



BRANDON R. SCHRAND

## CONFESSIONS OF A TELEMARKETER

Eleven days after I was arrested on felony drug possession in an Arizona desert wash—stopped, in fact, by a nine-car police roadblock—I applied for my first of four telemarketing jobs. Thankful that the charge had been dropped to a misdemeanor, I left blank the box on my job application that asked to explain in detail any felonies that might be lurking in my past. It was a troubled time. Nineteen, penniless, and living on a friend’s couch, I had just started—and failed out of—college. My prospects, as they say, were few.

It seemed like everyone in my smallish college town in southern Utah worked for a company I will call Monarch Marketing. Getting a job there, people told me, was a cinch. “If you can breathe,” a friend had said, “you’ve got a job.”

In my interview, I had to sell a ballpoint pen to my interviewer. Whatever it was I said—and I could have said anything—worked. In a matter of minutes, I was handed my paperwork, issued an ID badge, and given an official Employee Identification Number or EIN: 51630, a number that, for some haunting reason, stays with me. By the time the receptionist buzzed me out of the front door, I had become an official Telephone Sales Representative, or TSR. I would start the next day. Things began to look better.

That was April 1992. Occasionally, that time of my life feels as close as breath. But in terms of technology, those years might as well have spanned the Eisenhower administration. When I went to work for Monarch, the industry was in its golden age, its roaring heyday. That was before caller ID. Before automated and predictive dialers. Before entire call centers were boxed up and outsourced to Bangalore. And, most notably, it was before the National Do-Not-Call Reg-



istry. And I was there, on the phones, five, sometimes six, days a week. After a year of calling, I was promoted to Quality Control. Then I became a supervisor. I gave high-energy seminars on voice quality and a concept I created: “The Three Cs of Call Control: Confidence, Credibility, and Composure.” I wore a tie every day. I acquired a whole new lexicon of terms: contribution margin, billable hours, client monitoring, business casual. If there was one thing I knew, and I knew little, it was the industry. I watched its very landscape change dramatically. I saw the manual phones carted out one day under a patch of desert sky and dumpstered while new dialers arrived in a fury of winking lights. I saw the impact of caller ID and watched the business buck against this technology. I saw it all.

It belabors the understatement to say it takes a certain personality to survive telemarketing, much less thrive in it. I had never worked in an office before and looked forward to the change. At home in southern Idaho, I had worked as a grunt on a thundering drill rig and was a foreman on a dung-splattered quarter horse farm before that. By comparison, this was a new frontier. I looked forward to a dress code, to dressing *up* for work, rather than wearing my worst, fray-battered rags. I would gel my hair, slap cologne on my neck, and iron my clothes. This, I thought, was what they meant by “upward mobility.” On my first day of training, I surveyed the rest of the building and admired its pink walls, plastic rhododendrons, gray carpet, warped cubicles, milky fluorescent lighting, and clunky black chairs. I could not have been happier. Compared to a drill rig, this was Rodeo Drive.

Let me be clear: Monarch Marketing was not a boiler room operation. It was legitimate—for the most part. What muddies the water here is not the company’s ethics or standards, but the sales force, the ones on the phones, those who trimmed the script, who fudged the fine print to make a sale happen. The company itself was reputable enough. Its clients were of the Fortune 500 variety, household names now globalized, names you would recognize instantly. When I told my parents about my new job, they bristled; but when I spewed out a list of our top clients, they breathed easier. “Well,” Mom said, “that doesn’t sound so bad.”





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“No,” I said, “it’s *great!*”

I was first assigned to The Big Telephone Company project. They issued calling cards to their customers and it was our mission to call through the lists of those customers and coax them to add minutes to their accounts. (The program also invited corruption. A former TSR once compiled a list of customer phone-card numbers and then sold them to students in the dorms for twenty bucks a pop. He was taken down in a rural tri-county sting.) The program was a soft-sell, and I did well enough.

I never told people back home that I worked for Monarch. Instead, I said that I was a *sales representative* for The Big Telephone Company. I was beginning to learn how to spin my own image. And each day before work while I dressed, I would appeal to the mirror before me, cinch my double Windsor, and repeat the words: “I’m a sales representative.” When I was satisfied, and when those words had become truth, I would snap my fingers into a set of pistols aimed at the man in the mirror. “A professional,” I’d say and slick my hair back. “A professional.” Not a criminal. Not a college flunky. Not a broke, couch-crashing layabout. A professional. I mattered. I mattered because I was a TSR, EIN 51630. I mattered because I spoke with people across America.

One of the most interesting aspects of Monarch Marketing was that three-fourths of its sales team was made up of former Mormon missionaries (we lived in Utah, after all). It began to occur to me, however, that the high percentage of “Elder” TSRs had less to do with demographics and more to do with sales skills. These guys were used to people screaming at them. They survived the slammed doors, the derision, the threats, but above all, they knew how to sell. If they could market Mormonism, selling life insurance or food dehydrators would be as simple as breathing. It should be noted here that Monarch, which started in a garage, was founded by two former Mormon missionaries in the 1980s. Those theocratic corporate roots, as it turned out, ran deep in the company’s psyche.

Technically, my own family belonged to the Mormon faith, but we were not religious and had never attended church.





While I had something of an insider's perspective into this religious milieu, I remained mostly on the outside peering in. Eventually, though, I learned all of my sales tactics from these guys and studied their behavior—their unwavering (and often hubristic) confidence, their guile, and their spit-shine finesse. Their mere voices inflected a certain swagger that was somehow imbued with earnestness: “*Doesn't that sound fair to you, ma'am?*”

When I switched from The Big Telephone Company (after only two weeks) to The Big Credit Card Company, where I peddled an ineffectual, and to my thinking, bogus emergency-response program, I was elated. Five dollars per sale. Our team's Sales-Per-Hour goal, or SPH, was only 0.5, or one sale every two hours. Early on, I did very well. I made one sale every hour, doubling the hourly goal. I high-fived my manager, Jeff Thompson, a former missionary himself who was preparing to enter the navy as a doctor. I high-fived all my teammates. It looked like I had promise. I had the stuff.

If I had the stuff, James Roland perspired the stuff. He was the alpha male on our crack team. He stood six foot three inches tall, wore a suit daily, and bore an eerie resemblance to Barbie's Ken. His presentations floated through the phone lines like yards of velvet. While most of us on the team shot for a 1.0 SPH, James could pull down a 4.0 SPH without breaking a sweat. He breathed charm into every rebuttal, particularly the ace of all rebuttals: the thirty-day, money-back guarantee. “We don't sell products,” James once told me while marking another sale on the large dry-erase board that hung in our call room. “We sell thirty days.”

I laughed. It was genius.

He re-capped the marker, cocked a smile, and aimed the marker at me like a gun: “Thirty days, brother. Know what I'm saying?”

“I know what you're saying.”

On the evening of April 29, three weeks into my new job, a curious thing happened just as the computers bumped us into the Pacific time zone. The first three calls I placed to the Los Angeles area returned an “all circuits are busy” message. This happened, occasionally, if we were calling on a holiday.





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But this was not a holiday. James stood up and looked around. His suit filled the room. “Anyone else getting through?” One by one, we all stood up and looked at each other, hands on our headsets.

“What’s up?” Jeff asked, tapping the beeper clipped to his shiny belt.

“All circuits are busy, chief,” I said.

“In *Los Angeles*?”

Just then I got someone. I pressed my headset to my ear as if I could draw the person closer. Sirens wailed on the other end of the phone. People were shouting. The din was indecipherable beyond that. I started into my introduction but was lopped off: “*Boy*,” the man said, “where you calling from?” The rule was simple: never reveal the location of your call center, not even in general terms because, put simply, as a telemarketer you were a target. Yet, despite this rule, the word *Utah* somehow freed itself from my mouth and fell into my mouthpiece, irretrievable.

“Utah? *Utah*? Ah, *shit*, boy! You *gots* to get out of the hills. Turn on your TV. Don’t you know the city’s afire? Damn! *Utah* . . .” The contact terminated the call, leaving me, the TSR, dazed. Within minutes, though, it became clear that something was amiss. All shifts logged off and filed into the break room and training room, each of which had a television. “Riots,” someone said. I watched the screen, feeling my face flush hot. I loosened my double Windsor. There was a revolt underway and it was real. The hot tendrils of flame licking out of brick buildings. Streets tangled with bodies, wild with debris. Helicopters chopped sidewalks with flickering propeller shadows. I wondered if one of the men on the screen was the man I had talked with. Something we couldn’t articulate was there on the screen unfurling itself before our very eyes, demanding that we look. Police lights flared and reminded me of the roadblock in the Arizona desert wash where I was cuffed, and I shuddered.

Although Los Angeles seemed a world away—and indeed it was—I couldn’t help but feel as though I had touched it somehow, spoken with it, made contact, if only fleetingly. As the throngs spilled through the streets, I wondered how many of them I had spoken to over the phone, or would speak to in a matter of time, or how many I might con—even after





all of this. *Don't you know the city's afire?* I didn't know, and my ignorance made me feel both safe and unendingly insignificant.

Not long after the riots, I hit my first slump.

It worked like this. When we received a fresh batch of “leads” or “contacts,” the sales soared because the list had not yet been “penetrated.” These were virgin leads or golden contacts. Gradually, as we weeded through the list it was necessary to “disposition” each non-sale lead as one of the following:

- A.) Not Interested
- B.) Call Back
- C.) Wrong Number
- D.) Busy
- E.) Do Not Call (We had this option even before the registry, although it seldom worked effectively, and never immediately.)

Halfway through the list, the sales dwindled. And at the bottom of the list, they were nearly nonexistent unless you were James Roland—or Tim Barnes, another former missionary who exuded confidence to the point that it was palpable. I was neither James nor Tim, and had hit my first serious dry spell. It was an ugly, demoralizing time.

Night after night, Jeff, donned in pleated khakis, a pink button-down, skinny black tie, and sagging deck shoes, would wander over to my cubicle, pat me on the back, and say, “Why don't we call it a night, man? Tomorrow's got your name *all* over it, Schrand.” Those of us who couldn't sell were sent home as our empty boxes on the dry-erase board, our 0.0 SPH, only dragged down the team's cumulative sales average. And night after night, Jeff would cross my name off the roster and we would renew our vows for a better tomorrow. Always a better tomorrow. And night after night I would put away my headset and loaf home to my place on a yellow, collapsing couch, feeling lower and lower.

Nights brought sweats and dream loops. I literally began to dream my spiel. Over and over again, my mind raced over the scripted passages I had memorized, including any number of rebuttals, all ramrodded to that imaginary American public who consistently met my script with a torrent of hang-ups, name-calling, accusations, and threats.





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If the slump lasted too long (a month, say), but you were a good employee, you got to keep your job but were demoted to a lower paying, soft-selling, rookie squad. I would have rather quit.

But just as I stared down my third week of a paltry sales performance, something happened. Jeff announced before our shift one summer day that we got a new set of leads from the client. Veterans (i.e., James and Tim) would continue prowling through the old list, rooting out the last remaining sales, while the rest of us hit the new list. I had been spared. I was still on The Big Credit Card Company's team. I was golden. I could feel my edge return. Jeff handed around a drooping carton of doughnuts. Everyone cheered. It was a new list. A new promise.

A strange thing occurs in a telemarketing shop when sales are high (or at least in the more legitimate operations). Management becomes simultaneously pleased and worried. They pace the halls with nervous, white-lipped smiles stuck to their faces. They step on the call floor and high-five the TSRS, then pull the manager out of the room. People from Quality Control—the department that listens in on phone calls to ensure script adherence, rebuttals, and client standards—begin wandering around the call floor, whispering feverishly with the manager while jabbing their pens into monitoring sheets snapped to clipboards. Although it was not unusual for James to land four sales an hour, it was another thing altogether when the rest of us did. Sales were a good thing. Too many sales, however, were conspicuous. It spoke to the underbelly of our world. That we conned people. That we sold “off script.” That we goaded contacts into sales. That, put simply, we were lying. I made just enough to keep my job but not draw any unwanted attention to myself.

Tape recorders kept us honest. Or at least they were supposed to. Once, on a bright fall afternoon when the season's last breath was scented with wood smoke, dried leaves, and farmer's smoldering ditch-banks, our call center smelled of cleanser and new carpet. Our team was wrapping up the eastern time zone, and sales were scant. Jeff roamed the room, flashing his manager's smile, doling out motivational anecdotes, and practicing his golf swing with an aluminum yardstick. “We need five before central!” he shouted. “James,





Tim, Brandon, Tracy—that means you. Come on, now. Let’s do it!” Another sagging carton of doughnuts surfed from cubicle to cubicle.

Tracy Bunderson, a smart, nasally, and frumpy Mormon woman who was something of a debate whiz in college, had transferred into our room weeks earlier. She could rival Tim and James for sales, and Jeff was glad to have her on board. I stood in my cubicle and gave a shout back to Jeff: “*This* call! *This* guy! He’s golden!”

“Nail him, Schrand. He’s *yours!*”

“I’m on it.” Jeff high-fived me for luck and lined up his yardstick for a short stroke on an imaginary putting green.

The contact—a man I will call Mark Flanders—whose name popped up on my screen lived in Flushing, New York. The phone rang four times, then a pick up.

“Hello? Mr. Flanders?”

“Yeah?”

“Mr. Flanders, this is Brandon Schrand and I’m calling on behalf of The Big Credit Card Company. How are you today, sir?”

“A little pressed for time. What’s up?”

“Sir, we were calling [always use the less invasive past tense] our select card customers, people like yourself, who are prequalified to receive The Big Credit Card Company’s Exclusive Hospitalization Supplemental Insurance Program.”

His voice wavered, which meant, to TSRS, that he was wishy-washy, which was good—better than an immediate *not interested*. “And sir? [Keep their attention always; maintain call control.] Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Sir, the best part of this program—the *best* part—is that you have a full thirty days to review the program at no cost to you. What that means, Mr. Flanders, is that you can enjoy *all* the benefits of the program for a *full* thirty days, and if you find that it does not fit your needs, Mr. Flanders, just call our toll-free number and you can *cancel* at any time, okay.” [Never up-inflect your voice when asking a question for it intones uncertainty and weakness. Questions become statements.]

“Uh, that sounds—that sounds okay, I guess. How much is it again?”





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My heart raced as I advanced my computer to the CONVERSION prompt, catching, briefly, my own reflection in the monitor. In the background I could hear the sounds of life in Flushing, New York. From his address, I knew he lived in an apartment. His television was on. And either his living room or kitchen window was open and I could hear people shouting in the street below, traffic, horns trilling through crowded streets, music, a police siren, the thrum of a life so alien, so appealing, that I envied this man more than he possibly could have known. His world was significant. It was New York. Unlike southern Utah, it required no explanation, no apologies, no spin.

“Now, Mr. Flanders, for quality purposes I need to record the rest of the phone call, okay.”

He stammered, and his voice, I could tell, elevated ever so slightly. It was a tightening in the throat I had heard more times than I care to recall, a sign of reluctance. He was nervous and distracted but, in the end, agreed with a reticent if elongated “Um—O-kay.”

It was clear he didn’t want it, but it was also clear that he was the type of guy who had a hard time saying no. It was a problem, I was sure, that had haunted him most of his life. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was the sale. Nothing else.

The recorded portion of the call takes about four minutes. It contains all the disclosures and disclaimers, all the fine print. I read with the speed of an auctioneer, omitting all punctuation and jamming words together so that very little of it was decipherable. Despite my race to the end, my fight to keep him on the line, he hung up.

Jeff had just marked my sale on the white board and was calculating the shift’s SPH for the eastern time zone as I sat there listening to a dial tone. I looked down and my tape player was still going.

“Shit,” I whispered loud enough that Tracy heard it, loud enough to be recorded.

“What happened?”

“He hung up while I was closing.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No.”

“Call him back. Just tell him you need to give him the 800 number. Get it on tape. Say that you got cut off.” She looked





around with a furtive glance and rewind the tape, stopping it at the moment Flanders “terminated” the sale.

So I called back, but Flanders did not answer.

That’s when Tracy got an idea. “He wanted it, right?”

“Totally,” I lied. “He just had to go.”

“Here’s what we’ll do.” Tracy called her husband and explained the situation, told him that I would be calling and asking for *Mark Flanders* and that he should play along. All he would have to do is say yes he understood, no he didn’t have any questions, and thanks for the 800 number. That was it. Easy.

The plan worked beautifully, one actor reciting his lines to another. The illusion became reality. Worried that their voices wouldn’t match, I was relieved if not stunned by their similarities, their tonal gait. Tracy and I rewind the tape a half-dozen times laughing like schoolchildren at how brilliant it turned out. I had only two concerns. The first was that Q.C. would have heard and suspected something, but I felt safe knowing that they generally stopped listening when a call went to tape. The other was the background noise was so conspicuously different that it stirred a panic deep inside me. Rural southern Utah is not, by any means, Flushing, New York. We might have matched voices, but we couldn’t have matched worlds. In the end, however, I was the only one who noticed the difference. The sale stayed on the board, and I never heard a word about it again.

I recall an August afternoon of impossible desert heat when someone had phoned in a bomb threat to Monarch. It was the third in as many months, and certainly wasn’t the last I would live through. Our building, a squat pink and gray cinder-block structure, had been evacuated and all employees were prodded across a four-lane thoroughfare like a herd of cattle. On the other side, we were to stand on a strip of grass in front of the Holiday Inn and wait. ID badges glinted in the sun. Managers checked their beepers and murmured to one another. This threat caused a noticeable spike in anxiety when the county bomb squad recovered a blue backpack that no one had claimed. (We would later learn that a student, who was not at work that afternoon, had left it in the building the previous day.) For over an hour we stood on the grass, our ties whipping in the hot breath of summer, while two or three





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of us—non-Mormons—smoked cigarettes and cracked jokes. “Here’s the thing,” said my friend Willy, a sarcastic ex-Mormon accounting major. “We *need* a new building. I *hope* it blows up. Monarch has insurance. It’s a win-win. Crazy guy gets his revenge. We get a new shop. *Seriously*. My chair is a piece of shit.” We all laughed. Mormon women in floral print dresses stood forcing taut half-smiles while waving cigarette smoke from their faces. I smoothed my tie, took in a deep breath, and tried to mitigate the whiff of satisfaction I felt for working in a place that drew such threats. Did this mean I worked in a place of consequence, of significance, a place that wasn’t isolated in a corner of Utah after all, but somehow interconnected with everyone in the continental United States? Did this edge me closer to the world of Los Angeles? Flushing, New York? Did this kind of satisfaction make up for the arrest, make up for failing out of school? Yes, it did. And just like that, I had created the myth I needed.

As a telemarketer, you become so cynical that rarely can a customer get to you. A contact’s obstinacy or abusiveness only fuels your cynicism, and, ironically, cynicism, which often shields insecurity, works as its own kind of confidence in the call center. One call got through though, one got to me in a way I had not, or could not have, prepared for. A man in Santa Barbara answered the phone. He listened quietly as I offered my pitch and then said, “No thanks.”

“May I ask why you’re not interested at this time?” I asked, leaning against the wall of my cubicle, twirling a light plastic ballpoint around my thumb.

“It’s no use,” he said. “They found cancer. Yesterday.”

As a telemarketer, you know people by their voices. It is the only thing you have. The slightest severed breath or quaver or stilted word will betray the person to whom the voice belongs. This man was serious and his voice had completely disarmed me.

I cannot remember how I responded or if, in fact, I responded at all. I want to say that I dropped my pen. That’s how I see it in my mind’s eye. But I will never forget his voice—that freighted sigh. I am haunted by its resignation. I took off my headset and walked dumbstruck down the fluorescent-lit hallway to the bathroom where I stood before the mirror splashing cold water on my face avoiding eye contact.





Some calls surprised me in other ways. Those I made to people who wanted to talk to me. About anything. Their loneliness blew through the phone lines like a winter draft, a sudden cold spot in the room, one you wanted to avoid but couldn't because it seemed to seek you out. One woman in Connecticut wouldn't let me go. She was older. I imagined her at an oak drop-leaf table by a window, a batch of neatly clipped coupons before her. Photos in her living room of relatives who have passed or have simply failed to call. But we talked, she and I. I revealed my location again to compare weather: southern Utah vs. southern Connecticut. She asked questions and I played along. Anything for the star on the white board. Was I interested in sports? Not really. Did I like books? Yes, yes I did. Very much. I'm an English major, I had said, leaving out the part about failing out of school. No kidding? She said. I always thought that would be a fun major, truly delightful. We compared authors. She liked British writers. I liked the American ones: Hemingway, Didion, Faulkner, Twain. Did I have a girlfriend? Yes, I said. That's nice, she said. You sound like a young man who would have a girlfriend. Eventually, she bought what I was selling. But we both knew that she wasn't buying the program. She was buying this time, this conversation. We talked long after the sale was complete and, finally, I had to let her go. I've got to go now, Mrs. M——. The cue, I could tell, registered, but then vanished like a dove through an open window. Tell me, she said. Are you Mormon? I've heard so much about them. Not really, I said. What *are* they like? I looked around the call room. Like anyone else, I guess. I really have to go now. Well, she said, I have enjoyed talking with you, but I've forgotten your name already. Brandon. Yes, of course, Brandon. It's been so nice. Thank you. Thank *you*. Take care, Mrs. M——.

"You land that?" Jeff asked.

"Dude, Grandma was putty in my hands. She would have bought it *three* times if she could have."

"Well done, brother," James said.

I once did a brief stint on an "inbound" shift, taking incoming calls for The Big Cellular Phone Company just as it was getting its legs. Inbound was a coveted shift then. You called no one. They called you. How simple could it be?

Not so simple, actually. I might have chatted with Mrs.





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M—— about the world, but people who call The Big Cell Phone Company don't call to chitchat. They call because they are irate. Sometimes they are transferred, rerouted unwillingly, unknowingly, to the collections department—where I worked—to settle their bills before their cell phones can be switched back on. This was called hot-lining. Suffice it to say all of the inbound calls ended in storms of anger. One call, though, differed. A woman from Beaumont, Texas, found herself transferred to me one afternoon. Her name, though, was not on the account.

"It's my husband's phone," she said. "I was just borrowing it." She sounded affected, distraught.

"Because you are not authorized on this account, I need to speak with your husband, ma'am. Is he available?" I was in full-blown automaton mode.

She said nothing and then, "No. No, he's not around."

"Do you know when I might—reach—him—?" I turned up the volume on my headset. She was crying. She had no doubt clamped her palm over the phone's microphone, but I could still hear. I could always hear. "Ma'am? Is everything okay?"

"Not really," she said.

I stood and looked about the room only to see a sea of Mormon TSRS, their heads pinched with black headsets as they nodded with faux empathy to the person on the other end of their line.

"Listen," she said, sniffing. "Do me a favor, please. You got the phone bill there, don't you?"

"Yes, I have access to the billing cycle, but—"

"Could you just look and tell me if you see this phone number?"

"Ma'am, I can't do that."

But she wouldn't listen. Instead she read a phone number to me, and I could tell instantly that it was one of the primary numbers listed on the bill. I wasn't about to divulge that information, though. "Ma'am," I said again, "I am simply not authorized—"

"See," she said, "I think he's cheating on me. And I know the girl and I know her number."

I swallowed hard. "Ma'am, I wish I could help, but I can't."

"It's there, ain't it?"





COLORADO REVIEW

“I can’t do this, ma’am.”

“You sound real nice.”

“Thank you.”

“You probably have a hard job.”

“It’s okay. But—”

“Tell me. That number. Is it there?” she asked.

I stood and looked at all the TSRS. “Ma’am—”

“Like, is it a lot?”

I looked around. No one seemed to be paying much attention to me or this call, to her, to this kind of undoing.

“Do you see it?”

“Ma’am—”

“You see it, don’t you?” Her question came through as a statement, a way of verifying what she already knew.

I paused, loosened my tie, and exhaled. “Yeah. I see it.”

“Son of a bitch,” she said, her voice cracking. “Are the calls long?”

“Yes.”

“Like how long are we talking?”

I scrolled down and ballparked an average. “Longest is like an hour and a half.”

That’s what broke her. Absolutely broke her. She started sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I really am. I shouldn’t have—”

“You’re real nice,” she said again.

“Ma’am, I have to go now. I am so sorry. Take care.”

And that’s when I hung up on her.

It is a fundamental truth that the better a TSR you become, the worse you get at being a person. The risk is that you become almost wholly isolated. Contacts are contacts and never people. Time zones are sale zones rather than places rife with communities and neighborhoods. Lists are not names but prospects. You learn how to condescend, how to manipulate. You truncate scripted passages of a spiel and revise for effect, giving little or no mind to the legal ramifications. You skip the fine print, fail to mention vital information. You avoid questions by asking them in return. Over time the line between right and wrong vanishes and becomes a choice between sale and no sale. And you harden in the face of daily hate. You harden knowing, deep down, what



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others think of you, that you are an invasive, parasitic bottom-feeder. You begin to avoid the mirror. You know that despite your arrest in Arizona and your flunky status, when you're on the phones you can be anyone you want. You prey on the elderly, the hard of hearing, the timid, the ill, the passive, the crazy, the senile, and those who can't speak English well. Because they are not people. They are snatches of noise to be converted into a sale, a star marked on that great dry-erase board that lords over your workspace. Each one punctuated with a high five. Each one rewarded with another carton of doughnuts.

I wonder just how many people I have spoken with, really. Hundreds upon hundreds of people a day. Five to six days a week. Every week of the month. Every month of the year for six years in the business. The math is unfathomable. Chances are good that I have spoken with you. At dinner in your cramped kitchen in Lebanon, Tennessee, while you dragged a wooden spoon through the dented pot of curry. Or I have spoken with you in the light of morning in Boca Raton while you shook your head no, thanks anyway. I have spoken with you over margaritas in Show Low, Arizona, where you confided in me about your latest divorce and how you had no need for a home equity line of credit, but asked instead my age and if I was single and where I was calling from, and I told you so close you couldn't imagine. I have spoken with you in Mississippi, Wyoming, Maryland. When you were twenty-three and high on crack, and thirty-eight and high on Jesus. When you were fifty-seven and told me your wife was not available, that she had died last week and that what I was doing was criminal. And you have spoken with me and I have heard all your American voices: *Bueno. Praise the Lord. Yallow. Whatchoowant.*

Eventually I quit. It is ultimately a burn-out industry. No one expects you to cobble together a career out of all those sales, all those colored stars. Whatever it was that had kept me aloft all that time had run its course. You can endure the porcelain glare of the white board only so long, or con yourself in front of that bathroom mirror, before you begin to see the patterns and how they lead back to you. Cynicism be-





gins to eat its host. That is the real danger. So I walked out the door one day and left my badge at the front desk. It was late spring and I had been back in college for two years. I had one year left before I would graduate. That summer, in a moment of haste, I cashed out my 401-K, bought a computer, and moved home to southern Idaho to write. I took a summer job in a 120-year-old general store at the edge of a lake. It was the only store in a town of eighteen year-round residents, thirty-five in the summer. One of the only phones in town was a giant yellow rotary unit that hung on the wall in the back of the store. It never rang, and I seldom used it. From there, everywhere was long distance. There was no cell service near the lake. It was precisely what I needed.

Summer campers—typically elderly men and women bedecked in khaki shorts and fanny packs—visited the store on Sundays to make their weekly calls. They bought six-packs of beer, rounds of cheese, and spools of fishing line. They would crack open their beers and we would chat about the level of the lake, the mosquitoes, the trout so-and-so caught, and I would listen to their voices carefully, testing them for familiarity.

On some afternoons when charcoal thunderheads crowded the horizon, throwing the brushy hills into shadow, and yellow-headed blackbirds pecked in the gravel parking lot, I thought about the people I used to talk to, all the people I had conned. And though I never thought I would miss that job, not even for an instant, I occasionally felt an emptiness surround me.

I remember those afternoons. Sitting at the rickety wooden table on the dusty plankboard floor while summer rain battered the windowpanes and wind tugged at loose sheets of tin roofing, I would feel a sudden cold spot in the room seek me out. And I longed to talk to someone. Anyone. To draw those worlds near, to feel connected to it all, and to hear all those voices again. All those American voices once more.

But that was then. When I was still too close to it. Even the recollection seems sentimental. I recognize as much. Nor is it lost on me that I am myself now one of those American voices. That I am the one—now in my thirties and in Idaho—getting called in the middle of my curry dinner, badgered





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and harassed. And while I used to take a few moments to talk shop with those who called me, I now have lost my patience. I slam the phone. Hang up before they click on the line. Argue with them. Demand they put me on the do-not-call list. Demand I speak with their floor supervisor. I rant and I rave, pacing the length of my house. *People like you*, I have caught myself saying, *ought to be in jail*.

“You can’t treat those people like that,” my wife chides when I get off the phone from such calls. “You of all people should know better.”

She is right, of course. I should know better.

“He’s probably just a college kid trying to pay for school,” she reminds me.

Or, I think—taking a darker if inaccurate view—he’s a drop-out, a would-be felon, a double-Windsored con man, someone whose reflection I might recognize.

But even as recently as a few weeks ago, I launched into a tirade against a telemarketer, a random salesman calling from Ohio or Indiana or Illinois. A gum chewer. A proselytizer standing on an imaginary putting green. A slick-haired heartland stranger twirling a plastic ballpoint expertly around his thumb. To be clear, though, I should note that my tirade occurred *after* the call was over, with the dial tone’s sting fresh in my ear.

“Sir,” he had said. “Sir, the *best* part about this plan is that there is no obligation to buy now.”

“I know—”

“And *sir*, what that means is that you have thirty days to *review* the free information kit I’m mailing out today, and that way you can discuss the benefits *and* features of the plan with your family in your own home.”

“I—”

“Doesn’t that sound fair to you, sir?”

A vein bulged at my temple, and my throat tightened.

“Sir?”

