

The Permanent Day Off

Greg sped home on the normally quiet two lane road. He knew his wife was going to kill him for leaving work early. She told him that she loved the quiet time at home without him and she hated "distractions."

But today he had no choice -- he was fired. That's what happens when you punch your boss in the face.

He had it coming, Greg thought as he shifted into third gear. He loved his Alfa Romeo and today he tested its limits. An adrenaline junkie, the car purred under his command. But it had never been maneuvered like this before. Greg impulsively whipped his car down the normally quiet County Road 85 in order to give him more time to think.

"I hate that man," Greg said to nobody. He often talked to himself out loud -- something that often got him into trouble. He was not one to filter his mouth -- also getting him into trouble.

Yeah, I guess calling him a prick was not "protocol," but he had it coming. It took plenty of harassment for him to actually take action -- his boss was excellent at pushing his buttons.

With his heart racing, Greg turned off the road and just sat in silence, practicing what he would say. Of all the possibilities that raced through his mind, blaming the boss was the most practical. He never liked blaming others for what happened. *Maybe the boss just doesn't like me*, he thought. Just as quickly, he dismissed this idea. What did the boss have against him? Sure, the boss was hardened and demanding, but he seemed to bark out orders to everyone. The boss yelled at Tommy for asking questions during the late morning meetings and Mary in Accounting for always interrupting his private phone calls around lunch time. Every week, William in Sales received a public verbal lecture about his lack of a work ethic. He got in trouble all the time for coming over to Greg's cubicle too much. The boss thought he and Greg gossiped too much and so he moved Greg from head of Marketing to the warehouse in order to separate them. It was a demotion in Greg's eyes, but his boss, Bruce, chided Greg and reminded him that the company's attitude was that everyone's role in the company was important, no matter how poorly they performed. Bruce made Greg feel so bad about thinking less of the warehouse workers that he voluntarily bought them lunch the next day.

Greg all along thought his boss plotted against him, but this morning was the worst. Greg was minding his own business, stocking shelves in the humid, sweaty warehouse just like he did every Monday, when he saw Bruce stop and question Tim. Greg knew Bruce didn't even know Tim existed in the small company, because Tim never interacted with anyone. It took Greg two weeks before he even saw Tim and then he thought Tim was a new employee.

As Bruce muttered in a barely audible voice as Tim constantly glanced over in Greg's direction with that nervous manner. Only once did Bruce glance in Greg's direction, but the fact they were talking about Greg was painfully obvious.

Greg pretended to stock a few shelves a little closer to the action, but he still couldn't make out what Bruce was muttering. Tim stiffened up his posture as he recognized Greg maneuvering a little closer. With one last nervous glance, Bruce reached into his right pocket and Greg saw

what looked like a roll of money coming out of his pocket when both men moved around the corner out of sight. Greg could only imagine what was going on in that one-sided conversation.

After what seemed like an eternity, Greg heard Bruce's voice over-exaggerate a little louder, obvious intended for Greg to hear. The whole charade was amateurish, but it certainly produced its desired effect.

Greg began to move around the aisle to witness the exchange when he saw Tim hustle away from Greg's direction while putting his right hand in his pocket, struggling to shove something in there. Their eyes locked and Greg saw completely through Tim's soul which made Greg shudder.

Greg started after Tim when he heard Bruce's voice familiarly say over the intercom, "Greg, please come to my office."

He knew he was being fired. He had that feeling. That dreaded feeling. *Heather was not going to like this situation.*

The worst thing about it was that he knew he didn't do anything wrong -- at least he thought he didn't do anything wrong. Sure, he wasn't the cleanest person in the warehouse, but he was too valuable to let go. He certainly worked harder than everyone there, except for Tim.

Greg trudged toward the office which was on the opposite side of the building, heading toward his impending doom.

What am I going to tell my wife? He had no clue, but he knew what he wanted to say to Bruce.

"Sit down, Greg."

"Listen, Bruce, I don't why you are treat..." Greg began.

Bruce cut him off quickly, presumably to get this over with. The quicker he could get rid of him, he thought, the sooner he could cut out of work and see his other woman, as he did every Thursday at 3:00.

"Greg..."

This took Greg as a shock because Bruce never called him by his first name.

"...let me get straight to the point. Your work ethic stinks. You gossip behind everyone's back, you mope around the warehouse, and quite honestly you are a cancer to the workplace. Hell, your sales numbers were crappy and when I moved you to get a fresh start in the company rather than firing you, you tanked there too."

Stunned, Greg stood motionless.

"Emma, get Tim from the warehouse in here," Bruce spoke on the intercom to his newest conquest.

Tim, who seemed to be right outside the door as if he knew he was being called, entered the dingy room sheepishly as if he was a little kid getting a beating. He never looked at Greg who stared him down. He began to shut the door when Bruce stopped him.

"Leave it open -- this won't take long," Bruce informed him.

Bruce continued. "Tim here says he's scared of you, ain't that right, Tim?" Greg continued staring at Tim.

"Tim, what are you doing?" Greg tried to get any sense of emotion or recognition from the thin, frail old gentleman standing in the corner, but Tim never even took his eyes from off the floor. He only dug his right hand deeper into his pocket as if he was protecting something.

"C'mon, Tim," Bruce encouraged, "Didn't you just tell me the other day that Greg intimidates you?"

"Tim, you know this is wrong," Greg interjected. "Don't listen to this man. He doesn't even know who you are! He's just trying to get rid of me. Tell the truth! He's the one who intimidates you..."

"Shut up, Greg! I've had enough of you and your mouth. Now, Tim, I'm asking one...last...time," Bruce emphasized. He stood up behind his desk and walked around it and approached Tim.

"Stand up to him..."

"You shut it," Bruce wagged his pudgy finger at Greg. "You're worthless." He then turned to Tim and spoke slowly.

"Did this man intimidate you?"

What felt like an eternity took only ten seconds for an answer. Tim had already made up his mind.

"Yes."

Bruce wheeled around to Greg. "You're fired," and before Bruce uttered the last consonant, Greg reeled back and swung impulsively at Bruce, landing his right roundhouse punch squarely on Bruce's left jaw and continuing through his bulbous nose, creating a gusher of blood spewing all over Bruce's disheveled desk. The force of the punch launched Bruce across the top of the desk, sliding papers and files onto the floor.

Without waiting to survey the damage, Greg shoved past Tim and over Bruce's limp body toward the exit. He heard sounds of Emma's squeaky voice utter "Bruce!"

That is one voice I'm glad I never have to hear again, Greg thought. The rest of the scene blurred through his mind as the mad honking of an oncoming car jolted Greg back from his daydreaming. Greg swerved quickly to get back into his own lane. He knew he had no business driving in his condition, but he had to tell Heather the truth.

She's going to kill me when I get home, he thought.

He decided to pull over and think before he killed somebody. Besides, he needed to gather his thoughts to tell Heather, his wife. She wasn't expecting him home for a few more hours anyway.

Greg pulled his Alfa Romeo into a small, worn down gas station on the outskirts of town. He had never been here before and, from the looks of the place, neither had anyone else. He slid his car into one of the furthest spots in the parking lot, just in case someone happened to pull up, they wouldn't bump his car. He laid his jacket on the front seat and closed his door, looking around as he turned on the alarm.

Man, where am I? None of the surroundings looked familiar -- *I must have driven for a few hours*, he thought. He checked his Rolex and it read 3:12 p.m. He had only been on this little-used road for ten minutes, but it seemed like hours. He looked at his smartphone and even the GPS had no idea where he was. His car icon wasn't even on a road.

Greg strolled up to the door with bars on it and stepped on a roach on the way into the store. *We have plenty in common*, Greg thought, *we've both been squashed by the big man*. Greg chuckled to himself as he headed toward the beer cooler. As he wandered past the candy aisle, he noticed name brands that he had not seen in many years. It was like he had stepped into a time warp and blasted back twenty years.

He shrugged it off and looked for a Heineken, Corona, or even a Sam Adams, but only found Bud Light. *At least it's cold*, he thought as he grabbed it and headed for the counter. Impulsively, Greg grabbed a bag of potato chips and didn't notice that the bag had expired six months ago.

"Excuse me," he said to the old gentleman in the denim overalls who was barely awake behind the counter. "Do you know where I am?" Greg set down the Bud Light and the expired chips on the grungy counter, moving aside the bell on the counter with a sign in front of it that read, "Ring for service."

The old man didn't even blink as he stared at a blurry picture of *Young and the Restless* on the 10-inch TV set. "Excuse me, sir," Greg stated more forcefully as he thought the old gentleman might have been hard of hearing, "can you tell me where I am?"

Casually, Greg looked up and saw a sign that read, "Mars Post Office" above the counter. "I guess I'm in Mars -- makes sense," Greg uttered under his breath.

In order to get the old man's attention, Greg helpfully moved the bunny-eared antennas to get a better picture, but it only made the image worse.

Like a startled turtle, the old gentleman slowly moved his head around to face Greg in order to see who dared interrupt his favorite program. Greg immediately felt sorry for the man.

"I'm sorry, sir, for disturbing your show. I was only trying to make the picture better for you. It looked like you were having trouble seeing the show, I just...thought..." Greg tailed off his babbling stream of consciousness before he made a bigger fool of himself than he already did. He didn't make it any better when he blurted out, "That's my wife's favorite show as well."

The old gentleman blinked once in response to Greg's outburst and just stared at him, looking like he was trying to figure out how to handle customers. It looked like it had been a few years since someone had come into the store.

Not knowing what to do, Greg pushed the beer and chips closer to the gentleman, hopefully inspiring the cashier to remember how to ring up the stuff. Methodically, the old gentleman grabbed the beer and rang in the price on the antique cash register. Just as slowly he rang in the price of the chips. Then he went back to staring at Greg.

"Oh, and, uh, let me have one of those scratch-off lottery tickets right there." Greg pointed to the roll of tickets even though it was the only roll in the display case. Using his only speed, the man behind the counter slowly ripped off the end ticket and punched in the \$1.00 price into the register.

Then he stared at Greg again.

Without a word, Greg threw a ten dollar bill onto the counter and began to scratch off the surface of the ticket with the shiny gold coin he always kept in his right pocket for good luck. His grandfather gave that to him on his twelfth birthday and then died later that year. He worshipped his grandfather who taught him to control and channel his inner anger, something Greg struggled with his whole life after his father walked out on his mother when Greg was just five.

Checking the ticket again, Greg couldn't believe his eyes. He won the Grand Prize! He had never played the lottery before and on his first ticket he had just won the \$5,000,000 grand prize! He let out a howl and pumped his fist which startled the old gentleman. Greg left the change from his purchase on the counter and raced out of the store. He jumped into his Alfa Romeo and spun gravel behind him as he charged off toward the same direction he came from.

What luck! Now, he didn't have to tell Heather about punching out his boss. A million thoughts raced through his head about how he should relay the news to her. She will wonder why he is home so early. Greg checked his watch -- 3:19. Since this was Thursday, he knew that Nancy would be visiting. Heather always said that Nancy liked to come over on Thursdays. Evidently Nancy and Robert were having problems and Nancy sought out advice from Heather over coffee.

Let's see, Greg planned, I'll stop by and get some flowers from Petty's to surprise Heather.

He knew Heather couldn't resist roses from Petty's and this would be a good way to kill a little more time before he broke the news of his now former job and the lucky ticket. Sadly, he didn't know which piece of news she would be more focused on.

Heather said that Nancy usually voluntarily left around 4:00 so that Heather and he could have some time together. Greg didn't want to intrude on their conversation. Heather was very particular about having him around when she was visiting with someone. She even insisted Greg leave when anyone came to the house. Her relatives, neighbors, friends -- it didn't matter.

When Greg confronted her about it, she stated that her parents always spied on her and she always felt restricted about her privacy. Greg's in-laws appeared to be the nicest people he'd ever met and couldn't imagine them spying on her. As a matter of fact, he wouldn't have minded having them as parents, especially when he hadn't even talked to his mother in years after his dad's death.

He often wondered what the two girls talked about, but he had a sneaking suspicion it was about Nancy's husband Robert. Greg had never met Robert, but one time when he saw Nancy walking her dog around the neighborhood, Nancy confided secretly that she thought her husband Robert was having an affair. Greg couldn't understand why -- Nancy didn't have model looks, but she wasn't bad either.

Checking his GPS (it now figured out where he was), Greg zoomed toward Petty's. He still needed a way to tell Heather about his job and the ticket. He never knew which way her mood would swing. He contemplated telling her about the ticket first so that it would lessen the blow about the job. However, if he told her about the job first, he could then surprise her about the ticket, just to prove to her that he wasn't an imbecile, something he suspected she often thought about him. He always felt she thought less of him, but she never directly stated it -- however, the aura of her implied superiority displayed itself when she talked about her family and her family's money.

Maybe now he can prove to her that his new-found wealth was just as important and beneficial to their marriage.

Greg whipped into Petty's and grabbed the most expensive bouquet of flowers he saw and bounded up to the cashier, impulsively grabbing her favorite bottle of Zinfandel -- Heather was always a sucker for this \$40 bottle of Zinfandel, especially since it didn't come out of a box.

And this one is imported -- we can afford it, he thought. Greg didn't even know when his last paycheck would actually come through -- if at all -- but with the lucky ticket in his pocket, he figured he could splurge this once.

In his hastiness, Greg grabbed some crackers and a small selection of Brie and various cheddar cheeses since he knew there would be no dinner waiting for him when he got home. Heather despised cooking and so there was never anything to eat at home unless Greg brought it back from a local restaurant. They all knew his name, and order, by heart.

Putting everything on the American Express, Greg grabbed his purchases and scampered back to his Alfa Romeo, eagerly anticipating Heather's surprised look when he comes home with flowers, her favorite wine and a ticket to permanent retirement.

Motoring up Highway 11, Greg deftly avoided the red traffic lights and congested Thursday afternoon traffic near the Wal-Mart, which was always popular just before the weekend. The car hummed under his feet as he swerved onto the side streets he normally avoided during the week. He avoided this area purposefully because of the danger. Police officers tried to patrol the area, but the war on drugs was a lost cause here.

Right now, he felt alive. He felt dangerous. Something awoke in him that had laid dormant for years. He couldn't describe it, but he felt invincible. Today had been eventful -- he finally stood up for himself against Bruce, something he wanted to do for a long time but never had the courage to act on it.

No regrets. Bruce had it coming and something deep inside provided that spark. Fear? Anger? Injustice? Betrayal? Whatever it was, Greg knew more lived inside of him.

He couldn't wait to get home to Heather. Turning right on Waverly Drive, the scenery became familiar. He never realized how close they lived near this section of town. His knowledge of the

area was limited -- the grocery store, Melvin's Steakhouse (Heather's favorite), Jay's Jewelry, and various small boutique shops -- mainly because Heather didn't like to leave the house much, unless she wanted to go alone. He had to constantly run mundane errands, he had to go do the grocery shopping, he had get a Triple Mocha Latte at Grounds, the local coffee shop, and if she felt like it, he had to take her two poodles, Felicity and Pierre, to the dog salon because they needed to be bathed.

Why? They were things she wanted. What about what he wanted? He didn't know what he wanted anymore. At Christmas and his birthday, she claimed he was so hard to buy for, not that she ever got him anything, at least anything he wanted. Greg had no idea where these thoughts were coming from and he felt numb.

He passed Jay's Jewelry, one of Heather's favorite places to go...without Greg. Rarely did Greg join Heather outside of the home on her errands and he always wondered why, but never got the courage.

Today, his courage was plentiful.

Greg whipped around the Harrison Street corner and headed home, determined to talk to Heather. His mind raced with too many words and feelings, cluttering up his prepared speech he planned all the way home. Realizing he had been oppressed at both work and home, and with a newly-found determination, Greg pulled into his drive, not even noticing the strange black Escalade parked hastily down the street.

As he marched up the driveway, the passion and energy he suppressed for so long arose within him. *This ticket will finally allow Heather and I to move away from here and start our life over,* Greg thought.

He turned the brass doorknob to his modest home, fully unprepared for the finish of his eventful day.

"Heather, I've got some news," he began announcing as he walked toward the bedroom looking around for her. He never heard the gunshot aimed for his heart.

Nor did he see the blood trickling down his white uniformed shirt. His blood.

A sharp pain ripped through his chest and he began to feel faint. A rush of heat flew through him unlike any feeling he felt before. Greg temporarily forgot what he was saying and began to crumple to the ground.

That's when he looked up to see Heather standing in the master bedroom doorway with her pink Derringer gun aimed at him. Ironically, the gun was an anniversary gift he gave her this past May -- a strange request, he thought, but one he happily supplied.

Blood now began to pool rapidly under him, his shirt no longer white, but a dark pink. Trying desperately to form any words -- to make any sense -- he looked up at her. She stood motionless in her Victoria's Secret nightie that he had never seen before. It was certainly not the type of intimate clothing he would purchase for her.

With eyelids getting heavy and his breathing erratic, he reached out to her, his arms and hands seeking her help. He began gasping for air, struggling to utter the question -- the only question - - he could think of.

"Why?" Strangely, he thought his voice sounded weird and surreal, like an existential being had taken over his voice. He didn't recognize himself, nor the woman standing in front of him with a smoking barrel aimed at him.

With his last ounce of breath, he uttered a hoarse "Why?" one more time, receiving the same deafening silence from her. From behind Heather, Greg could barely make out a shadow moving into the doorway, although the image was blurry, it had a human-like shape.

Definitely the shape of a half-naked man. And one that looked familiar.

This can't be happening, Greg thought. His muscles had given way and he felt tired. He began to lose consciousness and struggled to stay awake. He knew that if he fell asleep, it would be over.

With one last gasp for help, Greg thrust his head up only to meet the face of the half-naked man who had been in his own bedroom, with Heather, while he was at work.

"I told you that you were worthless," Bruce calmly uttered in Greg's ear. Greg then heard Bruce's footsteps walk back toward Heather as he succumbed to sleep.