

## **COLD CALLER**

by **Jason Starr**

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ON MOST DAYS, I wouldn't have said anything. Like the typical New Yorker, I'd have given her a couple of dirty looks, maybe grunted a little, and minded my own business. But that morning was different. Maybe things were already building up in my life, pushing me to the brink. Or maybe I was just having a bad day. I'd had a fight with my girlfriend the night before and she'd left for work that morning without saying goodbye.

"Excuse me," I said irritably. "Excuse me."

She didn't answer. I thought she didn't hear me so I said it again, a little louder, then I noticed she was wearing a Walkman. I tapped her on the shoulder and she turned around as if I'd pinched her.

"There's plenty of room over there," I said, motioning toward the middle of the subway car.

"Get your hands off me!" she screamed. Because of the Walkman, her voice was especially loud.

"I was just asking you to --"

A thick, heavy hand arrived on my shoulder.

"Leave the lady alone, will ya?"

He was a young, muscular guy, wearing the plain gray uniform that plumbers and electricians wear.

"I was just asking her if she could move inside a little," I said.

"You were grabbing her," the guy said. "I saw you grabbing her."

"I didn't grab her," I said. "I was just trying to get her attention."

"You were grabbing her," he insisted. "I saw you."

You've been kicking and grabbing people ever since you got on this train. You stepped on my foot before and you didn't even say excuse me."

"Look, what's your problem?"

I don't remember what else he said to me, or what I said back to him, or who pushed who first. All I know is that within a few seconds I was wrestling with a man twice my size in the middle of a crowded subway car.

He was so much bigger than me, I don't know if you can even call it a fight. He got me in a headlock and punched me in the face a couple of times and then squeezed my

head and neck. People on the train were screaming – some begging for us to stop, others cheering us on. The doors opened and somehow our wrestling match moved onto the Seventy-seventh Street platform. That’s when the guy got his best shot in, connecting with a solid upper-cut above my left eye.

Finally, a Transit cop came over and separated us.

People had formed a circle, staring at me. I had a flashback to junior high school in Bainbridge Island, Washington, when Johnny McGuinness beat the hell out of me and a crowd of kids gathered around laughing.

These people weren’t laughing but I felt just as embarrassed as I’d felt eighteen years ago.

The cop asked us who had started the fight. The man said I did, which was a lie, and I said so. But when the cop asked if I wanted to press charges I said no.

“I just want to get to work,” I said.

“It’s up to you,” the cop said. As I was walking away, he added, “I’ll get you to a hospital if you want me to. That cut looks pretty bad.”

I kept walking.

With some crumpled up old napkin I found stuffed inside my back pocket, I put pressure on the wound. I got on the next train to Grand Central.

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I was working at a company called American Communications Association. I made appointments for sales representatives to sell discount long-distance phone services to businesses. It was a part-time job, just four hours a day, but I worked full-time shifts three days a week. After I’d lost my real job as V.P. of Marketing at Smythe & O’Greeley, a big New York ad agency, I’d only intended to work at A.C.A. temporarily, to make some extra cash after my unemployment benefits ran out. But two years had gone by and I was still at A.C.A., no closer to finding another job in advertising. Of course I’d interviewed at plenty of agencies, but the story was always the same – I was either over-qualified, or they said I’d been out of work too long. I was beginning to think that I’d be a telemarketer for the rest of my life.

The A.C.A. office was on Forty-third Street, near Eighth Avenue. When I got off the elevator on the seventh floor, Eileen, the receptionist, was chewing gum and polishing her nails. She’d never said a word to me or to any of the other telemarketers before, but today she dropped the nail polish when she saw me.

“My God, what happened to you?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said casually. “A little accident, that’s all.”

As I headed along the corridor, I realized the cut might be worse than I thought. I felt the napkin and discovered blood seeping through.

I went into the call center, where the telemarketers worked. The large square-shaped room had four rows of three-foot-wide cubicles. Surrounding the room were the managers’ offices with windows facing the telemarketing floor. Mike Peterson, the Floor Supervisor, came over to me while I was punching in at the time clock.

“Bill, there you are. I didn’t think you were going to make it in today.”

“Well, here I am,” I said.

“Why didn’t you call? Did you oversleep? I mean you know how it is here in the summer. We have a full staff and we need to –”

I turned around. Mike saw the cut on my face. He looked like he was going to vomit.

“Jesus Christ, you’re bleeding!”

“Really?” I said. “I was wondering what all that red stuff coming out of my head was.”

“What the hell happened?”

“I had a rough ride in on the subway.”

“The subway?”

“What difference does it make? I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“You should really get stitches for that or something.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I just have to wash it out.”

In the bathroom, I finally got the bleeding to stop. I put on a couple of Band-Aids I’d found in the cabinet under the sink, then went back out to my cubicle and prepared to work.

I hated my job, but I was good at it. I averaged two or three appointments a day, which was better than most people in the office. I earned sixteen dollars an hour, while most people were making ten or eleven. I was the second-oldest telemarketer, in seniority and age. Only Harry Pearlman, who was fifty-two years old, had been with the company longer than me. I think I was better on the phone than Harry though. I was very confident and relaxed and people always seemed to trust me.

Even when people didn’t really need our service I could sweet talk them into an appointment. Like this one time, a guy hung up on me while I was in the middle of my pitch. I called him right back and said, “I’m sorry, sir, we must have been disconnected,” and I wound up getting him.

I got off to a hot start on the phone, making two appointments in the first fifteen minutes. During the eleven o’clock break, I went to the concession machines in the back and bought a can of Pepsi. Greg Brown was there talking to a girl who’d just started at the company.

Later, I found out her name was Marie Stipaldi.

“Man, you know they’re ripping us off,” Greg was saying. “Just because the salesman makes the sale, you think he’s giving us credit for making an appointment? I know for a fact them motherfuckers ripped me off for three appointments. That’s fifteen dollars, man. That shit adds up after a while.”

“I don’t care about commissions,” Marie said. “I’m just working here for the ten dollars an hour.”

“Well, I care,” Greg said. “And if they keep fucking with my shit I’m gonna go in there and do something about it.”

“What are you gonna do?” I said. “Sue them?”

“Fuck the lawyers, man,” Greg said. “I’ll go into Ed’s office and tell him the way it is.”

“A lot of good that’ll do,” I said. “You know how easy they can replace one of us?”

“They can’t replace me, man. I’ve been making ten appointments a week. I’m the king of A.C.A. I’m the most important employee at this company.”

“Believe me, nobody’s important at this company,” I said. “I’ve been here a long time, too long, and I never saw one guy go into that office and get what he wanted.”

“He’s right,” Marie said to Greg. “You can’t treat this job like it’s serious. You have to expect to get ripped off.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Greg said. “A white man can go in and get anything he wants, but a black man’s gotta take what he can get. I bet one of you guys could go up to the biggest company in America, IBM or Texon or Exico or whatever the fuck it’s called, and you could get whatever job you wanted. But if I walked in there they’d give me a mop and tell me to start cleaning the toilets. And I know for a fact that if I was white, I’d be getting my commission money here.”

“I disagree,” I said. “Look at me. They owe me two hundred dollars in back commission.”

“I don’t care what you say,” Greg said. “The people who run this place are a bunch of racist motherfuckers. I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t be too upset if I showed up here for work one day and the whole place burned down – with all the people in it.”

“That’s terrible,” Marie said.

“I’m not talking about you,” Greg said. “Just them managers, you know. I know if they was sittin’ in a fire, beggin’ for me to help, I’d just let their asses burn.” Greg started to laugh. I started laughing too, partly because I liked Greg and partly because I agreed it would be nice to watch Mike and Ed burn. As we were laughing, Mike poked his head into the room.

“Break’s over, guys. Let’s get back on those phones now.”

“I been meaning to ask you,” Greg said to me as we were walking back to our desks. “Who fucked you up like that?”

“Fucked me up?” I said like I was confused. “Oh, you mean *that*,” I said touching my forehead. “It was just an accident.”

“Yeah, right,” Greg said laughing. “You got your ass kicked. Who was it? Did you fuck him up bad?”

“I got a few whacks in,” I lied.

“But he looks like he got a few more whacks in,” Greg said laughing.

As I was about to sit down at my cubicle, Mike came over and said he wanted to talk to me in his office.

“What about?” I said.

“I’ll tell you in private.”

I followed him, wondering what he could possibly want to talk to me about. Had he been listening near the concession machines and heard the things Greg had said? If so, I decided I'd stand up for Greg and deny everything.

Mike closed the door and told me to sit down. He went around to his desk and brought up a file on his computer screen. Mike was thin and wore a white shirt with a black tie and black suspenders every day. He always looked nervous and insecure and I often wondered if he was gay. Not that it would've bothered me if he was, but I think it bothered Mike that I wondered about it. He always treated me like I somehow disapproved of him.

"I really hate to do this," he said, not making eye contact with me. "But I'm afraid I have no choice."

"You're firing me?"

"Of course not," he said. "It's nothing that drastic. I know you're one of the best people here, which is what makes this so hard. It's just that...well, you know we have certain rules around here. They're not my rules, of course. They're Ed's rules and it's just my job to enforce them. You know you were late this morning."

"I thought we discussed that already."

"I just didn't want to say anything until I checked my records and made sure, but you realize this is the third time you've been late this month."

"I know that," I said. "But as you can see something happened this morning that was beyond my control."

Mike was nodding his head.

"I'm sorry about that, I really am, but we have a rule, and that's why we have the rule, so we don't punish you for your first infraction. On July first you were eight minutes late to work, on the eleventh you were fifteen minutes late, and today you were late an hour and ten minutes."

"I don't believe this," I said.

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do about it," Mike said. "After your first infraction, I gave you a verbal warning, then I gave you a written warning, and now I have to send you home without pay."

"This is ridiculous," I said, raising my voice. "Do you think I wanted to be late this morning?"

"It's not a question of what you wanted or didn't want --"

"This is a joke, right? You're not serious."

"I'm afraid I'm very serious," Mike said. "Maybe you didn't mean to be late this morning -- I mean of course you didn't mean it -- but there's the fact that you've been late two other times this month, and you didn't call one of those times either."

"Do you know how long I've been working here?"

Mike moved the cursor to a new spot on the screen. "Twenty-six point five months."

“That’s over a year point five longer than you’ve been working here,” I said bitterly, “and I think that entitles me to a few privileges.”

Mike’s cheeks had turned pink. I could tell he was upset that I wasn’t respecting his authority. Or maybe it was the gay thing coming out again.

“I don’t care how long you’ve been working here,” he said. “You’re still a telemarketer and you have to go by the same rules that the other telemarketers go by.”

I stood up.

“Excuse me, but where do you think you’re going?”

“Back to work.”

“I already clocked you out for the day.”

“You did *what*?”

“I’m sending you home, Bill. If you don’t go, I’ll have to do something drastic.”

“Are you threatening my job now?”

“I don’t *want* to threaten your job, but you’re giving me no choice.”

“I’m going back to work. I’ve already made two appointments today and I plan to make a couple more. In other words, I’m going to continue doing my job.”

“Bill, you’re making a big mistake.”

“I want to speak to Ed.”

“Ed won’t talk to you.”

I stormed out of Mike’s office and headed across the telemarketing floor. The argument had caused a scene. Almost everyone had stopped making phone calls, and when I passed Greg’s cubicle, I saw he was fighting to hold back his laughter. This made me smile, but I was too furious to laugh.

Ed was on the phone and motioned for me to sit down. He was the typical guy from Long Island you might see any weekday night in his shirt and tie at a strip club or a sports bar. He was balding and had a bushy mustache and a beer-drinker’s gut. He quit drinking a few years ago, but he was one of those recovering alcoholics who imposed their newfound wisdom on everyone around them. Sometimes people joked and called the company A.A. instead of A.C.A. because Ed ran the Telemarketing Department like it was a Twelve-Step program.

He was constantly telling us about “our responsibility to ourselves as telemarketers” and how “what we learn at this job will reflect on the rest of our lives.” He had created a long list of rules and regulations that read like a manifesto. Besides lateness, there were penalties for drinking or eating at the workstations, cursing, making personal phone calls, and violating the dress code. Even laughing was illegal, if it reached “a disturbing volume.” I don’t think I ever saw Ed smile or tell a joke, and he rarely said anything directly to the telemarketers. We said hello when we passed each other in the hallway, but this was the first time I had ever been inside his office. The telemarketers were supposed to air their grievances to Mike because Ed was “too busy” to deal with our problems. To me, it looked like Ed was never busy at all. Sometimes I overheard him

talking on the phone and his conversations were always about football or hockey or the size of some woman's tits.

Today it sounded like he was talking to his girlfriend, or someone he wanted to be his girlfriend. I was getting impatient listening to him go on and on in that pseudonice voice he put on only when he was talking to women – *Really? That's very interesting. I love museums too. Which is your favorite museum in New York?* – but at least it gave me a chance to calm down and figure out exactly what I wanted to say. It was comfortable in Ed's office, a lot more comfortable than where the telemarketers worked. I was sitting in a padded vinyl chair, breathing air that must have been about twenty degrees cooler than on the telemarketing floor.

Finally, Ed hung up. I was expecting him to be upset that I had barged into his office the way I had, but he was surprisingly cordial.

"Bill Moss," he said as though he enjoyed saying my name. "What happened to you this morning?"

At first I thought he was talking about my lateness, then I remembered the cut on my forehead.

"It's actually the reason why I came in here," I said.

"As you can see, I had a little mishap on the subway this morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Did you go to a doctor?"

"I don't think it's that bad," I said. "I'll take care of it when I get home. Anyway, what I'm here about, I was late this morning – over an hour. It was the third time I was late this month and Mike wants to send me home without pay."

Ed was looking at me closer now. He had a dazed, stumped expression. This would be the most complicated decision he made all day, I realized, and he didn't want to blow it.

"Let me get this straight," Ed said. "This was the third time you were late, and the other two infractions were brought to your attention?"

"Yes," I said, "but there was an extenuating circumstance."

"I get it," Ed said. "You think you're entitled to an exemption."

"Well, yeah," I said. "I mean it's not like I slept through my alarm clock or anything like that. I've already made two appointments today and I was telemarketer-of-the-month last month. I think I'm entitled to some sort of break."

"But you understood that the rule existed?"

"Of course," I said. "But I've been working here a long time, and as you can see I had an accident this morning."

Ed continued to stare at me, in deep thought, then he stood up.

"Wait right here."

He left the office. Through the windows, I saw him talking to Mike in Mike's office. Mike did most of the talking and I thought he looked angry and defensive.

Ed nodded his head a lot with his arms crossed in front of his chest. Then Ed left and started back toward me with his usual humorless expression.

“Well, I discussed the situation with Mike,” he said, sitting down at his desk, “and I’ve decided you’re right – he shouldn’t have sent you home without pay.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“However, I’m going to have to back up his decision.”

“What?” I said.

“Although I agree with your position,” Ed continued, “Mike is your supervisor and if I let you stay today I’d be showing him up in front of the other employees. If you hadn’t argued with him and made such a scene, maybe we could’ve worked something out.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “You’re sending me home without pay – me, one of the best telemarketers in the office, a guy who’s already made two appointments today. You’re just going to let me walk out of here?”

“I have no choice,” Ed said. “I have to respect Mike’s decision.”

“Fine,” I said bitterly. “But if I leave here now, there’s a chance I might not come back tomorrow.”

“That’s up to you,” Ed said. “Personally, I hope you stay on with us. Obviously, I don’t know you too well, but you seem to have a degree of intelligence, at least more intelligence than most people we hire here, and I’d like to keep you on board. But if you decide to leave, I wish you luck.”

I left Ed’s office, closing the door hard behind me, but not slamming it. I went to my cubicle and gathered some papers I had in my desk. Greg came up behind me and said in a low voice:

“I told you, man. The guy’s a motherfucker, ain’t he?”

“What can I say?” I said. “You were right.”

“You outta here, man?”

“Looks that way.”

“If I don’t see you again – peace.”

“Peace,” I said.

Without saying goodbye to anyone else, I left the office.

On Eighth Avenue, a beggar in front of a triple-x video store asked me for change, a drug dealer offered me crack, a tourist asked me for directions to Times Square. I ignored everyone. My forehead hurt and the heat was unbearable. It must have been a hundred degrees already and it wasn’t twelve o’clock yet. I thought about stopping at a phone booth and calling Julie at work and telling her about my morning, but I figured she’d still be angry at me because of our fight last night. I didn’t feel like making up with her, not yet anyway. I crossed Forty-fourth Street with a crowd of people, wondering what to do with the rest of my life.