hospital?” Sammy inquired.

“Oh, I like it a lot ... it is a tremendous learning experience for me – there is never a dull moment. But eventually I want to work in a private office for a specialist,” Leticia replied.

“How soon do you want to be doing that?” Sammy asked.

“Well, as soon as possible I suppose ... I really haven’t given it much thought,” she said.

So then Sammy hit her with a blast of positivity and strange talk about manifesting and coincidences and whatnot, saying “If that’s what you really want to do, then get a picture in your mind of working in a specialist’s office. Not only that but get clear in your mind when you want to be doing that ... five years, five months, five weeks from now, whatever ... and hold that picture in your mind from now until it becomes reality. Be on the lookout for any signs that it might come into your life, leading you in that direction, such as something you might read on a website or a conversation you might have with someone at the hospital. You could receive a sign in the most unexpected place ... and trust your instincts. Believe that you are worthy of finding your ideal job, and trust that God will provide that for you ... and it might arrive sooner than you think because the universe likes velocity.”

Leticia did not quite know what to think of all that, but even so she found it interesting ... and she appreciated Sammy’s encouragement.

As for Sammy, he felt good about being able to encourage Leticia, and he always liked talking about the power of positive thinking and faith. But truth be told, Sammy also had some other feelings going on that night. Sammy had always thought that Leticia was a cute kid, but she had always been just a kid to him ... until now. She had become, umm ... well ... she was all grown up now ... and ... she was a professional ... that is ... she had finished college and was working as a lovely nurse ... helping people to feel better and heal ... and she was 25 years old now ... a grown woman ... no longer a kid ... “That’s crazy,” Sammy said to himself as he started to imagine a romantic connection with her.

Immediately, Sammy got up to leave and gave Leticia a big hug goodbye, and then he headed home ...at exactly 12:00 midnight.

Undercover

Percy spent 5 years working for the FBI. As an FBI agent, he participated in some significant drug busts as well as other high-profile arrests, but he also made some serious blunders ... so serious that at times he would risk the reputation or even the life of a fellow agent in order to make a name for himself.

On one case he was working with an undercover agent who went by the name Muerte and who had infiltrated a drug gang. This dude had tattoos all over his body – a large red dragon on each of his calves, tattoos that covered both arms all the way down to his wrists, a large black spider that covered his entire back, and a blue-and-yellow striped snake with a tail that started at the back of his neck and that wrapped all the way around his neck twice before ending with the head of the snake near his throat. He also had a large gauge stainless steel earring “tunnel” in each earlobe, the kind that you can stick your entire finger through; those tunnels seemed to dangle halfway down his neck. This dude had gotten all his tattoos and the ear lobe tunnels over the course of 10 years *after* joining the FBI. Talk about someone dedicated to his craft.

With this disguise it had been relatively simple for Muerte to infiltrate the drug gang. He started as a low-level “runner” who was only permitted to transport drugs from one location to another, or from one dealer to another. This is one of the most dangerous jobs in a drug gang, and it is where all new members start out. A rookie needs to show the gang that they are willing to risk a long prison term to become a full-fledged member, and if someone gets caught running several pounds of cocaine, they are going down for a very long time. Of course, as an undercover FBI agent, Muerte did not have to worry about a prison term.

Muerte had been recording conversations and documenting drug dealing activity over the course of 5 years, and the FBI was on the brink of making multiple arrests and dismantling the entire gang. But Percy, in his zeal to earn a promotion, secretly ratted out Muerte to a rival drug gang mid-level leader that he had befriended, a guy by the name of Santo. Percy did not hide the fact that he was a member of the FBI, he had simply walked up to Santo one day and said, “I know who you are, and I know what you do ... and I want you to know that we are watching your every move, and every move your mother makes, and every move your wife makes, and every move your children make ... there is nothing that you and your family are doing, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, that we don’t know about.” Santo thought Percy was joking at first, but soon realized he wasn’t ... so he played the game, too. “So, if you know what I am doing, why don’t you arrest me right now?” Santo offered in response. Percy replied, “Because you are a small fish, and we are after big fish.”

This is how Percy’s relationship with Santo started, and over time Percy enjoyed the banter that he had with Santo, so much so that he started to appreciate Santo and, strangely, even considered him a friend. Santo was smarter than that, however, and continued to play the game and act like a friend while always watching what he said and while keeping his guard up.

One day Percy decided to go for the big strike and offered a deal to Santo. If Santo would tell him when he could catch Santo’s boss in possession of at least a pound of cocaine, then Percy would give Santo the name of an undercover FBI in their rival gang. Percy was willing to destroy Muerte’s entire case against a gang, built over several years, in order to score a victory for himself. What Percy did not realize was that all along Santo had been feeding him a pack of lies

about his boss in the gang, telling Percy how much he hated his boss for making his life miserable. So, Percy thought that Santo would be willing to expose his gang boss in order to get the boss arrested, thus clearing the path for Santo to move up in the gang. It was all a ruse, for Santo would never expose his boss like that, not if he still wanted a family ... alive. So, Percy ratted out Muerte, and a few weeks later Santo's boss acted like he was moving a stash of drugs in a brand-new black luxury sedan with some fellow gang members. The FBI swooped in to make the arrest ... and didn't find a trace of drugs. The gang was moving boxes of candles. Meanwhile, several people on the street (who were friends of the gang) had whipped out their cell phones and were documenting on video the entire scene, thus the FBI couldn't even arrest Santo's boss on suspicion of transporting drugs ... the gang implored the arresting agents to open every door, look under every cushion, telling them to show the evidence (they said this while they were being handcuffed) ... and the crowd nearby (growing by the moment) was also imploring the FBI to show some proof that there were drugs in the car. The agents finally decided to let them go, and the gang drove off in that black sedan that still had a new car sticker showing through the dark tinted backseat window.

In another part of town, however, Muerte was still operating undercover in a rival gang ... and now he could be killed at any moment. Luckily, Muerte had incredible instincts, and all it took was a few meetings with members of the gang before he sensed that something was amiss. He did not hesitate and immediately went to a safe place to suspend his undercover operations. Over time his suspicions were confirmed by the talk in the streets, he learned that someone had exposed his undercover work ... and almost all his work over several years had been destroyed. When the FBI arrived to make arrests, most of the people they were targeting had fled the country.

The FBI could never prove that Percy had ratted out Muerte, but they were strongly suspicious. There was also the suspicion that Percy was pilfering from drug seizures, something they also could never prove because Percy never actually used any of the drugs he stole, he was merely collecting a stash for possible later use. Thus, not one of the frequent urine samples that Percy was required to submit tested positive for drugs, and so the FBI had no evidence against Percy. But again, there was always the suspicion that Percy was not someone who could be trusted.

In the end, the FBI decided that they had had enough of Percy after 5 years, and strongly suggested that he find another line of work.

In the Men's Bathroom

Two months after the retirement party for her dad, Leticia went with some girlfriends to a concert in the downtown arena. One World was the name of the band, and they were an all-female group composed of Skye the lead singer, Sunny on keyboards, Venus on lead guitar, Star on bass guitar, and Moonlight on drums. They played music that was a combination of rock and reggae, and while the band played there was an incredible light show that was designed to make concert goers feel like they were being transported through space. When they weren't rocking out with soaring guitar solos, they had the whole place dancing to a reggae vibe.

Halfway through the concert, Leticia and her friend Ariel decided that they could not hold it any longer, and they practically had to climb over the nearby pulsating fans in order to go find a bathroom. With an audience of mostly females, the arena had converted half of the men's restrooms into ladies' restrooms to accommodate the demand, and it was into one of those converted restrooms that Leticia and Ariel strolled. They chuckled at the advertisements that had been placed over the urinals, one of which was evidently paid for by a doctor who, shall we say, helps older men who are having trouble having sex. The thing that was so funny to them was that the physician's name was Dr. Brenda J. Peters.

"No way!" exclaimed Leticia while laughing hysterically, "This has got to be a joke."

So, Ariel proposed a new advertising slogan for the good doctor, saying, "Got a problem with your peter? Don't be down ... come see me, Dr. Peters, and we'll the perfect solution for you!"

Those two started laughing so hysterically that Leticia had to sit down right there on the floor of what would normally be the men's restroom. Then she screamed, "Oh my God! I'm sitting on the floor of the men's bathroom!" She quickly scrambled to her feet ... and at this point Ariel was doubled over in laughter and she nearly dropped to the floor herself on her knees.

So, they quickly took a pee, and then Leticia said, "We've got to get the hell out of here," while grabbing Ariel's arm. Just then two other women walked into the bathroom and asked, "Is there something wrong in here?"

Leticia and Ariel busted out laughing again, and then proceeded to show the other two ladies the advertisement above the urinal.

One of the ladies hollered, "Oh my Lord ... I'm about to pee my pants."

Leticia pointed her in the direction of a stall, and implored her to move quickly, saying, "Go! Go!" while continuing to giggle. Then she looked at Ariel and said, "Come on already, let's get out of here."

Then Ariel shot back, "But we haven't washed our hands yet," as she stumbled toward the sink in laughter. Before she could get to the sink, she started to wipe away tears of laughter that were streaming down her cheeks – and then she let out a screech, saying "Oh my God, I'm touching my face!" She was half laughing and half grossed-out by the thought of using the men's toilet and then touching her face before washing her hands.

Two more women walked in, and they didn't know what the heck was going on. So, the second two women showed the newest two visitors the advertisement for Dr. Peters above the urinal, and then they all started laughing so hard that one of the newest visitors also sat down on the floor to catch her breath.

Then Leticia screamed, "You're sitting on the floor of the men's bathroom!" That woman also let out a screech and quickly scrambled to her feet. Then the **other** of the two newest visitors said, "I'm about to pee my pants." In unison, 3 of the first 4 bathroom visitors pointed at the 4th bathroom visitor and exclaimed, "That's what she said!"

Fortunately, none of the ladies had any accidents there in the men's restroom, and after Ariel had washed her face and re-applied her makeup, they returned to their seats at the concert. When they were finally seated, all their friends were looking at them curiously, and so one of them shouted loud enough to be heard over the band's music, "**WHERE HAVE YOU TWO BEEN?**" Leticia shouted back, "**WE WENT TO SEE DR. PETERS AND ...** "

Security Manager

Nation's Best Bank did decide to fill the position of Security Manager and posted the position on all the major online job boards, as well as sent notices to several recruiting firms throughout the state. There were over 40 applicants for the position, including Sammy. The company spent several weeks reviewing applications, which included doing background investigations on all the applicants.

About 5 weeks after he had applied for the position, Sammy was invited by a member of Human Resources to interview for the position. The HR rep must have asked him 50 questions:

"Why did it take you 7 years to finish college?"

"Why did it take you so long to find a job after finishing college?"

"With a college degree, why would you pursue a job as a security officer?"

"How many days of work have you missed due to sickness since you joined Nation's Best Bank?" She asked this question as if a member of Human Resources wouldn't already know that exact number of days.

"Of the days you called in sick, how many of those days were you actually sick?"

"What do you like most about your job?" ... "What do you like least about your job?"

"If one of the security officers on your team confided in you that they had a drug problem, how would you handle that situation?"

"In what ways have you failed as a security supervisor?" ... "In what ways have you succeeded in your position?"

"Male or female, have you ever been attracted to one of your employees?"

"What have you done to make Corporate Security more efficient?"

"Where do you see yourself working 5 years from now?"

"With an MBA degree, why would you want to continue working in Corporate Security?"

"How is Nation's Best Bank better off for having employed you?"

On and on the questions went, and over an hour later Sammy was exhausted. Then a second Human Resources representative entered the room, and the first one left. The new HR person put Sammy through essentially the same battery of questions. Another hour later, Sammy walked out ... and his head was spinning.

During the interviews with Human Resources, at the very beginning of each of those interviews Sammy was told how many applicants there were for the position. That information was a little

unsettling to Sammy right off the bat. He undoubtedly approached both those interviews a little overconfident, assuming that he was a shoo-in for the position since he had worked in the department for so long and because he had J.J.'s recommendation.

One week later he was required to interview with the Director of Property Management, which was a department that worked closely with Corporate Security. That interview was no easier than the first two, and when he walked out of there, he began to doubt himself. He wondered if he had been consistent in his answers in all three interviews, and he kicked himself at the thought of some things that he had said, and the thought of some things that he did not say but wish he had said.

Another week went by, and he was told that he would interview next with the Chief Operations Officer (COO). Holy crap! Sammy hadn't had any dealings with the executive team, and he had no idea how to approach such an interview. So, the weekend before the interview Sammy spent several hours researching online interview questions, learning about what to say and not say in a job interview. He also researched the background of the COO, as well as researched carefully all the business lines that the company pursued, and he felt confident that he would go in and knock the socks off the COO with his informed answers. Shortly after ushering Sammy into his wood-paneled office on the top floor with a view of the city below, the COO hit Sammy with this question: "Let's assume that you are the Security Manager, and that one day I told you to eliminate 30% of your staff. Who would you cut, and why?" Sammy was taken aback, and the whole interview unraveled after that. Sammy had many friends in the department, including many that were probably not considered top performers, and though he did not approve of how the slackers did their job, he knew that many of them supported families and he wouldn't want to see anyone lose their job. But the COO forced Sammy to give some names, and Sammy found himself squirming in his seat as he tried to answer the question. Later that night at home, Sammy felt guilty about some of the friends that he had suggested were underperformers and expendable.

Another week passed and Sammy found a letter in his mailbox. It began, "We had many highly qualified applicants for the position of Security Manager, and while your qualifications and experience are meritorious, we regret to inform you that ..."

Dr. Peters

In the afternoon on the Sunday after the concert, Leticia parked in the same parking spot that she always parked in, and walked past the same office buildings that she walked past every day on her way to work ... and then she saw the sign, “Dr. Brenda J. Peters, Urologist.”

“No way!” she muttered in disbelief.

She still had 20 minutes before she started her shift, so she wandered into the office to learn more about Dr. Peters’ practice. She tactfully explained to the receptionist that she was a nurse at the nearby hospital, and then Leticia told her, “I’ve just got to tell you ... my friends and I were at the One World concert the other night, and we used one of the men’s restrooms that had been converted to a women’s restroom for the concert. We saw the advertisement for Dr. Peters practice and ... well ... we were surprised to learn that a female physician is helping men with ED.” Then the receptionist said, “And I bet you think it is funny that her name is Dr. Peters, right?” “Well,” Leticia said sheepishly, “the thought did cross my mind.” The receptionist laughed and explained that quite a few people make that comment, and she also told Leticia that they receive several prank calls a week from men who have seen the advertisement hanging over urinals all over town. But the receptionist said that the entire staff had been carefully trained on how to field those calls, and that after getting past the humor they explain to the callers that Dr. Peters is well-known in her field, and that she has helped many men with that condition. Moreover, she told Leticia that the staff thanks each caller for their call, and then they tell the caller to tell other friends about Dr. Peters’ practice.

Then the receptionist said, “I’m sorry, Leticia, but I need to go get something in one of the back offices ... we are short-staffed, and everyone is pitching in to cover.”

Leticia replied, “No problem ... thanks for the information ... I’ll let you go.”

Then the receptionist said, “One of our nurses moved to California, but we hope to hire someone to replace her soon. Bye, have a great day.”

Leticia walked out, and while she was walking to work it suddenly dawned on her what Sammy had told her a few months earlier ... “You could receive a sign in the most unexpected place,” and that her ideal job “might arrive sooner than you think.”

The next morning Leticia went online to see if there was a posting for the position of nurse in Dr. Peters’ office. Sure enough, it had been posted, and the deadline for applying was that very day. So, she thought, “What the heck,” and applied for the position.

One week later she was interviewed by Dr. Peters herself, and Leticia was offered a job on the spot. Not only that, Leticia would no longer have to work weekends and evenings because Dr. Peters’ office was only open 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM Monday through Thursday, and on Friday from 9:00 AM until noon. And if that wasn’t enough, Leticia would be making \$12,000 more per year than she was making at the hospital.

“I would love to join your team,” Leticia happily told Dr. Peters. “I am impressed by your willingness to advertise in unconventional ways, by your ability to succeed in a position normally reserved for men, and by the professionalism with which your entire organization operates.”

To which Dr. Peters replied, “We are thrilled that you will be joining us. When would you like to start?”

Back to Police Work

Percy allowed himself to fall into a deep depression after losing his job at the FBI, and he thought about getting some personal counseling. But then he concluded that counseling is for wackos, so he decided to manage his emotions by using the stash of drugs he had siphoned from the drug seizures he participated in while working for the FBI. He thought long and hard about whether he wanted to get back into doing drugs, for it had been several years since he touched anything, but ultimately, he went for it because he missed getting a buzz. Besides, he didn't want all those good drugs to just go to waste, or at least that is what he told himself in his own twisted way of trying to justify using drugs again.

In addition to cocaine, now he had pot, hashish, and pure opium that he smoked in a glass pipe. He had seen too many addicts get really strung out on some of the harder drugs, like the ones that are shot into a vein using a needle, so at least he had enough sense not to start using those more addictive drugs. And he was back to keeping the windows shut and the blinds closed at his house. Flowers in the flower bed were a distant memory.

He had some money saved up, so he did a fair amount of travelling. He went on some guided hunts in the northwest part of the States, of course for him the thrill was in the kill and not in harvesting meat for consumption. He didn't even want the animal pelts, which could be made into rugs, clothing, and whatnot – he preferred to just let the carcasses rot, reasoning that the birds and other animals needed to eat too.

When he wasn't going on animal hunts, he was going on hunts of another kind ... he went on a cruise in the Caribbean, and he went to some of the big party spots in Mexico, such as Cancun, Acapulco, and Cabo San Lucas. After partying and travelling for quite a while and burning through most of his savings, he decided that he had better get back home and start looking for work.

He thought about going back to work in Big Rock, but he decided that he needed a change of scenery, and he hoped that he could find work in some other part of the country. So, he hired a job search firm and paid them big bucks to develop his resume and to assist him with the job search process. The firm specialized in placing people into law enforcement positions and into similar lines of work. His plan was to become a police chief again, and after extensive searches his firm was able to identify three open positions, each in a different part of the country. He didn't have the money to buy airplane tickets, so he ended up driving several hours to each location for the interview. The interviewers in each city thought it was odd that he had abruptly left the FBI, and that he had left a supposedly promising and secure career after only five years. Percy did not help his candidacy by being particularly evasive in his responses to questions about why he left the FBI, and his story tended to change in each interview. And when the FBI was contacted, they would only verify Percy's dates of employment, but would not provide any additional feedback on Percy's FBI record.

So, Percy lowered his sights, and he decided to become a police officer again, but this time he wanted to work in the city of his choice. However, the city that was his first choice was not hiring any new police officers, and his second choice never responded to his application, and his third choice considered him briefly but terminated the process after speaking with Big Rock, and his fourth choice of cities told him that he had failed the drug test.

After the positive drug test, he assumed that every other police department in any place he might like to work would probably administer a drug test as well. So, as hard as it was to do, again he weaned himself off all drugs.

After cleaning out his system, Percy continued to pursue a position as a police officer ... but after applying to several locales, there still was no place that wanted to hire him.

He started to get desperate as well as highly agitated with his job search firm, so he instructed them to widen their search to include any job in fields related to law enforcement, such as private border patrol, prison management, armored car money transportation, security, etc. The search firm concluded that any large company could benefit from Percy's years of work in law enforcement, and they arranged several interviews for Percy. One company was particularly impressed by Percy's background, and felt that he could help them secure their banking operations ... Nation's Best Bank right there in North Carolina offered Percy the position of Security Manager in their corporate offices. He would not be making nearly as much money as he had in the past, but since he was broke and had no other options, he reluctantly accepted the position.

Thank You

Sammy was extremely disappointed not to get the position of Security Manager, and felt it was tacky of the company to inform him via a standard rejection letter. They acted as if they did not know him.

So, Sammy decided it was time to look for work elsewhere ... he had been at Nation's Best Bank long enough, and it was time to put his MBA degree to work. So, whenever he could outside of work, he hit the job search process hard and heavy.

It didn't take Sammy long to remember how arduous his last job search was ... he had looked and looked and looked, and finally had to settle for the position of security officer. During his newest job search, prospective employers were turned off by the fact that he had an MBA degree but seemed to have settled into a corporate security position. They also didn't feel that he had any real-world experience in leading-edge technology or in business operations, so they declined to even interview him.

Sammy felt stuck.

"Okay, back to the drawing board," he said to himself. "What do I need to do to get out of this funk that I am in?"

He started by adopting an attitude of gratitude, and by doing gratitude exercises every day. In the morning when his feet hit the floor he would say, "Thank you, God, for this new day." Then he would give thanks for everything he experienced, for everything he saw, and for everyone he met, all day long ... dozens of times a day he would say "thank you" ... such as:

Thank you for the air I breathe.
Thank you for shelter, and for a bed to sleep on.
Thank you for electricity.
Thank you for a bathroom.
Thank you for my job and for everyone I work with.
Thank you for my clothes.
Thank you for my birthmark.
Thank you for plates and bowls and silverware.
Thank you for flowers.
Thank you for birds and insects.
Thank you for rainbows.
Thank you for my parents.
Thank you for all my friends, and may I be a great friend to all.
Thank you for every place or worship, and for every worshipping heart.
Thank you for challenges.
Thank you for the people who don't understand me or don't like me, or who hate me.
Thank you for CDs.
Thank you for software.
Thank you for vacuum cleaners.
Thank you for soap and for cleaning supplies.
Thank you for food, especially Thai food ... and Indian food ...

Thank you for dictionaries.
Thank you for all the languages in the world, and for all the people in the world.
Thank you for electricity – did I say that already?
Thank you for paper and pencils and pens.
Thank you for trees.
Thank you for transportation.
Thank you for my neighbors.
Thank you for dirt.
Thank you for the sun and moon and stars.
Thank you for surprises.
Thank you for my tools.
Thank you for my bicycle.
Thank you for my furniture.
Thank you for insight, hope, and love.
Thank you for fire.
Thank you for eyeballs.
Thank you for TV.
Thank you for laws.
Thank you for people who drive slowly right in front of me.
Thank you for clouds and rain and wind.
Thank you for calendars.
Thank you for computers and tablets.
Thank you for fruits and vegetables.
Thank you for books and magazines.
Thank you for my shoes.
Thank you for parties.
Thank you for that spider that is on the wall that I'm about to smash.
Thank you for gymnasiums.
Thank you for sports.
Thank you for Leticia.
Thank you for restaurants.
Thank you for money, and may I use it wisely.
Thank for the opportunity to give and to help.
Thank you for school.
Thank you for my phone.
Thank you for prayer and meditation.
Thank you for grocery stores.
Thank you for garbage collectors.
Thank you for my family.
Thank you for the ocean.
Thank you for the beach.
Thank you for wine and beer.
Thank you for medical marijuana.
Thank you for coffee and tea.
Thank you for incense.
Thank you for teachers.
Thank you for all my talents.
Thank you for the way you made me, and for the opportunity to design my life.
And thank you for Maggie ... she's a good doggie.

It's a Date

Leticia was loving life.

She couldn't have been more impressed with the professionalism with which Dr. Peters did her work. Not only did Dr. Peters have a large and successful practice with many clients, but the entire staff was thoroughly trained to provide the highest level of customer service. ED can be very traumatic for many men, and each man who came to Dr. Peters for help was treated with dignity, respect, patience, anonymity, and with the most highly advanced procedures, technology, and medicinal therapy available.

Leticia was warmly welcomed on the team from day one and responded by investing herself heavily in becoming highly informed and trained. She cared more about her work than at any other time in her life, and she dedicated herself to this new position out of gratitude for the opportunity and because she appreciated the work environment.

There was nothing that she wasn't willing to do ... everything from the most mundane tasks to what could potentially be the most embarrassing. Dr. Peters' name and practice were a joke to Leticia only briefly, but now Leticia handled every situation like the consummate professional.

It didn't take long for Leticia to be noticed for her professionalism and dedication, and eventually she was promoted to the position of Nurse Manager and given additional responsibilities.

She had thought about Sammy many times since starting work for Dr. Peters, and one day she finally decided that she could put off no longer thanking Sammy for his encouragement and prescient advice ... so she called him.

Sammy: "Hello"

Leticia: "Hi Sammy, this is Leticia."

Sammy: "Hey! How are you?"

Leticia: "I'm doing great – and you?"

Sammy: "Fabulous, as always. I'm happy to hear from you ... what are you up to?"

Leticia: "Well, I decided to take your advice and start visualizing myself working for the office of a specialist. Not only that, I could see a new job clearly in my mind coming into my life in the near future. I could really feel what it would be like to work in such an office."

Sammy: "Yeah ... and what happened next?"

Leticia: "As you suggested, I started to be more aware of my life, more aware of my surroundings, believing that good things were coming my way, and looking for any sign of my ideal job."

Sammy: "Did you get a sign?"

Leticia: "Well, as a matter of fact, I did."

Sammy: "Tell me more ..."

Leticia: "I would love to tell you the whole story, but in order to thank you properly for your encouragement, I would like to take you out to eat at your favorite restaurant ... and over dinner I will give you the whole scoop."

Sammy: "You're going to give me your whole scoop of ice cream?"

Leticia: Giggling, she said, "No, Silly, I mean that I have something to tell you, but I want to tell you in person."

Sammy: "Okay, that sounds great. Hmm ... my favorite restaurant ... hmm ... that's going to be a toss-up between Thai and Indian food ... hmm ... I think I have to go with Thai curry at Thai Village."

Leticia: "I love that place!"

Sammy: "Fabulous ... when do you want to go?"

Leticia: "How about this Saturday? I'll pick you up, say, at 7:00 PM."

Sammy: "I'll be ready ... I'm looking forward to it."

Leticia: "Me too."

Fire Me, Please!

Okay, let's just say it – Percy is a jackass. That much is painfully clear. Unfortunately, it gets worse. He also hates black people, brown people, red people, yellow people, pink people, and just about any person who is not his color.

So, when Percy found out that one of his security supervisors was African American, he let his racism rage.

“No-good, lazy, worthless, n*****s,” he repeated over and over. The problem for Percy was that he heard that Sammy was a long-time, excellent, employee who would be difficult to terminate. Percy was also told that Sammy had applied for the position of Security Manager, and that he was disappointed about not getting the position. “Oh great,” Percy said sarcastically ... “Now he's going to be pissed-off and he won't do anything around the office.” Moreover, Percy heard all about J.J. and his long-standing contributions to the company, and that J.J. had recommended Sammy for the Security Manager position. As a result, Percy knew that he would need to tread lightly for a while until he could endear himself to the “powers that be” in the company.

On his first day of work, Percy was invited to have breakfast with the COO, Norm Wilcox, at the local pancake house. Shortly after they walked into the restaurant they were seated before several others who had been waiting, and they were quickly ushered to a corner booth. It turns out that Norm was also a Marine, and in fact served as a Military Police Officer. Percy and Norm visited for a long while at the pancake house, talking about military life and about old war stories. They hit it off immediately when Norm had interviewed Percy, and now they were becoming close friends.

After breakfast, Norm escorted Percy into the corporate offices and showed Percy the Corporate Security offices on the 10th floor, which were one floor below the top floor where most of the executives were located. Percy would have a high-profile position, not only securing the banking operations, but ensuring that the company executives were always protected and safe.

Shortly thereafter, Percy was invited to the home of the Chief Marketing Officer where he had the opportunity to hobnob with various key people in the company. Percy seemed to really impress just about everyone. Percy settled into his new position and bided his time while he waited to put his stamp on his department.

Finally, the day arrived when Percy met with his three security supervisors ... and here is what he told them:

“I have been hired to clean up this department and make it more efficient. Beginning today, each of you will be starting from scratch. I don't care how long you've been working for the company, as far as I am concerned your work performance will be measured and evaluated from this point forward. Likewise, for your teams ... you will start today and analyze the performance of each of your employees based on the guidelines I will send you via email later today. The guidelines are entitled Total Security Excellence, or TSX for short. The first time one of your employees fails to meet one of the guidelines stipulated in TSX, you are to write up that employee and put them through

the work improvement process. They'll have 30 days to improve their performance and correct their deficiencies, but if I or anyone else in management here at Nation's Best Bank observes one of your employees who is on work improvement failing to meet any of the guidelines in TSX, that employee will be terminated immediately. Or, if any of you supervisors fails to meet the guidelines in TSX, I will write you up personally and put you through the work improvement disciplinary process, and any additional infraction during a 30-day period will result in your termination."

"I'm going to make your job easier right off the bat. Times are tough, and the economy is down. We need to cut staff in order to become leaner as a department and in order to save the company some money by eliminating excess salary and benefits. By the end of today, each of you need to submit to me the names of three people on your teams that will be, shall I say, right sized. You don't have to say anything to the effected employees, in fact I would prefer that you don't say anything. Human Resources can contact each employee tonight and guide them through the process of separating from the company. Each effected employee will receive some form of compensation based on their length of service to the company, those guidelines are stipulated in the Human Resources Policies and Procedures Manual. I think the severance package pay is one week of pay for every year worked at the company. What I would like to see you do is cut some of the employees who have been here the longest ... they are the ones who are at the top of the salary scale, and by eliminating them it will save us even more money. When these nine people are let go, we will instantly achieve an estimated 30% reduction in payroll expense."

"Good job, guys, and I will look for your list of names later today. That's all for now."

Sammy and the other two supervisors stumbled out of Percy's office, each one a little numb. Sammy thought to himself, "What shall I do? Should I just quit and leave the company today?" After thinking about it some more, he decided not to quit because he realized that the company would make the cuts anyway, so he would rather make the decision himself as to who was let go.

He pondered it some more and wondered if he could devise a strategy that appeared to meet Percy's wishes, while doing a favor to his effected employees. So, Sammy decided to meet with his most senior employee first, and then work his way down the seniority list until he had identified his three employees who would be let go.

First, he met with Clarence Brown ... Clarence had been working for Nation's Best Bank for what seemed like forever. Clarence was a very likeable guy, but honestly, he did not do much work.

Sammy: "Hey Clarence, come here! I need to talk with you ... let's go for a walk."

Clarence: "What's up, Boss?"

Sammy: "The new guy who is now over all of us, Sir Percy, told me today that I need to eliminate 3 people from my team."

Clarence: "No way!?"

Sammy: “Well, Clarence, I’ve been thinking. I know that your health has not been good lately, and you’ve said that you want to spend more time with your grandchildren. You’ve got 32 years of service, which means that the company would offer you a severance package that includes 32 weeks of pay, one for every year of service. Does that sound of interest to you?”

Clarence: “I’m only 6 months from being eligible to collect Social Security, and I was planning to retire then anyway. This severance package will start my retirement party early. Yippee!”

The second guy on the list, Harold, was in a similar situation. He had been looking for an excuse to quit for 2 years in order to pursue his passion for woodworking, but his wife insisted that he not quit until he had another job lined up. It just so happened that Harold recently went to a woodworking symposium, and he met a guy there who needed a part-time woodworker in his shop, and though it was only part-time, the guy was willing to provide full benefits. After explaining what Percy directed him to do, Sammy said to Harold, “You’ll get 26 weeks of severance pay for leaving the company – are you interested?” Harold, with a sparkle in his eye, exclaimed, “Lay it on me, Baby!”

Number 3 on the list was Frank, who had worked at the company for 20 years. After Sammy had explained the whole situation, here was Frank’s response:

“Oh my God! ... I have been wanting to go back to school for the longest time in order to finish my graduate degree, but I keep putting it off ... and putting it off. Well, I finally decided last week that I was going to go for it. My youngest child just left for college, and she will be on a full scholarship to play volleyball – I’m very proud of her. And I’ve already contacted the university to see what courses I need to take in order to complete my degree. I was going to submit my resignation to you tomorrow afternoon. But maybe I shouldn’t have told you that – now that you know I was going to resign, am I still eligible for a severance package?”

With a smile on his face, Sammy declared, “But of course! Twenty weeks of pay should pay for at least 2 school terms, plus books.” Then Frank said, “That is exactly how long it will take me to finish my degree!”

Thai Village

Leticia arrived promptly at 7:00 PM to pick up Sammy to take him to dinner. Sammy had been waiting somewhat nervously for at least 20 minutes for her to arrive.

Sammy was decked out in dark blue casual pants, a white shirt with fine red stripes, and a beautiful gray vest that was made of alpaca wool. Leticia was equally decked out for the evening, and she looked stunning in a calf-length red dress. She had been to the beauty shop earlier that day, and her long curly tresses of jet-black hair looked gorgeous.

Though Leticia had always thought of Sammy as an uncle, she now considered him a good friend ... albeit, a good friend who was several years older than her. She really enjoyed staying up and watching football with him at her dad's retirement party, and she found herself being attracted to his gentle spirit and wise counsel. And she never once thought that the large birthmark on Sammy's face made him unattractive – on the contrary, she thought it looked like a star, which would be fitting for a bright light of a person like Sammy. So, she put on her finest dress with the intention of letting the evening unfold as it may.

Sammy: "Did you get a new car?"

Leticia: "Oh, I've had this for a few months. I decided that I needed something that got better gas mileage ... plus I love the big sunroof."

Sammy: "This is a sweet ride."

Leticia: "Thanks, Sammy. How are things going for you?"

Sammy: "Oh, I'm doing great. Work has been kind of interesting lately ... I've got a new boss, and he feels that he needs to clean house. But maybe it's not his doing, and instead it could be that the executive team told him that he needs to reduce staff and lower expenses. In any case, he told me the other day that I need to let three of my employees go."

Leticia: "You mean fire them?"

Sammy: "No ... they need to be laid-off in order to save on payroll expense. It worked out great. Clarence was ready to retire ... Harold wanted an excuse to get into woodworking ... and Frank wanted to go back to school to finish his graduate degree. So, it actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise for those three."

Leticia: "Well that sounds good, I think."

Sammy: "Oh yeah, it's all good. So, tell me ... what good things have come into your life today?"

Leticia: "Um, good things? Well, I'm not sure what you mean ... it has been a fairly normal day so far, with the exception of going out to dinner with you – that's a good thing!"

Sammy: "Every day is a blessing ... and each day blessing upon blessing pours into our lives. The air we breathe ... the food we eat ... the opportunities that we have ... the circumstances in our lives ... the people we interact with. There is something good to be found in all of it. Sometimes we recognize the blessings, and sometimes we don't. For example, every person no matter how difficult they might seem, has something to offer us, something to teach us. Every day I try to find a blessing in everything I experience and in everyone that I meet ... and I try to be a blessing to everyone that I encounter. I don't always succeed, but that is my intention."

Leticia: "Wow."

Sammy and Leticia arrived at the restaurant a short while later and they were seated at a nice table for two in a romantic corner of the restaurant. They had a wonderful evening together, and afterward walked hand-in-hand to the car. They stopped at the sidewalk next to the car, looked into each other's eyes, and kissed softly. After Leticia dropped Sammy off at home, he floated from the car all the way into his house, past Maggie who was waiting for her bedtime biscuit, and into his room where he rolled onto his bed fully clothed. He soon fell into a deep dream.

Turning Point

When Sammy had submitted his list of three employees to be laid off, Percy said to him, “Now how in the hell did you get your three most senior people to agree to leave without a fuss?”

Sammy explained, “Well, it was not easy. I had a heart-to-heart talk with each of them. I explained that with your leadership, Mr. Percy, the company, and particularly our department, was becoming nimbler, more efficient, more focused, and that it would take radical changes to achieve our departmental goals. I said that TSX is here now, and that only the best and most productive employees would be able to perform at that level. I realize that you suggested that we let Human Resources handle the process, and I appreciate that. However, I wanted to be the one to clean house on my team in order to show every other member of my team who is the boss ... under your leadership, of course. I really think it enabled me to strike some fear into the rest of my employees ... and I expect that I will have no problem with any of them going forward. Anything else you need, Sir?”

Percy didn't know what to say, and he was so dumbfounded that he focused on trying to avoid saying something stupid, so all he said was, “Umm, no ... I don't need anything else right now.”

After Sammy walked out of Percy's office, Sammy said to himself, “You know ... maybe I can work for this guy after all. I just need to remember to properly inflate his ego first, and then fill it full of bullshit.”

That sounds kind of harsh coming from a loving guy like Sammy. To be clear, he understood that we all have feet of clay, and that no one should look at another person and pass judgment on them or ridicule them. Even the most despicable, hateful, insensitive people have some admirable qualities. The only way to reach anyone's heart and possibly turn them away from hate ... is to love that person unconditionally, to look for anything at all good in that person, and to focus on that one admirable trait. This was Sammy's plan for relating to Percy.

Sadly, Sammy's life began to take some dramatic turns for the worse from this point forward.

It started one day when he got home and discovered that his house had been vandalized. When he walked up to his house, he discovered that the front door had been kicked in. His first thought was to call the police immediately, but he could tell that no one was around, so he gingerly walked in. “Maggie!” he called ... “Maggie, where are you?” After calling her name several more times, he finally found her hiding under the back porch. She was obviously traumatized, and it took him quite a while to coax her out from under the porch.

After he got Maggie settled down, he reviewed the damage and discovered that someone had searched through all his cabinets, all his drawers, and all his closets ... but strangely, nothing appeared to be stolen. However, for some reason whoever it was that had been in Sammy's house decided to destroy all of his personal development materials that he collected over the years, all of his DVDs, CDs, and all the old cassette programs that he had found in thrift stores. Moreover, his computer was destroyed, as well as his CD/DVD player, cassette player, and MP3 players. Fortunately, some of his material was backed up to the cloud, but certainly not everything. It would be difficult and expensive to replace everything he lost.

Severance

About two weeks after his three senior security officers had been released by the company, he got a call from Frank.

Frank: "Hey Sammy."

Sammy: "Who's this – Frank?"

Frank: "Yeah, Buddy – what's happening?"

Sammy: "Not much ... how are things going for you in your transition to a new life?"

Frank: "Well, the reason I'm calling is that HR told me that I would be receiving my severance check one week after I left, and I still haven't seen anything yet. So, I called them a little while ago, and they told me that I need to speak with Corporate Security."

Sammy: "What? Okay, let me find out what's going on ... I'll call you as soon as we get this resolved."

Frank: "Thanks, Buddy."

So, Sammy went straight to Percy, and here is how that conversation went:

Percy: "I'm kind of busy at the moment, Sammy ... what is it that you need?"

Sammy: "Just a minor issue, I am sure it can be resolved easily. One of my guys that was let go was told he would have his severance check by now, but he's anxious to move on with his life and he has not seen the check yet. So, he called HR, and they told him to call our department. Do you know what's going on?"

Percy: "They were all terminated for cause, and thus not eligible for severance."

Sammy: "What?!"

Percy: "That's right ... each one of them failed at least twice in a few short hours to meet the guidelines stipulated in TSX, and therefore they were terminated by the end of the day."

Sammy: "Were they told that they had not followed some procedure? And did they know they were being terminated?"

Percy: "HR was supposed to handle that. Besides, that's not any of your business because you were not involved with that process. Now as I told you when you arrived, I'm busy now and I don't have time to talk."

Sammy didn't say another word, he just turned around and walked out glumly.

Sammy was beyond upset about what Percy had done ... he was despondent. How could this have happened? How could Percy have done that? Did HR deceive them? Sammy went incensed that night thinking about the whole situation, he did not know what to think or do. Sammy always had a bright and sunny disposition, willing to embrace whatever happened to him and to look for the good in it all while maintaining a positive attitude. But how do you apply that to your friends? What was he supposed to do, go to them and say, "Oh let it go ... there is something good in it for you." How ridiculous is that? He also felt guilty because it looked like he had somehow participated in the process.

The next morning, he went to the HR office and insisted on speaking with the HR Manager. After waiting for half an hour, he was told to come back in 2 hours. Sammy was steaming, but he restrained his urge to give them an earful, and instead said, "That would be fine."

Two hours later he arrived 15 minutes early. Again, he waited for half an hour. Finally, one of the HR reps came out and told Sammy that the HR Manager would see him now. Here is the conversation that Sammy had with Mrs. Clayborn:

Mrs. Clayborn: "What can I do for you, Sammy?"

Sammy: "Mrs. Clayborn, there seems to be some misunderstanding. Three of my employees were laid-off a few weeks ago, but somehow or another they were terminated. They were under the understanding that they would be accepting a severance package in exchange for leaving the company. How can we resolve this?"

Mrs. Clayborn: "Well, we started to prepare severance packages, but Percy came to us late in the day and told us that your three people were being terminated."

Sammy: "But we can't do that to them! All three were well-liked and good employees who had worked here for many years."

Mrs. Clayborn: "Sammy, we measure employees based on performance, not on how well they are liked."

Sammy: "But Mrs. Clayborn, you don't understand. They were good employees, and they agreed to leave the company in order to help our department meet payroll budget. They were told that they would be receiving severance packages."

Mrs. Clayborn: "Sammy, you're not in a position to offer severance packages. Besides, Percy decided to terminate them for cause prior to their departure from the company."

Sammy: "But they were not advised about any infractions that they had committed."

Mrs. Clayborn: "One of our HR contractors actually handled the exit interviews, so I don't know what they were told. All I know is that each of them signed exit paperwork that stated they were being terminated for cause."

Sammy: "That is absurd, Mrs. Clayborn!"

Mrs. Clayborn: "I beg your pardon, Samuel."

Sammy: "That just isn't right ... that is a violation of their rights as an employee. We cannot treat long-standing good employees like that. They were deceived."

Mrs. Clayborn: "Every employee who works for this company is told when they are hired that this is employment 'at will.' That means that either the employee or the company can terminate the employment at any time for any reason. That article protects both the employee and the company."

Sammy: "That's bull crap! And I think it is sleazy that you used a contractor to do your dirty work. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Mrs. Clayborn: "This conversation is over, Sammy ... and I'm going to talk with your manager about your behavior."

Sammy: "Fine! Write me up! Fire me! See if I give a damn!"

With that, Sammy stormed out of the office.

Pizza

Sammy thought long and hard about what he would do next, and he came up with a plan. He called Clarence, Harold, and Frank to arrange a time when he could meet with all of them at once. He invited them over to his home for dinner. Each of them appreciated the invite, but each was a little curious to know why the four of them would be meeting for dinner ... those four had never done anything socially together like this. Sammy convinced them he would treat them like kings, and that he had something important to share with them.

Sammy didn't prepare the meal, instead he ordered three extra-large pan pizzas from the best pizza place in town. Additionally, he bought three bottles of fine wine, as well as three different six-packs of the most expensive beer available.

When the three arrived, they were struck by how happy and jovial Sammy was acting ... he had jazz music playing on the stereo, and he was dancing around and high fiving them for just about anything they said or did. Finally, Harold said, "What is up with you, Dude?" Sammy replied, "I'll tell you in a little while ... but first let's have some pizza and a few beers." After they had chowed down on pizza, they settled in the living room to talk.

Clarence said, "I know what it is ... Sammy is sweet on J.J.'s daughter Leticia." Then Frank chimed in, "That's it! I heard about that relationship through the grapevine." So, Sammy responded, "No, no ... that could be one reason why I am so happy, but that's not what I'm about to tell you." Then Clarence said, "So what is it?" Here is what Sammy told them:

"Guys ... I have some really bad news for you. But hear me out! After I give you the really bad news, I am going to give you the really good news ... and the really good news will more than make up for the really bad news."

"So, let me start by saying that I try to take the long look at people. What I mean by that is that I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. I do not want to unfairly judge anyone at any time, let alone judge them too quickly or harshly ... but having said that, I've got to say that my boss Sir Percy seems like one really mean dude. You could call him an ass! May God forgive me if I am wrong, but I just get a bad vibe when I am around him.

"So, here is the really bad news, but remember that I am going to follow this up with some good news, so don't go nuts until you hear everything that I have to say."

"As it turns out, Sir Percy terminated your employment at Nation's Best Bank. That's right, you were all terminated. Evidently he schemed with Human Resources to have you all terminated."

All three were looking shocked, but Sammy continued:

"I don't know how it all went down, nor do I know what you were told ... but evidently the paperwork you signed stated that you acknowledged that you were being terminated for cause. I know, I know ... it is a lie and deceitful, and unlawful as well, but let me tell you what we are going to do about it."

“I know exactly how much money all of you were making when you left the company; as a member of management, I was privy to that information. So, what I have done is written a check to each of you for the money you would have received in severance, PLUS I added an extra \$200 to each check to compensate you for your trouble. I wasn't the one that terminated your employment, obviously, but I am responsible for letting it happen. I feel terrible that you were deceived in this way, but I will resolve the situation.”

When Sammy finished talking, there was quite a lengthy and animated conversation around the circle about what he had told them. More than a few times someone referred to Percy as “that bastard,” and they also used other assorted expletives to describe Percy and this situation.

But one time when Sammy had gotten up to use the bathroom, the guys huddled to discuss the situation briefly, and before Sammy had even returned, they had agreed on a plan. When Sammy sat down, they told him that they would not accept his offer. They told him that he was the best boss ever, and a good friend. And while they appreciated his gesture and his generous heart, they told him that they simply would not accept any money from him. They would check into applying for unemployment, but if for whatever reason that did not work out, they would simply consider this situation to be a hard lesson in life ... and it was yet another example of the racism that each of them had experienced regularly in their lives.

Sammy tried valiantly to convince them otherwise, to convince them to accept the money that he had offered, but they would not budge.

Jack

One of Leticia's best friends from high school worked at Nation's Best Bank, and one day while on her way to the offices to pay Sammy a surprise visit, Leticia ran into her old friend. Just before she reached the front doors, Leticia happened to glance to her right and saw him sitting on a bench. "Jack is that you?" she asked. "You have to be kidding me ... Leticia! How are you?" he hollered. They were both surprised by the unlikely encounter, and excitedly hugged and held hands and wouldn't let go of each other, it had been so long since they had seen each other.

They sat down on the bench and chatted for 30 minutes non-stop. To them the time just flew by ... and they couldn't stop touching each other, they had been such great friends and they were both "touchy-feely" and affectionate people. Jack was on his lunch break, but he decided to call his boss and tell her that he needed to take the rest of the day off. Leticia and Jack decided to have lunch together, and off they went. Though Leticia had planned to visit Sammy, since it was a surprise visit, she assumed that Sammy had not spotted her outside his building (otherwise, he no doubt would have approached her and Jack), and she just planned to visit him another day.

Leticia and Jack spent the rest of the day together, and then she cooked dinner for him that night. At the end of the night they exchanged phone numbers and email addresses, and they agreed to get back together soon. Of course, Leticia told Jack about how her relationship with Sammy had evolved from thinking of Sammy as an uncle to the point where they now had just started dating. Jack told her that he would love to get together with those two.

A few days later, Percy called Sammy into his office. Percy had heard about Sammy's interest in Leticia, and knew that she was the daughter of J.J. Moreover, someone on the Corporate Security team had been watching Leticia's meeting with Jack outside the building on surveillance video, and he passed that video on to Percy. Not only that, as the Security Manager for the company, Percy could monitor all communications to and from the company, and he captured an email exchange that Jack had with Leticia because Jack had given Leticia his work email address. After Sammy sat down in Percy's office, here is how the conversation went:

Percy: "How are things going for you, Sammy?"

Sammy: "Things are going well ... But you must understand, in my mind things are always going well because that is the way I choose to view everything I experience in life."

Percy: "I really like you, Sammy, and I would hate to see you get hurt."

Sammy: "What do you mean by that?"

Percy: "I have some video that I want you to see ... take a look at this monitor."

So, Percy showed Sammy the video of Leticia running into Jack outside the building, and then waited to see how Sammy would react. The conversation continued:

Sammy: "Well, it looks like those two are really good friends. I don't know who that guy is."

Percy: "Like I said, I don't want to see you get hurt. His name is Jack Taylor, and he works in Marketing here in the home office. I thought you might also be interested to read the email exchange those two had the next day ... I just happened to come across this while I was monitoring a report on company communications. Here, read it."

Sammy: "I'm not sure that I should be reading someone's private email correspondence."

Percy: "Nation's Best Bank owns all of the equipment and systems in this building, and Corporate Security is responsible for monitoring everyone's use of our equipment, including computers and computer programs. There is no such thing as private correspondence via email on company computers, all correspondence should be business related and is open to scrutiny. More importantly, it is our job in Corporate Security to monitor correspondence on company computers. Now, since you are a security supervisor that is a member of my management team, I want your opinion on what this email says."

So, Sammy went against his gut instinct, and read the email. It said:

Leticia: "Hey Jack ... it was so wonderful to see you the other day, and I can't wait to see you again. You were looking all sharp in a suit and tie, and you get more handsome every day."

Jack: "You are a Sweetheart ... and just as beautiful as ever. Thanks so much for making dinner for me the other night, it was a wonderful evening."

Leticia: "It was my pleasure – call me! Leticia."

Jack: "Will do ... see you soon. Love ya, Jack."

After Sammy read the email, he had a sinking feeling in his heart. His head was spinning a bit, and he couldn't really remember anything else that he talked with Percy about. After he left Percy's office, Sammy got busy with work and forgot about the meeting until he was on his way home. He was totally distracted while driving home ... the words in the email kept flashing into his mind ... "can't wait to see you again" ... "Sweetheart" ... "wonderful evening" ... "call me!"

Sammy was so distracted that when the driver in front of him stopped suddenly to turn into a parking lot, Sammy rear-ended the vehicle. Sammy and the other driver got out of their cars and met in the middle of the street. Sammy asked the other driver why he didn't use his turn signal, but the other driver said that he had used it and that Sammy shouldn't be following so closely. A disagreement ensued, each blaming the other for the accident, and of course when the police showed up Sammy was cited and given a ticket since the trailing driver is required to maintain enough stopping distance. Both drivers were okay, but since there was a fair amount of damage, both vehicles had to be towed. Sammy was given a ride home, and shortly after he arrived home, he received a phone call from Leticia. Here is their conversation:

Sammy: "This is Sammy."

Leticia: "Hey Sammy, what's up?"

Sammy: "Who the hell is Jack?"

Leticia: "What do you mean?"

Sammy: "Who the hell is Jack? You know, the guy you had your hands all over in front of my building ... did you two have a nice dinner together at your place?"

Leticia: "How do you know that?"

Sammy: "A little birdie told me so."

Leticia: "Listen, Sammy, Jack is just an old friend of mine ... a really good friend that I just happened to run into on my way to visit you."

Sammy: "Yeah, it appears that you two are really good friends, almost intimate friends."

Leticia: "What are you talking about, Sammy? I don't understand you ... this is all just a misunderstanding."

Sammy: "Well listen ... I think I am too old for you anyway. You're a good kid, and I wish you all the best in this life. Really, I hope things go well for you."

Leticia: "I don't understand ... does this mean you don't want to continue dating?"

Sammy: "Yep ... I think it would be best for now. I got a lot going on in my life right now, and I need to work through some things. I'm sorry if I misled you in any way. Take care."

Leticia (in tears): "Okay Sammy ... if that is what you want. Honestly, I can explain everything. I'm sorry if I hurt you!"

Disconnect.

Pet Day

After Sammy and Leticia stopped dating, Sammy was feeling sad and lonely. He had thought about calling Leticia several times, but also thought that she might call. It seemed to him that maybe she was better off with someone closer to her age, and if her and Jack were meant to be together then it would happen ... or, that if Sammy and Leticia were meant to start dating again, then it would happen. Sammy decided to let the universe work out the details.

Not only was he feeling sad and lonely, but he also began to think that he was on a run of bad luck lately. His house had been vandalized, he lost several of the personal growth resources that he had collected over time, his buddies lost their jobs, he was not enjoying his job and could not seem to find a different one, he got into an accident and wasn't sure how much that would cost him, and to top it all off ... his dating relationship with Leticia, which seemed to start with great promise, fizzled quickly and was now over.

He said to himself, "What could I be doing wrong? ... Why am I attracting these things into my life? ... Is God punishing me?"

He resolved to get out of that stinking feeling and reframe his negative thoughts and cast them into positive thoughts. He got clear in his mind that God was not punishing him, and instead he remembered that God loved him with an everlasting love ... Sammy got clear in his mind that he was a good man, a funny man, a generous man, a loving man, a kind man, a great friend ... Sammy got clear in his mind that he had many admirable qualities, and that everyone around him had many admirable qualities as well ... Sammy knew that life is good and meant to be celebrated.

To overcome some of the loneliness that lingered in Sammy's life, Sammy started to spend more time with Maggie. While going on walks, or going to the park, or taking her to the pet store, or wherever they went together, he often thought back about their history together. He thought back to the day he went to the dog shelter, about how he resisted at first to select Maggie fearing that she might be emotionally damaged and therefore be a troublesome pet. He chuckled about the memory of that first morning when he woke up to find three puddles of pee in the kitchen and a pile of poop behind his recliner. At first Maggie was very afraid around people, and Sammy felt good about how he was able to bring her out of that shell of fear. She still had her moments of anxiety, like when she was hiding under the porch after the break-in, but all-in-all she was doing great.

Though Sammy was not feeling too thrilled about Nation's Best Bank and about continuing to work there, he remained grateful for his job and for his employee benefits. One of his favorite benefits was the annual Bring-Your-Pet-to-the-Bank Day. It was rather comical; people would dress their pets up in various costumes and there would be all sorts of games to play in the grassy area outside the bank's corporate offices. The company invested a lot of money to put on this event, including hiring several contractors to serve as pet sitters to enable employees to continue working during the day as much as possible ... but in reality, this day was almost like a vacation day because most people didn't get much work done. And the company supported that break from work to appreciate the place that pets have in our lives.

While Sammy was outside with Maggie enjoying the festivities at pet day, Percy wandered into the area to see what was going on. Sammy spotted Percy and waved him over.

Sammy: "Mr. Percy, I would like to introduce you to the best dog that ever existed. Say hello to Maggie." But Maggie immediately began to cower and whimper behind Sammy, and she refused to be seen. "Sorry Boss, but I am not sure what is wrong with her at the moment."

Percy: "Well, there are lots of other dogs here, some much bigger than her ... she is probably afraid."

Sammy: "That could be so ... but I have only ever seen her be afraid around people."

Percy: "Why is she afraid around people?"

Sammy: "I don't really know. When I picked her out at the dog shelter, they told me that they thought she had been abused by her previous owner."

Percy: "Abused?"

Sammy: "Yep, she was very fearful around people. She also had several pelt marks on her body ... evidently the asshole who had her first would hit her with something. It took quite a while for her to heal both physically and emotionally, but now as you can see, she has blossomed into a wonderful dog and she is a friend to all." With that, Sammy stood up to give Percy a better look at Maggie ... but she continued to whimper and try to hide.

Percy: "She evidently has more healing to do." Then Percy started to look at Maggie intensely with a curious look on his face. "Was it already named Maggie when you got it?"

Sammy: "Nope ... that name just kind of came to me ... I thought it sounded like a cute name. I certainly wasn't going to keep the name she originally had."

Percy: "And what was that name?"

Sammy: "Heather."

Immediately, Maggie began to whimper even more, and then she started barking ... Sammy could hardly control her. Percy suddenly got a real serious look on his face, and then said he needed to return to work to attend to an urgent matter. Sammy kept looking around to see if he could find what was bothering Maggie, but he could not see anything, nor could he get her to settle down. Sammy had to take the rest of the day off so that he could take Maggie home.

Breathe

The next morning at work Sammy opened his email and found a meeting invite from Percy that included Mrs. Clayborn. Oh no, Sammy thought ... now he was going to get in trouble for his conversation with Mrs. Clayborn about the way his buddies had been unjustly terminated. Sammy did not have much time to think about it, the meeting was scheduled to take place in just 15 minutes in the Office of Human Resources. Sammy accepted the meeting invite, and immediately left in order to go to the meeting.

Sammy could feel anxiety arising within himself, so he decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator. Though his office was on one of the upper floors and the Office of Human Resources was on the first floor, he reasoned that the walk down the stairwell would burn off some extra energy and settle him down. But as he walked down the stairs, he thought, "What is there to be anxious about? ... What is the worst that could happen to me? ... What are they going to do, fire me? ... If they let me go, it could be the best thing that ever happened to me."

As Sammy walked down the steps, he started practicing deep breathing exercises. He told himself to breathe in deeply all the way down into the abdomen ... let it out naturally, touching the outbreath softly while letting it go. Deep breath in ... let it out softly. Ahhhhhhh. Over and over again, Sammy did this breathing all the way to the meeting. By the time Sammy reached the meeting, he was feeling quite relaxed and at peace.

Percy: "Sammy, we are not going to beat around the bush here ... you are being put on work improvement for failing to meet the guidelines stipulated in TSX, and furthermore you are being demoted to the rank of first level security officer."

Sammy: "Well, I started my career here in the position of first level security officer, and it has worked out pretty well for me ... I may as well give it another go. Besides, as you know Mr. Percy, there are a lot of headaches that come with managing people – at least I won't have that to worry about."

Percy: "You are being demoted, Sammy. That is a black mark on your record."

Sammy: "It depends on how you look at it. Maybe I didn't learn everything I was supposed to learn as a first level security officer, and now I have this opportunity to go back and learn everything this time."

Mrs. Clayborn: "You are also being put on work improvement, Sammy."

Sammy: "Who in the world cannot improve the way they do their work? I want to improve and do better every day, so I appreciate your reminding me of how important that is."

Mrs. Clayborn: "You seem to have a rather cavalier attitude about all this, Sammy. This is a serious matter."

Sammy: "In light of many other things in the world, this situation pales by comparison. Am I slaving away, day after day, having to work every day in a dirty and dangerous factory just to bring home a meager wage that barely feeds my family? Am I a political

prisoner who is imprisoned unjustly for standing up for the truth? Was I abandoned by parents who sold me into slavery? Do I have to search for scraps of food with hundreds of others in a stinking, rotting, city landfill? Do gangs threaten me every time I go anywhere? Am I homeless, without food, without opportunity, without hope? Mrs. Clayborn, I beg to differ with you ... this is not a serious matter. In the grand scheme of things, this is small and insignificant.”

Percy: “Sammy, you are being put on work improvement for your inappropriate comments and disrespectful behavior that you exhibited at your last meeting with Mrs. Clayborn ... and if your attitude today is any indication, it won’t be long before you are terminated as well. One additional violation of TSX in the next 30 days will be your last!”

Sammy: “Thank you, Sir. What else can I help you with today?”

Percy: “You need to sign this document acknowledging that your comments and behavior toward Mrs. Clayborn were inappropriate and unprofessional, and that any further violation of TSX in the next 30 days will result in your termination.”

Sammy: “But I don’t acknowledge that I was inappropriate, so I will not sign that document.”

Mrs. Clayborn: “Your refusal to sign the document releases Nation’s Best Bank from liability for severance compensation since it violates our “at will” working environment. Also, just as someone who refuses to take a breathalyzer is assumed to be guilty and given a ticket for DUI, any employee who refuses to sign the TSX work improvement form is assumed to be in violation of our corporate policy and culture.”

Sammy: “So if I am considered in violation of corporate policy whether I sign the document or not, why would I sign a document that I know is false?”

Mrs. Clayborn to Percy: “Put a note on the document indicating that he refused to sign it, and initial that note, Percy.”

Sammy: “Do you have anything else that you would like to share with me?”

Percy: “Go and report to Adam for work, he is waiting in his office for you ... he will give you your assignment for today.”

Sammy: “Thank you ... you two have a wonderful day.”

Sammy walked out of the office and could be heard whistling a tune as he entered the stairwell for the long walk up. As directed, Sammy reported to Adam for work ... which was an awkward moment for Adam since Sammy had been with the company for far longer than Adam, and because Adam and Sammy had been peers who were fellow security supervisors. Sammy completed his shift, and then went home to think about what he would do next.

When he got home, Sammy found Maggie in the back yard ... dead.

Death

Sammy was devastated.

He could not believe it at first. He was saying, "Maggie ... Maggie ... wake up!" but when he reached down to pet her, he realized that she was not breathing. He was in a state of shock.

So, he got down on his knees beside her, and gently petted her. Then he began to sob.

The tears just seemed to pour out of him ... flowing as buckets of water down his cheeks, soaking his shirt ... falling on Maggie as he gently kissed her on the head.

"Please don't leave me, Maggie," he pleaded.

Sammy stayed there for a long time on the ground beside her. It was as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders, he couldn't seem to move. He just kept sobbing.

When it felt like there was nothing left in him, when he wanted to cry but could not cry any more, he slowly and gently picked Maggie up and cradled her in his arms ... and then walked into the house and placed her in an empty cardboard box. He tucked a large towel all around her, and then walked out the front door to begin the two-mile walk to the veterinarian. Sammy's car was still in the shop, and he had no other transportation.

As he walked along the road, he discovered that he did in fact have many more tears within him. The tears would stream down his cheeks and wet the cardboard box as he held it to his chest.

Walk.

He would shake his head occasionally, and then look to the sky as if to ask, "Why?" But then he would remember that often God does not answer that question ... at least not right away, not when we are pleading for a response. The answers often come down the road, when we have had time to reflect on what has happened to us. We grow wiser, but the price of wisdom sure seems high at times. Maybe that is why wisdom is so valuable.

Breathe.

As Sammy walked along, he was barely breathing. His breathing had become shallow and tense, so he decided to breathe deeply. As he inhaled and his stomach expanded, the cardboard box was pushed out tight against his arms ... and then as he exhaled, the box fell soft against his chest. He tried to walk with a very measured and even gait, so as not to jostle the now still body of Maggie.

Cry.

This is how it went ... some crying and breathing and walking, all three mixed together as if they were one ... falling in and out of the various stage of grief ... disbelief, anger, and whatever else consumes your mind in moments like that.

Think.

Sometimes it is hard to turn off the mind, to turn off our thoughts. This was one of those times when Sammy's thoughts just seemed to fly in every direction, but he also remembered to stay present, to stay in the moment, to allow himself to mourn.

Life.

Occasionally, a car would whizz by ... and then it would get quiet again as Sammy kept up that gentle, slow stroll. Sammy would hear children playing ... and a train in the distance ... and neighbors chatting in the driveway ... the crinkle of litter under his feet ... the birds singing. "Life goes on," he thought, "And life is good." Acceptance.

When he walked into the office of his veterinarian, she looked up from her desk and right at Sammy. The tears began to flow again, and he managed to give her a pained smile before telling her how he found Maggie, and then he gently put the box on top of the counter.

"I'm so sorry, Sammy," she said, as tears started to fill her eyes as well.

Wiping away the tears in his eyes, Sammy said, "Thank you, Dr. Green ... Maggie was a wonderful friend. Death hurts, there is no doubt about that. But life is good, and I'm going to keep loving life and trusting the Lord.

Sammy and his veterinarian visited for quite a while, and then they discussed his wishes for the disposal of the body. He thanked Dr. Green again for her services, and after saying goodbye, Sammy began the long walk home.

New Day

Six days later, Nation's Best Bank terminated Sammy's employment. It all seemed so ridiculously unimportant to him ... he gathered up his stuff, said goodbye to all his friends that he happened to see on the way out, and he walked out with his head held high and his spirits up. Actually ... it felt like a beautiful day to Sammy.

He went home, got into some comfortable clothes, and then went on a bike ride. It felt great to be on his hybrid bike – he went for a ride whenever he could. On this day he decided to go for a ride on his favorite route ... he peddled for about three miles until he got outside the city limits, and then headed up a narrow-paved road that ended at the top of a canyon. From the base of the canyon until the very top was about five miles, and it was uphill all the way. Sammy loved it, and he would listen to audio the entire way ... all the way out of town, all the way up the canyon, and all the way back down again until he got home, Sammy had his headphones on and would be listening to music and inspiring programs.

Sammy took this time off work to do some projects that he had been putting off for months. First, he worked on doing some landscaping around the house, and then he shifted his activities toward fixing up the inside of the house. Every room got a new paint job, and then he replaced all the carpet with hardwood floors ... and he topped it all off by buying all new kitchen appliances. The place was looking great.

About six months after he left Nation's Best Bank, Harold stopped by to visit Sammy. Harold had sawdust all over his clothes, on his head, and everywhere ... it looked like he had just stepped out of the woodworking shop. Sammy laughed at the site of Harold, and then brushed off all the sawdust on Harold before inviting him to come in.

Harold: "Did you hear the news?"

Sammy: "What news?"

Harold: "Percy has been arrested."

Sammy: "You're kidding me."

Harold: "Nope ... I check the newspaper online every day, and I just saw a news flash. So, I called some of the guys who still work in security for the bank, and they were all told about it earlier today."

Sammy: "What was he arrested for?"

Harold: "Drug possession with the intent to deliver."

Sammy: "Yikes."

The FBI had been watching Percy ever since he left the agency, and finally decided that they had enough evidence to execute a search warrant. They found about 2 lbs. of cocaine, as well opioids and methamphetamines and other illegal drugs. Also, one of the escorts that had been

to Percy's house was an FBI informant, and since Percy had sold about 2 grams of cocaine to the escort, he would face the "intent to deliver" charge. It was a year and a half before Percy went to trial, and Sammy followed the trial news very carefully. In the end, Percy was convicted and sentenced to the maximum term of 10 years in prison. The judge gave Percy the maximum sentence since he had been both a previous police officer and an FBI agent and had compromised the public trust.

After Percy was incarcerated, Sammy decided to visit him in prison. Percy was shocked that first day he found Sammy in the visitation room, but Sammy extended his hand to greet Percy. Sammy visited Percy every month for the next several years and helped him stay out of severe depression. Percy looked forward to the monthly visits and felt that they had become friends.

About halfway through Percy's prison term, Sammy went to visit Percy at the end of December. The holidays are the toughest time of the year for inmates, and Sammy was pretty sure that Percy would be feeling blue at that time. But Sammy was unprepared to hear what Percy would tell him that day.

Percy: "I have a confession to make."

Sammy: "Talk to me."

Percy: "Do you remember the day Mrs. Clayborn and I put you on work improvement?"

Sammy: "I remember that day very well."

Percy: "While you were at work that day, I went over to your house and tossed a dog biscuit in the backyard that had been laced with rat poison."

Sammy was aghast.

Percy continued: "I regret that terribly."

Sammy: "You killed Maggie?!"

Percy: "Yes Sir, I did."

Sammy looked at Percy with disgust in his eyes, and then turned around and walked out without saying a word.

Sammy was heartbroken all over again. For the next several hours his emotions kept shifting as he thought about what Percy had told him ... one moment Sammy would be sad, and then he would be angry, and then he would think about how he could seek some sort of revenge, and then he would become sad again. He kept thinking, "How could Percy have done such a thing?"

Two days later, however, Sammy returned to the prison and asked to visit with Percy again.

Sammy: "Were you also the one who vandalized my house?"

Percy: "Yes."

Sammy: "Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?"

Percy: "I feel like a despicable human being ... and I don't have any excuses for my behavior. But I do want to tell you something that I have never told anyone else. From the beginning of my life, all I can remember is my father hitting me. As a child, if I spilled something on the floor, or my toys were not cleaned up, he would spank me. Later, if I came home with school grades that did not meet his expectations, he would whip me. He berated me constantly ... nothing I ever did was good enough for him. When I was younger, he would spank me, but as I got older, he hit me with things ... like a belt, or a board, or a chair – anything nearby that he could pick up, he would hit me with it. Shortly before I graduated from high school, he came home drunk and beat the living crap out of me. I was so beat up that I could not even attend the high school graduation. I did not want anyone to see me because both of my eyes were black-and-blue and nearly swollen shut. I never returned to that house to get anything that belonged to me, and I lived on the streets for several weeks, searching in dumpsters for something to eat or stealing food whenever I could. So, I joined the Marines just as soon as I felt healed enough to go through boot camp, and what I experienced in war ... well, I'm not sure I will ever be able to tell anyone about that. I try not to even think about it, but I can't stop thinking about it ... the memories keep flooding into my mind. When I was at war and fighting for my life, I had to kill or be killed ... and I did a whole lot of killing in order to survive. So again, I don't have any excuses for some of the things I have done, and now I am paying the price. But I want you to know that I see Kindness in you, Sammy. I appreciate your coming to visit me every month for several years, but I could not face you any longer without telling you what I have done to hurt you. After a while, I felt like a hypocrite for acting like a friend to you, and so it is time to confess. I'm sorry, Sammy, for everything I have done to hurt you."

Sammy was deeply moved, and he did not know what to say or do. Both of them sat quietly and looked at the floor for a long time.

Finally, Sammy reached out to hug Percy, and both began to cry. And then Sammy looked at Percy and said:

"I appreciate your honesty. Sounds like a hard life ... that's a lot of punishment to take. I hope that you have access to all the counseling and therapy that you need to heal from your war wounds and other trauma. I think you're on a good path now, so I wish you the best. And I'm glad to hear you say that you can see Kindness in me. I always try to remember what John the elder said in 1 John 4:16, that God is love, and that those that abide in love abide in God, and God in them."

Epilogue

Leticia ended up marrying Jack, but they stayed married for just a little over four years before divorcing. Sammy dated a few women over the years, but he had no other serious relationship. Ten years after their first kiss, Sammy and Leticia got back together again ... and Leticia was in her late thirties when their girls Luz and Vida were born. The twins became RNs like their mother, and they earned MBA degrees like their father, which lead them both into careers in hospital administration. Sammy and Leticia were happy together, and later became proud grandparents.

This novel is dedicated to helping fund ***Inspirado***, a creative, health, and wellbeing institute where anyone could practice languages, culture and a full spectrum of creative arts. Learn how to speak Spanish or English or another language, practice and teach music, learn to perform various dances, and express your artistic nature. Become happier and healthier by taking courses on fitness, meditation, creativity, art, sports, self-development, cooking, and other creative and cultural classes that anyone is free to design and teach. This is the dream for creating an educational center focused on creative inspiration that would be a blessing to many, and you can learn more as well as make a donation at Inspirado.org.

Thank you for reading this short novel about how love always prevails ... and feel free to contact me at Inspirado.org, or through these other sources:

www.fotopala.com

www.julioandgringo.com

www.linkedin.com/in/keithkreuz

Email: flywithspanish@gmail.com

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