

What's the Meaning of This?

The Life and Times of Dr. Greg Chambers

A Collection of Short Stories

by **James Yarbrough**

Smashwords Edition

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Copyright James Yarbrough 2016. All Rights Reserved

Published by Bard and Book Publishing.



Website: www.bardandbook.com

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my friend, the real G.C., the inspiration for long-suffering Greg Chambers in these stories.

Also, thanks to Anne, Lana, and Peggy of the Wildwood Critique Group for pointing out what I really wanted to say and how to say those things.

Contents

[Attracted](#)

[Weighty Matters](#)

[The Sign](#)

[Out of Step](#)

[For Richer, For Poorer](#)

[Another Story](#)

[The Bunny](#)

[Callin' You Out](#)

[Alignment](#)

[Play Ball!](#)

Attracted

In the two-and-a-half years I worked with Carol Cramer, this was new.

Receptionist and now Licensed Therapy Assistant in my practice, Carol defined frank, loud, impetuous, unapologetic, irrepressible, fearless, bomb-throwing. And – while this was harder to acknowledge – lovable. In her own, twenty-four-year-old, fresh-off-the-farm way.

But this morning a boring collection of sedentary minutes engulfed her and dragged me down like a barnacle-encrusted anchor chained around my neck.

I stared at her, erect for over two hours in that swivel chair in her office, the Bunker. She hummed, swirling slightly as she pecked on the keyboard, and smiled as if she alone knew some never-imagined secret. Occasionally I even heard a sigh of contentment. *Sigh of contentment? Carol?*

I scuffed through the door linking the waiting room to the central hall and instead of heading to my office, I turned left to meander into the Bunker. “Is... is everything okay?”

She glanced up at me, flashed an angelic grin, and returned her attention to the squat desktop’s screen. “Certainly, Greg. I’m just finishin’ up a new copy of the patient roster.”

I eyed the screen. Her cursor was a quarter-inch farther down the page than when I last checked an hour ago. “I thought you reworked the roster a few months ago.”

“It’s been eight weeks, but I wanted a fresh and updated copy.”

“Carol, I’ve seen four patients this morning, but you haven’t demand... er... *requested* to sit in on those discussions. That’s not like you. You always have... observations.”

Her fingers froze, and her over-large head riveted the screen. Her fleshy bulk puffed out the black pant suit that she wore on Wednesdays, a lemon blouse ballooning under her crisp jacket. A red-orange rouge I hadn’t noticed before tinted her otherwise ivory cheekbones. Ticking from the discount store wall clock chipped into my brain.

Her jerks startled me. Beaming, she grabbed opposite sides of her desk, pivoted the chair in my direction, lasered me with her dark eyes, and unhinged a cavernous mouth. “Greg, his name is Darren Jones. He’s twenty-seven. The most amazin’ man I’ve ever met. Kind, considerate, smart as a whip. He’s sweet to his sister. Unbelievably handy with a saw. Has a good job with the bank. Goes to Adelphi Church. Is quiet and lets me talk, and...” She paused to gaze lovingly at the most uninteresting ceiling panels on the planet. “And he *adores* my smile.”

I stared, mouth agape.

Her saucer-eyes again glued onto mine. “He lives alone, doesn’t smoke or drink, only has one tattoo and it’s where no one can really see, lets me order in the restaurant for us both, wrestled and did ROTC in high school. Gotta have his barbeque and slaw, works out some so he has big arms and chest, good protector. Loves his mama but ain’t a mama’s boy – you know that’s important for me -- attentive son but is ready for a

supportin’ wife he can cherish and encourage, and hold close, and have kids with, and grow old with. And – Greg -- *no* record. He’s got *no record*. I had my cousin at the Police Department check him out last night.”

“Sounds...”

“So, I’ve blocked out six Saturday mornings on your calendar starting on the fifth for pre-marriage counseling. Darren has to work late during the week. Big meetings at the bank after the doors close, you know. He didn’t have a problem at all with our talkin’ with you – you bein’ my employer and friend – because I explained how talented and sweet you are and how you wouldn’t hear of chargin’ us for the counselin’.”

“Carol...”

“I didn’t know how to tell you, so I’m really glad you encouraged me to reveal my little secret.” She giggled bubbily. “I gotta let you know how we met. You know how my great-granny always said ‘Love at first sight means you’re blind as a bat’? Well...”

###

“Oh! Hahahahahahaha! Ohhh. That’s too much! Darren, you are such a tease!” Carol slipped a hand between Darren’s torso and his arm, drawing herself near to him in an affectionate coo.

I scratched notes on my pad. “Do you *really* believe wives should serve their husbands breakfast in bed each Saturday and Sunday morning?”

Darren fingered his dark brown, curly beard. “Dr. Chambers, my Mama done this for my Pappy every week of their marriage.” He glanced down at his feet then back up, squinting malevolently as if I had questioned his personal honor. “And she’s the happiest little lady you’d ever want to meet.”

“They’re still married?”

“Pappy was sick a long time. Overweight. Pushed past four hundred pounds. Gout. Couldn’t work last fifteen years of his life. Mama had to take in sewin’ and work at the market when she wasn’t carin’ for him.” He paused and slapped one hand against his mouth to suppress a deep belch. He wasn’t entirely successful. “Scuse me. Pappy died at forty-five, when I was a kid. Hardenin’ of the arteries. Mama’s been a widow for fifteen years now.” He shook his head, his dark blow-dried mane oscillating with the movement. “She knows she ain’t never gonna find a husband like Pappy again.”

“Isn’t that sweet, Greg?” Carol rested her head on Darren’s meaty shoulder, his red and white plaid flannel shirt highlighting her raven hair. “Just like we’re gonna be. So *close*.”

I chewed for a second on the inside of my cheek. “I know this is just our second session together, but I think you’re hearing more about each other’s personalities, habits, values, and characters, don’t you think?” *Hearing. Learning?*

“Oh, yes!” Carol bounced her head up and sat aright.

“Yep. Guess so.”

“So, let me review some... ummm... contrasts we’ve identified so far.” I flipped three pages back in my legal pad on my lap. “Darren: night owl. Carol: early riser. Darren: likes to spend money and max out the credit cards. Carol: a self-described penny-pincher who saves a lot. Darren: likes to sit on the back row at church so he can get out on-time. Carol: wants to volunteer for every job there is at church. Darren: loves to fish and hunt. Carol: got her fill of *that* growing up in the country with three brothers. Darren: ain’t no way he’d ever cut his beard. Carol: it’s cute, but don’t you have a hard time with hygiene? Darren: his ambition is to retire at age forty and take things easy. Carol: loves working, will work until she drops. Darren: sex eight to twelve times a week every week is ‘bout right. Carol...” I gazed at her. “You’re going to get back to us on that one, I think you said.”

“Yeah... uhhh... yes.”

I turned to the next page. “Darren: We’re going to eat dinner every Saturday and Sunday evening with Mama. Carol: would...”

“You said that?” Carol faced Darren, a querulous expression painting across her whitewashed face.

“Well... sure. Ain’t no one can beat Mama on chicken fried steak on Saturdays. And then chicken fried chicken on Sundays.”

“I’m sure she’s a great cook, but I mean... honey, what I mean is having two meals during the week every week with your mother? Wouldn’t we want to have more give-and-take in that? There might be some things we’d want to do – just you and me.” She rubbed his ox-like neck with her long, pale fingers.

Darren half-turned to her, his brown cow-eyes melting. “Well, it’s like this, sweetie. This’ll be a bondin’ time for our family. Mama’ll be able to git to know you that way, you two cuttin’ up and cookin’ whatever Floyd and I shoot that mornin’.” He scratched his oily, blackhead-studded forehead and brushed back a mass of frizzed hair which had fallen over his eyes. “Oh, yeah. I didn’t tell you. Floyd is Mama’s new significant other. Ain’t never gonna be like Pappy though.”

Carol withdrew her fingers and leaned back on the couch. “Uhhh... are you sayin’ we’d be stayin’ at your Mama and... and Floyd... I mean your Mama’s house every weekend?”

Darren doubled-over and guffawed. “Why of course not! I mean... you just misunderstood!” He slapped the leg of his jeans with his right hand and shook his head, chuckling. “Naw, honey. We’ll jus’ be visitin’. We’re gonna build our little house – or could be a double-wide, not sure yet – across the road down on those ten acres Mama already given me. Stone’s throw away but not in her house. No, sirree. I ain’t gonna be stayin’ at nobody else’s at night. Not with my little cuddle bunny, I ain’t.”

I starred that point on my pad. “And then there’s this. Darren: Not really crazy ‘bout havin’ a wife workin’ outside the home. Carol: ...”

“Greg, would you excuse us for a few minutes? I think Darren and I need some time alone.” Her lips tight and eyes drilling into mine, she jerked her head slightly toward my office’s door.

###

I butted open the door to the waiting room, books, briefcase and umbrella in hand. Rainy days and Mondays...

I shuffled onto the laminate in the waiting room, flapped the golf umbrella to shed a few gallons of water, and spied Carol behind the glass of the Bunker. “Mornin’!”

From her swivel chair, she stretched to the panel in the Bunker’s glass and opened the slit. “Mr. Kukla’s comin’ in at 8:30, then Mrs. Cain at 9:45, and then there’s Timmy Johnson and his mother at 11. I’ll be sittin’ in on all of those. I’ve been studyin’ their cases and have *lotsa questions*.”

I nestled up to the glass, dropped my books and briefcase onto the lavender-striped wingback, and sat on one of its wide arms. I glanced down at my umbrella, twirling the shaft. “On Saturday I checked back with you and Darren a couple of times. But I didn’t want to knock. Looks like you finished up and departed between an hour and an hour-and-a-half after you asked me to leave.”

Carol steeled her gaze on the computer screen, tapping energetically. “We wrapped things up in about an hour-fifteen.” She stopped to glance to her left at a paper on her desk. “Incidentally, I’ve freed the next four Saturday mornings from your calendar.” Her fingers flew over the keys.

“Sherry and I were praying for you this weekend.”

She froze her fingers above the keys, peering into the screen. “Thanks. It’s funny, don’t you think? How we hear what we want to hear and not what we should be hearing.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’d only known him for two weeks.”

Her paper-machie head angled slowly toward me. Her gentle smile surprised me with its patient warmth. “No, Greg, I don’t mean Mr. Darren-Boy. What I mean is my great-granny.”

“Love at first sight means you’re blind as a bat’?”

“She had a better one. ‘Little daisy-flower’ – that’s what she called me – “treat a man like sun-tea. Let him sit out there alone in the open for a long time so he can develop and you can see what he’s made of. Then after that if he’s still around, you can make up your mind if he’s *your* cup of tea.” Her chest heaved. “I miss my great-granny.”

I glanced away. This wasn’t the first time I could imagine the frightening title of a Carol first book: *Great-grandma McDonald’s Smart Tips for Dumb People: How to break the expensive habit of seeing psychologists and prosper in life.*

Weighty Matters

“Please make yourself at home. May I offer you some refreshment?” I sidled over to my desk chair.

“No. Thank you, Dr. Chambers.” Perching on the far couch, svelte Mrs. Banks, dressed in blue slacks and a loose-fitting gray blouse, shook her head vigorously.

“Huh, well... what do you have?” Mr. Banks peered up at me with cow-eyes from the other side of the couch from his wife. His lumpy stomach cascaded over his stretched wide-leather belt.

“Coffee, juices, tea...”

“Any pastries?” Mr. Banks grinned.

“No. He doesn’t need that. Bring him coffee. Black.” Mrs. Banks stared at the floor, working her hands in front of her.

Mr. Banks shrugged, shook his head, and turned up his palms, grinning. His large, round eyes glazed over.

I moved to the beverage bar, poured a cup, ambled to Mr. Banks, and handed over the steaming coffee.

“Thanks.” Mr. Banks cradled the cup in his bear-like hands.

“I understand from speaking with Mrs. Banks on the phone that you two wish to discuss eating disorders. Is that correct?” I nudged into my office chair, rollers rocking on the wood laminate floor.

“Yes, Dr. Chambers. My husband has a serious overeating problem.” Mrs. Banks doubled-up on her hand-wringing.

I glanced at her husband, who seemed lost in enjoying his black coffee. “Mr. Banks, how would you characterize your eating habits?”

He shot me another grin. “Healthy.”

I had to like this good ol’ regular guy. “As in nutritious? Or as in ravenous?”

“Played football in high school. Worked on eighteen-wheelers all my life. I’ve always had a healthy appetite. Yeah. As in ravenous.”

“His cholesterol is outside the normal range. His triglycerides are borderline. His sugar levels have been creeping up. He’ll be diabetic by the time he’s fifty!” Mrs. Banks frowned. “And he’s thirty pounds overweight.”

“Heft helps when you’re man-handling a chassis on a semi.” Mr. Banks gulped the coffee.

That must’ve smarted with the hot java gushing down his throat.

“That doesn’t matter. You need to commit to, and stay on, a diet!” Mrs. Banks stared at me. Her glaring at *him* apparently didn’t have her desired impact. “That’s what matters.”

“Jane, let’s get down to brass tacks, huh?” Mr. Banks pivoted to gaze at the side of his wife’s head. “*You* have the eating disorder, sweetheart. You’re five-six and weigh all of eighty-seven pounds.”

“I do not!” Mrs. Banks bolted, whippet-like, to drill her eyes at her husband. “And it’s eighty-eight. As of this morning.”

“Mrs. Banks, how would you characterize your diet?” I planted my elbow on the armrest and stuck my knuckles under my chin. “Do you know approximately how many calories you consume in an average day?”

She glowed. “I eat vegetables, fruits, nuts, a little extremely lean turkey or chicken. No sweets. No GMO grains. 1500 calories per day. And I’m two sizes smaller than when we married. That’s a size 2P. And I’ve had two children!”

“I rest my case.” Mr. Banks nursed the last few drops from his paper cup.

“This is crazy, Dr. Chambers. I don’t have a weight problem. I’m healthy, energetic and at a permanently sustainable weight. We need a solution for *Sam* here.” She glanced toward the far corner where my receptionist and Licensed Therapy Assistant, Carol, slouched in the leather chair. “What do you think, honey? You look like you’ve had to diet a lot in the past.”

###

“Greg, I’m sorry. I really am.” Shaking her head, Carol twirled her chair toward me. “But when that... that... woman insinuated I was fat... habitually fat... well, I just couldn’t control myself.”

“No worries.” I leaned against her desk. “Maybe your two hundred decibel reply was just what was needed to get her attention. Plus, Mr. Banks enjoyed the exchange. He didn’t offer you that \$20 tip for nothing.”

“He was kidding... I think.” Carol brushed back her raven hair. “Anyway, what do you propose to do for them?”

“Diet inversion.” I rested on Carol’s side table. “Since both Mr. and Mrs. Banks really need weight adjustment – not to mention a way to identify better with each other – I’m going to recommend his wife’s 1500 calorie diet for Mr. Banks and her husband’s 4000 calorie diet for Mrs. Banks. Their weights will modify, and they will better understand the eating habits of the other.”

Carol jerked her hands like she was waving off an F-18 from an aircraft carrier landing. “Big mistake! For goodness sake, *don’t do that!*”

“Why not?” *Did I really want to ask?*

She grimaced and leaned toward me in her seat. “Number one: I’ve read a lot of weight-loss books, and you’d be puttin’ them both on a very unnatural routine.”

“Wait a second! Why do you know so much about weight loss? You were angry when Mrs. Banks said you would know a lot.”

“I didn’t say I hadn’t been overweight before and didn’t know a lot. I just was ticked off she *thought* I had been overweight and *would* know a lot.”

I nodded, tilting my eyebrows.

She twisted in the chair. “And then, number two: the bounce-back effect.”

“Bounce-back effect?”

“Greg!” Carol half-lunged toward me. “You didn’t raise animals in 4H, did you?”

“Missed out on that.”

“I was eleven. When my calf got too heavy two weeks before competition in the county fair, I cut waaaay back on her hay for a week. Oh, that worked all right! She lost five pounds in that week. Then I started her back on her regular diet. I thought I had things all figured out. Until I weighed her the night before the competition.”

“So?”

“*So?* She was now *ten* pounds overweight! *So*, I couldn’t compete her in the fair. Know why she was ten pounds overweight?”

I smirked. “The bounce-back effect?”

“That calf wanted to make sure she wasn’t gonna to be hungry again. So, in addition to eatin’ her normal hay ration I gave that week, she was sneakin’ out of her stall in the barn and snarfin’ down another calf’s hay too!” Carol slapped her hands together, thunder-like. “That’s just what will happen to Mr. and Mrs. Banks! They’ll finish your diet and exchange some pounds, but then they’ll fall back into their same, old habits – this time old habits *on steroids!* Mr. Banks will end up fifty pounds overweight, and Mrs. Banks will get run down by a butterfly!”

I winced. “And you have a better idea?”

Her eyes narrowing and a sly grin washing over her lips, Carol leaned back in her chair and grabbed the armrests. “I sure do!”

###

“Oh, Dr. Chambers and Carol. What a blessing you’ve been to us! I don’t know how to thank you!” Mrs. Banks, cherubic and tastefully plumper in the right places, cooed as she and her husband said their goodbyes to us in the empty waiting room.

Mr. Banks, his paunch gone and his previously flabby face taut, slapped me on the shoulder. “Yes, sir! I have to admit I’m very pleased! Very pleased! Me losing twenty-five pounds, and Jane gaining fifteen.” He brought his bough-sized arm around his wife and edged her to him. “She’s my little bride, my beautiful, squeezable bride again!”

Mrs. Banks blushed, glanced at the carpet, and then fixed her eyes on Carol and me. “And all this happening in only six weeks! It’s been an answer to prayer. Thank you so much!”

Carol and I waved as the Banks, hand-in-hand, exited the office and into the hall.

I turned to Carol. “You were one hundred percent right. Time for your victory lap.” I crossed my arms across my white button-down. “But tell me, will you? Why did you believe a *reverse* bounce-back effect would happen?”

“Because of William.” Carol’s meaty nose twitched.

“William?”

“William my goat.” She flailed her arms like I was supposed to be intimately acquainted with the animal. “Goes back to when I was thirteen. You see, Greg, billy goats are vain critters. Like most males of a species. That winter William had eaten his share of grub and more, and he was one pudgy goat. I was a dumb kid, so I just fed him more, thinking he was goin’ through a growth spurt. Well, before long William started eating less and lost the extra weight because he figured he could gobble as much as he wanted anytime anyway. Plus, spring came. And I knew William wanted to be lean and mean so he could chase those nanny goats too. So, William got himself trimmed down on his own.”

“Goats. People. And you think, Sam and Jane Banks were trying to rekindle...”

“That was definitely goin’ on. They were playin’ with each other’s emotions with this weight stuff. Didn’t you see that from the git-go?” She threw her arms toward the ceiling and shook her head. “You should have traded a few of those university years for time on the farm! Once I told Mr. Banks to eat more than what he normally did and Mrs. Banks to eat even less than what she normally did, they both realized over-eatin’ and under-eatin’ were self-destructive and that those habits were *theirs alone*. Stop with tryin’ to get the attention of the other with the eatin’ or not eatin’. Eat healthy, take responsibility, and see if those romantic juices don’t start flowin’ again.”

What had I created in hiring Carol three years ago as my receptionist? Now she was a Licensed Therapy Assistant and ginning up all sorts of creative treatment plans. Maybe I had underestimated her.

Carol glanced at the door. “I do think there’s room.”

“Room?”

“To put ‘Carol T. Cramer, LTA’ on the glass near your name.” She twisted her head this way and that. “Maybe would look better if my name was on top.”

I squinted and mashed my lips together. “Publish your book *Barnyard Animals and the Human Psyche*, and then we’ll discuss the door.” I did an about-face, stormed

through the waiting room and strode toward my book-filled office-oasis where deep, hoary theories held sway.

Surely there were no calves and goats in there.

The Sign

“So... “ I wiggled in my wooden chair and stared at my young patient sitting on the crème couch on the other side of my office. “She sounds like a wonderful young lady.”

As occurred regularly with Barry Phelps, he contemplated the wall behind me while shaking his foot, his ankle resting on one knee. A slight frown wandered across his face then hid, reappearing with a deep wrinkling of his forehead. He had a pleasant smile when he wasn't in deep thought, his high cheekbones and sandy hair contrasting with his blue-green eyes and dark eyebrows. Girls might even find him attractive.

After about a minute of silence, I tried again. “You're going to tell me you haven't received any sort of... uh... *sign*. Right?”

“Yep. Not a one about her, Dr. Chambers.” He continued to stare above my head at the wall. “That's for sure.”

“Barry, let me ask you this. You're twenty-six, college-educated, and have a good job. In our two sessions of discussions, you've told me about... ummmm... probably ten or twelve young ladies you've met since you moved to Greenville three years ago. Met them through Bible studies, at church, at work, through friends... Of those ten to twelve young ladies, how many have you actually asked out on a date?”

“Zero.”

“Zero? As in zilch?”

“That's right. I haven't received a sign about any of them.”

“But how have you met them? How long have you spent in their company, typically?”

“Oh, I don't know. Someone introduces us, I say hi, she says hi, and then we walk away I guess.”

“You don't try to start a conversation to get to know her a bit?”

“Why should I? There's no sign.”

I stared at him too long, but he didn't notice. His eyes still searched the wall. And his foot oscillated up-and-down like a mechanical vegetable chopper. “Barry, what kind of a *sign* from God are you looking for?”

“I dunno. God's ways aren't our ways. How can I say for sure?”

“You must have imagined some signs. She reminds you of a family member?”

“Nope.”

“She’s wearing your favorite colors.”

“Nope.”

“She’s holding a dachshund, and you love dachshunds.”

“Nope.”

“She smiles and seems to really, really like being around you from the git-go.”

“Nope. That would scare me.”

“She mentions a book you really enjoy.”

“Nope. Too common.”

I slid my glasses down my nose and eyed him over my frames. “Look, Barry, I appreciate that you’re trying hard to know God’s will for your life. And choosing a Godly, mature and loving wife is one of the biggest decisions you’ll make. But there’s this: What I hear you saying is, the way you’re currently doing things you wouldn’t recognize a sign if you saw one.”

He dropped his eyes to rivet on my face. “I never thought about that before.”

I glanced at the wall clock. “We’re out of time today, but I’m going to ask you to read through two books before seeing me again next week. I have copies to loan you. One is Gary Chapman’s *The 5 Love Languages* and the other is Paul Little’s *Affirming the Will of God*. Neither is a cookbook, but as you read these I want you to think about how more communication and reflection could better inform your decision about looking for a wife.”

“Okay.” He uncrossed his long legs and pushed himself off the couch.

###

“You wanna know what I think?” Carol, my Licensed Therapy Assistant, rocked in her office chair, her lily-white arms thrust toward me.

Did I have a choice? I leaned against the opposite wall.

“He wants God to hand him Miss Perfect on a silver platter. No work or thinking on his part. BAM!” She clapped her hands together in a boom that echoed through her office, the Bunker. “Not right! No ma’am! A man has to *work* for a woman’s interest and then – *maybe* – he earns her respect and love. *Maybe*. Your Barry Phelps is a lazy, laaaaazzzzzyyyy man!”

Truth be told, I agreed. “Why do you think...”

“So, here’s what you need to do, Greg.” She scooted to the edge of her chair, bringing its front wheels down on the floor with a plop. “Introduce him to your niece Rachel and break his ice-cold, inconsiderate, despicable, self-centered, pitiable...”

“Carol...”

“heart!”

“Rachel? I don’t know, Sherry and I hardly ever see her anymore because...”

“Because she’s two cuts higher on the hog than common baloney like you, right? Face facts, Greg! She’s won two beauty contests so far this year and probably’ll win the State Miss competition. She’s finishin’ her MD degree, speaks four languages, goes on medical mission trips all the time, reads like Einstein, is the world’s greatest conversationalist, dates the most eligible bachelors in town, and is drop-dead beautiful. Besides, unlike you, her father – your brother – worked hard and made a good living, so she’s rich!”

Seemed always to circle back to a personal insult, right?

I crossed my arms and glared at the ceiling. “So how am I -- the failure -- ever going to convince Rachel to do whatever I’m asking of her?” I twisted against the wall. “And what would I be asking her to do?”

“Women like Rachel love to help weak, incompetent men. Even if it’s her uncle – you -- that needs helpin’. And what are you askin’ her to do? You don’t know?” Carol bolted up from her chair and paced the Bunker, shaking her head. Grunts of disgusted laughter erupted. “*This* is what your askin’. You’re askin’ her to meet Barry so he’ll immediately be smitten, and then after Rachel dashes his hopes – if he’s serious about *signs* -- he’ll be forced to really think about what a *sign* looks like! The man has never been motivated to do that before!”

“So he won’t be able to hide behind waiting for a sign, if that’s what he’s doing. That’s what you mean?”

“Exactimento, Sherlock! Lissen, my great-granny had an ol’ sayin’ that fits here.”

I could hardly wait. “Oh?”

“Gettin’ men off dead-center is harder than wringin’ an ol’ rooster’s neck.”

“Carol, I don’t like fooling my patients. It’s an unprofessional intervention.”

She fixed on me with her ebony eyes like I was a fly buzzing around uncovered fried chicken at a picnic. “I’ll tell you what *unprofessional* is. *Unprofessional* is chargin’ him and not helpin’ him! Look, you leave things to me. Rachel and I are good buddies. I’ll explain what we’re doin’, and I’ll set everything up. Barry’s comin’ back next Thursday at 2:30?”

“Yes, he’s...”

“I’ll have Rachel come in to see me about 2:25, and you can introduce them right here. Alright? You on board?”

“I... guess.”

###

Carol slid back the small door in the Bunker’s glass wall. “Loosen up, Greg! You look like a tarantula tensin’ to jump on a beetle!”

Two-thirty by the wall clock in the waiting room. I strode over to a coffee table and tried to look interested in one of the unnecessary magazines Carol always laid out.

The door buzzer sounded, and I jerked my head to glimpse Barry entering. “Why, hello, Barry. Good to see you.”

He stopped short of me. “My appointment is at 2:30, right?”

I straightened. “Yes, You’re right on time..”

“Oh, good. With you out here in the waiting room, I thought you had other plans... or something.”

“No...no, not at all.” Had he already smelled a rat? “Uh... have you met my assistant, Carol Cramer?” I stepped over to the Bunker, Barry following well behind.

Carol thrust a hand through the door in the Bunker’s glass wall. “I’m Carol. It’s good to meet you.”

Barry shook her hand. “Nice to meet *you*.” He dropped her hand and stepped back away from the glass.

“So... Carol, umm... Barry and I will just be walking back to my office...” *Where was Rachel?*

Cool and collected, Carol glanced up at me. “Sure, Greg. I’ll hold any calls.”

Buzzzzz!

The door to the waiting room flung open, and Rachel, all five foot-eight and in stylish heels, legged in. “Oh, Uncle Greg, how are *you*?” She glided to me and gave me a warm hug just as she had done as a darling little girl.

I grabbed her shoulders and held her in front of me. “What a nice surprise! What are you doing here?” I played my part pretty well.

She glanced toward Carol. “Carol and I are making some lunch plans.” Rachel waved at her with her fingers.

I glimpsed Barry, standing next to me. He was focused on her alright, and what right-minded young man wouldn't be? Light brown curls, the flow of her lithe frame, pink cheeks, her large green eyes, and her cute pixie nose. Hard to believe I was somehow genetically related to this beautiful young woman.

"Where are my manners? Barry, meet my niece." I curved my right hand toward her.

Rachel and Barry simultaneously extended hands, eliciting giggles from both. "I'm Barry Phelps. *Very* pleased to meet you." Yeah, sure looked like he was...

"Thank you. I'm Rachel... Rachel Chambers." She politely returned the stare.

"Look, could you two excuse me for a minute? I have to locate a file. I think it's in Carol's office." I floated toward the Bunker.

"Sure." Another simultaneous gesture from them both.

I whipped around the corner and through the door into the Bunker. I stooped down at the bottom drawer in the file cabinet, lowering my voice to Carol. "I'm giving Rachel a few minutes to steal his heart. How do you think it's going?" Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Carol grabbing a quick glance.

She cooed. "He's mesmerized. This is my best idea... ever!"

With the glass door shut, I couldn't make out their words. Occasionally there was laughter.

"They're sitting on the couch... Barry is so animated! He can sure smile when he *wants* to... His heart is gonna be soooo broken! Can't see Rachel's face, but from the way he's respondin' she's doing a great job with this trick!"

After a few dead minutes with me searching for a file, I clanked the drawer shut, stood, pivoted and strode toward the waiting room. "Later..."

"They're still talking... and smiling." She stage-whispered to me.

I stopped in front of the brown leather couch where the two sat jabbering away on the lips of the cushions. "Uhh... excuse me. Barry, I guess we'd better get started."

He jerked up, stretching to stand tall "Sure, Dr. Chambers." Barry turned to Rachel. "It was great meeting you. I'll text you."

She rose gracefully and glowed, the wonderful actress she was. "I enjoyed meeting you as well.... Bye."

Barry followed close behind as I opened the door to the hall and strode toward my office. I gave Carol a wave and a smile.

###

“Do you find this odd? I haven’t heard back from Barry Phelps for two weeks.” I leaned against the metal file cabinet in the Bunker. “During that last session right after he met Rachel, he was so enthusiastic! He mentioned her several times as a girl he immediately connected with and how she was so *special*. He was *so* motivated to pursue her. What happened? When did she dump him? How is he taking the disappointment? That’s a downside with this profession. You really can’t ring up a patient and ask them how they’re doing. You’re entirely at the patient’s whim. They may call, they may not. If they’re cured or really despondent, you may never hear at all!”

“Greg, if you’re done with the pity-party, I got some hot news for you.” Carol raised her fingers from the keyboard, a wry grin arching over her mouth. “Remember how we said Rachel was a great actress in meetin’ and encouragin’ him?”

I crossed my arms. “She is! I think she missed her calling..”

“She wasn’t actin’..”

“Wha... what do you mean?”

“This is my absolute best idea ever! That’s what I mean!” She cackled and wriggled her upper body like she’d just stepped into a freezing meat locker.

“What do you *mean*, Carol?” I uncrossed my arms and stood straight. Heat washed up my neck. “Translation, please!”

“*She likes him, Greg! A lot!*” She smiled ear-to-ear and shrugged her shoulders, which were clothed in that nylon black-and-white polka-dot dress she always wore on Fridays.

“What!” I grabbed my head with both hands. “No! No...no...no, Carol! This is *not* supposed to *happen!*”

“I too was curious, but I acted while you dithered. I invited Rachel to dinner last night at my apartment, and she spilled the beans.” Carol spun her hands in a bevy of gesticulations. “They’ve been seeing each other practically every day since they first met here in the office. She’s smitten. She thinks he is too. Isn’t that great?”

“Yes... I mean no.... I mean... But... but it’s *too easy... too easy* for Barry! Don’t you remember? That’s why we hatched this plan – to encourage him to know what a sign *is*. To become more mature in knowing how to understand God’s will and in trying harder in relationships and in appreciating... And... and what’s my brother going to say?”

“And there’s one other thing.”

I massaged my temples. “Yeah?”

“Rachel is convinced her meeting Barry the way she did is a sign.”

“A what?!”

“She said she always thought she might meet Mr. Right through you. Isn’t that *sweet*? She said you deal with so many interesting, sensitive people, she thought God might be leading her to consider a man she met through you!”

There was this gigantic glob in my throat. “I... how... no... what... that wasn’t...”

“It’s like my great-granny always said: ‘While you’re plannin’ the Fall hog-killin’, somebody may just be bringin’ you a big pork loin dinner with all the trimmin’s.’”

Out of Step

“Mr. Wainwright, let’s start again, if you don’t mind. Are you married?” Surely the third time I asked him would be a charm.

“Dr. Chambers, I have three wonderful children. Amy is twelve, Randy is ten, and Melissa is eight. All healthy, well-behaved, and a pleasure to be around.” Wainwright brushed his blond, wavy hair, smiled, and crossed his leg ankle-on knee.

“And they’re in youth group at the church?”

“Julie and I have been married fifteen years next September. She’s wonderful! I am a very blessed man. Just the kind of encouraging and sweet wife I need.”

Carol leaned forward from her perch in the corner leather chair. “And your children – they’re in youth group at church?”

Wainwright scooted to face Carol. “Why, yes, they love to go! Retreats, summer camp, service projects, Bible studies. They really enjoy all those activities. My wife and I are very pleased in their spiritual progress.”

I glanced at Carol then back at the patient. “So, are there any particular concerns about your job?”

Wainwright frowned, darting his eyes first to me, then to Carol. “I think I just answered that question. The kids are doing great in the church youth program.”

“Mr. Wainwright.” I rearranged my note pad in my lap and looked up. “Do you realize you’re answering the question Carol or I previously asked you, instead of the question just asked?”

“No real concerns, Dr. Chambers.” He chuckled and gestured with one hand. “Sure, like all families, we could use extra income. But I have a good job. I enjoy what I do and the people I work with. I’m well-paid enough so my wife can stay at home with the kids and just work her part-time business when she has the time.”

“But of course, you told us in your pre-visit questionnaire that your employer wanted you to see me because of this tendency you have of not answering questions immediately. Right?”

“Oh. *Again?* I didn’t realize I wasn’t answering your immediate questions. I’m sorry.”

Carol winced, and her skull pulsed like a masseuse’s vibrator. “Yeah, well. You *did*.” In her black pant suit with the red belt she looked like a ninja enforcer. All she needed was a dark hood over her pale, fleshy face.

I cleared my throat. “Do you mind if we contact your employer to help us better understand your work situation?”

“Right. I understand. For some reason my supervisor has a concern about my communicating with him. I don’t believe there’s a big problem. He’s a great guy, just a bit high-strung sometimes. You know?”

“So, you don’t mind if we contact your employer?”

“No, please feel free to contact Dan. No problem.”

“I think that will wrap things up today, Mr. Wainwright. We’ll get back together soon. Thank you.”

Wainwright smiled and shook his head, slapping his knee. “You two are funny! It’s almost as if you don’t realize sometimes you’re asking the same question twice. Sure, go ahead and contact my boss Dan.”

I bit my lip and urged Carol with my eyes. “Would you please show Mr. Wainwright out?”

Carol squirmed from the leather chair, meandering toward the door, her nighthawk-black pumps clicking on the laminate.

“So, I guess I’m leaving now, huh?”

Carol lounged at the door, extending an arm toward Wainwright as if to herd him. “Time to go!”

“Thank you, Dr. Chambers.” Wainwright extended a hand to me. “Great meeting you, and we’ll be in touch.”

I leaned up from my wingback, grinned and shook the offered hand. I pointed toward Carol.

“Right.” Wainwright stepped boldly to the door and out into the hall.

EXPEDITE!!! I scribbled the note to myself atop Wainwright’s file.

Two jays hopped branch-to-branch in the oak tree outside my window. Or were they cuckoos?

“Dr. Bame-chers?”

Where did that come from? I bolted from my chair and twirled toward the door. A tall thin man, mid-thirties, dressed in a black suit, eggshell button-down, and robin egg-blue tie stood tower-like with his right hand loosely in his pants pocket.

“Yes. Chambers. Greg Chambers. And you are?”

“Jarlie Chones. I have an appointment with you now.” The man glanced down his angled, gleaming wristwatch.

I blanked for a second. “Oh... oh, yes! I’m so sorry. Charlie Jones. Yes, Mr. Jones. Please forgive me. I was expecting you. Won’t you please sit down? Would you care for a beverage?”

“Yes, please. Boffee. Clack.”

One of the cardinal rules of counseling is not to stare vacuously into the face of a paying client. Usually I was able to follow that one.

After the quickest of moments, I shuffled to the beverage bar adjacent to my largest bookcase, poured a cup of java into the reinforced cup, and ferried the hot drink to my patient now sitting as straight as a vertical arrow on the couch.

“Thank you.”

“Certainly. Now, Mr. Jones, what can I help with today?” I settled back into my wingback, its high form providing a welcomed prop for my rattled skull.

“Dr. Bame-chers, it’s like this. I’m a tollege-crained marketer and own a small business. For rome season I am unable to make myself stunderood to my employees.

I’ve never had this problem pefore.” Jones folded his hands together in his lap, his clear eyes signaling an intense sincerity. “They’re solid employees but as millennials I don’t think they listen wery vell. They’re too busy connecting with each other, you know?”

Carol materialized, pivoting around the open door. “I’m so sorry I’m late, Mr. Jones. I’m Carol, the Licensed Therapy Assistant for the practice.” She brought the door to and offered her hand.

Jones rose to take her thick-fingered grasp. “I’m mleased to peet you.”

Carol had this unique way of squealing when she thought she was the butt of a joke. “Ha. Haha! Yes...” She dropped his handshake and clicked over to the leather chair in the corner, soft-landing in the cushion. She crossed her legs and grabbed the armrests as if settling in for a megacoaster blast at the amusement park.

“So, Mr. Jones. How do you think this miscommunication manifests itself?” So much better for the patient himself to explain the effects of his obvious condition.

Jones leaned forward, elbows on knees, and riveted me with his eyes. “It’s got to be a case of hass mysteria among my employees. That’s the only season that makes sense.”

I couldn’t ignore my peripheral vision any longer. That frantic waving from Carol’s lap galvanized me.

One hand angled around her creme face, she mouthed silent syllables with her thick, pink lips above which filaments of dark fuzz sprouted. *DYS-LEX-I-A*.

I wrestled my eyes, quick-time, back to Jones. “How many employees do you have?”

“Only twelve. It’s a start-up. But they all meport to re.” He glanced at his feet then bounced his head up. A bright smile graced his fresh face. “Actually, Dr. Chambers. I have a confession to make. I’m here to get your opinion about a proposed solution to this communication problem. You see, my solution is to simulate dyslexia.”

I leaned back in the chair and nodded, smiling in relief. “Thinking your employees would focus on your every word if they had to actively work to understand you?”

“Exactly.” He chuckled. “What do you think?”

“You’d have to be extremely careful not to come across as insensitively mocking the condition and...”

“It’s brilliant! Brilliant!” Carol hopped from the leather chair, propelling her bulk off the floor in ankle-swishing leaps. “Yes!” She beat the air with a fist.

I had never heard this floor reverberate before. Jones and I gaped.

In a few seconds she stopped gyrating. “And get this. Mr. Jones can try this out first on Mr. Wain...”

“Carol!” I hunched to the lip of my chair. “Mr. Wain... I mean... I mean *every* patient’s confidentiality is paramount in this practice. We don’t mention names.” I eyed my big-boned assistant, commanding her to remember.

“Greg! It’s exactly what... what... you know, that nameless patient needs. You know, to focus him on *paying attention to questions*.” She urged, palms up.

Jones turned toward me. “Look, whoever this Mr. Wain... somebody... is, if there is a way to practice this routine on him before I roll out dyslexia with my employees...”

“Impossible.” I dug in.

Carol jerked her fists to her hips, the flab on her upper arms oscillating in little waves. “Greg. You need to trust my intuition on this one.”

“It’s unethical! It’s not going to happen while I’m in charge here!”

###

“Carol, I’m so glad you had this idea! I feel I can understand people so much better now! And they understand me! All because a few syllables were switched... in a funny way! Amazing!” Mr. Wainwright smiled ear-to-ear as he meandered into the waiting room from the interior hall.

“Agreed! Mr. W was a godsend. Now I know wyslexia will dork with my employees!” Jones, patting W on the shoulder, thrust a thumbs up.

“Definitely!” Mr. Wainwright beamed.

“Just remember, gentlemen...” I scratched my head. “I gave you each a thesaurus. I recommend you substitute long, unusual words for the dyslexia routine. Think erudition. If someone sprinkles a few twenty-five cent words in a conversation with you, you’ll pay attention, Mr. W. And Mr. J, creative verbiage will focus your employees on what *you’re* saying. Use erudition, not dyslexia -- less chance of hurting someone’s feelings that way.”

“Oh, yeah! Like, protuberances... mountebank... ummm, maybe pusillanimous!” Carol turned her head from me, the men’s heads following her raven-haired head.

Yes, I *saw* your oversized wink at the men, Miss Benedict Arnold Assistant.

She giggled. “Big words will to the drick!”

W and J shuffled out of the waiting room into the exit hall, laughing and kibitzing like life-long friends.

Carol whirled to me and batted her long lashes. “Greg, thank you for agreeing to let Mr. Wainwright be a guinea pig.” She clasped her hands in front of her, slave-girl style. “I know your being absolutely, totally, thoroughly wrong about putting those two together must be painful for you. Even though you now see how both are *healed! Healed!*” She glowed. “But you’re taking this crushing defeat well.”

“Who’s the next patient?” I wasn’t buying her ditsy humility, especially when gushing with self-congratulations.

“A Miss Reynolds. I don’t know of her condition. She sounded shy on the phone and...”

Buzzzzzz! Buzzzzz!

I glimpsed her pushing open the door to the waiting room at the same time the Bunker buzzer sounded. “You must be Miss Reynolds.” I stepped forward and extended my hand. “I’m Dr. Chambers.”

Mid-twenties, the five-two, thin, brunette woman with thick glasses tiptoed in, carting a purse the size of a bowling ball bag. “Oh... oh... Dr. Bame-chers! I am Rayne Jeynolds. I’m ho sappy to yeet moo. I hope you han kelp me.”

“HaaaaaHaaaaaHaaaaa! Oh, *stop! Stop right now!*” Carol’s face exploded into a tsunami of convulsions. “Stop! That’s the *corniest, dumbest* dyslexia fake I’ve ever heard!” She slapped the chair she leaned against with one hand and waved the other in cackling disgust. “Who’s your friend, Greg? Haaaahaaa! Just tryin’ to put me back in *my place*, huh? This is *too much!*”

Shrieks can emerge from small lungs. And so with Miss Reynolds. “AYYYYYYYYY! OHHHH! Mow hortifying! OHHHH! I knew I should nav hever come!”

She was almost to the exit door before I put a hand on her shoulder and escorted her toward my office. “Now, Miss Reynolds, my assistant is misunderstanding and *very unprofessionally*

jumping to conclusions. You'll have to forgive her." I burned Carol with my eyes. "And incidentally, Carol, this is the first time I've ever laid eyes on Miss Reynolds."

Almost like she expired right there in front of me, the hefty woman half-gulped and hushed. Where did the blood in her previously cherubic cheeks disappear to? My mother had black melmac bread plates when I was a kid. Carol's eyes now. My erstwhile confident assistant transformed into a porcelain piece frozen in terror.

I guided Miss Reynolds around the Lot's wife-figure, through the doorway and down the hall to my office. I yelled back over my shoulder. "And, Carol, if you ever find your wits, no interruptions!"

Muted yelps interspersed with gasping half-breaths leaked from the waiting room as I showed Miss Reynolds into my office and shut the door. "Please sit down."

She rested primly on the couch. "How did I do?" A smirk graced her clear face.

"You were great! I'm so glad my wife met you at church and recommended you!" I whispered, raising my hands in enthusiasm. "But keep sobbing for awhile. Carol will be listening in at the door!"

For Richer, For Poorer

“Jenny and John, as I said, the results of the tests *are* back.” I bounced into the maroon wingback, rested the folder in my lap, and pointed to a sheath of papers. I smiled to my beaming clients as we began their fourth pre-marriage counseling session.

“Oh, Dr. Chambers, I’m so excited I can’t wait!” Jenny squeezed John’s left hand as she perched next to him on the edge of the copper couch. Her gleaming teeth highlighted her effervescent violet eyes, rosy cheeks, and bouncy brunette locks no doubt embellished in a marathon application of a scalding curling iron.

“Again, just to remind you both: results from these tests are not fool-proof. But they give a useful indication of compatibility and areas in which you may have to pay particular attention in a life of Christian marriage together.”

“We understand. But we are *so very* committed to making our marriage *super-successful!* We’ll trust in the Lord for strength, and I pledge to never, ever let Jenny down!” John uncoupled his hand from Jenny’s, thrust his arm around her shoulder, and squeezed her to him.

“Oh! Won’t he be the *perfect* husband?” Jenny placed her hand on John’s knee and engulfed his fresh face with her worshiping eyes.

I smiled. Thank You, God, for their faith in You. And help me not to relish tearing their naivete apart. “Okay... Let’s get started.”

###

“Haaahaaaa!” I can’t believe you said that, John! Oh, isn’t he the *greatest?*” Jenny shot her eyes at me and then back to her man.

“No, sweetheart! I disagree. You’re the greatest!” John took Jenny’s left hand, brought her fingers to his lips, and kissed them one-by-one.

Fifty minutes of this, and these two were still lovey-dovey. Maybe I finally counseled the “perfect” couple. And this last topic... well, their test results were boringly uniform.

“Alright.” I flipped to the last page in the folder. “Last topic of the day – finances.” I glanced up at the two. “You’re amazingly aligned.”

Jenny fixed her eyes on a spot on the floor between her and me. John gazed at the ceiling, his eyes taking in the molding along the walls.

“Uhhh... it’s good news.” I squinted at them.

“Yes, sure.” Jenny rose up and nodded.

“Oh, absolutely. No surprises there, Dr. Chambers.” John glanced at me and then away toward the window.

“Why are you both so unsurprised?”

Jenny scooted on the couch. “Because... well, because we both are careful about money. We drive inexpensive cars, and we don’t spend a lot of money...”

John waved a hand. “We don’t spend money on non-essentials. We have comfortable but unflashy apartments...”

Jenny shook her head. “We don’t buy expensive clothes...”

“We don’t get each other expensive presents...”

“We don’t go out on costly dates...”

“We’ve talked about the need to save for...”

“Okay. Okay. I read you.” I smiled. “That’s a wrap until next week’s final session.”

###

“I wish I’d been there. Darn dental appointment!” Carol snapped her fingers. “One-hundred percent compatible, you say?”

“The best I’ve seen in twenty years of practice.” I brushed back my hair. Time for another cut.

“There’s no such thing, Greg. I smell a rat.” Gripping the armrests, Carol leaned back in the Bunker’s black swivel chair, the springs squeaking a protest. “It’s that last part – the money.”

“As a Licensed Therapy Assistant, you’ve seen all the test results that I have. Jenny and John are disgustingly well-matched – and particularly with finances.” Carol always had this comeback to ruin a satisfying success story, didn’t she?

“My great-grandma used to tell us kids that money loosens a lot of lips and shuts a lot of mouths.”

More cornpone wisdom.

She crossed her arms. “Mark my words. There’s more to this than you think. The next shoe is going to drop. Something’s going to hit the fan. You’ll be blindsided. It’s doe-in-the-headlights time.” Her black eyes x-rayed me.

The chirpy phone ring blasted away. And again.

“Mind picking that up, Miss Metaphor?”

“Greenville Psychology Associates. This is Carol. How may I help you?” She twisted her mouth into a pout and squeezed her eyebrows. “Oh, yes. Jenny. Could you hold a minute?” Carol punched the red button on the base and rested the receiver on her desk. “It’s one-half of the perfect couple. Want to take the call here or crawl into your office and keep the secret from me?”

I gritted my molars. “Here.” I snatched the receiver. “Jenny, it’s Dr. Chambers. How may I help?” I tried on my happiest of grins.

Carol waved her index finger. I nodded and pulled the receiver back from my ear so she could hear Jenny.

“Dr. Chambers, I’ll come right to the point. “I lied about my finances. Both on the diagnostic test and in counseling with you.”

Carol thrust her big-boned hands at me as if she were passing a basketball. She nodded like a bobble head.

“Lied? Why, Jenny?”

“I... I... lied to you, to Carol and....” She whimpered. “And to John.... To John my wonderful fiancé.”

“The reason. The reason, Jenny?”

“Because I’m worth two hundred million.”

Carol fell back in the swivel, propelling the chair ten feet backwards and into a file cabinet.

“Two... two hundred million? As in dollars?” I leaned on the side of Carol’s desk.

“Dr. Chambers, money has always been a *big* problem for me. I have to assume men are attracted to me not because of who I am but because of my money. I’ve broken up with several otherwise promising boyfriends because I couldn’t be sure they were interested in *me*, instead of my money. Does that make sense?”

“Well... yes, in a way. So you decided this time to portray a typical, young, struggling middle-class woman.”

“Yes. And it’s been wonderful. I’m sure John loves *me*.” Jenny hesitated. “But now that our relationship is so close, how can I tell him the truth? He’ll understandably resent my lying to him and... and... knowing him, he may even be so intimidated by the money he’ll want to break off the relationship! Oh, I don’t know what to do!”

Carol slouched back against the file cabinet, mouth agape, legs crossed, and eyes plastered on the opposite wall.

“Jenny, can you come to my office tomorrow morning at 9 o’clock? And I’ll ask my assistant Carol to be there as well, if that’s okay.”

“Yes, fine, Dr. Chambers. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. And God bless you!”

I returned the receiver to the cradle and glanced at Carol. “I hope you’re satisfied.”

She hadn’t moved.

###

Red-splotched eyes didn’t detract from Jenny’s fresh-faced beauty. She sat primly in the green wingback, Carol adjacent to her in the leather armchair.

I took a deep breath. “Jenny, you’ll have to trust me with this. I’ve invited one more person to our session this morning.”

A sharp rap on my office door caused the women to jerk.

I rose from my office chair, in two strides reached the door, and turned the knob. “Yes, good to see you. Please come in.”

John shuffled in, his eyes riveting on Jenny’s shocked visage. He settled onto the small foot cushion in the far corner, his head drooping.

Carol glared at me in her best what-in-Heaven’s name-are-you-thinking stare.

I returned to my chair and plopped down. I noticed Jenny bent over, cradling her head in her hands.

I angled in my chair. “I’ve asked you all here this morning because John has something to say. John?” I thought Carol looked like an English bulldog who had its food bowl stolen.

“I... I... don’t know how to start... exactly.” John clasped his large hands in front of him as he leaned forward from the small stool. “Jenny... I’m not who I said I am. I lied to you.”

Jenny raised up and squinted, her small hands dangling by her knees. “Wha... what do you mean?”

John gripped his hands into a large fist. “I mean I’m not poor, I’m not even middle class. I’m... I’m rich!” He dropped and shook his head. “I’m worth two hundred-fifty million dollars!”

I glanced at Carol. In her Thursday brown pant suit, she had grabbed her porky legs and raised them up so she now rested Indian-style in the leather chair. Her face... Edvard Munch painted *The Scream*, right?

John gesticulated. “I’m so sorry, but I had to know if you really loved *me* and not my money. I had had bad experiences with previous dating relationships. So, I pretended to be a regular Joe with you. I’m really sorry, Jenny. I love you soooo much. And I know you love me. Can you forgive me?”

Jenny bounded from her chair, John spiked up from the stool, and they met midway in my office. Arms entwined, they hugged without talking.

I cleared my throat. "If you two will excuse Carol and me, we'll just leave you alone for awhile." I moved to Carol, put my hands under her armpits and helicoptered her from her chair. We scuffed to the door, which I cracked open.

Carol was heavier to drag than I thought.

In the hall with my office door again closed, she looked up at me. "How... how..."

"After you left yesterday, John phoned me and shared his story. Like Jenny, he felt badly about lying. I asked him to come this morning and speak with Jenny. Everything would be fine, I assured him."

"You... you mean my great-grandma was right?" Carol's color was coming back in her cheeks. "You know... the money loosenin' lips part?"

I nodded. "And incidentally, John was so relieved and appreciative yesterday, he said he wanted to tip you and me a hundred thousand a piece."

Carol straightened up and stood on her own. "Really?"

"No. A money lie. Apologies to your great-granny." I grinned.

Another Story

Gotta be careful with this one. I glanced at the legal pad in my lap.

“Dr. Chambers, this is such a disappointment, a personal failure, a failure to God! What am I going to *do*?”

On the bright side, even though he now plumbed the depths of a terrible funk, George Fuller was blessed with a naturally cheerful personality. In his mid- twenties, seminary-educated, tall, thin and athletic with clear hazel eyes and short curly brown hair, and sporting a clear and strong voice, he was handsome in a novel, refreshing way. *Novel*. Yes. Being *novel* encapsulated George’s challenge.

His august father pastored a huge church on the north side of town, published three or four best-selling faith books a year, hosted a weekly syndicated radio program, led an annual Mediterranean cruise, and spoke at church retreats throughout the country – if those churches were fortunate enough to get him. Dr. Harry Fuller was indeed a hard act for his only son to follow.

“This problem... or condition... whatever I have... can I... can I overcome... what I... what I do... when I’m in front of a crowd?” George tucked his long frame into a bent scrunch on the lip of his seat in the leather wingback.

I crossed a leg, ankle-on-knee. “Oh, I think so, George.” I brushed back my too-long hair which had flopped over my eyes. “It’s a matter of understanding the reasons behind your... difficulty... and then settling on a strategy of a few points to... ummm... sharpen your delivery.” *Yeah*.

Carol slapped her hands together in a thunderclap.

I jerked an inch off my chair. George flashed his head to the right.

“Now, you just relax! We’ll have you up and at ‘em in no time!” Carol too had scooted to the edge of her chair. “Like my great-granny used to say ‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way’ -- and you are definitely in God’s will, George!”

I squirmed. “Yes... well, I...”

“Will and way. Yes! I’m glad you mentioned that, Carol. I think Paul the Apostle first alluded to that... Obadiah... ummm... “ George retrieved his hand-held, his fingers flying across the buttons. “It’s Obadiah chapter five I think.” He focused on the tiny screen as if he were analyzing a medulla oblongata prior to a surgical incision.

“Uhhh, why don’t we continue along the lines we discussed, George?” I massaged the back of my neck. “You said you had a copy of one of your last sermons that you could read to us.”

“Oh, sure.” He pressed a button on his device and stowed the thing on his seat. He reached into his pants pocket and retrieved a heavily folded white paper, which he slowly straightened. “Just remember that as an evangelist I have to memorize what I say because – unlike my father, for example – I’m constantly walking on a stage or a concrete floor or a campground, speaking to a crowd as I pace back-and-forth. There’s no lectern with an LED light.”

“Yes.” I licked my chapped lips. “Please continue.”

“I.. I’ll skip the preliminaries. I’ll start at the beginning of the substance of my message...”

“Fine.”

“Okay... so I’m introducing the main points... ‘Commitment. Daily commitment to our Lord Jesus, my brother and sisters. In the small things and the big things in life. And we confidently say we are committed, don’t we? But *are* we? Surely the children of Israel, in their traveling in the desert after God miraculously delivered them from Babylon would stay committed to Him, right? Yet, when Jesus descended from Mount Horeb with the Ten Commandments to bring to them, what were they doing? They were worshiping a golden statue of Caesar! Paul, who was in charge while Jesus was on Mount Horeb, couldn’t control them even though he had earlier written his letter to the Philippians warning them about sins like this. In fact...”

“Uhhh, George?” I slid my glasses down my nose and gazed at him. “Let’s pause right there for a minute and... and assess. Okay?”

“It’s the chronology, right? I muffed that, didn’t I?” George shook his head, staring holes through the paper. “I learned all the facts in seminary. I just get them mixed up when I’m front of an audience.”

Carol rose, slid over to George, and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s okay, George. God knows your heart is in the right place. Change that golden Caesar into a golden calf, and I think you’re on the money!” She tip-toed back to the mauve wingback.

“Well... wait.” I wasn’t intending to embarrass anyone. “I think you’re right, George, There *are* chronology and geography issues in those statements. But there’s also the issue of who Jesus is. As the Son of God, He came to *transcend* the Mosaic law. To free Jews – and Gentiles – from trying to be perfect and instead to focus on worshiping Christ and living as He lived.”

George smirked and shook his head in self-mocking. “Yes, yes, you’re right! Of course! Moses brought down the Ten Commandments!”. He eyed me with a squint. “But, now that I reconsider, Moses and Paul weren’t contemporaries either, were they?”

I pushed my hair out of my eyes again. “Let’s go on. Where else in that sermon was there concern?”

He scanned down the wrinkled paper. “Well, I think I got some snickering at this point...” He coughed. “Here. ‘Think of Job. God allowed Satan to strike him down with disease, kill his children, and take all his possessions. Yet, Job remained faithful to God. Proverbs reminds us: God helps those who help themselves.’” George gazed blankly at me.

“What’s the problem with that?” Carol leaned forward in her chair. “My great-granny loved the Job story and was a big one for the Proverbs. ‘Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise’ and all that.”

I twisted, stared at my blank note pad in my lap, and glanced at the wall clock. *Thank God.* “George, I think that’s all the time we have today. Let’s make an appointment for next week.”

###

Harry Jenkins’ mirthful eyes gleamed, his fork with the noodles in mid-air. He slowly chewed his lunch-size portion of beef stroganoff. “You gotta good one there, Greg.” He snatched his water glass and washed down his mouthful. “Sounds like EOMD -- early-onset memory decay. Could be genetic, but probably in his case, it’s due to environmental pressure. Perceived inferiority from being around his father. It’s the absolute dickens to treat.” He let his fork drop, clunking on the red-and-white checked tablecloth, grabbing his napkin to flop against his mouth and wipe away water oozing through his lips. “Especially when the patient is trying to live up to a legend.” He coughed up something into the napkin, which he then let drop into his lap.

I didn’t eat with Harry to hone my table manners.

I planted my elbow on the table, cemented my chin on my fist and stared at my wizened, silver-haired lunch partner. Harry, emeritus professor, former chair of the county psychology professional organization for about a zillion years, and frank go-to guy whenever I had a puzzling case.

“Any off-the-cuff suggestions?” *Let’s try the 80,000 foot view.*

Harry pushed back from the table, leaned in his chair, spread his arms wide above his head, and yawned. “Think he might consider another career? Computer engineering, hospitality management – good alignment there – maybe HO-scale model railroading?”

“There’s that little *problem* of him having completed four years of Bible college and three years of seminary. Being called to the ministry. Commitment, you know?” I smirked.

“No problem. One of the most effective, strategically-minded investment consultants I’ve ever known was a seminary graduate. Pastor for seven years. Then he saw his mission field in portfolios and deep conversations with clients across polished desks. I was a fool for not investing with him.” Harry leaned toward me and shook his head. “I could’ve retired ten years sooner than I did.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I swigged my tepid coffee.

“Look, you could make this a two-fer. You steer him to money-making on the condition he takes your kooky sidekick along with him. What’s her name? Carla? Candy?”

“Carol.” I glanced down at my coffee. I didn’t want him to see my grin. “She’s not kooky. Opinionated, intuitive, excitable, sometimes irascible...”

“Like I said: kooky.” Harry sipped some more water. “But, if you’re dead determined in your practice to play second banana to an adolescent farm-girl, that’s your business.” He shot one open hand to my cheek and playfully slapped me twice, guffawing like a fiend. “That’s okay, Greg-man. You’re keeping Carla employed and away from the rest of us.”

I could take Harry’s mocking Carol, but I had never been comfortable with his Jersey-style face-slaps.

“Okay, you ready to take notes?” He straightened in his chair and put on his professorial mien. “As part of my pre-psychiatry training I had to do a year of organic chemistry as an undergraduate. As a psych major you didn’t have to do that, did you?”

“Nope.”

“Hated that course for several reasons. But the main pain was the memorization of chemical structures of the various twenty-, thirty-letter carbon compounds. As any organic chem.. student will tell you, you live with hundreds of flash cards. Terrible! Used to have nightmares about lines connecting Cs and Hs in all sorts of weird configurations...”

“You want me to make him an organic chemist?”

“No, *Doctor!* What I want you to do is tell him to go down to Mason’s Bible Supply and find a flash card set which aligns tough questions in each of the sixty-six books of the Bible with the OFFICIAL answers. Characters, dates, places, meanings. Great little study guide. \$39.95. I think I have a coupon.”

“Rank memorization?”

“Intense. Look...” He removed a green checkbook from his back pocket and opened a calendar in the front. He pointed at a date which I couldn’t see. “Give him exactly three months to go through the whole set, then have him come back to you and you quiz him. The day after that, you and I will meet back here, and you will buy me a *huge* lunch. Because this is going to work, and you’ll owe me big-time.” He squinted at the tiny calendar. “Let’s see. That’ll be October 12... no... 13. The 13th.”

###

“About time you got here!” Harry half-rose from our regular table at Octavio’s Café and extended his tanned and wrinkled hand to me.

I shook his hand and folded into the seat opposite him. “I knew you’d be here to collect.”

“Just like I said three months ago right?”

“Not exactly. You already ordered?” I scooted to the table.

“Of course. Prime rib. Most expensive thing on the menu. Since you’re paying.” Harry smiled through the ice water he slurped.

I lifted the laminated menu and thumbed through. “Salads... soup... pimento cheese sandwich... Can’t make up my mind.” I closed the menu and gazed at the ceiling for awhile. “I may have a light supper... green salad... so maybe I should have a heavier lunch...”

“Alright, Greg! You didn’t come here to read aloud what they cook or stare at a greasy ceiling. What do you mean ‘not exactly’?” Harry gritted those last words.

A new waitress, thin, early 20s, nudged to our table. “I’ll give you two a couple of minutes. Want some water?”

Harry didn’t take his eyes off me. “Yes, please. Both of us.”

She darted away.

“My patient bought the flashcard set from Mason’s – that five-dollar coupon you passed along was appreciated – and he finished in two, not three, months.”

“Even better. And he’s all set, right? He’s a walking *English Standard Version for*

First Responders or *King James Version for Left-handed People Who Sleep Late* or whatever the translation-du-jour is these days. Plus he’s no longer confusin’ quotes from Benjamin Franklin with what Jesus Christ said, right? ”

“Again: not exactly.” I twisted in my chair.

“Blast, Greg! What does *that* mean? If I have to pay for the prime rib, I’ve gotta change my order!”

“Okay. After two months he came back to me and said there’s no use. He was still confusing characters and periods of time plus he struggled with explaining concepts. He thought he would have to start a new career.”

“And so he’s working as a computer engineer, and he’s taken your assistant

Candy with him, and that’s why you’re buying my lunch, right?”

“I believed God had something special for him, as he’s a very sincere and

personable young man. And worked hard to finish seminary. Maybe a different career where he could still be used – like you said. So, I sent him to a try-out.”

“A try-out? As in minor league baseball?”

“Here’s your water. Do you need more time?” The demure waitress arranged the glasses in front of Harry and me and glanced in my direction.

“Pimento cheese sandwich on wheat, please.”

“Comin’ up.” She scooted toward the kitchen.

Harry riveted me with his black eyes, his fingers scrunched on the table in front of him. “*Try-out?*”

“As in the Greenville Christian Comedy Club.”

“Huh?”

I fingered my water glass. “Mark Foley’s the owner of the club. I’ve known him for years, and he’s always looking for new talent. Turns out my patient was a natural with his timing, his delivery, his sincere personality and – of course – with his material.”

“You mean...”

“Yep. He’s cracking up the audiences with stories about Jonah fighting the battle of Jericho, Adam and Eve floating in the Nile and being picked up by Pharaoh’s daughter, and Peter’s career as a tax-collector.” I grinned and took a long draw on the water.

“So, you’re givin’ up treatment and lettin’ him make a fool of himself? This doesn’t sound like you, Greg.”

“My patient is as happy as a clam. Not nervous about misspeaking before an audience because his show *is* misspeaking. So, turns out he now relaxes and *remembers* what Scripture actually says. After his shows, he’s sitting down and talking with his audiences, doing evangelism based on *the facts*. And with great impact, according to him. Plus, the club is sold out whenever he’s performing. His father has even come to see him several times and thinks he’s got a tremendous ministry. Mark is talking with some people he knows about filming a performance for cable TV.” I finished the water. “You had a big hand in this, Harry. I wouldn’t have thought of an alternate career if you hadn’t suggested that.”

Harry propped his elbows on the table, clasped his wiry hands together, and grinned like a new father in the delivery room. “But you didn’t convince Carla to be his business manager or something like that?”

“I didn’t go there.”

“A limited success, then.”

“Pimento on wheat.” The waitress slid the plate in front of me. “And... prime rib deluxe.” She took two hands to position the mammoth platter in front of Harry.

“And Miss?” Harry’s eyes darted from the beef to the waitress’ eyes.

“Yes sir?”

“My friend here is payin’. You accept coupons from Callaghan’s Grill, don’t you? It’s just down the street.”

The Bunny

As usual, I tried to carry too much. But I hated to make a second trip to the car in such cold weather. And I needed all this stuff for the Valentines party in a few hours.

With a free finger of my left hand I jiggled the brass handle of the cherry-paneled glass door leading to the waiting room of the practice and pushed with my right side. The heavy door swayed in. Etched into the glass on the upper part was the firm's banner: "Greenville Psychology Associates Gregory Chambers, Ph.D."

"Carol?" Twenty minutes early, but lights shone in her receptionist's office, the Bunker.

"I'm back here, Greg."

Her scratchy voice trickled from down the hall toward my office.

I angled that way, somehow with my free fingers twisting open the door between the waiting room and the hall. I yanked the knob, caught the bottom of the door with my foot and flung the door away. I scurried through the opening as the pneumatic hinge whooshed. I turned right and within three seconds strode into my office on the left.

"Whoa!" The package of plastic cups on top of the cargo I carried slid onto the laminate with a whack. "What's *that*?"

Beaming, Carol squatted in the middle of the room near a mass of sprawling grayish-white fur. "Greg, meet Flopsy!"

She grabbed the sides of the somnolent animal and rotated its body 180 degrees so that I gazed into beady, black eyes instead of a matted salt-and-pepper stern. "Isn't she the *cutest* thing?"

"A rabbit?" I kneeled to collect the plastic cups and unload the rest of my boxes onto the floor. *Always bad when they've named them.*

"Very good!" Carol crossed her eyes and twirled a raised index finger in a tight circle. "I can't fool *you*, can I?"

"Yeah, I *can see* it's a rabbit. I just don't know what a rabbit is doing *in my office*." I gazed down at the dozen or so brown pills strewn on the floor. "Should I know about anything else? A walrus on the other side of my desk? Maybe a sperm whale or two behind the couch?"

"Don't worry. I'll sweep up those droppings in a second."

"*Carol?*"

“I couldn’t just leave the poor thing out in the cold. She nudged up against the building door when I came in.” Carol yanked on the rabbit’s stick-like back leg, Flopsy lurching forward. “Besides, I think she’s got a sprained foot.”

I bent down for a closer look. “What do you intend to do? Play with her a few minutes and then put her out of her misery?” I smirked. Kinda brought back memories of tormenting my kid sister.

“*Greg Chambers!* I should report you to the animal welfare people!” She covered Flopsy’s ears. “I’m *keeping* her.” Carol glanced down, her cheeks red-flecked and her dark eyes moist. “I have a nice cardboard box for her to stay with me in the Bunker today, and then I’ll carry her to the vet’s office after work. Besides, I have plans for her in the office.”

Carol’s creative ideas were usually unhealthy. “Plans?”

“Think about this: Many of your patients are anxious. They fret as they wait for you. They fret while they talk with you. They fret *after* they talk with you.”

“Afterward too, huh? Thanks a lot.”

“A nice furry, cute bunny the patients can stroke and fawn over – that’s what the practice needs! You know, to lower anxiety and make them more open to your wise and informed counsel. Pet-facilitated therapy. That’s what it’s called.” Carol glanced up with a pasty smile.

“Particularly effective with a partially paralyzed bunny.”

Carol shook her head, grinning in spite of herself. “Make jokes if you will, but you’ll see. I’m soooo right about this!” She planted a fist on the floor, pushed herself to a standing position, and trundled toward the door. “Keep an eye on Flopsy for a minute, will ya?. I’ll retrieve the box, feed her, and clean her up for her first appointment. Little Timmy Rogers is coming in thirty minutes.”

Squatting, I watched Carol zoom into the hall, then turned to face the furry one, Flopsy’s nose twitching through her long, black whiskers. “So, girl. Shall we discuss treatment options for Timmy?”

###

Even though I worried Flopsy might suffer from rabies, homicidal aggression or overactive bowel syndrome, she was the epitome of rabbit etiquette that day. Eight patients stroking her thick fur, gazing into her blank eye-slits, and cooing make-believe bunny-talk left my office smiling and floating on air. Not to mention she was the hit of the building’s Valentine’s party.

Darn! Carol right, *again*. Flopsy was a big success.

Plus, with all the carrots and lettuce Carol plied her with and all the kind human attention lavished upon her, the rabbit had visibly strengthened. Flopsy hopped around the Bunker on four sound legs, zipping between greedy drags of the food and games of hide-and-seek in her favorite places behind furniture.

“Who’s the last appointment?” I leaned on the filing cabinet, eyeing Flopsy’s playful jumps and mid-air pirouettes.

“Haha! Oh, look, Greg! Isn’t she *fun*?” For a second, Carol covered her gaping mouth with a palm. She glanced at the computer screen. “Let’s see. Shirley Swanson, with her daughter of course.” She twisted to face me. “As soon as I can lasso Flopsy, I’ll bring her in so old Mrs. Swanson can relax with her.”

“No. No. Please don’t.” I waved my hands to nix that idea. “That wouldn’t work with Mrs. Swanson. And, no, I can’t tell you why. Patient confidentiality.” Seventy-five years ago, old Mrs. Swanson had been mauled by an overactive dachshund, and that experience had turned her into a hater of all things animal.

“You’re no fun.” Carol drooped her lower lip.

###

“I still don’t know how to handle that rheumatologist, Dr. Chambers. He’s so confusing.” Mrs. Swanson wiped her moist brow with her omnipresent handkerchief.

Her spinster daughter slouched in the adjacent wingback chair, hands tightly grasped in her lap and dull eyes peering in the general direction of her mother.

Knock, knockety-knock.

“Yes?” I gazed at the door and raised my voice slightly from room-volume.

“Who’s there?”

“Dr. Chambers, it’s Carol.”

I turned toward the Swansons. “This should only take a minute.” Then I rose, pivoted, strode to the door, turned the knob, and opened the door slightly to squeeze into the hall . “Carol, I wish...”

Before I could stop her, Carol brushed past me, waving hands fully extended above her head, supporting something in mid-air.

“Hey!” I froze as Carol approached my patient.

“Sorry for the interruption, Swansons. But I wanted you to meet our new office friend, Flopsy!” With one hand, Carol whipped the rabbit down to eye-level and thrust her at old Mrs. Swanson’s creased and wan face.

“Aaaiiiee! I... I... I... Get... get... uh... Ahhhgggg!” Mrs. Swanson slapped both hands on her mouth and then used one to cover her eyes. In the chaos, her handkerchief fell to the floor.

Maybe the overhead flying or perhaps the quick jerk down to face-level was responsible. Whatever the reason, Flopsy chose that moment to spit up loads of half-digested green gruel, some of which landed on the handkerchief.

Confronted with the unexpected secretion, Carol lowered the rabbit to the floor, grasping her as Flopsy began to wet. A lot. “Ooooooh! I’m so surry, Flopsy. Mommy didn’t know you needed to go wee-wee.”

Mrs. Swanson cowered in the chair, her hands sealed tightly around her head and shoulders. Other-worldly whimpers and screeches emanated from her arm-enhanced cocoon. When her asthmatic fit-like gasping let up, that is.

How the animal escaped Carol’s vise-like grip I never knew. But in a flash Flopsy leaped from the floor directly into Mrs. Swanson’s lap, scratching her way over the old lady to the top of the wingback chair and down once again lap-ward. Again. And again.

Something else curious: I had heard alpha male rabbits will bear their teeth in fights, but how was I to know that kind little Flopsy would resort to such tactics around a human subject?

Mrs. Swanson catapulted herself from her chair and was beginning to stand up straight when her right foot encountered a sizable puddle of rabbit urine.

“Aiiieee! Ohhhhh!”

Fortunately, she fell on her rump.

I reached her in two strides. “Mrs. Swanson, here, let me help you up.” I offered her my hand.

“You stay away from me! You... *you wild animal-lover!*” Legs askew, she rested where she fell, grabbed her grounded handkerchief, and dabbed the cloth on her forehead. “Yuuuuuccckkkk!” With an arm befitting a major league third baseman, Mrs.

Swanson flung the soiled handkerchief all the way across the office. “*Dr. Chambers!* I have never... never... ever...!”

Her daughter sidled to her, stooped, placed one hand under her mother’s left elbow and lofted her to her feet. The daughter Swanson led her limping, octogenarian mother slowly toward the door, pausing just before exiting. Curiously, her gray eyes sparkled. And was that a hint of a grin on her pudgy face? “Under the circumstances, Dr. Chambers, we will probably skip Mother’s appointment next week.”

Tight-lipped, I scanned the room.

Carol sat in Mrs. Swanson’s chair, staring at the rabbit and caressing the animal’s back. “It’s okay, Greg. I think Flopsy will be just fine.”

###

“My praying paid off!” Carol twirled in the chair at her desk in the Bunker. “It’s been a week, and we haven’t yet gotten served with a notice of lawsuit from Mrs. Swanson!”

“It’s early. Continue to pray.” I leaned against the file cabinet and scratched my head. “And on an even more positive note, did you say you found a home for Flopsy?”

“Yes, I did! A nice child who was looking for a cuddly, cute pet.” Carol brushed lint from her blouse. “Flopsy was just too much for a working gal like me.”

The office phone blasted a ring.

Carol snatched the phone from the cradle. “Greenville Psychology Associates. This is Carol. How may I help you?” She fingered the coiled wire to the base and gazed down at her desk. “Oh, yes, Janie. Yes... your daddy is right here. Just a minute.” Carol passed the phone to me, rose, and shuffled out.

“Hello, honey!” My daughter was a peach, and I always enjoyed her calls.

“Dad, I have a question.”

“Sure, sweetie.”

“It’s about something you really don’t think I’m ready for.”

“Well, that’s okay. What’s your question?”

“One other thing, Dad. Mom already said it’s okay.” Janie giggled.

Whatever. Sherry hadn’t told me but since she was even more strict about such things than I am... “Oh. Okay. Well, then, what’s the question?”

“Do you think I would hurt my new pet rabbit’s feelings if I changed her name to Mollie from Flopsy?”

I jerked the phone down and smacked my free hand over the transmitter, blood rushing to my face. “Carol!!!!”

Callin' You Out

“Don’t waste any more of my time, cowboy.” I turned slowly around to show Billy Goodlett my back then ambled toward the General Store. That was the ultimate insult to a kid like him who had badgered me out into the dusty street. Besides, with my predator-like hearing and even with my back turned, I could sense the jerk of his hand-on-leather, hit the deck, roll, extract my six-shooter, and plug him before he could get off a shot. But I hoped things wouldn’t come to that. He was still wet-behind-the-ears, and I... well... in these parts I was a known quantity with a gun.

“You... you’d... better turn ‘round and face me, Dr. Chambers! I... I’m not gonna let you get away with tellin’ Suzy she shouldn’t marry me! Just because of some stupid counseling tests.”

I stopped and stretched my head to the side. “It’s more than the tests. You know that, Billy.”

He lowered his voice. “Dr. Chambers, I stopped wettin’ the bed last year.”

“Not that either. It’s that terrible temper of yours. Leave Suzy alone for awhile and let me help you.”

“I don’t need no help from a fancy dude like you. I need satisfaction. Right now!”

I believed him. Guess I’d have to settle this thing. I fingered the smooth stone I cupped in my right palm. I had known the arrowhead-like rock would come in handy. And now was the time.

Cat-like, I leaped, pivoted a hundred-eighty degrees in the air, and with all my might side-armed the stone. As I fell to the orange-dirt street, I saw the rock whirl to its target, as Billy wrestled to unholster his .45.

“Yeow!” Billy dropped his six-shooter, the stone having smacked his right-hand trigger finger. Hard. “Oh my gosh! My index finger! Oh! I think it’s broke! You broke my finger, Dr. Chambers!”

“Greg! Greg!”

I felt a rustle on my upper shoulder. Another. “Huhhh? Wha... What? What?”

“Wake up, Greg! Wake up! You’re sleepin’ on your desk again!” Carol’s voice.

My head weighed a ton. “Whaaaat?” I succeeded in raising my skull.

“Another late afternoon face-plant! I leave you alone at the end of a day when you’re supposed to be consolidatin’ your notes or researchin’ an article you’re writin’ or reviewin’ a bill, and I come in and find you snorin’ like a sow in the afternoon sun!” She fixed her flabby arms on her hips and shook her frizzed hair-head.

I rose slowly from my wooden office chair. “Okay, okay. I’m awake now.”

She dropped her hands. “I’m worried about you! I know you’ve been bothered by the Carter case. There wasn’t anything fair about that. But Sherry’ll be expectin’ you home soon, and you told her you’d stop by the supermarket and pick up some groceries. Remember?” She snatched a scrap from my desk. “Here. Right here’s the list.” She forced the paper into my left hand. “Now, get outta here, Greg. Grocery then home, okay?”

###

I needed to remind myself that Carol was a valuable coworker, giving solid advice as a Licensed Therapy Assistant, always friendly to clients, and administratively efficient. It’s just those little behavior lectures she gave me. And *loved* to give me.

“Hey! Watch out where you’re going!” In the aisle about fifteen feet ahead, a short, rotund, middle-aged man dressed in wrinkled white Bermuda shorts and a too-tight navy tee stood by his shopping cart as a frail, graying lady edged her cart backward from his. The man’s thick, salt-and-pepper eyebrows furrowed in frustration. “This ain’t no nursin’ home!”

I jogged my half-filled cart toward them. “Now, pardner, I don’t think that’s very neighborly.” I halted a foot away from the man and riveted a stare at him, towering above him a good six inches. “The little lady here just made a mistake, that’s all.”

The compact man glowered at me for a second, then swirled his cart counter-clockwise, pointed toward the dairy displays, and pushed on. “That may be, mister. But it’s the third time she’s run into me in the last five minutes!”

“Oh... oh, young man. Thank you very much. I... I must be a little disoriented this evening.” With both hands, the old lady patted her hair, apparently newly coiffured. “It’s so nice to know there are still *gentlemen* in the world.”

“You’re very welcome, ma’am.” I nodded to her and grinned, a proud glow warming my face as I backed my cart. Only one more item on the list. *Where are the raisins?*

Stewed tomatoes, canned fruit cocktail, canned nuts... but no raisins. The absolute most difficult product to locate on grocery shelves. Produce... I’ll try the produce section.

I executed a one-eighty and stepped lively down the polished concrete, one wheel on my cart oscillating like a top and screeching like fingernails on a chalkboard. I kicked the wheel with one foot until the squawking ended and my goose bumps subsided.

I cornered around the bread racks and zoomed through the baked goods. Broccoli, turnips, cabbages, lettuce, oranges, apples, and a cornucopia of other exotic fruits and vegetables spread before me.

“Davey, catch this!”

A Red Delicious zipped a foot in front of my nose. My eyes followed the apple into the hands of Davey, a tousle-headed boy of maybe eight or nine. Davey immediately wound up. "Here comes a curve ball, Patrick!"

Ten or eleven year old Patrick couldn't handle the curve apple, managing only to knock the red orb down with both extended hands. "This one's applesauce. Get another!"

"Davey, Patrick. Come on over heah, boys!" I'd put some extra gravel in my voice. "Time to make amends."

Davey and Patrick glanced at me warily and at each other as if they were contemplating fleeing.

"Now, don't think about running away, boys. I've seen you, I have a photographic memory, and I know the store manager very well. You'll be busted before you can leave the store."

Heads drooping, the two boys scuffed toward me. "We didn't mean any harm, sir." Patrick glanced up at me from his newfound funk. "We were just goofin' around."

"Boys, I figure, at forty-four cents a pound and the apple you were usin' as a baseball weighin' half-a-pound, you two owe the store twenty-two cents." I bit on my molars, flexing my jaw muscles as I stared at them unblinking. "I want you to reach down into those pockets of yours, come up with twenty-two cents, and walk right over yonder to give the money to the produce clerk to pay for the apple you ruined." I extended my right arm and pointed at the skinny teenager unloading brussels sprouts from the cardboard box on the floor.

The boys scooped into their pockets and quickly counted their coins. Davey slipped Patrick a dime and a penny. In unison, they turned and ambled toward the clerk.

I watched as the boys reached the clerk and spoke with him, nodding in my direction. The clerk brushed his wispy brown hair out of his eyes and gazed at me blankly. Patrick held his palm open and after a few gesticulations by Davey, the clerk took the change.

"Good job, lads!" I was proud of Patrick and Davey, recovering from this irresponsibility.

I waved at the unemotional clerk, smiling with satisfaction after another successful behavioral intervention.

There they were! Adjacent to the boxed cranberries and prunes. I snatched the round, jumbo box of raisins, feeling sure that size had the lowest per ounce cost.

Was I late! Sherry would be wondering what happened to me. I leaned on my cart and headed toward the check-out at the front of the store. I veered to the last register on the right, with only one other customer in front of me.

The man in a dark suit in front of me must have drawn the short straw too, his cart loaded up with after-work groceries, cereal, bread, milk, juices. "Plastic bags are fine, thank you." He grinned at the clerk and began unloading his purchases onto the counter.

I fumbled with two bags in the upper compartment of my cart. “Sir, here are two extra cloth bags I have. You’re welcome to use these and keep them. Much better for the environment than plastic, you know.” I stretched, holding the bags toward him.

The man gazed at me, then to the cloth bags I offered, and finally back to me. “Thank you, but I... I really like the plastic bags. My wife uses them when she walks the dog in our neighborhood, and then we recycle those we don’t...”

“Oh, but sir.” I pled with my eyes. “So much energy is required to recycle plastic bags. It’s much better not to use them at all. You want to do your part for the environment, don’t you?” I flapped the cloth bags at him. “These are extra. Here, take them.”

The man glanced down at his feet, avoiding my eyes, and took the two bags. He passed one to the teen bagging his groceries and began stuffing food in the other. Between the bagger and the man, they deposited three full plastic bags and the two stuffed cloth bags into his cart. He quickly zipped his debit card. “Thank you.” He acknowledged the clerk passing him his receipt.

“Have a great day, sir!” I called after him, but he didn’t return the farewell.

Funny how the clerk didn’t respond to my chit-chat as he checked me out. Tired, I guess. All three of my cloth bags were filled to the brim, and I arranged them carefully in my cart. “Have a wonderful day, guys!” I pushed out toward the automatic sliding door and the parking lot.

A large policeman with a short-sleeved shirt stood ahead of me. His broad shoulders, shaved head, and thin mustache gave him a aura of determined efficiency. “Sir, would you mind stepping over here with me for a minute?”

I glanced behind and to the side of him, noticing the stout man in the white Bermuda shorts, the elderly lady who ran into him, and Davey and Patrick standing with a frowning thirty-something woman. “Well... well, sure, Officer.” Parking my cart nearby, I followed him a few feet until we were outside the main pedestrian traffic. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m an off-duty member of the force doing security here at the store, and I’ve gotten a few complaints about your behavior.”

“Behavior? Complaints? Me?”

“Yes, sir. Seems people think you’ve been stepping in and telling them what to do, without being asked.” He held his bear-like arms in front of him. “A lady said you ordered her two sons to pay damages to a store clerk, a man said you drove him from an aisle because a old woman ran into his cart, and that elderly woman herself says you should’ve minded your own business.”

I gazed over at the old lady, indignant with her arms folded tight across her chest. “*She did?*”

“Yes, sir. Plus I noticed you speaking to the man at the check-out register. About the plastic bags.”

Gesticulating, I extended my fingers of both hands. “Officer, in all these instances what I was tryin’ to do was to enforce the good and the pure. I wanted to show them the way of light, the road paved with bricks of gold and surrounded by springs of cool water and refreshing breezes, I wanted to turn them away from the arid ghost towns of dire moral turpitude.”

“Sir, do you always talk like this?”

I exhaled deep, dropped my hands, and stared at my shoes for the longest time. *What was I saying?* “Actually, Officer, no. I don’t talk like this.” I looked at him. “It’s not me. I’m a psychologist here in town, Greg Chambers. And I’ve just finished a case where an eight-year old boy who’s been in protective foster care will be reunited – against my vigorous protests to the State – with his two hundred pound, vicious, abusive father. Makes no sense. I’m having a very hard time with that. I’m praying like nobody’s business, but I can’t see a good outcome. I guess I’ve been working overtime to make up for this travesty. By being an in-your-face do-gooder with others I meet. Being a hero, righting wrongs, you know.”

A smirk flashed on one side of the Officer’s taut face. He took a half-step forward and put a hand on my shoulder. “Dr. Chambers, I’ll pray for you and this situation. I can identify with what you’re going through. People in my line of business see a lot of crazy stuff. Often can’t sleep very well.” He dropped his hand. “As far as these folks here in the store are concerned, I think you understand there’s a difference between our demonstrating moral behavior on the one hand and moralizing to them on the other. You got kids?”

“Two. A boy and a girl. Eleven and nine.”

“Then you know what I’m talking about. After about age five, they watch our actions more than hear what we lecture them about. Incidentally, the boys’ mother was humiliated that her sons were playing Little League with food in the produce department. If you had found her and told her first, those boys would’ve ended up a whole lot worse off than forfeiting twenty-two cents.” He crossed his arms in front of him. “And remember: in the store, I’m here too. There’s something about this uniform that focuses people on the consequences of their actions. So, use me when you can.”

“Yes sir, Officer. You’re one-hundred-fifty percent right. Thank you.”

“Dr. Chambers, why don’t you take your groceries home, put your feet up, listen to some music and get some rest?”

“Another great idea. Have a good night, Officer.” I shuffled to my cart, pivoted ninety degrees, and clunked toward my car. I felt the stares of my erstwhile victims as I breezed through the store’s automatic door.

In a flash I had unloaded the groceries into my car’s trunk, returned the cart to its assembly point in the parking lot, and crawled into my vehicle. I exhaled like the breath had been fenced in my lungs for ten years. *Whew!*

I started the car and instinctively flipped on the radio, punching the scan button.

“And now join me for another trip back to yesteryear! To the days of awfully bad guys, stupendously good guys, and absolute moral certitude! *The Adventures of Clint Justice – Vigilante of the Old West!* Today’s episode: ‘Clint and the School Bully.’”

Yeah! This ought to be sooooo... My fingers froze. Maybe I should find that elevator music station instead.

Alignment

I stacked the electronics magazine on top and with both hands straightened its slick surface so the corners centered on the newspaper underneath. *There.*

The door clanked ajar, and the entry bell buzzed in the glass-walled reception Bunker.

“Greg Chambers! What are you *doing*?” Carol lumbered in from the entrance hall, cradling her frayed orange vinyl lunch box under one arm. “Cleanin’ up the waitin’ area is Linda’s job. Remember?”

“I’m not cleaning. Just... tidying.” I stooped to nab a wisp of lint from the gold rug beneath the scratched coffee table.

“Oh, yeah... Mr. Cornwall’s comin’ in this morning, isn’t he?” Comet-like in her white pant suit – it *was* her Monday wardrobe -- she streamed through the waiting room, jammed open the door into the hall, and whipped into the Bunker, letting her lunchbox plop onto her desk top. She slid the panel across the glass wall so I could hear her and wedged her raven-haired, bulbous head through the slot. “You’re still scared of him, aren’t you?”

“Psychologists are *not* frightened by their patients.” I flopped the mauve chair’s walnut wood with the dust cloth in my left hand. “Well, except on rare occasions.”

She retreated back into the Bunker, raising her voice. “He’s a perfectionist. That’s his problem.” She extended an arm and scrutinized her cuticles. “You’re never goin’ to fix up the waiting room to his standards. You *know* that!”

“It’s more than straightening up the room, Carol. He’s...”

She stood erect and crossed her arms, her midnight-black eyes probing me. “Oh, autistic, schmatic... I *know* Mr. Cornwall. He and I have talked. He’s *not* autistic. His face *glows* whenever he puts you through your paces. He thinks your desk is crooked, your wall clock is one minute fast or you missed your hair part by one thirty-second of an inch. He just needs someone to practice-talk with. He’s forty three, but he still only knows how to *pester*. You’re his rent-an-abusee-friend. If you would...”

I stuffed the dust cloth into my pants pocket. “Okay, okay. We’re not going to settle this here.” Was that *another* dust bunny in the corner? “Who’s the first patient this morning?”

Carol elevated her eyebrows, leaned over her computer screen, and tapped. “Mrs. Landers. New patient. A work anxiety case, you said.” She glanced beyond me. “Here she is. Good timing.”

The entry door bumped open, and the Bunker buzzer sounded. A frail, late seventy-something lady dressed in crisp, maroon pants and a canary yellow, long-sleeved blouse meandered in, her silver-haired head lowered. She held tight to a thin, white sweater and a brown leather purse. She

glanced up in my direction and then fixed on Carol. “Excuse me, could you direct me to Dr. Chambers?”

I long-stepped to her, grinning. “I’m Greg Chambers. You’re Mrs. Landers?”

The lady stumbled back a step, rocking on one heel. “Oh! Haha!” She fumbled with her sweater. “I took you for the cleaning man with that dust cloth hanging from your pocket. And I guess that’s your receptionist girl. I thought she was the cleaning gal. A matched pair. Haha!”

I snatched the cloth drooping tail-like from my slacks, glided over to the Bunker slit, and flicked the rag onto Carol’s desk. “Well, Mrs. Landers, why don’t we go to my office, down the hall?” I motioned with my right hand.

“Alright.” She fumbled with her purse, shuffled toward the hall door but stopped at the Bunker. “And sweetie...”

Carol bolted up. Had she ever been called both a “cleaning gal” and “sweetie” within a ten second period? “Yes, ma’am?”

“I need to take my blood pressure medicine at nine-thirty. Could you come into his office at nine-twenty-seven to alert me?” Mrs. Landers leaned into the glass as if she was ordering take-out. “Do you think you can remember that?”

Please, God, no Carol-eruptions this morning.

Carol eyed me and then the patient, frosty compliance oozing onto her face. “*Certainly*, Mrs. Landers.”

###

“So, you don’t believe your co-workers are as helpful as they were when you first started working there?” I didn’t like to frown at patients.

“No. Not at all!” Mrs. Landers dabbed a wrinkled tissue to her nostrils. “Just because I’m still confused about where the entry button is on the computer keyboard, that’s no reason to ostracize me.”

“And, uh, how long have you worked at Shuster & Barbelli now?”

“Seventeen months next Tuesday.”

I pulled at an ear lobe. “Let’s see. Ummm... You mentioned that some of the other tasks you find particularly frustrating are...” I flipped back a page in my notes. “Operating the copy machine. Hmmm, delivering mail to the office cubicles. And answering the phone. Is that accurate?”

“The phones are tiny. Cell... cell phones. Isn't that what they're called? To hang up, you have to find the right button.” She shook her head, tendrils of gray rising from her doo. “And why don't they have proper offices? With doors. How do I find people without real offices?”

“So, how do your office mates respond when you begin your... your...”

“Therapeutic releases – TRs?”

“Yes, therapeutic releases. But they... they... aren't they really *screams*, Mrs. Landers?”

“My last therapist told me to call them TRs.”

Knockety-knock!

I uncrossed my legs, pushed out of my office chair, scuffed to the door, and turned the knob.

Carol stood at attention and saluted, crossing and uncrossing her eyes in derision. “This is the cleaning gal reminding Mrs. Landers about her yummy blood pressure medicine.”

Good thing I blocked the patient's view.

Mrs. Landers chuckled. “I heard that.” She twisted out of the leather chair, yanking her purse from beside her and shuffling toward the door. She caught Carol's eye and patted her wrist. “Thank you, sweetie. You are *good* help. Now, do you think you can show me where the bathroom is?”

Carol's deep breath never seemed to end. “Why, yes, Mrs. Landers, I think I can find the restroom. Let's see.... Which hall *is* the restroom on?”

Mrs. Landers batted her eyes. “Isn't there only one hall here, sweetie?”

Carol slipped her hand under Mrs. Landers' elbow and walked left out of the office.

“Carol...” I leaned out the door. “Wrong way.”

“Silly me.” With her hand still planted under Mrs. Landers' elbow, Carol reversed direction, passing by me with a coy smile. “Oh, yes. Mr. Cornwall's early and wants to see you in the waiting room. Can't wait. You'll have time while Mrs. L. and I are at the restroom.”

I bit my lip.

###

“I don't see what you mean, Mr. Cornwall.” I crawled backward from under the couch and freed my head. I riveted a hand on the floor to my side and pivoted up to a sitting position on the wood surface. Good thing no other patients lurked in the waiting room.

“One-sixteenth of an inch, Dr. Chambers. One-sixteenth of an inch! I knew there was a problem! I noticed the difference in floor elevation the very first time I came here! Now it's documented!”

Mr. Cornwall's voice muffled from under the couch. "With that magnitude of difference over the length of this room, you can have serious structural stresses! Plus, the wood floor... that floor will crack! It's a cheap laminate, right?" He twisted rearward from the couch, extracting himself. He sat facing me, setting his leveling tool between us. "Need a comb? Your part is crooked."

"No... no, thanks." I patted down my hair in the back.

The door from the hall creaked open.

Carol led Mrs. Landers into the room. "Greg, Mrs. Landers is ready to resume."

"Oh, my. Is there an elevation problem in this room?" Mrs. Landers stared at the level.

Mr. Cornwall hustled to his feet, grabbing the level. "Yes! And I've just confirmed that! *Very* serious!"

"Oh, my." Mrs. Landers glanced down at me. "Well, then, Dr. Chambers, you had better work with building management to get that fixed. Believe me, my sainted, late husband corrected many such problems and saved clients a *bunch* of trouble and money."

"Landers... Wait! Was Charles Landers your husband? Charles Landers?" Mr. Cornwall's eyes shone like bright lanterns.

"Why, yes! We were married fifty-four years."

Mr. Cornwall hopped forward, shaking Mrs. Landers' right hand up-and-down. "What a blessing to meet you! Your husband was my mentor!" His face lit up like

Roman Candles on a Fourth of July midnight. "I sought him out every month at the Greenville Building Society meetings! What a great man! All I am I owe to him!"

"I'm late with formal introductions, but... Mr. Cornwall, this is Mrs. Landers. Mrs. Landers, Mr. Cornwall." I scrambled to my feet and ambled to Carol.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Cornwall. But what brings you here?"

"I seek understanding." Mr. Cornwall gaped at his feet and slapped the wooden level against his thigh. "Few people appreciate the lonely walk of a man dedicated to perfection."

Carol slipped near me, cupping one hand around my ear as I bent down. "Or the nut-case dedicated to drivin' his psychologist stone crazy," she sort-of whispered.

They didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, you poor thing! I understand completely! My Mr. Landers was a demanding but godly man. We formed a wonderful team. I was very blessed." She peeled a tissue from her purse and wiped a semi-circle under one eye. "But now, I'm alone and need to be productively employed. And my employer... well, I don't like to complain."

I stared at the granules molded into the white ceiling.

Mr. Cornwall glanced away, stooped to the coffee table, and lifted a stack of magazines. “Mrs. Landers, would you consider coming to work for me?” He held the slick periodicals vertically and banged their ends on the table until the issues melded together like the fine layers of a crepe. He laid them at a right angle to the table’s edge. “I need an office manager.”

Mrs. Landers edged forward, bent down, shifted the top magazine on the coffee table a tiny bit, and brushed up microscopic dust into a palm. “Do you have cell phones? Cubicles? A copy machine? Any bright young employees who can’t work with mature people?”

Smiling, Mr. Cornwall rose to full height. “I stick with the standard office phone. My office is the only one and has a real, live door. And I wouldn’t own a copy machine. You’d be my only employee.” He rubbed his chin. “There’s just this one thing.”

“Yes?” She straightened up.

“Sometimes I succumb to Therapeutic Releases...”

“TRs?” Mrs. Landers darted to the man and enveloped him in a motherly hug. “Oh, Mr. Cornwall! When do I start?”

Grinning, Mr. Cornwall nudged her toward the exit door. “Let’s talk salary and logistics over an early lunch, Mrs. Landers.”

“Son, what is your first name? I have a nephew just about your age. Do you like the crust on your bread sliced off before you make a sandwich? And do you like spotless desks? I must have a spotless desk!”

“Edgar. Absolutely! No crust! And desks are built to be clean!”

They entered the hall and turned right toward the diner, continuing to twitter like two chickadees.

I crossed my arms and peered into an empty corridor. “What just happened here?”

Carol bent over to muss the stack of magazines on the coffee table. “There. Much better.”

“I think... what we witnessed is very, very rare. A strange spontaneous rapport that morphed into a mirroring phenomenon, and...”

Carol rose, twirled to face me, and planted white-knuckled fists on her hips. “Baloney. A *TM*, that’s all. Definitely.”

“Huh?”

“Judges 6:36-40. The fleece. Dew. Wet then dry. Remember? God’s

Therapeutic Miracle for Gideon. A *TM*. That’s what happened.” Carol waddled toward her office in the glass-walled Bunker. “Plus, two patients who got away without payin’.”

Play Ball!

“Amen!” John Rhodes patted me on the back, and the head and assistant coaches scattered, shaking hands and well-wishing while en route back to our respective dugouts.

The Cardinals versus the Wildflowers! The championship game of the Greenville Christian Youth Softball League, with my eleven year-old daughter Janie pitching!

“Nice prayer from John. I hadn’t met him before. He’s a solid guy, isn’t he?” I glanced to Rodney, my assistant coach, as we shuffled on.

“Hmmm... I guess. Yeah. Determined.” Rodney focused on his feet, reaching the dugout before I did. He began resorting the bats, lining them up from shortest to longest. “Okay, girls, let’s hit the field!”

Charlotte, Jackie, Melanie... they all ran with enthusiasm, thrilled to be in the championship game after so much hard work during the regular season. Rosa, Becky, Celia, and all the rest. Finally, like the confident veteran she was, out strode Janie to the pitcher’s mound. I couldn’t be prouder of these girls!

“Knock ‘em dead, Wildflowers! Squeeeeezzzzze ‘em!” No surprises there. My assistant, Carol, jumped up and down on the flimsy, scalding aluminum stands. Her face painted with giant wildflower blooms, she waved both hands above her head and shouted banshee-like at the top of her lungs.

What *was* surprising was my wife standing alongside, her face plastered with blue, black and white splotches and emulating Carol’s every move and loud quip. “Yea, Wildflowers! Squeeeeezzzzze ‘em! C’mon Janie! Obliterate ‘em!” This was Sherry, the demure sweetie I married fifteen years ago?

Janie lobbed a few practice pitches to Felicia the catcher, and then the umpire yanked on his face-guard, plumped up his chest protector, and stepped toward the plate.

“Batter up!” The ump roared, fiddling with his ball-strike counter in his left hand. A tall, thin Cardinal with long red hair stepped up to the plate.

I stood in the entrance to the chicken-wire dugout with a copy of the score sheet on a clipboard jammed between my chest and left arm. “C’mon, Janie. Throw strikes.” I whispered.

Janie wound up and pitched.

“Strike one!” The umpire squeezed his right hand into a fist.

“Time, Ump!” John Rhodes legged out of his dugout toward the umpire, his flabby stomach bouncing and his knobby knees oscillating up-and-down like two water pump handles.

I took a step from the dugout, arching my head to hear.

John glued his big hands on his wide hips. “Check her glove, ump. That was a spit ball!”

What? I lengthened my stride toward home plate.

“Greg.” Rodney called after me. “Keep cool.”

As I neared, John and the umpire talked in hushed tones. John gesticulated with both hands, and the umpire turned the ball over and studied its surface.

I frowned. “What’s the problem?”

The umpire eyed me. “The coach thinks your pitcher made an illegal pitch.” He then turned to Janie and walked halfway to the mound. “Little lady, would you please bring your glove to me?”

I watched as Janie stepped to the ump and handed over her glove. John peered over the ump’s shoulder. So, I followed suit, gazing at the leather over the ump’s other shoulder.

“Naw.... Naw... I don’t see anything, Coach. And the ball’s dry too.”

“Well... you need to keep an eye on that one. She’s sneaky!” John turned on a dime and scampered back to his dugout.

“Hey!” I couldn’t believe what I just heard. “That’s my daughter you’re talking about.”

The ump patted me on the shoulder and steered me back to our dugout. I shuffled back, scowling.

“C’mon, Greg.” Rodney grabbed my arm and pulled me all the way in. “That’s John being John.”

“Whadyya mean?”

“The shake-up artist. A nerves man. Complains about everything, and the other team eventually makes mistakes.”

“And this guy calls himself a Chris...”

“Strike two!” The ump raised his right fist.

“Ump! That’s a balk!” John yelled and half-jogged toward the plate.

Rodney worked his way around me. “I’ll handle this one, Greg.”

What was going on? Balk? There wasn’t even anyone on base!

I watched in disbelief. Rodney stared at his sneakers, waiting for John to end his tirade. Then he mumbled something while still staring at the ground, smoothing the dirt with one toe. Rodney

must have made a convincing case because five seconds later the ump shook his head and John, head-down, half-jogged back to his dugout. John's emaciated assistant coach with the long, stringy hair cowered in the far corner of the dugout.

Rodney walked in, halting next to me, and leaned over to whisper so the other girls wouldn't hear. "It's gonna be a lonnnnggg game."

###

After five years of coaching girl's softball, I thought I'd seen just about everything. Until today. In addition to the spit ball and balk fictions, John Rhodes had accused our players of lying, having illegal uniforms, using non-regulation bats, sliding with the intent of spiking an infielder, being impolite to the umpire, and – my favorite – abusing an animal because between pitches little Paula Simon in right field chased a bunny off the grass.

Top of the sixth, and we led 5-3. Last chance for John's kamikazee Cardinals.

At some point in the contentious game, Carol and Sherry had worked their way off the bleachers to stand directly behind John's dugout. Whenever John came out with another of his insulting fusillades against the Wildflowers, Carol, accompanied by Sherry, moaned, screeched, and began musical counter-ditties. One of my favorites was "Hey-hey-whadyya-know? Coach Rhodes is full of woe!" Unfortunately, some of the Cardinals' Moms started their own scores in response, culminating in: "Whatta we need? Herbicide! Herbicide-for-who? Wildflowers!"

This *was* getting ugly.

Janie remained on the mound. What a trooper! She was tired but in the face of the Cardinals' hijinks, she insisted. She wanted the win!

"Strike one!"

Cheers from our parents. Even calm Rodney grunted approval. "Good girl, Janie."

Janie took the throw from the catcher and concentrated on her next pitch. She started her wind-up.

Wait!

The Cardinals in their dugout all stood, four or five pitching dirt through the fence at the mound, while the rest of the girls yelled "The pitcher's a pig, the pitcher's a pig! Oink, oink, oink!" And then they kicked the fence like maniacal chimpanzees!

John leaned casually against the door of the dugout, a smirk sliding across his fleshy face. He pointed toward the mound and shouted. "That's another balk, ump!"

I bolted out the door of our dugout toward home plate. "Time out, Ump! What the heck is going on?" I felt Rodney's tug on the back of my jersey, but I wasn't about to be stopped.

###

“Greg, will you just forget about all that? It’s been two weeks already!” Carol stared up at me from her desktop keyboard in her office, the Bunker. “Our girls won the championship, John Rhodes won’t be a coach in the league anymore, and you and Rodney were voted Coaches of the Year! What more could you ask for?”

I crossed my arms and leaned against her desk. “I could ask that my wife and Licensed Therapy Assistant hadn’t been carted off to the police station. That there hadn’t been a bleacher-emptying brawl of parents after you and Sherry started watering down the Cardinals with that hose. And that the big girl on their team hadn’t slammed Rodney with the bat as he was trying to calm everyone by singing *Trust and Obey*. That’s what.”

“Rodney was off-key. Annoying. Plus, *that* song at *that* time? *Onward Christian Soldiers*, would have been more appropriate.” She giggled in her maddening way. “Besides, the girl just grazed him with the bat.”

“Did you really have to start with the hose?”

“The Cardinal girls were all dirty after throwing all that dirt at Janie. Their hands, their jerseys, their shorts, their...”

“In your rush to enforce personal hygiene with the Cardinals, how did Sherry get involved?”

“The hose was hard to hold! I turned the thing on full blast so Sherry had to help me point.” Carol pushed back from the keyboard. “You know what? You’re just sore! Sore because you missed most of the excitement!”

“That’s silly. I’m just appalled. Appalled that our girls – and the Cardinals girls too – witnessed this shameful exhibition by supposedly Christian adults! If I had known...”

“You know, your eye *is* lookin’ better. Not nearly as black under there. And the swelling is down a lot.” She squinted at me. “A sucker-punch. That’s the only reason John was able to take you out.”

I glanced at the ceiling in disgust.

Carol clapped her hands together and swirled her chair in a 360 degree celebration. “Oh, Greg! I wish you could have seen how Sherry and I so smoothly aimed the hose at John and I flipped the nozzle to the gut-blast setting. The force of the water took him flat down on his keister, and I kept that on him for two, maybe three minutes.” She cackled like a hen laying a triple-yoker. “He rolled like a possum caught in a flash-flood!”

“Are you not bothered by Christians coming to blows over a girls softball game? What kind of witness does that show?”

Carol’s smile evaporated, and she leaned back in her chair, gazing at the flowered carpet. “You’re right, Greg. I wasn’t showing Jesus’ love for others. But at least a couple of days later

all the parents – from both teams – were able to get together, ask and give forgiveness, and pray for one another. You should be proud of Sherry for organizin’ that.”

Yeah, I was. I needed to calm down. I was in my self-righteous lecture mode. Maybe if I hadn’t rushed out of the dugout in the first place none of this would have happened. “One other question. I understand the umpire was very helpful at the police station. I mean, Sherry said he spoke up for you and her. I was still out like a light when that happened.”

There were some aspects of Carol’s weirdness I could read like a stop-the-presses newspaper headline. Such as when she was trying to hide something by darting her eyes around the room super-quick and rambling around to look for some obscure file. Like now.

“The Brantley notes. Do you know where I might have laid her file?” She opened cabinet drawers, rifled through the file cabinet, and then searched behind the coffee pot.

“*Carol.* What *about* the umpire? What’s his name? Wilkins... Wilson... Wilford...”

“Winford. Brad Winford, I think.” She grabbed an old dust cloth and wiped her desk top.

“Brad Winford... Why does that name sound familiar?” I glued my eyes on Carol’s back. “Wait a minute... Don’t you have a cousin named Winford?”

“I... I don’t want to talk about this anymore, Greg.” She scurried over, opened the main drawer to her desk, and flipped a white envelope across the surface to me. “I’ve gotta go to the ladies room.” She stormed through the door to the hall.

I snatched the envelope, raising the flap and extracting a note. Heavy block letters streamed down the page.

“Carol and Mrs. Chambers,

Thank you for delivering some come-uppance to John Rhodes. He’s been a real trouble-maker for three years in the league, but I couldn’t do anything about it as an impartial official. Enclosed is a gift of appreciation for \$20. You two go out to breakfast on me. You’ve earned it!

BW

P.S. – I think you should have held him down with the hose for ten more minutes.”

“Sherry insisted I give the twenty dollars back to him.” A pixie smile gracing her puffy face, Carol peeked around the corner from the hall. “But I kept my ten dollar part.”

I riveted my eyes on the ceiling, and thrust my hands palms-up.

She smiled that disarming, sweet grin of hers. “Look at things this way. Like my sainted great-granny always said ‘A person may be baptized by water, but a sinner ain’t saved until he’s drowned by the Spirit.’”

I turned to face her and slowly shook my head. *Next year it's gonna be coaching chess or tiddlywinks.*

Did you like this story?

Read more from James Yarbrough

at www.bardandbook.com