

4422 Words

On Being a Ferret

No question Dickens had it right; this is *the best of times* now that the wicked ego bruising I've been taking with each job-interview rebuff will soon be only a fading memory. Six long months I've been at this job hunting thing including that memorable day early on when I'd naively returned home frisky as a spring lamb with wanting to whirl Mary around the kitchen after nailing every interview question flush to the wall! My final answer I'd especially relished! "So, before we'd consider

selecting you as part of our team could you please share with us what really makes you tick, Mr. Sullivan?" Well they'd asked and I didn't hesitate to let them in on a full ten-minute precis of how I live my life focused on the balance I constantly strive to achieve among my ten core life priorities. "Even now," I ended, "I appear before you today keen as mustard to undertake with energy and diligence whatever tasks you may ask of me as a valued team member." "Topnotch," they go. "Can't wait to let the boys upstairs in on your most impressive presentation and then back to you in five to seven days, hopefully with good news, if everything checks out."

Days filled with joyous anticipation until, on the ninth day, the letter arrives starting out with lavish praise for my super interview – Yes! Until my eye skips down to... And Hell's Blazes! They never anticipated the excellence of one final candidate. They were so sorry, but hopefully, if budget projections hold firm... *Sure! And would they like to know what they can do with their precious budget projections?*

Mary is watching from the family room window and has wisely retreated behind the kitchen counter as I come roaring in like a raging lion.

"Oh, Honey," she pleads, "I know, I know, but don't forget about that nice man from last week who thought you'd be a good fit for their public relations position."

"And you want to know how I feel about him as well?"

"Could I maybe fix you a nice cup of tea?"

Tea? When I'm deep in the throes of despair about how I'll never be hired by anyone ever again. But that's how Mary is, always up-beat no matter the dismal failure her husband is. Promising interviews that fizzle to ashes. Each civil service test that's more like a self-imposed slaughter for this middle aged simpleton going up against those thousands of young smarter-than-God recent college graduates. So here I am in one of my dark wolverine moods where Mary's kind words bounce off me like hailstones on pavement, as I roundly reject her tea offer and go stomping off in search of the stiff drink I really need.

So, had the bishop been right back then when he'd prophesized the titanic pickle I was getting myself into? Did I mention I'd been a priest for over twenty-five years moving happily through life, until I wasn't any longer and figured to seek help from my spiritual confidante? Halfway through explaining the turmoil racking my soul he held up an impatient hand.

"Right, Right. This sounds serious. Very serious. So, let's begin with, "how's your prayer life?"

"Not bad I suppose."

"Good as your golf game?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you constantly work to improve your golf game. Right?"

"You bet I do."

"Why?"

"So I can knock the tar out of my golfing buddies."

"Exactly as it should also be with your prayer life too so you can knock the tar out of Satan when he's putting these illicit thoughts and desires in your mind."

"Like wanting to hold a loving woman in my arms?"

"Fine as long as you don't act on that want."

"I know, I know, but all the same..."

"Just like married men must also curb their illicit desires. It's human to want, it's divine to curb. Come on John, you've always been a pretty happy guy, right?"

"Sure, but not so much lately."

"And you're going to be happy again. Trust me. Remember, you're sworn to celibacy and you're only courting disaster if you don't live up to that commitment. So, beginning now, focus hard on the positives in your life"

"Like?"

"Like how you've been your own man all these years. Come and go as you please. No one to nag you. Play golf when you want. Have a drink when you'd like one. You still have a passion for golf?"

"Of course!"

"And a good Manhattan?"

"Even two sometimes."

"Well, there you go! So remember, pray hard, focus on the positives and God will see to the rest. Guaranteed!"

With that I left for home, my comfortable home where I no longer find much comfort. And yet, going after what I really want is, *Unthinkable!*

So, back to my secret fantasy world where I'm forever loved and cherished. My latest fantasy, a bonny young parishioner who worships me for all that I am – handsome, urbane, understanding. She's the last person I say goodnight to in fantasyland as I'm drifting off to sleep. And, the same person I should have

briefly greeted before moving on when we met up a while back, instead of what actually happened.

Puzzled she was, shocked maybe, as I saw her nod uncertainly to my mumbled invitation about having dinner sometime. And, oh my God! How petrified I was when we did meet up a week later at a discreet restaurant well out of town. Never been in a spot like this before. Not even close and I can't even breathe with how gorgeous she is in this soft light over our table. "White wine please," I hear her calmly say to the waiter. "I'd like a Manhattan," I somehow manage. Halfway through the second Manhattan I begin to find my voice. "So many people just love and admire you," she's saying when I abruptly interrupt to ask if I can tell her something? And without waiting for an answer I launch into a long, rambling diatribe about the futility of seeking to provide real comfort and understanding to hurting people when there's none to be found in my own soul. "I'm feeling lost," I finally blurt out, "you think maybe you could help me find my way?" Six months later, for better or worse, our lives are intertwined in a very magical place where I'm finally finding peace and comfort in the companionship and intimacy of my beautiful Mary.

Until, way too soon, reality encroaches with the jabbing realization the bishop needs to know I'm leaving my post. A nice

note should cover that. No fuss. No recriminations. Until Mary fixes me with those dark brown eyes. "No John, you need to tell him face to face. You owe him that much." Me! The once master of my own life now sweating this bishop's meeting instead of the nice clean getaway I'd planned. It's a strange new world I'm now in where I better learn to adapt quickly or end up being swallowed whole.

The bishop whom we variously viewed as somewhere between meditative and fussy, starts our meeting by asking if I've been back to see my mother in Ireland lately?

"And no Bishop, since she's gone to heaven these several years past."

"And where she's watching over you," he continues not missing a beat. And like I'm also hoping like hell she is as well for the rest of this meeting.

"So, Bishop, thank you for seeing me this morning."

"Not at all John, happy to help a good man like yourself."

"Actually it's a little bit awkward." *You see, Bishop, very simply I've met this wonderful lady.* Exactly like Mary and I rehearsed last evening. This morning though without the nearness of her, I'm feeling utterly lost.

That's when he starts to gently probe. Might my problem be stress related?

"Not really, Bishop."

"Well, then since time is passing..."

"Of course, Bishop, what about giving me a little time off?" A request he reacts to only with pursed lips.

"How much time off, Father, and for what purpose?"

Great! Now I have him moving in the right direction. "Six months," I say without further explanation. Secretly, I'm hoping that by then I'll have a good job so I can come back as a success to take him to lunch with Mary on my arm.

That's when I see his nose twitch like he's just picked up a whiff of skunk. And, as I answer yes, I'm hating myself for admitting that, *involvement with a woman*, is what Mary and I have together. But that's how it is with these lads who can wax eloquently all day about love in the abstract, GOD'S INFINITE LOVE FOR MANKIND. But let a poor sap like me go falling in love with a real woman and love quickly morphs into *involvement*.

There followed several minutes of shaming me with dark references to Judas and sacred vows cast aside like old shoes.

"I can't even imagine, at your age, the host of insurmountable problems you're facing," he concluded.

There was no handshake or word of thanks at our parting and I left for my car feeling broken as a stepped-on dandelion. Thirty minutes later I arrived home to find Mary pulling weeds in the front yard and after taking one look at my pallid face she knew better than to offer tea. The whiskey tasted raw and punishing with the way I swallowed it so fast. Which was exactly what I deserved for not speaking up for Mary and me. With that, I signaled Mary to top up my glass again even though it had barely gone noon.

#

For two straight days I remained looped until Mary had had enough. "Listen," she began giving me a laser look on that third morning as I slouched half-soused over her kitchen table, "listen to me, this has got to stop and here's how. First, I'm pouring the rest of this rot gut down the sink and, starting this morning, you'll either do what I say or leave my house."

Talk about choosing the lesser of two evils, I'm muttering to myself as I embark on this intolerable assignment, where I quickly discover two things. Jogging is a young man's game and a purple-faced, fat-assed fiasco like me has no better friend than a friendly park bench. One hour later I come staggering back home hoping to fool Mary into supposing I've been galloping all

over Land Park. Instead, she's down on her knees scrubbing the kitchen floor where she pauses long enough to tell me Marty phoned. "And he'd like you to call him back right away."

"Did he say why?"

"No," she replied a little sadly due to the unspoken distance she sensed between them since I left to get married. "But I'm hoping for good news." Sure enough, Marty is sounding unusually chipper when he picks up on the third ring.

"Listen John, we need you to make a fourth tomorrow at Diamond Oaks Country Club." Good old Marty, my best priest friend for over thirty years, with no time to waste on trivia like how Mary and I might be doing once there's a golf game on the line. "So, can we count on you hot-shot?"

And for a moment I almost said "Yes," like I'd done a thousand times before when golf was one of the highlights of my life. But not today. Clearly Marty is disappointed I can't make it and in no mood to have me drag him into my new world.

"Marty, before you go, want to hear something interesting/"

"Like what?"

"Like there's no such word as, "irregardless."

"Come again?"

"No such word as, "irregardless."

"Hold on there, Bucko, crap like that is for those who still comb hair in the morning."

"And fools like me messing up civil service tests." Clearly, he'd had enough.

"Well then you better get back to your studies. Adios."

#

Two days later Marty called back to tell me a big-shot parishioner would like to help me with my job hunting. I was speechless. "Marty what can I say?"

"Say nothing, because all I've done is grease the skids for you a little and now it's up to you to get yourself down the hill without falling on your ass by saying dumb stuff like, irregardless" to the man. With that, he hung up.

The night before I'm to meet with Marty's big-shot parishioner, I'm in bed by eight thirty – alone. By midnight I'm wide awake and swatting the swarms of thorny questions that keep buzzing around my head like angry hornets. Downstairs in the kitchen I drink four strong cups of coffee in quick order before heading for the den for one more go-over of *How to nail your Interview*. Hours later Mary ventures into the lion's den with a soft good morning and a plea for me to relax since she's sure I'll do

fine. And besides, good news, she's just had an early morning call confirming her teaching contract renewal for next year with a tidy ten percent raise.

Later, she walks me to the bus with a ton of good wishes and one very memorable soft sweet kiss for luck. On the bus I close my eyes against all distractions as I go over the answers to what I suppose will be his questions as the bus lurches toward downtown.

At twelve thirty I step out of the elevator onto the twenty first floor of the County Administration building to the clear annoyance of the receptionist with the brittle smile and questioning eyebrows.

"John Sullivan, here for my one o'clock appointment with Mr. Overly."

"Oh yes, take a seat over there," she says, pointing to a comfortably furnished waiting area a few paces down the hall. "He'll call you when he's ready," she finishes before retrieving her magazine and I take my seat. She didn't say his name — she didn't have to.

A little before one o'clock several staff members come drifting back from lunch making mock complaints about returning to the same salt mines I'd be willing to mine all day with no

complaints. But at my age and strange sounding resume, will anyone ever take a chance on me?

Directly across the hall I'm staring at the massive closed door to his office where I'll soon learn my fate. Eventually, I hear it, a clock striking the hour of one at the same moment the door is opened and I see him framed in the doorway.

#

Except, when I say framed, he's nothing like the towering presence I'd built up about him in my mind, without regard to how many of history's giants have also been men of diminutive stature. Like Napoleon and Gandhi and now my esteemed mentor with his welcoming smile and extended hand that have me floating on angels' wings. Way beyond the immaculate pinstripe suit and gold framed glasses, I can see he possesses so much of the sangfroid I desperately crave. Even a spark or two from his firepower will be more than enough to ignite the flame I need to compete in the real world. I'm instantly on my feet and nervously reaching for his soft manicured hand. That's when I remember too late. Hyperhidrosis! It's that excessive sweaty palm condition where a quick sleeve swipe is imperative before shaking hands. Thankfully, though, he reacts not at all to the embarrassing way I've just moisturized his hand.

"Welcome to County Administration," he begins, "I'm Randal Overly and you're John right?" *You bet I'm John! As in John of the sweaty palms who's in total awe of you and the palatial office I'm now entering.*

The two gigantic bay windows straight ahead provide a panoramic view of downtown. Over to the left is the picture wall behind his desk that's centered by a smiling Ronald Regan presenting him with some award alongside Pope John Paul with his right hand raised in blessing. "Have a seat, John," he says waving me to the conference table over to the right that's topped by a golden bowl of red roses. "My sister's garden," he explains, smiling at the gape on my face as we take our seats.

"So John," he starts out, "let's first see if we can sort out a few things for you like I promised Father Marty?" *Here goes, I'm thinking, as I remind myself again of Marty's final admonition. "Butter him up good now, but by the same token, don't be fooled by that genial exterior he uses to cover up a hard conservative core that's big on the importance of Hell Fire as a deterrent to sin and bringing back the old Latin mass. So, smile a lot and keep your mouth shut whenever possible, and hopefully you'll end up on the pig's back."* But, even as I go with my best smile, I notice he's staring at me like he's just slipped into some kind of trance.

"John, may I ask how long you've been in ministry?" Now, here's a line of discussion I'd just as soon he'd forget.

"More than twenty-five years, Mr. Overly."

"Twenty-five years," he repeats shaking his head sadly like he's just watched his favorite dog expire at his feet. "And your radical change of course was undertaken for very good reasons I imagine?"

"You are absolutely right about that, Mr. Overly."

"Now then, since we're both men of the Spirit, may I first give you a glimpse into my own soul so you better understand my motivations?"

You go right ahead with all the glimpses you want as long as we get to the bottom line pretty damn soon like you promised Marty.

"Look around you for a moment John – consider this fine office, my title, my staff, these pictured dignitaries paying me honor and let me also aver, I consider them all to be only as straw compared to the life you're thinking of leaving."

Thinking of leaving? Obviously, Marty's left out a few details here for his own good reasons, so I'd best be careful.

"Yes, Mr. Overly."

"As straw, John."

"Yes, Mr. Overly."

"And now that you understand the inner workings of my soul, let me now move to the primary purpose of our meeting."

Finally!

"Ever since Father Marty spoke to me about your difficulties in finding work, I've been thinking about the best way to provide you with the kind of hands-on work experience you may be lacking. Even better, the training program I have in mind for you, will also pay you reasonably well as you gain that experience. How does that sound?"

Like how about my being your forever more slave and that's just for starters?

"Oh, Mr. Overly, that sounds so exciting and exactly what I've been hoping for. I'm so very grateful."

"Right then, no more worrying, so you're in the right frame of mind when you report back here for work on Monday morning."

Once again I notice that same dreamy look on his face. "And remember John, everything remains in God's hands."

Like Dickens would say, *it's the best of times*. Until I forget to be careful because I'm so excited and end up pulling the pin from the grenade.

#

Very late that evening Mary never chided me one bit and how great was that? She'd come in close after I'd finally calmed down. "All you really owed him, Love, was your best effort and who knows how far you'd have gone?"

"I know that now," I replied with my head hanging low from the sadness of it all, "but I'm so proud to be married to you, I just couldn't hide it."

"And I love you so much for that."

"But, Mary, I'll never forget the dark thunder in the look that took over his face at mention of your name."

She was bone-weary, my poor Mary, after hearing for the tenth time about the awful chasm that opened up between us at my mentioning how happy she would be for me.

"But, you're not seriously involved with this woman I hope?" he'd shot back.

"I'm married to her, Mr. Overly."

And that was that. Because, up until that moment he must have figured he could somehow still save me for ministry, until he couldn't! And now he's on his feet and marching out of the office with a curt command for me to, "remain in place." Moments

later he's back with a large file that he dumps on the conference table. Could this be another miracle now that the first one seems to have been knocked on the head? Not likely, starting with the way he informs me that the training program he'd spoken about earlier was now filled to capacity like he'd just been informed. But, not to worry, because here were several announcements of other vacant county positions for which I might wish to apply. "Look, here are two Sanitary Landfill Tech I positions."

"And what would those entail, Mr. Overly?"

"Well, you'd start as a Tech I, more commonly referred to as ferrets that hunt down and separate out all metals from the piles of general refuse coming off the dump trucks at the landfill."

And, all right! In that moment I really hated him. Hated him for the mean way he'd taken a sledge hammer to that old priest ego thing he'd correctly figured I still hadn't fully shed.

You know the real reason that fibrous looking appendage to your chin is called a goatee, Randal, not to mention about how I've been told your father was likely a two-headed ape?

These questions I sorely wanted to ask him, but dared not so as not to complicate Marty's life any further. Instead, I sat there

silently holding his damn vacancy announcements with my jaws clamped shut against the rising bile in my throat. Like Dickens would say, *it's the worst of times*.

Should I make love to Mary like she wanted me to or start in on one right good bender? Did I have any choice? I thought not.

On the second morning a tearful Mary pushed a strong cup of coffee in front of my nose. "And to think I was once certain I could always count on you for support instead of looking at some damn fool drinking himself to death." It was a hard shot that only deepened my sullen mood.

"So now I'm to be a ferret, is that it?"

"Better than the bleary-eyed hedgehog that's sitting across from me this morning. So, on your feet this instant and get cleaned up, I have something to show you."

What she showed me later on were two pages of comments on my resume sent to me by one Matt Slowey, my classmate who'd also left ministry several years back and was moving mountains over at the State Legislature. Slowly I began to read.

"So, you've been rejected and little wonder given this twaddle you call a resume. You need to understand right off, no potential employer knows or cares what a Licentiate in Theology is. Consider changing that to something like: Masters in

Medieval or Ancient History. And ditch those references to sermons in favor of, say, "Motivational addresses given to large and appreciative audiences."

It was both depressing and a little exciting as I read on about this new approach to my finding a job. "What do you think, Mary?"

"Well, he's done very well, so what do you have to lose?"

I finished reading his comments to which he'd appended a few more personal words of advice. *Don't get discouraged and start dreaming about going back to your old gig, because you're badly damaged goods to the bishop and his people. So, move on, you owe that to Mary who risked everything on you.*

And for the next two days Mary and I reworked my resume, sometimes long into the night. But, that's my Mary – neither fatigue nor long hours matter while there's important work to be done. I'd promised to love and support her always and in return she's going to be there even for an old head hanger like me. And buoyed by that thought I vowed to start anew, since Mary also assures me over ninety percent of people eventually find a job. Even someone like me!