

Word count: 3,738

## WORKING FOR GOD

It was an odd hour for Susan's doorbell to ring. But then again the whole day had been odd.

All Susan's friends had been busy that Monday. She had wanted them all to go the County Volunteer Center, had been pushing at them for weeks about it. But Janine had a hair appointment, Heather was at the dog groomer, and Thea had set aside the day to finally, *finally* rearrange her living room furniture.

So Susan stood there in the kitchen wondering what she might do with herself. It was these times that the pantry full of soups and pastas and sauces beckoned to her, an orchestra waiting for its conductor, but there was no one to cook for since Cam had died, and she didn't think she was up to it anyway. The floor's sticky spots whispered to her. The dust on the windowsills fumed silently. The loose corner in the dining room wallpaper broke free and curled, reaching out to her until she could stand it no longer. Today, she resolved, she would get her house in order.

By early evening she had mopped the floors, wiped the windowsills, bleached the bathrooms, glued down the wallpaper corner and taken out the trash, all without noticing the coal-colored clouds scuttering in from the east. If she had looked up she would have seen their

giant black cauliflower heads bobbing above her neighborhood. But it was only when an icy gust of wind tugged the trash can lid nearly out of her hand that she sensed a vague darkening, as if winter had come too early. She rubbed the prickly goosebumps from her arms as she tucked back inside the house and plucked a can of chicken soup from the pantry shelf.

As the soup warmed in its pot, she turned on the tv and clicked on an old rerun of *Friends* when the doorbell rang. She paused the introduction, leaving the six New York friends paralyzed in a dance around a fountain, and padded in her slippers to the front door. She put her eye up to the door's little round peephole but saw no one.

Susan flicked on the porch light and opened the door, but no one was there. It wasn't until she peered to the far edge of the porch, behind the wrought iron bistro set where the light didn't quite reach, that she saw the slim black boy there. He gently stepped into the edge of the light, a reluctant actor on a tiny stage.

"Good evenin', ma'am," he said. His smile was shy, a little forced, revealing a single front tooth. He remained as far away from her as he could be—a good eight feet—and still be visible. His black slacks, white button-down shirt and dark blazer draped loosely on his bony frame. From his neck an official-looking laminated ID card hung from a lanyard. He clamped a clipboard full of papers against his left side.

"Good evening," said Susan feeling a bit off-kilter, for hers was a neighborhood that rarely got solicitors, especially in the dark. As well, it was rare to see a black person in her neighborhood at all, unless he was a city worker, and this boy was too young and too thin and too—well definitely not a city worker. Even without her glasses, Susan discerned the polyester shine of his thin, tired-looking suit, and even from this distance there was an earthy smell about

him that she recognized from the Goodwill store where she had donated Cam's clothing last year.

She knew this boy would be wanting something from her, and thought that she should simply close the door, for it was cold and the warm salty soup smell wafted out to her. But that would be rude, and Susan prided herself on being anything but rude. While many would reflexively close the door on a poor black boy, she would not to do so. Besides, his manner was so humble that she felt no fear of him.

Moreover, the clipboard suggested that he might have a political petition for her to sign, which interested her very much. Since retiring, she felt she had no influence on the world anymore and relished any opportunity to exert her opinion. She hopped down onto the porch and closed the front door behind her.

The single tooth reappeared in the boy's uneasy smile. "My name is Prince," he said, extending his hand awkwardly, as if he were struggling to coordinate his movements.

Susan stepped toward him to shake his hand. Up close, she noticed that he was not a boy, but a man, perhaps in his twenties. He bent forward to shake her hand, as if to preserve the most space as possible between them, so that she wondered if he might be afraid of her. Then he took a breath and began a speech.

"I am employed with WFG, that's Working for God ma'am, a jobs program for people like myself who are gettin' on their feet. You see, I used to be a knucklehead, but now I got me a job and appear before you here," he announced, offering his clipboard for her inspection. "You see, all these neighbors of yours have signed that I am—" and here he pointed out a bullet list so she could follow it, "Well-dressed, Personable, Polite, Honest and Sincere. Now you see

me here before you and I ask you, would you be willing to sign that I am these things? Because in this jobs program, I get points for that.”

Susan didn't recognize any of the names on the pages as neighbors of hers, so she was a little incredulous at Prince's story, but the hand that held the clipboard was shivering, and there seemed no harm in it, so she added her name to the list.

“You get points?” she asked.

“Yes, and if I get enough points I can be a junior manager. I surely need to be a junior manager because I need to make money to care for my little boy.” Prince reached into a pocket and withdrew two photographs of a toddler in a little red jumpsuit with cartoon animals on it. In one, the child stood before a television and held a toy truck up to his mouth; in the other he sat on a toy horse. His big brown eyes shone from under a cap of tight black curls.

Clearly there was no political petition for her to sign and she was getting cold. She wrapped her arms around herself. “How do you get points? Aren't you trying to sell me something?” she pressed.

“In a manner of speaking, yes ma'am. Actually what I'm hoping is that a lady of your character would sign up to donate some magazines to young children. You can choose from the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, or several other organizations to receive them. I have a catalog right here.” As Prince fumbled to disengage the glossy catalog of magazines from the back of the clipboard, all the papers fell onto the porch. He bent to gather them, apologizing. As she looked down at him, Susan saw the ridge of his spine through his blazer.

“Please have a seat,” said Susan, indicating the wrought iron chairs.

“Ma'am, I don't suppose I could trouble you for something to drink?”

“Of course,” said Susan. “What would you like?”

The young man’s face brightened with a shocked expression, as if he couldn’t believe his fantastic luck. “Oh, anything is just fine.”

Susan dashed back into the warm embrace of her home. The soup bubbled softly from the kitchen. She should invite him in, she thought, but she remembered having read some years back about a woman in Ohio who had let some young black teenagers into her home to use her phone. They had shot and killed her. “Better safe than sorry,” Cam would have said from behind his newspaper. “Don’t be stupid.” But then Cam would never have opened the door, especially in his last years. “Strangers,” he would have muttered, wrinkling his nose and leaning back in his recliner.

Susan searched the house for beverages. Mere water seemed rude. She had several sodas, but they were all diet, and he certainly didn’t look like he needed a diet drink. He needed something hearty and warm, so she grabbed Cam’s old oversized coffee mug that said *#1 Dad* and filled it with the hot soup. She noticed she still had coffee from the morning and thought how he might like it the way she used to make it for her own children. Even if he was a man, no one could resist a sweet treat, and she thought that the extra calories would do him good. So she took down the cup her boss, Mr. Daly, had given her the day she had retired, before Cam got sick. It said *Today is the first day of the rest of your life*. She mixed the coffee half with milk and counted out four big spoons of brown sugar and warmed it in the microwave.

When she opened the door he startled from the chair as if a gun had gone off and splayed a hand across his heart. As she laid the mugs on the iron table, she wondered if the

reflex meant sincere thanks or abject fear. While she was gone he had organized his papers on the table, so there was barely room for the mugs.

“Both for me? That’s a whole meal ma’am. I thank you kindly.”

A warmth rose up in Susan as she took the iron chair across from Prince. This was why she wanted to go with her friends to the County Volunteer Center, for this feeling. It was the same feeling she’d had every day at work, when she’d typed a letter up beautifully or when she’d soothed a disgruntled customer. It was why Mr. Daly and the others had called her *the heart of the office* for thirty-one years. But now no one needed a ninety-two-words-a-minute typist with outstanding shorthand skills. She worried the county might not even have a volunteer job for such a person. The lady at the counter might sigh in a practiced way and say “I’m sorry we don’t have anything for you.” But surely they would not turn away a whole group of ladies. Surely they could find something for them all to do. She would have to be pushy with Janine, Heather and Thea, but someday they would thank her for it, she was sure of it.

“Take care. It’s quite hot,” she cautioned. To her surprise Prince didn’t touch the mugs, which steamed gloriously between them, and she marveled at a restraint she knew she herself didn’t possess.

The chill in the air crossed the threshold of freezing, and Susan sensed the brink of it in the brittle crystalline air. If only her intentions could stay outside with Prince, while her shivering body could curl up on her sofa with the remains of the soup and a fun tv show. Susan gave a shiver and pressed the topic forward.

“So let me see your magazines. What kind of magazines?”

“Different kinds. All kinds. But the best one I think is this one for preschoolers, called *Child’s Week*. Maybe it’s because I have a little one myself...” and here he paused and smiled. “But if you could buy some donation subscriptions for one or two of these—” He set the catalog on the table in front of her.

Susan had never heard of *Child’s Week*, but imagined a brightly colored playroom full of pillows, and little brown children, which her mind quickly and consciously erased and replaced with children of all races, looking at pictures of muppets and pages with large alphabet letters. She imagined a little boy opening a magazine. On one page there was a giant C, and around it pictures of cats, crayons, coats, crows and carrots.

“Ma’am?”

Susan looked up. Prince was pointing to an item in the catalog. Susan squinted at the page.

“Whew! Isn’t that pricey for a preschooler magazine?” she asked.

Prince shuffled in the chair. He still had not taken even a single sip of the coffee. It smelled so sweet and creamy that she made a mental note to fix one for herself when all this was over.

“Actually, those are weeklies, so that’s why the price is higher,” explained Prince.

Susan turned her face upward, began to mentally divide the price by fifty-two.

“But then that’s just more magazines for those poor little kids,” Prince blurted, interrupting her calculations.

Susan thought for a moment. She decided she would do it; she would buy the magazines. If she couldn't go to the Volunteer Center, at least she could buy some little children a few magazines.

The condensation on the iron whorls in the table turned white. Susan crossed her arms over her chest. "And what about for the older kids?"

Prince glanced through his catalog. "I have all sorts of other magazines for them."

"Do you have anything about politics? They need to know what's going on in this world of ours. I'd be interested in helping with that."

"There's one called *News Today Magazine*," said Prince flipping back a page.

"I've never heard of that magazine," said Susan, remembering that she had cancelled all her subscriptions after Cam died.

"Here it is. The description says "This weekly magazine includes com—, commen..." He trailed off, pointing at the word and working his mouth.

It took Susan a moment to understand. She squinted, having left her reading glasses in the house, and craned her neck to view the glossy catalogue. "Commentary..."

"Com-men-ta-ry. Commentary from both con—, con—"

"Conservative," Susan offered.

"and li-ber-al sources..."

"That sounds good," she said, cutting him off mercifully. "I'll take the preschool one, and *News Today* as well. And what do you get out of it?"

"I get a twenty-five percent commission on anything I sell."



“Ok, then I’ll take two of the preschool magazines and two of those news ones as well. So the older kids have something.”

“You will?”

“Now just let me go get my checkbook.” As Susan rose and turned, she saw Prince quietly take the mug of coffee and raise it to his lips.

Susan went inside the warm house and breathed in the chicken-soup-filled air. Her checkbook was on the side table with her favorite family pictures. Here were her children, each posing in graduation robes, and there was Cam in his wheelchair. She looked across the living room at where his recliner used to be, before the wheelchair, and pictured him years ago.

“Susan,” Cam muttered to her, from the recliner that was no longer there, “it’s a scam. He’s ripping you off.” He then shook out his newspaper, as one does a shirt from the dryer, and held it before his face, indicating that the subject was closed. She remembered how much she hated that newspaper, and the recliner as well. Goodwill had been happy to acquire it.

She gathered her checkbook and her reading glasses and headed out the door.

Prince was writing carefully on the first page of a little receipt book. His pink tongue worked in the corner of his mouth as he wrote. As Susan sat down she noticed that the coffee and the soup were all gone. She nodded to herself and smiled.

Prince announced, “That’ll be three-hundred and fifty-six dollars, ma’am.”

“What? Let me see.” Susan reached over and took the receipt book and put on her reading glasses. Listed on the receipt were the four magazines and a forty dollar “shipping” charge. She checked the math and it was right.

She wanted to say “What’s this? I’ve never heard of a shipping charge for magazines before.” But she figured he would not know why there was a shipping charge, and he couldn’t do anything about it anyway. This was the deal—help or not? She was committed, for she had told him she would take the magazines, and she had seen his face brighten. “I guess that’s okay,” she said.

“I knew I could count on a lady like you,” said Prince, tearing off the receipt and handing it to her.

She filled out the check. “Working for God?”

“That’s right ma’am. I thank you. I knew you were a lady of quality,” said Prince, taking the check from the table. “Now you have a lovely week ma’am.”

Susan said goodbye and entered the check information into the ledger, which she always immediately did after writing a check so that she didn’t forget and upset Cam. By the time she looked up, Prince had disappeared, had melted into the night.

She went in the house and sat down on the sofa. From the empty space beside her, Cam’s voice whispered, “you idiot. You should never have answered the door.”

“Hmmff,” muttered Susan, resolutely grabbing the remote, but she found she could not relax and watch her television show. She picked up her cell phone and looked up *Child’s Week*. She found nothing. She looked up *News Today Magazine*—nothing. Her stomach began to tighten. Then she punched in “Working for God.” “Fake Magazine Selling Scam!” said the first result. She clicked on it and read the article. These people travelled in teams, it said, hitting cities and then disappearing before the police could catch up with them. And even when they did, the companies changed names too frequently to be caught.

Susan felt her face flush. Almost four hundred dollars hadn't seemed like much out on the porch, but now it welled before her. She thought of the neighbors' signatures, the points, and the pictures of the little boy, and winced at how easily she had been played. Cam was not surprised and lifted an eyebrow derisively. But Susan remembered the knotted arch of the man's spine, and the hunted look—those were true, she decided, straightening her back with equanimity. Did the rest of his story even matter? She continued reading the article. The worst thing you could do, it said, is to take it out on the sellers, who are hapless street people the managers bully and starve, and force to continue selling, convincing them they owe the company money.

She knew it. She had felt it all along, and she prided herself on this sort of knowledge that Cam never understood. Prince was desperate. If only he could get his commission and she could get the rest back, she wondered hopefully. But it was Cam who mostly did the financial transactions; she had little experience to consult. She came up with an idea and raced to get her purse and car keys, two twenties clenched in one hand.

She drove all through the neighborhood, but there was no sign of him or even a car parked on the side of the road that might be waiting for him. Susan went back over the same streets a few times, more slowly each time. At last she saw him, a moving shadow crossing the road in the dark place between the pools of streetlights. She pulled up next to him.

"Prince!" she yelled.

He broke into a run.

"No! You don't understand!" she called out the window. "I have money for you!"

Prince had run into a neighbor's front yard, where he stopped, stood for a moment, then turned toward her. "What did you say?"

Susan pulled over, parked the car and dashed out toward him, Cam hissing behind her ear at every step. *Idiot! Idiot!*

"Here, I have forty dollars and it's just for you. But we both know those aren't real magazines. I...I don't blame you, but you can have the forty dollars if you give me my check back." Susan was breathing heavily now, her voice becoming shrill, for she was not a person who stood in the street offering cash to strangers in the dark of night. Cam would not have approved.

Prince walked toward her. He detached the check from the clipboard and held it in his hand. "But I have to pay the company, ma'am. I need the check."

"You and I know they aren't going to give you a commission. But here's forty dollars for you. Now just give me my check. Please."

Prince held out the check with one hand and reached for the forty dollars with the other. With her free hand, Susan reached for the check. Inexplicably she felt a flush of emotion as their fingers were, for a split second, joined by the papers in their hands. He pulled the two twenties gently, slowly from her fingers, and then whisked the check back into his fist. In a reflex she was not even aware of, her hand flew to her chest and she caught her breath. Prince turned away and ran, calling behind him "I'm sorry ma'am! I'm so sorry!"

Back in her house, Susan sat on the sofa, her head cupped in her hands. Cam refused to speak to her, scowling silently behind his newspaper. Such a thing had never happened to her

before, and she could not believe she had been so gullible. She pictured her check out there in the hands of criminals and despaired. Could she do nothing to stop it?

It occurred to her that she could do exactly that—stop it. She had never had occasion to stop a check before, so it had never crossed her mind, but she would do it the very next morning, as soon as the bank opened. She exhaled and rejoiced, knowing that, in a world of every manner of transaction, there was always a way for a kind-hearted lady, a lady of quality, to protect herself and her money.

Susan gave a sidelong glance next to the sofa, to where Cam's recliner used to be, but there was nothing there. Tomorrow she would rearrange the furniture to cover that space. Maybe get a nice big plant. Then she might call and see if Janine or Heather or Thea would like to go get a manicure. She leaned back on the sofa and the cushion of it seemed softer than ever. She clicked the remote and the *Friends* danced around their fountain.

THE END