

SOLICITATIONS

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THE SUMMER I was twenty, when I thought myself blessed with an adventurous curiosity and believed everyone had a story worth listening to, I became a telephone solicitor. My job was to renew magazine subscriptions, but I was certain I could coax cranky wisdom and profane tales from the wires. I imagined soliciting stories from all classes of people in every region of the country—waterfowl farmers in Maine, gas-meter readers in Hoboken, San Francisco city planners, Houston tax lawyers, housewives from the heartland, press-punch operators in Chicago. Through my telephone I would hear America singing.

“Always think sale!”

Chuck Sandock, manager of the evening shift at Dial-the-Land, paused to let his first words of advice register with me. Then he drew his clasped hands to his chest and leaned forward in his chair.

“Can I count on you to remember that, Bobby?”

I bobbed my head and he nodded solemnly.

“All right then. Let’s listen to some sales.”

We were sitting in a glass cubicle overlooking several rows of solicitors. Sandock surveyed them all for a few seconds, then, having made his choice, he pinched a pencil between his chubby fingers and jabbed at one of the blinking buttons on his telephone console. A scratchy voice came over the tiny speaker propped on his desk.

“ . . . and since you’ve been a regular subscriber to *Sports Illustrated*, Mr. Bluefarb, all I need is your okay by phone to continue your subscription when it expires next month. Okay?”

“Sure, okay.”

Sandock released the button.

“See,” he said, leaning back in his chair, “nothing to it. Let’s try to hear one from the beginning.”

He jabbed at a few buttons until we heard a ringing phone.

“Hello?”

"Mr. Jensen?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Leo Paley, sir, calling from Dial-the-Land in behalf of your *House Beautiful* magazine. How are you this evening?"

"Dial-the-what? I don't get any *House Beautiful* magazine."

"No, sir. But you used to receive it. Your subscription expired eight months ago."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Then you wouldn't care to renew?"

"Good thinking."

The man hung up and we heard the solicitor mutter, "How does he expect me to sell this shit?"

Sandock banged the button out.

"Stay away from his kind, Bobby. His attitude is bad news. Remember, every lead is a potential sale. Can I count on you to remember that?" I bobbed my head and he jabbed at another button.

"Oh, my darling, the world was beautiful just to give us pleasure," whispered the trembling voice of an elderly man.

Sandock and I caught ourselves staring at each other, both of us momentarily paralyzed with embarrassment, like two strangers on a crowded bus suddenly brushed up face to face. He glanced away and released the button.

"Damn personal calls," he sighed. He went on to explain that every call we made was registered on a computer printout, and any solicitor discovered to have called a number more than three times would be fired.

Sandock punched into a few more calls, and after we heard one more sale he sent me to my phone.

"Go for it, Bobby. Only time waits for your success."

Twenty-four other solicitors worked the evening shift, phoning the East from six until nine and the West from nine to midnight. The work area was windowless and small, about the size of a grammar school classroom. At the front of the room a big chart listed the weekly sales of each solicitor.

I started out calling *Time* subscribers in Cleveland. Though I stumbled woodenly through my sales pitch—"Uh, hello, my name is, uh, Robert March and I'm, uh, calling from Dial-the-Land"—the first person I spoke to renewed her subscription. I glanced up at the glass cubicle and saw Sandock raise his thumb. The solicitor to my right, olive-skinned, exotically scented, patted my arm. My next call was also a sale and I noticed the solicitor to my left glaring at me. He was an old man, and for an instant I wondered if he were the one who had reminisced about the beauty of the world. But then I saw what bad shape he was in—he had a livid nose, red-rimmed eyes, nicotine encrusted lips—and I doubted that the world had given him much beauty or pleasure. His eyes scorned and probed, refused my polite twitch of a smile. I looked back down at my phone, punched out a number, and was hung up on before I could finish my pitch.

He was the man Sandock had warned me to keep away from. Leo Paley chain-smoked all night, coughing and growling his pitch into the mouth-piece. His name was seventeenth on the sales chart. The darkly beautiful solicitor to my right was Andrea Campo. She seemed to breathe rather than speak her pitch. Her sales were average. When she became bored, which was often, she played Russian roulette with Sandock's intercom system, whispering, "Sand-cock, Sand-cock," into the phone.

At the beginning of my second week a new sales chart was posted. I had earned two hundred and twenty-two dollars and was in seventh place. Leo had dropped to nineteenth.

"Wow! You did really great your first week!" Andrea exclaimed.

"Oh, beginner's luck," I replied.

"No, it's more than luck. You have the right kind of voice for this."

"Really?"

"It's a no-nonsense voice. You'll make a lot of money with it."

"Well, the money's nice, but I like being able to hear so many fascinating voices. Walt Whitman would have loved a job like this."

"Who?"

"Walt Whitman? An American poet?"

"Oh, yeah, isn't there a rest-stop on the Jersey turnpike named after him?"

"I wouldn't doubt it."

"Right. I've been there."

Though I was earning piles of money, soliciting stories proved much more difficult. Once I called a man in Startouch, Utah and remarked, after he renewed his subscription to *Field and Stream*, on the lovely name of his town.

"Yes, sir?" he replied, as if I still had more information for him about his subscription.

"You must live up in the mountains?"

"Yes, sir. But you'll still send me that book, won't you?"

By the end of my second week I was fifth on the sales chart, but nobody's wisdom or troubles enriched my wires.

"Say, pal, play fair, why don't you?"

These were the first words Leo Paley had spoken to me after glowering in my direction for two weeks. He had dropped to twentieth on the chart.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean selling magazines to minors. I heard you say, 'Don't forget to tell your mom you renewed.' You've been doing that all night."

"So. He's sixteen. He pays for it himself. What's so bad about that?"

"I told you," he said bitterly, "because it's against the rules."

I ignored him and punched out a number; he walked away from his phone and went into Sandock's cubicle. A minute later Leo returned to his phone and Sandock called me in.

"Bobby, have you been selling magazines to children?"

"I only renewed with a few teenagers who told me they pay for it themselves."

"You're going to have to call them all back and close again with the parents."

"Call them back! Close again! Do you know how much time that's going to waste?"

"Maybe you should have thought of that before. Look, Bobby, you've been doing a great job. You'll get a lot more orders. Can I count on you to do this?"

"Do I have any choice?"

He extended his hand. "Thanks, champ," he said, when I finally grasped it. "I'll see you at the top."

I returned to my desk and picked up my phone. I looked over at Leo. Ignore him, I warned myself. "Why don't you mind your own business?" I said to him. "What does it matter to you how I get my sales?"

"Look, pal," he said impatiently, "look at the leads he's giving you. *Sports Illustrated* in Scarsdale. *Outdoor Life* in West Virginia. *Fortune* in Shaker Heights. All with recent expiration dates. There's only a limited number of those leads and he's handing them out to you because your numbers are good. That's why it matters."

"Can I help what leads he gives me?"

"No, but you can at least play fair."

It was nearly nine, and I began calling my West Coast leads, *Playboy* in California. The subscription dates were nearly a year old, and after an hour of calling I had only one sale and a number of lewd inquiries about my job benefits. At ten I thought I finally had another sale.

"May I speak with Mr. Scott Epstein?"

"Yeah?"

"Oh, good evening, Mr. Epstein. This is Robert March calling from Dial-the-Land for *Playboy* magazine."

"Yeah!"

"Yes, Mr. Epstein, and the reason for my call is that your subscription to *Playboy* is due for renewal, and since you are a past subscriber all I need is your okay by phone to continue your subscription. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

I thought his voice had a nasal, adolescent tone; certain that Sandock was listening, I played it safe and asked him how old he was.

"Fourteen," he answered.

"Fourteen. I see, Scott. Well, in that case I'll need to speak with your mom or dad."

"My mom's here, but she won't pay for it."

"Right, Scott. I understand it's your subscription, but I still need your mom's okay."

I looked up and received an approving nod from Sandock.

"No, see, my uncle Morty sent me that magazine."

"Oh, uncle Morty pays for it. Well, why don't you give me his number and I'll ask him if he wants to renew it for you."

"I can't."

"You can't? Doesn't he have a phone?"

"No, he's in jail."

Sandock was motioning for me to hang up.

"I can give you his address."

"Not tonight, Scott. Maybe next year."

One hour, no sales, two rude and one dead subscriber later, a man complained that he had written *Playboy* for years and had never received an answer.

"It's about time you people got around to calling me!"

"Was there some problem, sir?"

"You bet there was. *Playboy* used to be a real classy publication until Hefner started putting pubic hair in it."

"Yeah, so what's the trouble. Does it fall out onto your lap?"

I banged the phone down and held my breath while I looked up towards Sandock. He gave no sign of having heard me.

That night Andrea invited me back to her apartment, a luxury high-rise in Fort Lee with a spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline. I sank down into a chocolate-colored suede sofa holding a glass of Chivas. A few erotic wood carvings from a South American tribe were displayed on a glass coffee table along with a book of David Hockney reproductions. The book was opened to a picture of a young man swimming nude in the shimmering blue depths of a pool.

Andrea told me she had studied theater for a semester at a local community college before dropping out so she could act full-time. "I just work these telephone gigs between real jobs," she explained.

"You pay for this apartment working at Dial-the-Land?" I asked, knowing she made about two hundred dollars a week.

"I don't pay any rent. My father owns the building."

"So why even work at Dial-the-Land?"

"Because I don't want to be totally dependent on my old man. I think being dependent on anybody is the biggest bummer in the world."

"Don't you think your attitude is rather illusory?"

"Huh?"

"I mean you're still dependent on your father, aren't you?"

"Yeah? So . . . and why are you working at Dial-the-Land?"

"I have to. My father doesn't own any buildings."

"Oh, excuse me. I thought you were there because of all the fascinating voices."

"Well, maybe I was stretching things a little," I said into my drink. "No, I was stretching things a lot. In all honesty, about the only words I hear are yes and no."

"Honesty. . . . Yeah, well, I can agree with that."

We exchanged smiles.

"Tell me," I asked, "what's Leo's story? Did you see the way he tried to get me in trouble?"

"Don't pay any attention to him. He's just a jealous old fart."

"But do you think his leads are really getting worse because of me?"

"Did he say that?"

"More or less."

"Well, so what? Are you responsible for him?"

"Hey, Mr. Millionaire. What are you going to do with all your money?"

Leo smiled broadly at me, exposing a mouth of eroded teeth.

"I don't know," I mumbled, and looked for a number to punch out.

"What's the matter, pal? You sore at me because of last night?"

"Can you blame me?"

"Hell, I probably saved your ass. What if the mother of one of those kids had complained to the company? Don't think it hasn't happened before."

"Yeah, thanks a lot. I'm in your debt."

I had the phone pressed to my ear, about to make my first call, when I noticed that half the pinky on Leo's left hand was missing.

"What happened to your finger?"

He held forth the mangled stub, the rest of his fingers slightly curled, as though displaying a ring.

"Blown off in battle," he answered, beaming. "Palestine, 1948. My great adventure." He chuckled at the thought.

"What are you calling tonight?" he asked.

"*Sports Illustrated* in Forest Hills. *Outdoor Life* in West Virginia. *Cycle* in Youngstown."

"Good locations," he said, nodding. "When do they expire?"

"Next month."

He sighed and laid his leads on his desk like a badly-dealt poker hand.

"*Golf Digest* in the Bronx. Expired last Christmas."

I punched out a number.

"Travel," he said, when I finished my call. "That's what you should do with your money. Don't hang around here. Go see the world."

"I'm in school, Leo. I have an education to pay for."

"What does your dad do?"

"He's a lawyer."

"A lawyer, and he doesn't pay for school?"

"I have a sister in dental school and a brother entering college in the fall. I have to help out. Education is expensive."

"I should have been a lawyer. Lawyers have it easy."

"What are you talking about? My father works really hard."

"Sure, sure, I know he works hard. But lawyers are only advisers. They're not on the front lines like real business men."

"Is that what you are? A *real* business man?"

"I used to be. I was an account executive with an advertising agency in the city for twenty-three years."

"So how come you're not doing that anymore?"

"I had a heart attack four years ago. This is the only job I can find."

"You can't get back into advertising after being in the field for so long? Don't you have friends who can help you?"

"The *field*? I'm not in a field, professor, I'm in *business*, and I can't get hired because I'm sixty-two and I've got a bum heart. Plus I'm fat and I smoke too much. So the insurance on me is too high. Become a liability, then see where your friends are."

"That doesn't seem right. Can you really be turned down for a job just because of your medical history?"

"Where have you been hiding? Disney Land? Those bastards can do anything they want, and what they want is someone your age who can bust his balls. No, I've stopped looking for real jobs. I'll be doing this shit until my heart conks out on me."

I found a number to punch out.

By the end of my third week I was fourth on the sales chart; Leo had sunk to twenty-third. The solicitor in twenty-fourth place, an old man named Tony Dillon, looked even worse than Leo. He wore a lustreless gray toupé that was as stiff and misshapen as hair matted with dried blood, and his cheekbones were shiny with capillaries. When Leo introduced me to him by the water fountain one night, I was certain Tony's was the voice I had heard speak about the beauty of the world. Leo, however, only spoke about the ugliness of Tony's life: "I can't tell you what a sad existence that man leads. He lives by himself in a room at the 'Y' and watches soap operas all day. No friends, no family, as far as I know. Jesus, at least I'm out. I'm at Belmont enjoying the sunshine or at the library reading and listening to music. Poor Tony. I don't know what can be done for him." Leo loved talking about Tony, bestowing what little pity he had to spare with a philanthropic grandness. It was one of his few chances to feel rich.

The last place solicitor, Harold Mays, sat right behind me. He was a black Jehovah's Witness and a very careless shaver, for there were always several

blood-soiled dots of tissue paper stuck to his face and neck. He delivered his pitch in a dull monotone, but after every refusal his voice brightened as he asked, "Would y'all rather read about my church?" He paid no attention to anyone in the office except Leo. Once a night, while Leo was away from his phone, Harold put on his desk mimeographed Bible selections and pamphlets with the words *Awake* emblazoned across the top. He placed everything down very delicately, tilting his head and smiling down at the desk, as though he were leaving him a bouquet of flowers. When Leo returned, he would stare sourly at his desk, as if it had been splattered with birdshit. Then he threw all the materials in the trash. Otherwise, Harold's most ardent solicitations were conducted by phone. He didn't need to waste time on anyone in the office. He had the name, numbers, and addresses of hundreds of readers. I'm sure the big sales chart meant nothing to him. He probably kept his own tally. By my count he convinced three or four people a night to receive his pamphlets; and every once in a while he scored a big sale, as I heard him uttering soothing words and prayers to some soul in misery.

Perhaps Leo's leads had gotten worse since I started working at Dial-the-Land; certainly his sales had gone down because he was paying so much attention to me, but that really wasn't my fault. His phone lay idle for long stretches while he cross-examined me: What kind of leads did I have? What was my major in college? What would I do with a philosophy degree? Be a lawyer like my father? Why was I wasting my time at Dial-the-Land? Why didn't I get a real job, one where I could learn something? I always kept my phone busy, punching numbers, pitching magazines, listening to Leo with my free ear. He claimed to have studied at the London School of Economics, owned businesses in Amsterdam, Istanbul and Tel Aviv, made and lost several fortunes. "Bullshit," Andrea would sometimes croon in a low voice. Leo always ignored her. He boasted expertise on the stock market, lawyers, horses, and ex-wives. He loved warning me about all of them.

"You know what women are really after in a divorce, Bobby? Money? Property? Hell no. It's sexual titillation. It's their big chance to twirl you around by the balls. That's how these women get their jollies."

"Leo," Andrea interjected, "you are totally sick."

"Are you familiar with the Book of Job, professor?"

"A little. Why?"

"Because if I had read it more closely in my youth I would have known what to expect."

"Expect about what? Divorce?"

"Absolutely. It's the clearest warning ever issued to western man."

"God, Leo," Andrea exclaimed. "You are so full of shit! I read the Book of Job in my Survey of World Literature class and I know it has nothing to do with divorce."

"Like I said, Bobby," Leo continued, "it's clear as day. You just have to think of the wife as God, her lawyer as Satan, and the husband as Job. 'The Lord asked Satan,'" Leo declaimed, "'Have you considered my servant Job? Satan answered the Lord, Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has and he will curse you to your face. Then the Lord said to Satan, So be it. All that he has is in your hands—but spare his life.'"

A little while later, while Leo was asking me how many sales I had, Andrea lashed out, "Stop asking him that! Why don't you mind your own business and quit bothering him!"

"What are you talking about? Bobby and I are pals. He loves to let me know how great he's doing. Don't you, Bobby?"

"I don't care," I mumbled.

Andrea shoved her chair away from the desk and marched out into the hall.

"That is a wonderous ass," Leo marveled. "Wouldn't you say?"

I said nothing and punched out a number.

"What are you getting off her now?"

At the other end of my line a phone in Roanoke, Virginia was ringing. I covered the mouthpiece with my palm and said, more softly than I meant to, "That's enough, Leo. All right?"

Someone picked up and I stumbled into my pitch.

"... and since you've been a regular subscriber, Mr. Jones, all I need is your okay by phone to continue your subscription. Okay?"

"How much did you say?"

"Only thirty-two cents a copy."

"How much altogether?"

"Seventeen ninety-seven."

"Well, I don't think so. Thanks all the same."

"Don't you enjoy *Outdoor Life*, Mr. Jones?"

"Yes, sir. I sure do. It's a real fine book."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Leo watching me, a weak, sarcastic smile on his face, like a man waiting to be hit.

"But you still don't want it?" I asked.

"I guess not right now. Maybe some other time."

I tossed the card into my reject pile.

"Lost it?" Leo asked.

"Yes."

"Too bad. You have to close more strongly."

"Yeah, thanks."

"You gave him an out. You made it too easy for him to say no."

"Look, Leo, I don't think I'm going to get to these *Fortune's* in Grosse Point before we switch time zones. I have plenty. Why don't you call them?"

I held the leads out but he frowned at them, as if he were receiving an IOU when he had been expecting cash.

"Go on. They're yours," I said. If he didn't blow too many sales the leads were worth about twenty dollars in commissions. He took them without a word of thanks.

"Say," he said, "why don't we go for a drink after work?"

"Sorry, I'd like to. But I'm busy."

"With what's her name?"

I punched out a number.

"Why do you let that old man bother you?"

Andrea and I were driving back from the beach in her red Porsche.

"He doesn't bother me. I like listening to his stories."

"Don't tell me you believe him?"

"I don't know if I believe him. I just find him amusing."

"If you're amused then you must be as sick as him."

"Well, then I must be . . . look, Andrea. I feel sorry for him. His health is bad. He thinks he's going to die soon."

"So why does he have to be so nasty to you?"

"He's just too bitter to be any nicer. So let him be nasty, let him bullshit me. It's not costing me anything."

"That's where you're wrong. Don't tell me you haven't noticed your sales have gone down since Leo became your best friend."

"Andrea, I wasn't even talking about money."

"Well, I was . . . shit, half the time I don't even know what you're talking about!"

She screeched the Porsche around the last turn of the underground garage ramp. We rode the elevator up to her apartment in silence. She went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. A minute later I stepped out of my bathing suit and joined her. She was clutching her elbows, her head bowed beneath the force of the water. I placed my hands on her shoulders and brought my lips close to her ear. "Let's make a deal," I said, sliding my hands down her breasts and around the curve of her hips. "I won't talk about Leo if you won't. Okay?" She nodded, and I pulled her around and thrust my tongue into her mouth.

Sandock also noticed my drop off in sales and told me I was being moved to the other side of the office.

"You and Leo have become a little too buddy-buddy," he explained.

"We're not 'buddy-buddy.' My phone is never down."

"Look at the scoreboard, champ. He distracts you more than you realize."

"So why don't you move him? I like where I'm sitting."

"Bobby, listen. Just between you and me, Leo's days here are numbered."

"Goddamnit! Why did you have to tell me that?"

For a long second he pressed his lips together while his eyes strafed me. Then he replied in a low voice, "Because you asked."

One evening in early August, Sandock heard Harold Mays ask a subscriber if she would rather read about his church. Less than five minutes later Harold was out the door, but not before he had deposited a pile of pamphlets and prayers on Leo's desk. "I'm goin' to keep prayin' for you, Leo," he said. "I jus' know one day you goin' to answer the Lord's call."

Tony and Leo both dropped a notch on the sales chart. The next week I moved from second to first place when the number-one solicitor, a high school guidance counselor named Ben Pessen, was fired after the computer revealed he had phoned Dial-a-Joke seventeen times one night. Sandock pinned Ben's printout to the bulletin board like the hide of some big game he had shot down.

My sales soared without Leo distracting me. His continued to plummet. Most of the time he mumbled to himself or wasted many minutes bent over his desk gazing and poking at his leads like a fortune teller studying tea leaves. Whenever he walked by my desk I delivered a pitch, even if there was no one on the other end of the line. Sometimes he would stand over me for so long I had no choice but to look up.

"Can you believe this shit!" he exclaimed, cradling a lead in the palm of his hand. "This guy died three years ago!"

He waited anxiously for a word from me, but I didn't know what to say and punched out a number.

I had been at Dial-the-Land for just over a month and was averaging twenty-one dollars an hour in commissions and making love with Andrea until three every morning. Afternoons I lay beside her on the beach, day-dreaming about my potential or dwelling vainly on my stamina.

In the middle of the month, Andrea landed a walk-on part in an off-off-Broadway play and quit her job at Dial-the-Land. Our routine was hardly disrupted, though. The last act ended at eleven and she was back to meet me at her apartment by one.

Soon after noticing that Andrea was gone, Leo again asked me to join him for a drink. I agreed, but just for an hour. I followed him in my car to the local joint he went to every night.

"So, are you lonely at work without your girlfriend?" he asked as we slid into a dark, wooden booth.

"No, I see her every night."

"Did she find a better job?"

"She has a part in a play."

"Does that pay better?"

"I don't think she gets paid anything. . . . She has a rich daddy."

He gave me a cynical, collusive smile. "I guess there are no worries for you, are there?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think? You have a rich girlfriend, a dad who's a lawyer. You're safe."

"I'm glad you've got my life figured out for me, Leo."

He drew a newspaper out of his pocket and unfolded it onto the table. "Does your dad play the stock market?"

"I don't know . . . probably not."

"Well, it takes nerve. A little luck, some skill, but mostly nerve. I used to play before my divorce, but now that bitch has all my capital tied up . . . so . . . I was thinking you might let me dabble with a little bit of that money you're making. We can turn a nice profit in no time."

"No."

"Look at this stock here," he replied, as if I had said nothing. He pointed to a line of numbers. They were as incomprehensible to me as a slate of cuneiform. "I've been following this item for almost a month. It's risen from two to five to ten dollars and shows no sign of decline. So if you sign a thousand dollars over to me I know we can make a five-hundred-dollar profit in just a few days."

"Forget it."

"Bobby, this is a sure thing!" he exclaimed, exhaling a cloud of smoke in my face.

"Leo, I don't need an extra five hundred dollars. So why should I risk one thousand?"

"You won't be risking *one cent!* If this wasn't a sure thing I wouldn't have even wasted my breath. I know how adverse you are to risk, professor."

"Leo, I didn't come here for you to criticize me."

"So who's criticizing? I only thought you'd like to make an easy few hundred dollars."

"Not this time."

"Suit yourself," he sighed. "I'll be going out to Belmont tomorrow. Care to join me?"

I had never been to a racetrack and had no desire to go. I pictured hundreds of Leos wandering the grounds in aimless pursuit of luck or whatever else had been denied to them in life.

"I don't think so, Leo."

"Then why don't you give me twenty dollars and I'll place a few sure bets for you."

"No thanks."

He tilted his head and downed a full glass of bourbon. Then he stared despondently into the empty glass.

"Look, pal, I only have ten dollars on me. After I put gas in the car I'll only have five left over. So if you loan me ten tonight I promise I'll pay you back twenty tomorrow."

I reached into my wallet and slapped a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"I only want ten back. This is strictly a loan. Not a joint venture."

A half hour later, as I bent to kiss Andrea in her doorway, she drew back, holding her nose.

"Where have you been?"

"In a bar."

"That's obvious. With who?"

"My best friend."

"I should have guessed."

She pinched my sleeve between her thumb and forefinger, then let my wrist fall back to my side.

"Just make sure you shower before coming to bed."

Every night for the next week I drank with Leo after work. There was really no way to avoid it. At five minutes to midnight he was standing over my desk saying, "Drink, pal?" He knew I had no place else to go for the next hour. In the bar he was abusive and sad, and I would count the minutes until I'd be slipping between Andrea's scented sheets. He damned all the cowardly business partners who had soured brilliant deals and mourned all the badly-timed or just-missed ventures that might have changed his life. "Remember I told you about that time I went to Palestine in '48? That same year I had a chance to buy a beer distributorship in Scranton. Even that might have saved me. I was supposed to be partners with my brother-in-law, but instead I had to be where history was made. So what happens? I get my little finger blown apart in the desert while my brother-in-law, a man with an IQ of fifty-eight, becomes a fat-assed millionaire."

Leo railed on against everyone he knew with less talent than himself who had done better in life. He labeled all lawyers "spineless pricks" and described Sandock as "lower than whale shit. . . . Tonight he gave me *Field and Stream* in West Virginia. All in the same town. New expiration dates. Sounds decent, right? Everybody down there likes the woods. I figured maybe the scumbag was finally giving me a chance. Pal, I called for an hour and didn't get one lousy sale. Not one. Then number twenty-five tells me that the local steel mill is closed down. No one in town is working. So those leads are fucked, right? You'd think Sandock would admit it for once. Bobby, do you know what that asshole said to me when I asked him for new leads? He told me I had a goldmine. When people are out of work, he says, they have more time to read. So I asked him if he had ever been out of work, but he didn't answer. Just recited some shit about converting losses into gains. Well, I've been out of work, I said to him, and I can tell you that a man without a job doesn't spend twenty-two fifty on a goddamned magazine subscription. There are more important things in the world to worry about. Then he really blew his top. Said no wonder I couldn't sell with such a negative attitude. Fuck attitude . . . it's the leads . . . all I want are some decent leads. . . . Jesus, Bobby, what scum he is. He's worse than Job's comforters. Do you know what those cocksuckers said when Job tried to tell them of his troubles?"

He had already downed five bourbons and his eyes were bloodshot and desperate.

"Tomorrow night, Leo. Tell me tomorrow," I said, inching out of the booth. "I've got to go. Really." I refused to let Andrea have the satisfaction of my being even a minute late.

"How long will you say such things, the long-winded ramblings of an old man," Leo recited. "Some comfort. Shit. The bastards. They saw what kind of pain Job was in. So I'm asking you this: Why would they be so pitiless?"

"Tomorrow, Leo," I said, walking away.

"I'll tell you why!" he shouted after me. "Old Job scared the shit out of them. Understand?" Everybody in the bar had turned to look at Leo. "They couldn't buy the idea that they weren't any safer than Job. Job knew this, too, but he forgave them anyway. 'Pity me, only pity me, you that are my friends,' he cried out to them, 'for the hand of God has touched me.'"

Every night I raced to be at Andrea's by one-fifteen. She would be standing in her doorway looking skeptically at her watch. Fetching my breath, I would hold mine in front of her face, tap it, and smile "no." Then we went to the bedroom, undressed in silence on opposite sides of the bed, and made strenuous love staring into each others' wide-open eyes.

One evening during the last week in August, Sandock called Tony Dillon up to his glass station. I watched Sandock showing him a computer printout. Tony nodded a few times. Then Sandock put his hand on Tony's shoulder and he hobbled out of Dial-the-Land.

Leo was pitched forward in his chair, as though he had been stunned by a blow to the back. When his eyes sought me out I glanced away. We both knew that one night soon he too would be fired, as suddenly and inexorably as Harold, Ben, and Tony. I punched out a number. No one answered, but I found myself so rattled I couldn't move to put the phone down. I kept it pressed to my ear for more than a minute, each ring drilling me with anxiety. Finally I walked up to the bulletin board and examined Tony's computer printout. The number which had gotten him fired was underlined in red: 203-695-0078. He had phoned it thirteen times in one week. I studied the number for a few more seconds, then went back to my phone and punched it out. "Hello?" answered an elderly woman. Oh, my darling, the world was beautiful just to give us pleasure. The words burned in my throat like a stalled confession. "Yes, hello? Who is this? Is anybody there?"

"I'm next, Bobby," Leo moaned to me in the bar that night. "That bastard is going to fire me next."

"You don't know that," I mumbled into my drink.

"I'm not even making the minimum wage in commissions. It's costing them money to keep me on the phone. Have you seen the shit I'm calling? Subscriptions that expired two and three years ago. I called four stiffs tonight! I can't take that anymore. I'll be dead myself within a year."

I stayed with Leo until the bar closed. When I stepped outside I could see my breath. September was only a week away, and I raced through the streets more furiously than ever, as though I were trying to out-run the rotation of the planet.

I buzzed Andrea's apartment for five minutes until her voice came over the intercom.

"What?"

"It's me, honey," I gasped, still out of breath.

"Go away."

"Andrea, sweetie, I'm sorry I'm late but Tony got fired and Leo took it very badly and he kept talking and talking and I couldn't get away. So please let me up. Okay?"

"Get out of here! Now!"

I was aware of how badly my hair and clothing reeked of Leo's bar, and I desperately wanted to rise twenty-three stories, strip off my clothes, shower away my stale, sad stink, embrace Andrea's soft flesh, inhale her dark warmth, and feel virile and unlonely and only twenty years old.

"Oh, Andrea," I wailed into the intercom, "the world was beautiful just to give us pleasure!"

"God," she groaned. "I can't believe I'm listening to this bullshit at four in the morning. Beat it! Before I call the cops!"

Over the next week I slacked off to eighth on the sales chart. I took home three hundred dollars and slept alone every night. Whenever I tried to leave Leo in the bar he pathetically cried for me to stay for just one more drink, and he would raise a subject he had been over a thousand times before. I had no resistance left, and always wound up staying until the bar closed. At three-thirty in the morning, too drunk and exhausted to even take off my clothes, I collapsed into my unmade bed, not knowing who I pitied more, Leo or myself, not even knowing which one of us I hated the most.

During the first week of September, Sandock called Leo up to his cubicle before Leo had made his first call of the evening. Sandock did all the talking while Leo stared into his lap. When I saw Leo rise, I pressed the phone to my ear and trained my eyes on the desk. I didn't look up until he was standing right over me.

"That's it," he said hoarsely. "I'm gone."

His lower lip began to quiver and I pretended to be in the middle of a call. "That's right, Mr. Riley. Only thirty-eight cents a month for *Mechanix Illustrated*. Yes, huh, huh, that's right." I placed my hand over the mouthpiece and whispered "Call me at home."

"Thanks, pal."

When I was certain Leo had left the building, I put my phone down and bounded up to Sandock's cubicle.

"I had no choice," he said, before I could even utter a word.

"What is he supposed to do now?"

"I can't worry about that. I have costs to consider . . . Leo will be fine. These telephone jobs are a dime a dozen. He'll find another one tomorrow."

I pressed my finger tips on his desk and leaned towards him.

"What is it, Bobby? Do you want to curse me out? Call me an asshole? Scream 'I quit!' and storm out with everybody watching?"

I straightened up. "What?"

"You heard me."

"You don't like me very much, do you?"

"No, you're mixed up. *You* don't like me."

"Don't you think the feeling's mutual?"

He shook his head, his face almost pained with disappointment. "No, no, haven't you understood anything? I'm not in the business of liking or disliking anyone."

I sat down.

"You knew I was going to quit next week, right?"

"What are you saying? You're quitting now? Fine. Quit now. Or quit tomorrow. Or next week. Whatever you decide, champ, it will cost you more than me."

"Maybe I'll think about it."

"Think about it."

I returned to my desk, but after only two calls I went back up to Sandock and told him I was quitting.

"You've thought everything through?"

"Yes," I replied. "Everything."

When I got home I poured myself a drink, opened a book, and unplugged the phone. I went to bed at midnight, but three hours later I was still wide awake. I re-attached the phone and dialed Andrea's number for the twentieth time that week. I gave up after six rings. A half hour later, when I was just about asleep, my phone began ringing. The first ring jolted me up. I reached for the receiver, but then realizing what it would cost me to answer, I slid back down, pulled the covers over my head, and listened to the phone ring and ring and ring and ring and ring and ring.