

Jennifer Klitzke

dkrk1@aol.com

763.300.5495

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Smile Club

By Jennifer Klitzke

Two coworkers pass by. The whiff of stale cigarette smoke invades my cube, the place where I retreat to avoid my uneasiness.

I'm on my first day as supervisor of an eclectic crew: Jesse, Steve, Smash, and Sally. Jesse is a three-dimensional cartoon character—a youthful, blue-haired, lip-pierced punk from the trendy south side. Steve is a gifted artist with beady eyes and goatee. His break-time sketches are all too realistic. I'd hate to know what his nightmares are like. Smash is a snake-loving, heavy-metal rocker who wears tattoos like wallpaper. And Sally is an “old school” paste-up artist who has bum luck with computers. Like Jesse, Sally colors her hair, only not blue. Her copper-colored wispy hairdo makes for a youthful facade. This motley crew had been hired before me and is a stark contrast from the four college-educated, high-achieving art directors that I had hired at my last job.

I had been the senior art director at a successful corporation and had built my department from inception. Together, my staff and I had helped the company exceed sales goals by designing dynamite direct marketing material, which had positioned the company well for a merger. Then came downsizing, and I lost the best job I ever had.

Now I'm a night-shift production supervisor. Being hired days after losing my job, I should be thankful, but the truth is, I got the job nobody wants, with hours nobody wants, with co-workers nobody wants.

We share cubes with first shift: the visible people. For second shift, we are recognized when a scapegoat is needed, even though we cover for first shift while they surf the Internet and do freelance work on company time.

“What am I doing here?”

This question rattles my brain until it collides with my dad's famous words: “Whoever said that life was fair?” He meant well, but it leaves me feeling invalidated and alone.

Driving home that first day of my new job, I complain, “Why God, why?” I complain about losing my dream job and complain about how inept I feel managing the motley crew.

Then God interrupts my rant and whispers into my heart: “Jennifer, consider yourself a high-paid missionary. Learn to love these people, not judge them.”

Conviction slices through the hardness surrounding my heart. Perhaps this critical attitude is what really separates us—not our staggering differences. After all, God loves me despite my quirks. Who am I to withhold love because of my dis-ease?

Then I have an idea.

I encourage every good thing my staff does with a yellow-faced smiley and launch the “Jesse Barget Smile Club”—naming it after the punk-rocker, because she claims the first smiley. Then Steve collects five smileys in one shift. Soon everyone has smileys; they line the cube walls and overstep the personal space of our rivals.

Our second-shift camaraderie continues. Smash slithers into my cube on Halloween with glowing red eyes and hissing fangs. My screeching sends the crew cackling—especially the Smile Club president.

Later that evening, Sally and I conspire a plan. While Jesse slips away, we plant a big, black beetle next to her computer mouse. When Jesse returns, Sally and I casually drop by her cube and ask her to show us monitor calibration.

Jesse reaches for the mouse, and the intimidating insect tickles her hand. Her already spiked hair raises a notch higher, her saucer-sized eyes bounce from their sockets, and she bolts with a loud shriek. The crew laughs louder than when the devil dropped by that Halloween.

Soon the cubes no longer separate us. Our conversations drown out the office white noise and spill over the cube walls. Ten hours quickly pass. We talk about relationships gone bad, jobs gone bad, lunches gone bad. Like the day Sally's feta cheese and garlic deafened the air with a loud smell.

In December, the over-the-cube-wall conversations turn personal. Jesse shares with the crew how Christmas-time pulls her apart ever since her parents' divorce. She wonders: If she had been less rambunctious as a child, would her parents not have split? The ugly pain re-emerges every Christmas.

Her pain pushes up my Christmas memories. Last year my husband left our seventeen-year relationship. If I had been a better wife, would he have stayed? I feel lost. Our one-flesh relationship had been severed leaving me with an inescapable dull, hollow ach. And as half a person I wonder, "Who am I?" Nine months of questions without

answers and inescapable feelings, it's like I'm pregnant with the pain. Just what will I give birth to?

I snap back to the moment when Steve unburdens his day. A note had been tacked to his door. "It's over. I found someone else." Everyone passing his apartment knows too. He feels rejected and betrayed. Oh, that ugly pain! Somehow the over-the-cube-wall conversations bring comfort.

At break time, Sally and I drive a mile to the gym and walk three miles on a treadmill, getting nowhere. Breathless, Sally spills out the day's conversation with her mom, reliving the childhood pain of never being good enough. Her questions are my questions. Can anything good come from this ugly pain?

Back from the gym. Smash stops by. Trembling, she whispers, "My best friend overdosed—she's the sixth in two years." I don't know what to say, but give her a hug; it speaks louder than words anyway.

How ironic, Smash's friend escapes the ugly pain only to add more of it to those who love her. On my drive home, I think about Smash's friend and the motley crew. It strikes me that our staggering differences are only an outward expression of the familiarity that unites us: that ugly pain.

I ask the same questions: Why am I here? Who am I? What is the point of all this? They rattle my brain. But now I know I'm not alone in this quest because I am a member of the "Jesse Barget Smile Club." I have come to love four uniquely different people who are more like me than it appears.

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