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Press One For Two, Press Two For One

“Gracias por llamar a America Online!” This is what you would have heard me say had you been a Spanish speaker and had the patience to get through to me at one among several work numbers that I had in 1996. Not that I knew any of my work numbers. Not that I spoke Spanish either. You might have been calling me to cancel your America Online account, the one you started via the free CD-Rom from your local grocery store, shopping mall, library, doctor’s office, roller-rink, fast food chain, or any of an infinite number of places that the newly ubiquitous World Wide Web had been waiting to snag you. The America Online account that you had been assured would be easy to cancel. The same account that I would have, had you been an English speaker, assured you for the third or maybe even fourth time that “we would of course be happy to cancel for you right away sir/madam!” after first grilling you over and over about why you were choosing to leave the fold. Since, however, you didn’t speak English, and since you’d made it through the complex phone tree to my extension (where my computer screen had already alerted me to read from the Spanish script on page 26) you would instead first hear the aforementioned poorly accented greeting after which you would be asked in more pidgin Spanish for your name and number so that one of our bilingual representatives could call you back “lo más pronto como sea possible!” which translated roughly to “When hell freezes over.”

As you may have surmised by now, I was working in a call center. Our country’s various industries and corporations still entrusted Americans to do the work of talking on the phone for them in 1996 and Dial America was one such call center in Athens, Georgia. When I moved back to the Classic City after a year on the west coast, I needed a job quickly, and like most of the people that I worked with there, I had thought that answering phones was better than nothing.

I also thought that at least I wasn't cold calling people. "That is the lowest form of wage slavery," I thought. "They do nothing but annoy people who are trying to have dinner. They are the worst," I said to myself, as I went in for my first day on the job. "I, on the other hand, will be helping people." I couldn't have been more wrong. We handled calls for two major corporations, five "non-profits," and the phone company's billing and marketing departments, and the last thing that any of us accomplished on any given day was actually helping someone.

The way the scripts that Dial America had us read from saw to that quite well, actually. It must have been a very disgruntled Psychology major indeed that had come up with all the questions and answers I was expected to draw from during the course of any given interaction. The most typical conversational stratagem was the circular sidestep:

(page 34 Bell South script, question 5) "Well sir/madam, what if I were to tell you I could lower your bill while giving you more features?"

(if customer answers) "But I just told you that all I want is to cancel my call-waiting."

(turn to page 35, answer 7) "I understand, and I'm here to help, so if you tell me which features you prefer, then I can tell you how we can lower your bill."

(if customer answers) "Just cancel my call waiting please."

(go to Call Choice script, page 35 answer 10) "Well of course sir/madam, with our Call Choice plan you can have up to three features of your choice including Call Waiting, Call Forwarding, Voice Mail, and many others all for one low monthly bill of only..."

And round, and round we would go.

The learning curve is pretty sharp for a job that basically requires that you pretend to be no more than a disembodied voice. Once you've read the various scripts a couple hundred times

each, and memorized where they are located within the blue binder that is as thick as the phone book in some of our nation's smaller cities, the only thing left is to make sure you're listening for those times when your voice and breathing suddenly sound as though they are being magically sent through a mile long hall lined with sheet metal. It is important to learn to recognize this oh so subtle shift in call quality, as it means that your call is being (yes that's right) monitored for quality purposes.

I had no problem doing the job for a few months. I tried to have fun with it and even fancied myself to have a good phone voice even if sometimes, well actually often, I was mistaken for a woman by the party on the other end. I would doodle the most intricate cross-hatching this side of *Charlotte's Web*, and wonder at my mouth's ability to go it alone, spouting this double speak nonsense while I was elsewhere in my mind. "Very Zen," I thought. Until one day I had to admit that I was really there. I really was taking part in what Dial America was doing, as well as what the companies for whom Dial America worked were doing. Sending people around in circles? Posh! Ignoring my own humanity and that of the people with whom I was taking part in that favorite pastime of teenagers everywhere- talking on the phone? Nothing! Wasting my life in a dimly lit office that could be gone in the blink of a corporate eye for minimum wage? So much child's play compared to what was going on with the account that was referred to around the office as the VAP account. Even after eventually learning that the acronym stood for Veteran's Action Plan, I continued referring to it as a word. "Vap" just had a ring to it. Not necessarily a nice ring as is usually said, though. It reminded me of the thick, slick popping sound made by bugs hitting a windshield at a high speed. Knowing what I now know about the account, it most likely always will.

If I had been more sociable I might have learned the details of the VAP account sooner, but as a general rule I mostly keep to myself while at work, and the truth is I didn't much care for speaking even outside of work throughout my time at Dial America. I don't chit chat much by nature, but after having been informed that I was overheard going through entire sections of the scripts in my sleep, I became even less loquacious and more prone to, well sulking really. I did have to speak to my supervisors from time to time, though, and the Veteran's Action Plan account had been mentioned a few times. Usually it was referred to as something that I might be asked to take on eventually if I were to continue improving. Taking this to mean the obvious, that I was slowly turning into a real live robot, I wanted nothing to do with VAP.

I have heard it said that the things a person fears most will eventually come to pass, and while I didn't really fear being assigned to the VAP account (I should have), I did have my reservations. The call floor was broken up into different sections where different types of calls were handled. I had seen the section where folks took VAP calls getting steadily more populous over the course of a few months. I figured that to be a sign that it was high maintenance and even less fun than pretending that I was personally going to pull the plug on someone's AOL account "right away sir/madam" for the fifty thousandth time. I was right.

Tammy was the name of the woman who gave me the initial rundown on the account. She looked so very pale, clammy and hospital-clean as to seem practically sterile. Not as though she couldn't conceive children mind you, just that she wouldn't want them sneezing anywhere near her if she did. I pretty much held my breath for fear of contaminating her with my humanity. She explained in perfectly enunciated American English that Veterans Action Plan was a cleanup account. This meant that they had somehow managed to make a large group of people pretty angry at them, and that we at Dial America had been hired to sort it out. Not only did this mean

that I would be speaking with the occasional caller who was actually irate, it also meant business as usual. I had long before figured out that nothing I tried to do for anyone with whom I spoke on a daily basis actually made any difference at all. My clicks and computer entries for each call were meticulously logged in a database which Dial America's client companies could access at their leisure. And then they were forgotten. Whether or not it sounded good to the caller, if they had been told that Call Choice was good for them, they were getting it. So, handling the callers for the VAP account, who apparently had even more reason to be angry than most of our callers, seemed crazy. Tammy assured me that we would get it straightened out and get back to other more productive (her words) accounts in no time. As much as she seemed to be a good candidate for being the company's supreme cleanup authority, I couldn't bring myself to believe her. There was just something too cold about the way she said it.

No one bothered to explain to me what the Veteran's Action Plan had done wrong, or really what they had done at all. In the three weeks that I lasted, I gleaned details from the callers to help me paint a mental picture of what had transpired. The fact that this mental picture resembled abstract impressionism made me feel uneasy and genuinely apologetic. People were calling because they had discovered a charge on their phone bill that they could not explain, and having called the phone company ("Gracias por llamar a Bell South!") they had been referred to the number at which they reached Dial America again, only this time they were greeted with "Thanks for calling Veteran's Action Plan, my name is _____. How may I be of assistance today?" The issue was of course never fixed the first time a person called, and some had called multiple times before reaching me personally. There were also new people discovering the trouble all the time which explained the steady rise in Dial America employees being put to the task of talking to them.

It is my opinion that Dial America's management had been dealing with these indignant callers by means of their most seasoned, smooth talking employees, in the hopes that most who called would be so charmed that they would forget about the pesky little \$2.99 charge they had discovered. They would hang up truly believing it was fixed, and that they had just spoken to a really nice person in the bargain. This explains why they were so angry when three months later they noticed that they had been charged another three times. They were so angry that they would relate stories of how this had happened to them before I could even say hello. The story was always very similar.

They had been visiting one of the many places that one could pick up free AOL discs at that time, and had seen a booth advertising a raffle. The organization putting on the raffle was a veteran's organization of some sort and so they, of course, had no qualms about supporting a good cause and putting their full name, address and most importantly their telephone number and signature on the entry form and paying the dollar entry fee. Little did they know that on the back of the entry form was unreadable fine print relating how they were authorizing VAP Inc. to apply a voice mail service to their phone line. They were being ripped off - which should have been enough of a reason to refuse to take the calls. I knew that would have basically been the same as quitting, and so tried to soldier on. I needed money after all, and I figured that since I wasn't directly involved in the fraud (I was just a disembodied voice after all) that I could live with the small guilt of being slightly complicit after the fact.

Then one day just after one of my allotted ten minute breaks, I received the call during which the whole notion of being party to this operation turned from one containing a begrudging sense of necessary evil into one embodying existential nausea. The day was particularly beautiful in that bright, sunny southern way that can convince a person that the rest of the workday will be

okay - provided the weather doesn't change before the end of it. I put on the headset and waited for my next call to come through. When the voice of a hysterical woman came into my ears I bolted upright and listened closely. Her accent was thick and I could tell she would have been more comfortable speaking with someone in Spanish, and had most likely gotten sick of waiting for someone to call her back. She was sobbing when the call came through and she didn't let me finish my greeting. I listened patiently as she bawled her way through the story of how her brother couldn't possibly have authorized any such voice mail service being added to their phone line on the date that we were claiming, and that this was her third time trying to get the charges for the service removed from their phone bill. "I know this without a single doubt," she explained. I could only sit and wait for her to continue. This was nowhere in the blue binder on front of me. Her conviction- the sound of it coming through in the timbre of her insistence, and her obvious refusal to let the lump in her throat stop her words- seemed to me to have literally taken hold of my tongue. "Someone must have forged his name trying to be nice," she explained between wet gasps. "Someone who didn't know what had happened." This is the point at which I did it. I broke script. I no longer cared if anyone was listening in on the line. I only cared that I no longer took part in making this woman's loss haunt her.

"Ma'am?" I interjected.

She continued; her grief just kept coming through the headphones. And so I interrupted her again. "Ma'am? I know that I already asked you this at the beginning of the call, but can you tell me what your first name is again?" This drew her up short. The silence was wary, and I could tell that she had to think about it. "Rosa," she said. "What happened to your brother, Rosa?" I continued very shakily, as things were clicking together in my head. "We have in our records that he signed up on, uh, on July 5th." The dread that I was feeling was like vertigo. I didn't want

to know what had happened, but at the same time, I felt I knew already. As I waited for her answer to well its way up through her sobbing, I thought of all the things I'd learned about this account. About how the people in charge of running the booths were paid depending on the number of folks they fooled into signing up. How they had been caught pulling the slips back out of the trash after folks had nearly signed up, but then read the back of the slip and tossed it in the nearest waste basket. I could see Rosa's brother in my mind's eye. I could see him balling up the slip and tossing it. I could see it being fished out a few hours later or maybe the next day even. I could practically watch as the hands of the poor jerk, who like me was just trying to make a buck, as they smoothed the paper out and slowly copied the information onto a new slip.

When she finally answered, Rosa's voice snapped me back to the moment at hand. I was one of a thousand or so young people in a large, dark office space on the bank of the Oconee River in Athens, Georgia, USA. All of us were hooked up to telephones, talking without saying a thing. Typing and clicking in the dark. What she said to me as I looked around made even the supervisor who had just started listening in cringe as he watched my face from his handset at the end of the row of cubicles. "My brother was stabbed to death on Independence Day in the parking lot of the mall," said Rosa. I was now staring into my supervisor's eyes with tears coming in quick succession from my own. "Rosa?" I said calmly, without waiting for a cue – "I'm going to let my boss finish removing the charges for you if he can. I wish I could tell you how sorry I am, Rosa. It probably doesn't make a difference to you either way, but I'm quitting this job. I'm sorry. I'm hanging up now."

There are some jobs that are just not worth it. Not worth the time we must waste on them for the piddling amount of money that we bring home. This is sometimes true because of the sheer boredom and pointlessness involved, and sometimes it is true because the job we are doing,

and the companies for whom we are working, are not only not doing any good in the world, but are actively doing bad. For every corporation willing to whore itself out to the highest bidder, there are thousands who are willing to take a cut of the profit even if it means cutting themselves off from their own sense of right and wrong.

That day I went to hand in my blue binder and tell Tammy that I just couldn't do it any more. I realized that the coldness I had sensed in her when she first briefed me about the VAP account was really just a wall of ice separating Tammy-the-human from Tammy-the-functionary. That might at least explain the completely colorless quality that seemed to define her comportment. Perhaps like Lady Macbeth she really did try to wash off the invisible blood that clung to her like crosstalk to a long distance call. Or maybe the scripts had just driven her nuts.

I still find myself cursing Alexander Graham Bell from time to time; and talking on the phone is something I only do in measured doses, but I will never again forget that the voice on the other end is a real live human being, just like me. Unless, of course, they're one of those robots all the companies are using nowadays.