

# Brad's Story

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A True Story

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"I'd like to thank all of you, very, very much, on behalf of Jason and myself. You've all been a terrific help to us, and let me once again apologize most sincerely to you all. Tonight is our way of saying thanks and sorry, so please eat, drink and enjoy – on us." "Cheers!" Everyone raised their champagne glasses as Brad smiled and sat back down in his seat at the head of the table. This was the happiest I had seen him in a long time. Sitting next to his partner Jason, he almost looked the image of his old self again, that easygoing, pleasant and sociable young man I remembered from a year and a half ago. Brad had been the latest "new boy" in the office. We had seen quite a few over the years – some had kept to themselves, stayed quiet and vanished after a while so that eventually nobody could remember their names. A few had made themselves instantly unpopular, so that people breathed a sigh of relief when they too eventually vanished back into the crowded bustle of the city streets. But most had been regular everyday guys and girls – ordinary, boring nine to fivers like the rest of us. So it was a little like getting a new puppy when Brad came along, especially for the girls in the office. He was tall, muscular and good-looking with a square jaw, jet-black hair and a flawlessly straight nose. He rode a bike to work and would emerge from the lift perspiring and clad in tight lycra, to the admiring stares of most of the female staff. "G'day mate," the guys would say, "Haaaai Brad," the girls would say. It soon became evident that he had a great personality too, he was unfailingly positive and cheerful, never passing up an opportunity to make the whole office laugh with some witty remark or a subtle pay-out. He was a good work-mate too, reliable, helpful and efficient. He also never missed going to the pub, always bought his round and got himself invited to all the birthday bashes or dinner evenings. But there was one thing about him that some of the guys in the office found a little odd. Brad never talked or joked about women and he always came to work dos alone. So one Friday afternoon at the pub, about four months after we had first met him, Rita - one of the single girls asked him whether he had a girlfriend. Rita had taken quite a fancy to him, as had a few of the others and realizing that she had competition, Rita threw caution to the wind, with a little help from the three or four Margaritas that she had downed. The whole table went silent, putting the poor guy squarely on the spot. He looked around briefly then looked Rita straight in the eye and quietly said, "I

don't have a girlfriend but I've got a partner." Nobody said a word but everyone was thinking – Oh, right, of course, we should have guessed! Belinda then came to our rescue with, "Oh, what's your partner's name?" "Jason." "Well, you should bring him along one night." Brad looked around, saw that all of us agreed, except for Rita who had by this time gone to the loo, smiled and nodded. Brad being gay was the main topic of conversation in the office for the whole of the next week but eventually it became yesterday's news and the rumor and gossip mill moved on to something else. We met Jason too one night and while he was clearly the strong silent type and quite obviously wore the pants in the relationship, he too seemed like a nice bloke. Everything was fine and busy at the office for the next few months until we started noticing that Brad was taking a few sickies. We thought nothing about these at first as he was only away for a day or two at a time and there seemed to be nothing wrong with him when he returned to work. "Just a tummy bug," He would usually say and it would be left at that. But soon we saw less and less of Brad and Jason at social gatherings or Brad would come alone, usually saying that Jason was "busy." When Brad stopped going to the pub with us on Fridays we started to suspect that something was amiss. One Friday when I asked him along he snapped at me, "Look, I just can't afford it!" I was a little taken aback. I had never seen him like this. I asked him if there was something wrong and whether there was anything I could do to help. I could see that he wanted to tell me but all he said was, "I've run into a few money problems, nothing serious it's just that we've had a few unexpected expenses lately." "Is there anything I can do to help?" He hesitated then looked at me straight in the eye and with the most pathetic look I've ever seen and said, "Could you lend me a few hundred dollars?" I lent him three hundred; he of course was very grateful and promised to pay it all back. It wasn't long though before I found out via the office grape vine that Brad had borrowed similar amounts of money from a few others. For a while everything at work was fine and we went about the daily grind as usual then, one Monday, I came in and was told that Brad had left. My first thought was that he had run off with my money and I soon found out that he had paid none of the others back either. Naturally we were quite disappointed and a little angry with him; the guy had been a mate after all. Two months passed and we had all by this time given up on seeing Brad or our money again. Then one Tuesday night at exactly 9:30 I got a phone call on my mobile – it was Brad. "Look man, I'm really sorry," he said sounding sad and very sincere. "I can't pay you or the others back all of your money but I feel really awful about the whole thing. Jason and I have come up with an idea with which we hope to make it up to you. He's been quite sick; I'll spare you the details but our insurance won't cover it and so we've had huge medical bills." What could I say, he sounded like a man who had obviously suffered a great deal for someone that he cared for and loved. "What did you have in mind?" He suggested that they take us all out to dinner with all expenses paid at one of the classy hotel restaurants in town. Upon hearing this I suggested that he save his money but then he said, "No I want to do it for Jason too...I don't think he has much time left." He then started crying and hung up. I was feeling dreadful by this time and whatever anger I had towards this guy was quickly fading. I found out from talking to the others that the venue and time had been arranged and we all met on a balmy Saturday night in mid February at one of the big city hotels to have dinner – and what a dinner it was, with service and food simply superb. My heart sank when I saw Jason

walking with a stick, he was not a well man at all and looked to be in the advanced stages of cancer, with sunken cheeks and hollow, pale eyes. I felt so sorry for the guy and also for Brad who seemed to be putting on as brave and cheerful a front as possible – cracking jokes, praising us and thanking us all for our generosity. All thoughts that this pair had duped us in any way were quite gone from our minds and when the bill came, I noticed Brad produce a Visa card and slip it into the little folder. The evening wound to a close with everyone fed, watered, happy and relaxed. People gradually said their goodbyes and drifted off into the warm night. I shook Jason's bony hand, hugged Brad and offered him a "Take care mate." It was the last time any of us were to see of either of them. I then learned that one of our party, Jenna and her boyfriend Steve, had decided to stay the night and had rented a room. We all cracked jokes about dirty weekends and Jenna not coming in to work on Monday. We all then said goodnight and parted happy. Well Jenna did come to work on Monday and she was in a foul mood to put it mildly. She and Steve had been woken by a knock on the door early the next morning. It was the hotel's manager and a security guard. The manager politely but firmly told them that Mr Bradley James' Visa card had bounced. The look of embarrassment on Jenna's face could only compare, I would imagine, to the look of annoyance she wore that Monday morning. Luckily she was able to convince the hotel's management not to involve the police, promising them that we would get to the bottom of the matter. We couldn't find any trace of Brad or Jason anywhere. All of Brad's numbers were disconnected, we couldn't find him listed in the phone book – nothing. We then had a meeting a day later and decided to pay the dinner bill ourselves, but that night there was a story on the news. Some fishermen walking along one of the quiet southern beaches at dawn that morning had found a car with its wheels stuck in the sand and the surf washing over the bonnet. Wanting to help, they soon noticed a pipe running from the exhaust into a hole in the roof; inside they found the bodies of two young men, both had been dead for hours. I think about Brad rarely now. But those of us who knew him won't ever forget his story. We subsequently found out that both he and Jason had H.I.V. And the dinner – well, even Jenna now jokes about that. After the hotel had received the police report they decided not to charge us for the meal. I'm sure Brad would have wanted us to see the funny side.