

Chapter 10a

Things were going relatively well for me, personally and professionally at the Bensalem Police Department through 1977. I continued to learn about people, and about me, in this increasingly transitional and edifying first full year as a uniformed patrolman.

While I was making new friends on the police department, mostly fellow rookie cops, I certainly didn't abandon or forget my former Philadelphia/Olney neighborhood friends. Besides Ray Geary, most of my other friends had jobs in the business world or working at other government agencies, such as John Welsh as a Philadelphia firefighter, and the Best Man at my wedding, Jim Coyle, working as a civilian at the Naval Operations Depot in Northeast Philadelphia. Another Olney friend, Tim Lamplugh, was going to school for computer science at the time, but for a short while in 1977 held a job on Bristol Pike in the Andalusia section of Bensalem Township. He worked at a place called ABC Furniture (fictitious name).

At a party at one of my Olney friend's houses one night, Tim, a redheaded Irish-American with a quirky and quick-to-the-punchline sense of humor, told me he had just recently attained a sales position at ABC and suggested that I stop by some day as he knew I was looking to buy some furniture for the new house that my wife Eileen and I had recently purchased. So, taking him up on his offer, I stopped by there one early afternoon to pay him a visit.

My visit would cost Tim his job before that day was over.

Tim wasn't clear at the party as to whether I should stop by while working, or when I was off-duty. The issue just never came up in conversation. Either way, around lunchtime one day a week later, while on a 7A-3P day-work shift, I was driving my patrol car by the furniture store. As things were quiet in Bensalem, I figured this would be a good opportunity to pay Tim a visit.

So, I pulled the car into the lot of the large one-story furniture store, parked out front, and walked inside in full uniform with my police radio squelching on-and-off at my waist. No big deal I thought. I walk into retail establishments in my uniform all the time, this shouldn't be any different. And, in this case, I actually know here a guy from my old neighborhood.

No problem, right?

Wrong! At least for Tim it became a problem, and a big one.

As I walked inside the store's large double-glass doors, I was approached immediately by an employee with a deeply concerned look on his face. He was carrying a clipboard with papers on it but as soon as he saw me inside the doors he threw it under a nearby desk and then walked over to greet me. The portly, bald, middle-aged man asked me right away if there was anything wrong. I replied politely and with a smile that there was not, only that I was possibly interested in some furniture and I wanted to talk to my friend Tim, one of the salesmen.

The now only somewhat relieved salesman said, "I'm sorry, who?"

I reiterated, "Tim. Tim Lamplugh."

"Tim...Tim...Uh, can you wait here a minute?" he said while walking away from me, but not before retrieving the clipboard from under the desk along with some other documents in one of the drawers. It seems he didn't want to risk me, an on-duty police officer, somehow going over to his desk and finding anything there.

Hmmm...this was strange, I was thinking. This salesman really seems nervous to have me in his store. And what about Tim? Is he with another customer? Is he not here today? For that matter, do I even have the right store? Maybe it's just me in this uniform. Maybe....

As I glanced around the sales floor, I noticed there were no other customers in the store. There were salesmen milling around, but no one seemingly shopping. Strange again, I thought,

as there were, in fact, numerous cars in the customer parking lot. Maybe they were all closing deals in some back offices somewhere in the building. Whatever....

For the next minute or so, while waiting for Tim, I walked around not too far from the inside of the front entrance checking out the various sofas, recliners, coffee tables and end tables. They looked to be of decent quality and style, at least at first glance. While sitting in a recliner to test its comfort level and its various positions (not easy with a holster belt and its attached equipment around my mid-section) I looked off into the distant sales floor and I saw the fat, bald guy walking with Tim towards me. The man seemed to be almost lecturing Tim about something, with his finger rapidly wagging in front of him in synchronicity with his rapidly moving lips. Finally, he broke off abruptly toward the bedding department and Tim walked directly up to me.

Tim had a grin on his face and extended his hand to shake mine. He was genuinely happy to see me.

“Great to see you, Fitz! Sorry it took a while for my boss to find me.”

I replied, “That’s okay. I hope this is an okay time to stop by.”

“Sure it is, no problem at all,” Tim said as he was eying his boss standing a few aisles away who also seemed to be eying us back at the same time.

“Just so you know,” continued Tim in a reduced volume while we walked between sleep-sofas and kitchen tables, “My name while working here is Mr. White. No first name, just Mr. White. The assistant manager over there didn’t even know my real name when you first asked for me.”

“Wait! You use a fake name to work here?” I inquired.

“Yeah, it’s store policy. No one uses their real names at ABC Furniture, not even the owner.”

Tim hesitated somewhat while looking around him before continuing, “Sometimes, sales kinda go wrong and the customers come back kinda mad here looking for the salesperson and the owner wants to make sure no one can be identified by their actual names.”

“Uh...okay...I guess. Let me ask you, do YOU even know the real names of your colleagues and bosses?”

Again, after carefully looking around to make sure he wasn’t within earshot of anyone, “No, and I don’t want to know their names. They pay me in cash too. Weird, eh?”

I agreed with him, all the while aware of at least one set of eyes on me as we strolled the sales floor. They belonged to the fat, bald, middle-aged guy; minus the clipboard now.

Despite all of this, Tim assured me, they do sell some decent furniture here and with fair prices too. Although, he warned me, the management of ABC frowns over customers paying with cash or checks. They want customers to pay on time, with one of ABC Furniture’s “customized, personalized, in-store, installment plans.” Tim then winked at me, and whispered that I don’t want to go there. The interest rate is over twenty-five percent, and the payments go on for years.

I then assured Tim and I had no desire to go that route but instead said IF I was to purchase something I would pay with cash. He hesitated again and told me the store hardly ever deals in cash with their customers and he’s not sure he could get me the same good price if I didn’t go with their credit plan.

I knew Tim well enough to realize that he was just newly learning of this credit-versus-cash matter in the last week and that he was not all that comfortable with it. The assignment of

the nom de plume “Mr. White” also surprised him after he answered the newspaper want ad and actually started in the sales position a few days later.

Upon spending no more than fifteen minutes in the store (the police radio being relatively quiet the whole time), looking at, touching, and sitting in or on a few different pieces of furniture, I thanked Tim, and bellowed a loud farewell to the still nervous looking and glaring assistant manager. The suddenness of it caused him to juggle and then drop some papers he was carrying. Geez, what’s this guy’s problem?

I eventually left the premises. Outside, I shook Tim’s hand, said goodbye and took off in my patrol car. I’m sure there was a collective sigh of relief among the ABC Furniture employees in the store that day upon my departure, especially the shaky assistant manager. I wasn’t sure why yet, but something told me they were relieved to see me go.

As it turns out, within a few hours, Tim was relieved too. Relieved of his job, that is.

Tim called me at home the following night. He told me as I was leaving the parking lot that afternoon in my marked police car, the owner of ABC Furniture was just pulling into it. Tim said that upon walking into the store, the assistant manager ran up to the boss-man and engaged in a rapid fire, one-sided discussion, pointing to Tim...er...make that Mr. White, and apparently explained my unannounced visit to the store. The boss-man did not seem too happy with Mr. White, aka Tim, at that time. And, that unhappiness apparently manifested itself later that afternoon when Tim was terminated from his position by the boss-man. He wouldn’t give Tim an official reason, but simply said he (Tim) wasn’t working out at the store and didn’t fit “our corporate image.” I’m not sure what kind of corporate or ANY image a business is trying to convey when all the employees use bogus names, but that’s what he told my good friend.

Tim was laughing on the other end of the phone line while telling me this story. He made sure to let me know that he was fine with it and that it was just a matter of time before he would have quit as he didn't like the business practices or the people there. I felt awful, as it seems I had caused him to lose his job simply by showing up there the day before. I apologized and told Tim that I shouldn't have gone there in uniform, but I would never have thought that this issue alone would get him fired. He continued that he knew the business owner and at least some of his staff were into "shady stuff," which was not just limited to convincing the economically vulnerable customers who would wander into the store that they NEEDED this furniture right then and there, they NEEDED to put their purchase on the store's special payment plan, and then they NEEDED to sign the contract that very minute.

In Tim's short time at the store, he had already seen and heard several previous customers or customers' family members come into the store complaining about the truck full of new furniture just delivered with monthly payments going in to the 1990s (still over a decade away), most likely well after the functional lifespan of the furniture itself. They were each told it was too late, the contract was signed, and they had to make the monthly payments...or else!

Tim ended the phone call that evening telling me he already found another job, he reminded me he was just one semester short of completing computer school, and was glad to have ABC Furniture behind him. Knowing his sense of humor, I ended the call by asking him, "Are you sure, Mr. White?"

He responded while laughing, "Yeah, I'm sure." And in Tim's well-known style of humor, he couldn't resist but to add, "You know, it's not too late to get that living room set on sale. In only fifteen years after paying ten times its worth, you can fully own it. But you have to sign the contract now. And tell them Mr. White sent you."

I thanked him and laughingly told him I'd think about it.

Within a year, the ABC Furniture Store was shuttered and closed for good. Some sort of legal action was filed against it by one or more state agencies (including the PA State Police) and the owner and employees were nowhere to be found after that. No doubt they were living and working elsewhere using their various fake names. I'm sure one of them even reused the name "Mr. White" in the meantime. Fortunately, the Mr. White I knew from Olney was long gone by then.

I was learning early in my law enforcement career that some people love cops, some people hate them, some fear them, with most people somewhat neutral about them. I'm not sure if the ABC Furniture people hated me or feared me and/or what I represented, but they apparently didn't want one of their employees being friends with me, the local cop. And, that cost him his job.

Tim and I agreed then and now even many years later, it was best he got out when he did. He actually thanked me more than once for my serendipitous visit that day. If he stayed any longer as Mr. White he may have also been paying for it well into the next decade...just like many of the unfortunate ABC Furniture customers were doing.