

ON BECOMING A FERRET

4135 words

No question Dickens was right; this is *the best of times* now that the best news of my life is total balm to the soul after the brutal ego-bruising I've just been through. Six months of the special hell that job-hunting can be! Take that one time early on when I'd come home frisky as a spring lamb to take Mary for a whirl round the kitchen after nailing every interview question flush to the wall! My last answer I'd especially relished! "So on to our last question, could you please elaborate on how you'd be a good fit for our team, or in other words, what really makes you tick, Mr. Sullivan?" Well they'd asked hadn't they? And now by golly they were going to listen and learn. For a full ten-minutes I dissertated on the daily symmetry by which I meticulously carry out each of my ten life priorities. (Well doesn't everybody?) "Even now," I concluded, "I appear before you today keen as mustard to bring that same symmetry to whatever tasks you may charge

me with should I become fortunate enough to join your team.” “Topnotch,” they go. “Can’t wait to have the boys upstairs chew on all of this. OK, be back to you in five to seven if everything checks out.”

On the ninth day the letter arrives that I rip open and bask in the opening lavish praise about my super interview—yes! Until my eye skips down to... And Hell’s Fire! No way had they anticipated the excellence of the final candidate. They were so sorry, but hopefully, if budget projections for this coming year hold firm... *Sure! And would they also like to know where to take their 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 lion.

“Oh, Honey,” she starts pleading, “I know, I know, but don’t forget how that nice man last week thought you’d be such 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 wallowing in the misery of how I’ll never be hired by anyone ever again! But, that’s how Mary is, up-beat no matter the dismal failure her pathetic husband is turning out to be. Supposed positive interviews that fizzle to ashes. Civil service tests that are nothing but a self-imposed slaughter for this middle-aged simpleton going up against all those countless young smarter-than-God college grads. No wonder I’m already well into one of my dark wolverine moods where Mary’s kind words go bouncing off me like hailstones as I roundly reject her tea and head for the den and the stiff drinks I really need.

So, had the bishop been right 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 through life like a contented steer munching sweet grass, until I wasn't? That's when I decided on a little guidance from my spiritual confidante who held up an impatient hand when I was only half-way through explaining my areas of discontent.

"Right, Right. So, let's begin with the fundamentals, "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."

"Why?"

"So I can hopefully knock the tar out of my golfing buddies every so often."

"Exactly as it should also be with your prayer life so you can knock the tar out of Satan when he starts pestering you with these illicit thoughts and desires."

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

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

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

“Just like married men must also curb their illicit desires about women other than their wife because it’s human to want and divine to curb. Come on now John, I’ve always taken you for 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 lifelong celibacy and you’re only courting disaster if you don’t live up to that commitment. So, beginning now, focus hard on the many 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 your passion for golf?”

“Of course!”

“And a stiff Manhattan every now and then?”

“Sometimes even two.”

“Well, there you go! So never forget the tried and true formula, 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 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 drift off to sleep. And the same person

I should have briefly greeted and moved on when we met up a while back. Puzzled she was, maybe even shocked at my mumbled invitation to have dinner with me sometime. And, oh my God! How petrified I was when we met 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 thinking how gorgeous she is in the soft light above our table. "White wine please," I hear her calmly say to the waiter. "And 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 this long, rambling diatribe about the futility in trying to provide real comfort 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 back?" 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 living with my beautiful Mary.

Until, way too soon, reality encroaches starting with the stark realization the bishop needs to know I plan to vacate 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 having to sweat this bishop's meeting instead of the nice clean getaway I'd planned. It's a strange new world I find myself in where I better learn to adapt quickly or be swallowed whole.

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

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

“And where she’s watching over you,” he says not missing a beat. Like I’m hoping she really is for the rest of this meeting.

“So, bishop, thank you for seeing me this morning.”

“Not at all John, happy to see a good man anytime.”

“Actually bishop this is a little bit little bit awkward for me.” *Which I’m then supposed to follow up with, ‘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 mostly immobilized.

That’s when he starts to probe gently. Might my problems be stress-related?

“Not really, bishop.”

“Well, then since time is passing…”

“Of course, bishop, what about allowing me a little time off?” A request he initially reacts to only with pursed lips.

“How much time off, father, and for what purpose?”

Great! At least 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 real success and invite 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 watch how quickly love morphs into *involvement*.

There followed several minutes of shaming me filled 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 crushed 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 in 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.

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For two straight days I stayed looped until even Mary had had enough. "Listen," she began giving me a laser look on that third morning as I slouched half-soused across 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 having to choose the lesser of two evils, I'm muttering to myself as I embark on this pretty intolerable assignment, where I quickly discover two things. Jogging is a young man's game where a purple-faced, fat-assed fiasco like me has no better friend than a friendly park bench. One hour later I come staggering home hoping to fool Mary into supposing I've been galloping all over Land Park. Instead, she's on her knees scrubbing the kitchen floor where she

pauses long enough to tell me Marty phoned me. “And he’d like you to call him back right away.”

“Did he say why?”

“No,” she replied a little sadly I thought due to the unspoken distance she sensed from Marty 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 and with no time to waste on trivia like how Mary and I might be doing in our new life together once there’s a golf game on the line. “So, say we can count on you hot-shot.”

And for a moment I almost said “Yes,” like I’d done a thousand times before when golf was *the* highlight of my life. But not today. Clearly Marty is disappointed in me and not in any great 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, I’m thinking crap like that is for those who still comb hair in the morning.”

“And fools like me messing up on civil service tests.” Clearly, he’d had enough.

“Well then you better get back to your studies. Adios.”

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Two days later Marty called back to tell me how one of his big-shot parishioners 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 and now it’s up to you to get yourself down the hill without falling on your ass with 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 at the swarms of imagined interview questions buzzing around my head like hornets. Downstairs I drink four strong cups of coffee in quick succession 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 including 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.

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 with a forced smile 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 as I head for 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 with mock complaints about having to come back to the salt mines—the same mines I can only dream about mining someday. But at my age and weird-sounding resume, will anyone ever take a chance on me?

Directly across the hall I’m staring at the massive closed door to the office where I’ll soon learn my fate. Then, 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.

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Except that 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 or Gandhi! And now my esteemed mentor with his welcoming smile and extended hand that have me floating on angels’ wings. Way beyond his immaculate pinstripe suit and gold framed glasses, I can see he’s radiating tons of the sangfroid I so desperately crave to ignite the flame I so desperately need to compete in the real world. Instantly, I’m on my feet and reaching for his soft manicured hand. That’s when I remember too late. Hyperhidrosis! It’s that excessive sweaty palm thing 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 his picture wall that’s centered by a smiling Ronald Regan presenting him with some prestigious award alongside Pope John Paul whose right hand is 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 that’s mostly a cover-up for a hard conservative core where he’s big on stuff like Hell Fire and bringing back the old Latin mass. So, smile a lot and keep your mouth shut whenever possible, so you’ll hopefully end up on the pig’s back.” But, even as I favor him with my best smile, I notice he’s staring at me like he’s just slipped into some kind of weird trance.

“John, may I first ask how long you’ve been in ministry?” Now, there’s a line of discussion I’d just as soon scotch right off.

“A little more than twenty-five years, Mr. Overly.”

“Twenty-five years,” he repeats shaking his head sadly like his pet Pekinese just expired at his feet. “And this radical change you undertook was for very good reasons I imagine?”

“Absolutely right Mr. Overly.”

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

Go right ahead with all the soul glimpses you want so long as we’re at 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, the pictured dignitaries paying me honor and as I’m also quick to aver, they are only 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 have some understandings of the inner workings of my soul, let me 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 some of the hands-on work experience you may be lacking. And good news, the training program I have in mind for you will also pay reasonably well even as you gain experience. How does that sound?”

Like how about my being your forevermore 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*. So much so I forget Marty’s warning about keeping my mouth shut and end up pulling the pin from the grenade.

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Very late that same evening Mary never chided me 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 might have gone from there?”

“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 thunderous look that took over his face at mention of your name.”

She was bone-weary, my poor Mary, from hearing over and over about the awful chasm that opened up between us at the mention of 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 really 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, for example, 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 the *ferrets* that delve in and separate out the 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 meanness with which he’d taken a sledge hammer to that old priestly pride he’d correctly figured I hadn’t fully shed.

Shall I tell you why that fibrous looking appendage to your chin is called a goatee, Randal? And, is true what they say about your father being a two-headed ape?

And those were only two question out of what I sorely wanted to ask him right then but dared not lest I complicate Marty’s life even further. Instead, I sat there silently holding his damn job announcements with my jaws clamped shut against the rising bile in my throat. Like Dickens would say, *it was the worst of times.*

Should I make love to Mary like she wanted me to that night or start in on one right good bender? Did I have a 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 once supposed I could count on you instead of living with some damn fool drinking himself to death.” It was a hard shot that only added to my sullen mood.

“So now I’m to be a ferret, is that it?”

“Better than the bleary-eyed hedgehog sitting across the table 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 were two pages of comments on my resume sent to me by one Matt Slowey, another classmate who’d 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. Please understand no potential employer gives on hoot in hell about what a Licentiate in Theology is. Consider changing that to something like, Masters in Medieval or Ancient History. And ditch all 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 ever get so discouraged you start dreaming about going back to your old gig, because*

right now you're only 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 always 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 I ask her?