

# Smile Club

By Jennifer Klitzke

*Two coworkers walk by my work station. The whiff of stale cigarette smoke trails behind them and intrudes my cube – the workspace that provides a safe place to avoid the uneasiness.*

Here I am a white, middle-aged, divorced Christian woman on her first day as supervisor of the “motley crew”: four in all, Jesse, Steve, Smash, and Sally. Jesse is a youthful, blue-haired, lip-pierced punk from Uptown. She wears thick, black-framed, round glasses that make her look more like a cartoon character than a person. Then there’s Steve, the only male of the bunch. He’s a gifted artist with a goatee and a fixation on fantasy games such as “Dungeons and Dragons”. His sketches are all too realistic; I’d hate to know what his nightmares are like. And Smash, a tattoo-ridden, snake-lovin’, heavy-metal rocker who jumps out of her chair every time you walk by. Lastly is Sally, a 60-something, “old school” paste-up artist who has the worst luck with computers. She colors her hair too, only not blue. Her copper-colored wispy hairdo is a youthful facade that hides her age. Three women and a man who were hired before me – quite a contrast from the performance-driven staff I hired and trained at my last job.

I was the Senior Art Director of a successful marketing company. It was a dream job with all the perks: great salary, bonuses, benefits, four-week vacation, and a window office that overlooked a nature preserve. I built my department from the ground floor. My staff was exceptional: four dedicated, determined, high-achieving art directors. Together we helped the company meet and exceed forecasted goals which positioned the company well for a merger. Then corporate downsizing led to my demise, and I lost the best job I ever had.

Now I’m on the night shift as the production supervisor of a printing company. Being hired only four days after losing my job, I should be thankful. But the truth is I got the job nobody wanted: with work hours nobody wanted, with co-workers nobody wanted. Like the misfit toys on the Christmas classic: “Rudolf”. We were all hired because no one else applied for the job.

Each of us has a cube that we share with the first shift: the people who count, who matter to the business. For those of us on second shift, we’re the ones forgotten unless there is someone to take the blame. We are the ones to pick up the slack from the first shift while they surf the internet, play computer games, and conduct freelance on company time.

I ask myself, “What am I doing here?”

This question rattles through my mind until it gets tangled in my thoughts. Echoing in my mind are the words my dad used to say throughout my



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growing up years, “No one ever said that life was fair.” He meant well. His words were intended to restore my perspective but left me feeling invalidated and alone.

That night I leave work at 2am and cry out to God. “Why God, why?” I complain about the dream job I just lost and how this one pales in comparison. I complain about my new staff and wonder how I am going to effectively manage the “motley crew” with our staggering differences.

I sense God gently and firmly answer, “Jennifer, be thankful for your new job. Consider yourself a high-paid missionary. I brought you here not to judge these people but to love them.”

I feel a convicting knife slice through the critical attitude that surrounds my heart. Perhaps this attitude is what really separates me from them – not our staggering differences. After all, I am far from perfect and God loves me. Who am I to withhold love from these people because they are different from me?

The last thing I want to do is come off like the

self-righteous “Church Lady” from “Saturday Night Live”. That legalistic, rigid, rule-setting performance trap is the furthest thing from knowing Jesus Christ and His unconditional love – something we all long for. Reading Matthew 23 of the Bible, I can tell that Jesus hates what religious people did to those searching for God. They drove people away from God instead of to God. The last thing I want to do through my actions, words, and reaction is drive people away from knowing God’s love.

Then I have an idea.

I begin to encourage every good thing I notice. When I catch one of the crew doing something well, I give them a yellow-faced smiley sticker. We start the “Jesse Barget Smile Club” – naming it after Jesse, the punk-rocker, because she is the first to earn a smiley for finishing her work on time. Then, Steve, our token male, overwhelms all of us by earning five smileys in one shift. Within the first week, everyone earns smileys. Smileys line the cube walls overstepping the personal space of the first shift. We have so much fun that the first shift wants to earn smileys too.

Our camaraderie builds and we begin to pull pranks on each other. Smash, the snake-lovin', biker chick, slithers into my cube. With the blood-red contact lenses in her eyes and hissing fangs in her mouth, she look like something from "Night of the Living Dead". An alarming scream blares from my mouth and sends the others rolling with laughter – especially Jesse Barget, president of the Smile Club.

Later that day, Sally, the copper-topped grandma, quietly sneaks into my cube cupping her hands with a sheepish grin. "Let's get Jesse," she says as she open her hands to reveal a big black beetle she found milling around the outdoor smoking area. Sally and I conspire a clever plan. All too anxious, we tip-toe into Jesse's office while she is away from her desk and plant this intimidating, uninvited insect on her mouse pad next to her computer. When Jesse returns, we follow her into her office and ask, "Hey Jesse, will you show us how to calibrate our computer?"

Jesse reaches for her mouse. The grotesque, black beetle creeps onto her hand: her already spiked hair raises a notch higher; her saucer-sized eyes bounce out of her eye sockets; and she bolts out of her cube shrieking. She is notably more frightened than the day Satan's sidekick came to visit my cube. This has the rest of the crew cackling until our sides hurt.

Soon the cube walls no longer separate us. Conversations unfold as soon as the first shift leaves for the day. "Those slackers," we call them. We talk over the cube walls while we work. It makes the ten hour shifts fly by. We talk about everything: relationships gone bad, previous jobs gone bad, lunches that smell like they have gone bad. Like the day Sally had the audacity to eat feta cheese and garlic in her cube, sending us all running for fresh air. What a loud smell!

The next night, our over-the-cube-wall conversations continue. Jesse shares how her parent's divorce riveted her life when she was fourteen. Somehow she feels responsible for the breakup, like if she were a better kid, her parents would still be together. It has been a confusing time. And a painful time that seems to stick with her ten years later.

This triggers recent memories of when my husband left three days before Christmas with someone else – a seventeen year relationship ending in divorce. I never thought our relationship would end, I thought I'd be married until my dying day. It's amazing to look at someone I spent half my life with and thought I knew better than I knew myself, only to wonder if I ever knew him at all. He was my best friend and my soul mate – anguishing to realize it wasn't mutual.

Then I wonder, "If I had been a better wife, would he have stayed?"

I snap back to the present moment when Steve, our only male perspective on second shift, unburdens his heart. He wasn't going to say anything, but Jesse opened up and he feels safe to come out of hiding. Steve left his apartment that afternoon to find a note affixed to his door. "It's over. I found someone else," it read. His girlfriend left him for another man – a long-term relationship that ends with a note affixed to his apartment door. Everyone walking by his doorway learns about the breakup. He feels overwhelmed: violated, exploited, rejected and betrayed. "A note on my door! Can

you believe it? How cruel," he says. Somehow he finds comfort in our over-the-cube-wall conversation that night.

His pain seemed all too familiar as I reflect on my recent breakup. In marriage, my husband and I became "one flesh". In divorce we are torn apart. I feel that way too – torn and raw – my nerve endings feel exposed. Its a dull, hollow ache that can not be quenched. There is nowhere to escape it. It's as if I am pregnant with the pain only hoping one day I'll give birth to life – something worth living for. Without my husband, I ask, "who am I?" I feel lost in myself.

Later on, Sally and I grab our gym bags during our hour-long break time. We drive to the neighboring fitness center that is a mile away – only to walk three miles on a treadmill getting no where. Walking and out of breath, we talk about life. She shares a recent confrontation with her mother. It uproots pain that stems back 50 years to her childhood. She shares familiar messages of being overlooked, criticized, and never good enough. I don't have answers. In fact, many of the questions are the same ones I ask, like, "What does this mean?" I wonder if we ever get rid of this ugly pain or if God can use it for something beautiful.

A month goes by and Smash stops by my cube. She's trembling and whispers, "Can I talk to you?" We step into a meeting room and close the door. She says, "I need to go home." She tells me that her best friend died of a drug overdose. She was the sixth friend in the last two years who died that way. I am numb and speechless – stunned by the news. Before she leaves the room, I give her a hug, gaze into her crystal green eyes and say, "I'm so sorry."

Smash went home early that night. How ironic, her friend found a way to escape the pain and disappointment of life only to bring on more pain and disappointment into the lives of those who loved her.

I leave work at 2am with thoughts burdening my mind about Smash's friend and the rest of the "motley crew". It strikes me that I have a lot in common with these people. All of us feel the same familiar feelings: being rejected, abandoned, never good enough, and last picked. What makes us different from each other are the choices we make to deal with the pain in life. I run to God, others run to drugs, fantasy, and relationships for comfort, relief, and escape.

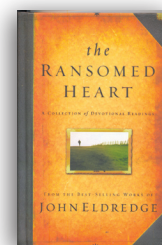
I'm still asking the same questions: Why am I here? Who am I? What does this mean? They still get tangled in my thoughts. But now I know I'm not alone in this quest because I'm a member of the "Jesse Barget Smile Club". I have learned to love four uniquely different people who are more like me than it appears. ■

*This memoir is based on a true story. The life lessons learned are true. The photographs are fictitious and the names and details have been changed.*



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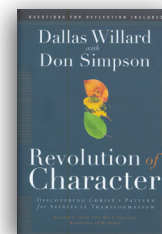
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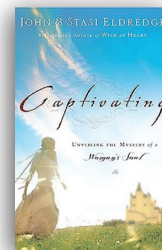
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