

Excerpted from *Getting the Important Things Right*

by

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The Parent

Percy was sitting Indian style on Lydia's Cookie Monster mat in the corner of the garage. Lydia was nestled in the hole Percy's crossed legs made, and the two of them were reading—for the trillionth time—Lydia's favorite book, The Giving Tree.

They were just getting to the cutting-down part of the story, which always made Lydia sad, when in walked a stocky, masculine-looking woman with short-cropped gray hair, a boxy-looking navy suit, and lace-up shoes.

She strode over to where Percy and Lydia were reading and said, "Mr. Albemarle?"

Percy said, "That's me. Need your bike fixed?"

The stocky woman said, "Mr. Albemarle, I don't have a bike. I'm Marilee Truelove from Social Services. It has been brought to our attention that you are raising a young girl in a

motorcycle repair shop. Usually I have to fish for clues, but you're making my job real easy. The evidence is right before my eyes."

Percy began to stand, but Miss Truelove said, "Keep your seat; this won't take long."

And, with that, she pulled up a stool, plopped herself down, perched a clipboard on her knees, and started scribbling.

Percy looked down at Lydia. He still hadn't gotten the hang of ponytails, and her red, curly hair was a mess. One side of her hair was still in its tail, but the other side had come loose, the rubber band dangling from the ends of her hair. It was hot in the garage that day, and Lydia had wet curls stuck all around her little face. And, because of the heat, Percy had allowed her to take off her tee shirt and wear only her overalls. She had just eaten a grape popsicle, and she still wore a purple ring around her mouth. He had not noticed until a social worker was sitting in front of them that his little girl looked like a neglected rag-a-muffin. But Percy knew that his little girl was not a neglected rag-a-muffin. Lydia was the most important thing in Percy's life, and he took his parenting very seriously. Sure, he had had his share of screw-ups and couldn't make good ponytails, but he didn't doubt his parenting skills for one minute.

Miss Truelove glanced over at the fenced-in area full of toys and asked, "Is that where you keep your daughter?"

Percy responded, "Miss Truelove, you act like I keep Lydia in a cage. She is free to come and go, but she knows she must stay in her play area when we're working on bikes. She has

her dolls and dollhouse, her trucks, her books. She even has her sleeping mat and pillow for naptime. That's more than lots of kids have."

Then Miss Truelove narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips, and said, "Mr. Albemarle, what about that calendar hanging on the wall over your child's play area. Do you think that is appropriate?"

You see, there had been a pin-up calendar on the garage wall since the beginning of time. And, truth be told, it was pretty racy. Miss January wore earmuffs and a long scarf around her neck. Her bare bottom was perched on the seat of a huge black Harley. Miss February wore a red feather boa, and one of her red satin fuck-me stilettos rested on the same Harley seat that Miss January's bare bottom had occupied just a mere month earlier. Miss July had sparkers...well, you get the idea. And Miss Truelove clearly didn't think it was a fitting wall decoration for a child's play area.

Percy said, "Miss Truelove, this is Mr. Peterson's business, and he has always had a pin-up calendar in his garage. He was kind enough to allow me to raise my little girl on the premises; I wouldn't think of asking him to change one thing about this place. Now, those are just naked women, and, quite often, my child is a naked woman herself—a small naked woman, but a naked woman, just the same. She can just look at that calendar and see what she has to look forward to."

Lydia had not looked up from her book since Miss Truelove had entered the garage nor had she said a word, but when

she heard the social worker mention the calendar, she said, “Those ladies look like my mommy, but they’re not as pretty as my mommy. One day, when I grow up, I’m going to be a pretty lady like my mommy.”

That having been said, Lydia returned her attention to her book.

Percy said that Miss Truelove seemed quite taken aback by Lydia’s matter-of-fact remark about the calendar, so she decided to engage Lydia in conversation, saying, “And just what is your daddy reading to you?”

And Lydia replied, “My daddy isn’t reading to me; I’m reading to my daddy. It’s my favorite book, The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein.

Miss Truelove gave Percy a conspiratorial wink and said to Lydia, “Then why don’t you read a little of The Giving Tree to me?”

So Lydia turned back to page one and began reading her favorite book to the social worker.

Miss Truelove said, “Are you sure you’re reading? Perhaps you’ve just memorized the words.”

And Lydia replied, “No ma’am. I didn’t rememberize it. I read it.”

When Miss Truelove asked how old Lydia was and she answered that she was three and one-third years old, Marilee said to Percy, “I don’t believe a child her age can read that well. Are you sure she’s not just repeating what you’ve read to her?”

Without a word, Percy reached for the Time magazine on his desk, opened to a random article, and handed it to Lydia to read. She was doing just fine until she reached the word *legislative*.

But when she patiently and correctly sounded out all of the syllables, Marilee said to Percy, “How did she learn to read so well at just three years of age?”

Before Percy could answer, Lydia said, “My daddy taught me.”

Percy said, “No one read to me when I was a kid, so I never was a very good reader. I like to read, though, and I want my little girl to like reading, to be a good reader. That’s why I’ve always read to her. That’s why she knows how to read well at her age.”

Marilee looked quite impressed with that accomplishment but said, “I notice your child isn’t wearing shoes. Isn’t it dangerous for a child to walk around in a repair shop in her bare feet?”

With that, Percy picked up two little pink tennis shoes that had been hiding beneath his leg.

Before Percy could say anything, Lydia said, “I’m not allowed to walk around barefooted, but I can’t read with my shoes on. I have to take them off so my feet can breathe and my head can think better.”

Miss Truelove tried to stifle a grin, but it was damn near impossible to keep from smiling when Lydia said stuff like that.

Percy was confident that his impeccable parenting credentials were showing when Snake and Turtle roared up on their hogs, hopped off, and strode into the garage. Lydia squealed when she saw them and jumped up into Snake's ample, tattooed arms and gave him a big kiss on his scruffy cheek.

Both bikers wore leather vests over bare chests, tight shredded jeans, long ponytails, and bodies full of tattoos. From the flare of Miss Marilee's nostrils, it was apparent she wasn't too taken with Snake and Turtle.

Snake bellowed, "The tickets have arrived! The event is on."

Hoping to draw Miss Truelove's attention away from the tattoos and focus on his friends' fine qualities, Percy said, "Miss Truelove, I'd like for you to meet our friends, Snake and Turtle. They are in charge of the event to save the USO room at the airport. Gentlemen, meet Miss Marilee Truelove."

And Marilee said, "The USO room?"

And Snake bellowed, "See there, that's the problem. No one even knows about it. You see, the USO has a room out at the airport where servicemen and -women can rest and have a bite to eat and see a friendly face while they are traveling. The volunteers serve sandwiches and donuts and coffee and make our men and women in uniform feel appreciated. But it takes money to keep the program going."

For the first time Turtle spoke: "And that's where we come in, Miss Marilee. Our bike club holds benefits throughout the year to help support the room. The tickets we're selling now

are for our black-tie soiree up at the Hilltop Inn. We'll have a fancy dinner with lobster and steak with two drinks included. Now, me, I don't touch the stuff, but some folks find those two drinks an important part of the package. Then after we eat, we'll dance to the tunes of the Sweet Swings till midnight. You look like you'd be quite a dancer, Miss Marilee. Buy a ticket and put on your fancy party dress, and I'll personally squire you to the dance on my hog."

Percy said that by this time Miss Marilee was blushing from head to toe and having a hard time talking.

Finally, she said, "Well, I could probably help. How much are the tickets?"

Turtle told her that they were a hundred and fifty bucks.

Miss Marilee said it sounded like a lot of money for a dinner-dance but that she was pretty sure she could manage it for such a good cause.

Once Marilee had written her check and given it to the bikers, Turtle said, "We sure do appreciate your generosity, Ma'am. You'll make a lot of servicemen and -women mighty happy. I know cause I was once a serviceman myself. Now, you just leave your number with Percy here, and I'll be getting in touch with you."

With that Snake and Turtle turned on their heels, and Snake yelled, "And we're off to find more good-hearted souls."

Miss Truelove just stood there with a faraway look in her eyes until Percy reeled her back in to the issue at hand.

"Miss Truelove?"

“Oh, yes, excuse me.... Now, tell me, Mr. Albemarle, where is Lydia’s mother while Lydia is here in this garage?”

“Lydia’s mother goes to school. You see, when Lydia was born, her mother, Vickie, was a student at Middleburg College. She had a 4.0 average and a full academic scholarship. Didn’t make sense for her to quit. So we worked out a schedule so she could keep studying for her degree.”

“And she’s still in college?”

“Well, now she’s at the University, working on a graduate degree.”

“And what kind of graduate degree is she pursuing?”

“Miss Truelove, Lydia’s mother is just a thesis away from getting her Master’s in Social Work.”

And Miss Truelove’s scowl turned into a very large grin.

Percy continued: “Miss Truelove, Lydia’s mom was a child of the foster care system. She has always wanted to go into social work in foster care so she can help children find parents like the mother she found.”

Miss Truelove said, “Mr. Albemarle, I can see that you and Mrs. Albemarle have faced some very hard decisions and have arrived at the ones that suit your family best. It may not be a conventional lifestyle, but it seems a lifestyle that works for you. You are raising a very extraordinary child; her parents must be pretty extraordinary, as well. I still find the calendar hanging over your child’s play area inappropriate and most distasteful, but it doesn’t seem to have had a negative effect on her. Thank you for

your and Lydia's time, Mr. Albemarle. I wish that all of my calls had such a positive outcome."

As she shook Percy's hand and turned to leave, Percy said, "Miss Truelove, could you tell me who thought it was necessary for you to investigate my parenting?"

Miss Truelove scanned the documents on her clipboard. When her eyes came to rest, her smile disappeared.

She looked at Percy with a profound sadness in her gaze and said, "A Colonel Thomas Albemarle."

And that was why Percy was sitting on my sofa, bent forward with his face buried in his hands, sobbing like a wounded child.

Between racking sobs he gasped, "Why, oh why, Sis? Why doesn't he love me? Can I ever do anything he approves of? Why don't you care, Sis? Don't you want him to love you?"

To be honest, I'd stopped caring long ago. I figured you can't miss something you've never had, and I was tired of wanting something I knew I'd never get.

But not Percy. He knew there was nothing more special than the love between a father and son because he'd seen it with his friends and their fathers. He so desperately wanted that love with his own father. He knew it could be so special if it were done right.

And he was crying for a wish he was certain would never come true because they just couldn't seem to get it right.