

Someone There Would Love to Talk to You

I hope to get collared. Chewed out. Devoured. I could use the abandon. Instead my manager will scold. She will chide or cluck. My numbers don't demand a collar. My recordings are moderate. And there is my problem, clear like the skin on my manager's nose, moderation. I've had too much of it.

My manager foils her nose with rowdy dresses, hundreds of sprung cats or bent birds. She tempers the dresses with too many cliches: "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.

"Do you have time to daydream with me?" The first scripted line sits on the lips like gruel. I drivel it. Some hang up. Some complain. None of them flog hard enough. We buy their numbers from shams, shell games, floating internet ads that promise college scholarships. And not just us. Within one day, nine different online colleges will ask for them by name, will try to stoke their fantasies.

I need penance. I need someone else's flagellation.

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The numbers are up. Emailed to everyone with an echoing ding. Last month I fooled fifteen students. I congratulated them—after the misspellings on the applications made me cackle, after I shared the errors with the bilkers around me, after we cackled together. I congratulated myself, and made the soft, greasy handoff to the student loan department.

Fifteen sticks me right in the middle. Where I was born. Where I will die—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 foiled-stamped certificate. The manager ignores me, and her bright, wrinkled wolves taunt with the turn of her back.

“I thought I blocked this number.” One of the first students I fleeced always answers his phone.

“Do you have time to daydream with me?”

“Not anymore,” Nathan says

“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. In fact, I can hear Judge Joe Brown berating someone behind him.

“The numbers must be out,” he says.

“I’m smack dab.”

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

Cubes look better on me than aprons or polos or calculus homework. College and I had to see other people. She was always seeing hundreds of thousands of other people. Maybe that’s why I never went to class.

“To keep you accountable,” I say.

“And who is watching after you?”

“One computer records every call.”

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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?”

“Written. She called me lily-livered.”

“In writing?”

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

“She’s never seen you drink,” I say.

Ambrose licks the 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 spectral 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 refurbishes his grandmother’s farmhouse. He asks whether the vet tech degree has any labs. Another stay-at-home mother shows her cap and gown to the grandson she doesn’t have yet.

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

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

#

Pedro blows his gift card on a company coat. He unboxes it at his desk. While most of the team smatters applause for his runway twirl, Ambrose drapes camouflage over her chair. She pins up a handwritten letter from her boyfriend with a Polaroid of him in swim trunks.

The boss drills us with slogans: “Cast a wide net”; “Believe for them”; “It’s a numbers game.” One hundred dials. Six calls per fresh number. One a day for the stale ones. I double-click the dead numbers, caressed by the three tones, the automated voices. My dials rank.

“Charlie.” The boss clogs my cube, cupcakes with plastered grins bottling me. “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 phone call. Too pitchy, the timbre of ire, the boss gets an email. She listens in. I’ve had a few close calls. 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 Big Brother doesn’t know I’m here.

#

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

“Forward it to me.”

Over our line, 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. 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-ty. When he’s been on the phone too long, she scrawls on the walls to get his attention. His wife defends corporations. “It’s mostly reading briefs,” Nathan says. “Even this late?” I asked. Closing the deal took four or five calls. He said he had always wanted to repair cars or cobble shoes, to work in a room with unfinished tables and natural lighting, but I imagined 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 Tallahassee on street view. The van caught the ranch in spring. The roses needed trimming. Tibetan prayer flags burned in the window. I have always

wanted to ask him if he prays. To whom? For what? I've seen the few pictures of him that are public online. His voice is paler, fleshier. His wife wears too much foundation.

#

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 if they are the same ones from yesterday. She draws tight the cardigan she's worn over every outfit this week.

"Any luck?"

"Some hard maybes. A few check-in-laters."

We squint into the sunlight washing the break room.

"You seeing any action?" she asks.

"Two."

"And the boss hasn't said anything?"

"Not yet."

I eat old donuts. To test my memory for Nathan's number, I call him from my cell phone. Yup. But he doesn't answer. He probably doesn't recognize the number.

#

The August quota pretends we're a real school. "It's on the top of every mind," the boss says. I do remember my first textbook-free fall, the commercials, the sales signs at grocery stores. What glum relief. Like the death of a sick grandfather. Except I believed in resurrection. Next year. Next year. That was how long ago?

We're hustling veterans. In a company shirt and visor, the boss passes out new leads and pitches. The GI Bill offers easier money for everyone, the potential 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 VA," a nurse answers.

The company has no interest in moderation. They buy lead lists from diploma mills and open every holiday. They brand coffee mugs, pillow cases, and underwear. 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. I put the veteran's hospital on the do-not-call list. I put every number assigned to me on it. Two clicks. My lists dwindle.

In 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 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.

Again I call Nathan from my cell. Still 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 a 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

with marker up his arm. Ambrose has stopped using her chair. She squares her mouse and pad in front of her to double-click calls. I do not move—even as my email dings, as the chairs click and rattle in the cubes around me.

Until Nathan calls.

“Hey.”

“Do you know a 503 number?” he asks.

“That’s here. That’s Portland.”

“I thought so. Someone’s been calling me. Not leaving a message.”

Nathan never calls me when his wife is home. Maybe she’s never home. He complains about her over the phone—clothing, music, when she doesn’t ask about his day, even though he was home, even though it was same as the last forty days.

“Beats me.”

“My tenth wedding anniversary is next month.”

“Okay.”

“I was just thinking about it. I need to pick someplace special to go. Where’d you go on your honeymoon?”

“I’m not married.”

“We stayed at this place in Mexico with crystal clear glass between the shower and bedroom,” he says. “Pretty hot.”

I know what he’s selling. I’ve bought it many times before.

“Listen, the boss is eyeing me. I should go.”

“Okay, okay,” he says. “Take care of yourself.”

“Happy anniversary.”

I can’t sit still. There are no old donuts in the break room. I would try to light a filter at the ashtray in the courtyard but I don’t have a lighter.

We are a corporate park inside of a corporate park, seemingly anonymous buildings copy and pasted for miles, nameplates on the doors too tiny to read from a distance. Who knows what’s going on inside? But it is. At all hours. In overtime. Going on and out and hustling, hustling, hustling. I return to my desk to sit still. An ancient art.

Ten minutes or an hour later, the boss’s chat box pops. *Ambrose is late for a scheduled call. A soft maybe. Call and follow-up?* Soft means vulnerable. I could only screw this up.

“Gerald? This is Charlie from American Intercontinental 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, *The Buddy Backup: First, I’d like to congratulate you. You’ve already made a difficult, first decision. To commit to an education.* I hold one finger on each line.

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

“I haven’t what?”

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

“Who is this?”

“I represent the woman who suckered you. Or one of them—”

He has a voice like revving your engine at a stoplight or driving your dirt bike through a gated neighborhood.

“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. Try selling it voice to voice, some static on the line, the television never off.”

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

My chat box is outlined in red in a way I’ve never seen. Finally.

“You need someone that makes three times as much as you ever will to tell you that you’re an idiot too? Let me guess, you were going to major in entrepreneurship. Everyone thinks they can be an entrepreneur. Because no one knows how to follow orders.”

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

“You obviously don’t,” Gerald says.

“Be proud of that, why don’t you? You’re a sucker twice over. A sucker for thinking about this school and a sucker for wearing that uniform—”

The boss 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.”

“I told him the truth,” I say.

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

I stand. “Harder.”

“We’re here because we care about these people. We care about giving them a chance no one else will. We pay you to care.”

“Harder.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need it harder.”

“Pack your shit.”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll call security.”

“Tell me the truth. I’m a failure, a con man who sucks at conning, a pawn who lets himself be pawned. I shill shit I’d never buy. Or maybe I would. If the right asshole got me on the phone on the right night. I might be a soft maybe too. Hell, I’ve been a soft maybe my whole life.”

I make security pull me out of my chair. Grab. Drag. 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 beige building after beige building, all the tinted eyes of their windows, I catch my breath and leave Nathan a voicemail.

“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, Tallahassee. You’ll need to find someone else to call. That number won’t work any more. This one will. But call the 800 number. They can connect you. Someone there would love to talk to you. Just let them know. Don’t hesitate. I know you, okay? Don’t hesitate.”