



Do you have time to daydream with me? That is the first line of the sales script. Some days we sing it. Some days we mumble. Most hang up or complain. We buy their numbers from internet ads, shams, shell games that promise college scholarships, but deliver nine different online colleges calling six times a day. We all want them in our for-profit schools.

Last month I snagged fifteen students. I congratulated them—after the misspellings and run-ons in their applications made me cringe, after I showed the errors to the sales people around me. I congratulated myself and made the soft handoff to the student loan department.

Those fifteen enrollments stick me right in the middle. Where I was born. Where I will die—buried in a refurbished casket, a high-gloss finish. Ambrose and Larry, they get the lashes. Pedro, for the first time, gets to wallet the gift card and pin up the foil-stamped certificate. The manager ignores me, and the bright, wrinkled wolves on her dress taunt with the turn of her back.

some stupid glow

“I thought I blocked this number.” One of my favorite students I fleeced answers his phone.

“Do you have time to daydream with me?”

“Not anymore,” Nathan says. We are supposed to call the students we’ve enrolled once a month to encourage them, but I can’t bear to. Except Nathan. He calls me too. We talk every few days.

“Imagine the home you’ve always wanted. Imagine the car you’ve only dreamt about.”

“Imagine passing calculus.” He has a voice like sweatpants. Like a corduroy couch and the afternoon sun and small claims court television.

“The numbers must be out,” he says.

“I’m smack dab.”

“Does the manager know you’re there?” he asks. “Why *are* you there?”

My manager, Ms. K., tempers her dresses with too many clichés. “Build a bridge of trust.” “Listen to what the customer cannot say.” “Do more with less.” She stalks the cubes. I straighten my shirt. I smooth the pages of my script.

“I’m here to keep you accountable,” I say.

“And who is looking after you?” he asks



Ambrose eats old donuts, four stacked, custard on her chin, sprinkles in her lap. I bring her a black coffee.

“Flukey month,” I say.

“My second in a row.”

“Is that a verbal warning?”

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“Written. Ms. K called me lily-livered,” Ambrose says.

“In writing?”

In cursive. Ambrose produces the admonition. *Sags at the first no*, the boss wrote, *gladly*.

“She’s never seen you drink,” I say.

Ambrose licks jelly off her shirt.

“What now?”

“I’m going to dig in at the first no,” she says. “I’m going to bombard the second.”



I smile, dial, stoke, and coax. The script spends twice as many pages on the abstract as it does on the small print. Transport them to a future tangible enough and they won’t notice what they’re signing. One over-the-road freighter describes how he would refurbish his grandmother’s farmhouse. He asks whether the vet tech degree has any labs. Another stay-at-home mother imagines wearing her cap and gown for the grandson she doesn’t have yet.

“And how would that make you feel?” I ask.

Oily, barbed, I slither in my leather chair. I close my first sale of August.



Pedro blows his gift card on a company coat, a branded jacket. He unboxes it at his desk. While most of the team smatters applause for his runway twirl, Ambrose drapes a sniper’s camouflage over her chair. She pins up an encouraging email from her boyfriend.

The boss drills us with slogans. “Cast a wide net.” “Believe for

them.” “It’s a numbers game.” One hundred dials a day. Six calls to the newest numbers, or until someone answers. Once a day for the stale ones. I call the dead numbers, the disconnected—the system cannot tell the difference—and I am caressed by the three tones, the automated voice. My dials rank.

“Charlie.” The boss clogs my cube, surrounding me with a fresh-pressed cactus pattern. “You had a good month last month, didn’t you?”

“Fifteen,” I say.

She purses her lips, unsure of the taste.

“I’ll do better,” I say. “I’ve already got one.”

“Sit up,” she says. I nod. “No, really. Sit up. Chest out. Chin up. They hear *everything*.”

We call the recording software PRISM Jr. It monitors the tones of every call. Too pitchy? The timbre of ire? The boss gets an email. She listens in. I’ve had a few close calls, or I’ve assumed they’re close calls. A potential student’s husband answered the phone for her and demanded to be added to the do-not-call list. “I do have to speak to Stephanie, sir.” Numbers no one has answered in months came to life cussing. But the boss’s chat box has never popped on my screen. We’ve never reviewed those calls in my coaching sessions. Even the algorithm doesn’t care.



“I found a free math tutoring site online,” I tell Nathan.

“Forward it to me.”

His email sings.

“What else is going on?”

“Nothing,” I say. We sit in silence. He’s a mouth breather. I click my tongue. Ambrose stands when she gets someone on the line.

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The boss adjusts her posture, two fingers on the small of her back, one to point her chin.

“What kind of job are you going to get when you’re done?” I ask Nathan.

“You promised me my own business. You had me picture the reviews in the paper.”

“Do papers still do reviews?”

“Online then,” he says. “I’m making you write the first one.”

“I’ll lie for you.”

Nathan is a stay-at-home dad. His five-year-old calls me *Char-tee*. When he’s been on the phone too long, she empties junk drawers to get his attention. His wife defends corporations. “It’s mostly reading briefs,” Nathan once said. “Even this late?” I asked.

Closing the deal took four or five calls. He said he wanted to repair cars or cobble shoes, to work in a room with unfinished tables or natural lighting, but I could tell he wanted to get out of the house. I imagined him with a bank account he didn’t tell his wife about, hiding the debit card in his sock drawer, using the business address for the statements.

Ambrose makes a sale. She salutes the boss, who tells her she’s still off the pace.

Nathan forwards me a picture his daughter drew of me—I dial from a chair of dollar signs, big hands, blue hair. My smile reaches my ears. “How did she know?” I ask.

I’ve seen Nathan’s house in Charlotte on street view. The van caught the ranch in spring. The roses needed trimming. Tibetan prayer flags burned in the window. I’ve seen pictures of him that are public online. His voice is paler, fleshier. His wife wears too much foundation.

I listen as Nathan coaxes his daughter in front of the television and starts a movie. I hear his microwave warming her up some-

thing to eat. His sighs into the phone.

“Do you have time to daydream with me?” he asks.

“Always.”

“Imagine thinking only about yourself. Imagine not sharing anything—the bathroom, the television, the couch—”

“Imagine guilt-free work,” I say. “Imagine being proud of that little name in the corner of your paychecks.”

“Imagine talking to your coworkers like adults. Because they are adults. Imagine talking to any adults at all.” Nathan complains when his wife won’t ask him about his day. Every day with his daughter is a rerun of the previous. But he wants to be asked, and he tells me what he would have told her.

“Imagine telling everyone what you think of them,” I say. “Bosses, family, friends.”

“Imagine not worrying what anyone thinks about you. Doing whatever the hell you want.”

I feel something for Nathan I haven’t felt for anyone in a long time. “How was the rest of your day?” I ask him. “Tell me everything.”



Stragglers ask for overtime. They stay late and wheedle the Hawaiians. One morning, I catch Ambrose brushing her teeth over the break room sink.

“Sorry,” she says. “Bathroom reeks.”

I stare too long at her stockings, pilling, and try to figure out if they are the same ones from yesterday. She draws tight the cardigan she’s worn over every outfit this week.

“Any luck?”

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“Some hard maybes. A few check-in-laters.”

We squint into the sunlight washing the break room.

“You seeing any action?” she asks.

“Two.”

“The boss is going to hate that.”

I eat old donuts. To test my memory for Nathan’s number, I call him from my cell phone. He doesn’t answer. I am sure he doesn’t recognize the number.



Two weeks into August, the boss passes out new leads and pitches. We’re hustling veterans. The GI Bill offers easier money for everyone, the prospective student and the company. “You’ve served your country. Now let your school serve you.” That’s scripted. I stare long enough at the line that the ink seems to move, to melt. Soon it’s pinging off handsets, reverberating off the drop ceiling.

My lead list is seven names but only one phone number. Brothers? Roommates?

“Mercy Veterans Medical Center,” a nurse answers.

This company. They buy lead lists from diploma mills and open every holiday. They brand coffee mugs, calendars, and pillow cases. Most of my coworkers have a degree from the school because hiring them raises the graduation employment rate. Now they’re developing master’s programs in sales and education, in coaching and closing. Now they want me snagging hospitalized veterans.

I put the VA on the do-not-call list. I put every number assigned to me on it. Two clicks. My list dwindles.

In the break room at the empty donut box, I count the checks I’ve cashed from this company. Two a month for how many months? More money than I made as a stockroom leader or a

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sandwich artist. I have saved plenty and bought things I didn't unbox, a pasta maker, a subwoofer. I could have refreshed my resume months ago, but I show up every morning on time. Is money the only reason?

Again I call Nathan from my cell. No answer.



I show up, but I don't feign work. Every morning a few more numbers are loaded into my system and I set each one as do-not-call. Then I sit. Stillness takes effort. I want to fiddle and fidget. Not looking busy, I ache. Pedro's hung a company flag from his cube. Larry counts sales up his arm with marker. Ambrose has stopped using her chair. She squares her mouse and pad in her palm to double-click calls.

I stop dining at my desk. After two days, I stop shoveling food on the plastic chairs in the break room. I don't care if there is a wait at the closest restaurant. I want the table near the window, dessert, one more cup of coffee.

My boss barricades the best sales people with boxes full of paper. She berates a few loafers, collects the frames of their families, their cell phones. I stuff my cell in my sock.

Then I take it out, shove my script in a drawer, and put my feet on the desk. I hope to get collared. Chewed out. Devoured. I could use the abandon. Instead my manager will scold. She will chide. My numbers don't demand a collar. My recordings are moderate. And there is my problem, clearer than the cost of these online degrees. Moderation, I've had too much of it.



Nathan calls.

"Hey."

"Do you know a 503 number?" he asks.

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“That’s here. That’s Portland.”

“I thought so,” he says. I can hear a woman’s voice behind him, talking to his daughter about dinosaurs or pancakes. He never calls when his wife is home. “Someone has been calling me. Not leaving a message.”

I tried before work and after, then again, wondering when he would be alone.

“My wife is thinking you sold my number,” Nathan says. “That your company did.”

“Beats me.”

“I assured her,” he says with a voice like a shovel, like the soil is filled with stones, “that there is no good reason a number from Portland would call so often.”

There are thousands of good reasons. Imagine all the deals someone sitting in a cubicle in Portland might be able to offer someone in Charlotte. Imagine him free of his cubicle and his quota and the sense that he is being judged by the computers and people around him. Imagine him free of his apartment and his city, willing to go wherever necessary to offer what he can.

“I need it to stop,” he says.

“Answer,” I tell him, “and ask to be placed on the do-not-call list. Then he will never call again.”

There is no old food in the break room. The filters in the courtyard ashtray are sucked clean. We are a corporate park inside of a corporate park, seemingly anonymous buildings copy and pasted for miles. Who knows what’s going on inside? But it is. At all hours. Overtime. Going on and out and hustling, hustling, hustling. Companies have no use for moderation.

When I return to my desk, Ms. K’s chat box pops. *Ambrose is late for a scheduled call. A soft maybe. Call and follow up?*

“Gerald? This is Charlie from American Education University

Online. How are you this evening?”

“Gerry.”

“Gerry. Of course. I’m calling on behalf of Ambrose. She’s running a bit late, but she told me you were interested in changing your life.” These situations are scripted too: *First, I’d like to congratulate you. You’ve already made a difficult, first decision. To commit to an education.* I have no idea where my script is.

“First,” I say, “I cannot congratulate you. You haven’t done shit—”

“Excuse me?”

“I guess I could congratulate you on being a sucker—”

“Who is this?” It’s like he realizes someone is on the other end of the line.

“I represent the woman who suckered you. One of many, I bet—”

“I’ve done more with my life than you can imagine—”

“I’ve seen the movies,” I tell him. “You want a real war? Try selling the future. Hope. Trying selling it voice to voice, some static on the line, the television never off.”

“Get your manager on the phone now, you fuck-pocket.”

What is happening? What is happening? The boss types it four times in the chat box. Finally.

“You need someone who makes three times as much as you to tell you that you’re an idiot too? Let me guess. You were going to major in entrepreneurship. Everybody thinks they can be in charge. That they have the idea a billion other people haven’t tried—”

Now at my desk, Ms. K yanks my phone cord from the console. She stares in disbelief. She searches the drop tile. “Tell me someone died. Tell me you just found out you have cancer.”

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“I told him the truth,” I say.

“This school pays for your car. Bought those shoes. This school just wants to help.”

I stand. “Harder.”

“We’re here because we care about these people. We give them the chance no one else will.”

“I need it harder.”

“Pack your shit.”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll call security,” she says.

“Can *they* close this sale?”

Security pulls me out of my chair. Grabs. Drags. I toss and kick so their hands leave marks. So I can feel their fingers in the soft parts of my arms for hours.

Out among building after building, all the tinted eyes of their windows, I catch my breath and call Nathan. I leave a message.

“It’s me. Got some great news. I’m being assigned to a special project. Some face-to-face consultation. Over the road. Atlanta, Durham, Charlotte. You’ll need to find someone else to call. That number won’t work anymore. This one will. Or call the 800 number. They can connect you. Don’t hesitate. I know you, okay? Someone there would love to talk to you.”