

Customer Service

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When a phone call is more like torture.

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1

It was the light percussion of a triangle that did it. The soft ting of it incorporated with what would be a rather drab tune, that roused him from slumber. Head pounding, eyes swimming in a sea of their own fluid, he blinked away sleep to the real nightmare (not that he remembered if he had been dreaming, or what it would be about anyway). The old-fashioned style corded phone's receiver lay beside him on the leather couch, chiming the God-awful tune that woke him.

Zach glanced around the room – sorry, 'man-cave' he would boast to his buddies when they paid visits on football night – trying to decipher the time. The great thing about his man-cave was, there were no distractions. Just him, his couch, mini-fridge full of brewskies, a beat up, old coffee table to set them on and his glorious 32-inch Flat Screen TV across the other side of the room. It wasn't much, but the basement was only so big, and his plans for what it would be were larger than the basement it was confined to.

The TV was Zach's newest addition, and currently the bane of his existence. The remote, to be exact. He couldn't get the thing to turn the TV on and as to not punch a hole through his new baby, Zach instead opted to call for help and sort the matter out the right way. The plan was simple, half an hour event. Tops. His little snooze told him it had been more than that, but as for real-time, he hadn't a clue.

He popped up, reaching absent-mindedly for the empty pack of smokes next to the plastic ash-tray full of used butts on the table, smoked right to the filter. He grumbled with annoyance. If Kris would just let him smoke upstairs, he wouldn't have to hide like a child with a chocolate chip cookie right before supper.

It was his house for fuck's sake, he'd paid the down payment, it was his credit that has been ran, but he would be fucked if he could light up where he wanted. That would be a sin . She'd stared at him

like he'd asked for a threesome. Hell, she'd stared at him the same way when he had asked for one! The answer was the same both times, "Are you out of your fucking mind? No!"

Jeez. Gimmie a break.

He was about to get up to head upstairs and grab a few out of the carton he kept in their bottom kitchen drawer when the music stopped, a nasally voice calling out to him.

"Sir, hello, are you still there?"

Hold your ass sweetheart, you put me on hold, remember? "Yea, I'm still here."

"Great! Thank you so much for that, sir." Uh huh. "I was told by the last representative you're having trouble with your television?"

The way the woman pronounced television had come out more like tell-ley-va-sion. Call centers, Christ. "Uh, no, it's the remote. It's not doing anything. My TV won't tur—"

"I see, yes. Sorry about that, sir. I will help you fix the problem, sir. Have you tried pressing the power button?"

Mother of God . "Yes, I have. A whole bunch of times before I called this hotline, and the last woman had me do the same. It's still not—"

At the same time, she started cutting him off again, "The power – oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead." Hint of exasperation.

"I was just saying it won't turn my TV on."

"Yes, okay. The power button is the red button on top, sir." Pow-are, re-yd.

"I'm aware, I'm not an idiot. I know what color button to press, thank you very much." Fully exasperated.

"Sorry for that, sir. I'm just required to ask, you know?" an awkward laugh, full of anxiety. "Have you tried taking the batteries out of the remote and putting them back in?"

Zach pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers, trying his best to remain calm. Without a cig, that was like asking Tom Cruise to climb a 2,722-foot-high skyscraper. "Yes, several times."

"Hmm, yes. I see. Okay, well, let me do a bit of digging and get back to you, sir. I will put you on hold for just a second."

Before he could protest, the tune was back, this time the triangle replaced by piano. Kill me. Zach

slouched back in his seat, sighing audibly. His hand was half-way to the empty pack when he realized for the second time in less than ten minutes, he didn't have any. Stress will screw with your head more than the beer in his fridge.

Ah, yes! Beer! That would help put him at ease for a hot-second. If the woman got back on the phone while he grabbed a cold one, she'd just have to wait. The door to the mini-fridge swung open, revealing three bare shelves, void of anything aside from the open pack of baking soda his 'ole lady stuck in it to keep the stench of fermented yeast at bay.

Tongue against front teeth, Zach's frustration was building gradually by the second. He slammed the fridge closed, causing the thin excuse of single-paned glass shelving to shake inside, jingling like keys in a glass bowl. Zach contemplated running to grab the few things he needed, but the hum of music reminded him he couldn't go too far, he would have to start from the beginning to get his remote fixed. There was no way in hell his temper would allow that to happen.

"Kris, babe? Wanna grab me a bottle from the fridge and a few smokes? I'm out." He called, sitting back down, loosely grasping the phone in his left hand. When he didn't get a reply, he raised what was already a booming call to an even louder yell, "Kristen!" She hated being called her full name, that would do it.

It wasn't Kris who'd answered him though, "Um, sir? You there?"

This lady.. . "Yea?" He answered shortly into the phone.

"So, are you using the remote that came with your television? If it is a different model, you will have to call that company instead."

"No! It came with the fucking thing." He spat between grit teeth. "I don't know what kind of moron you take me for."

"Sorry to have made you feel that way, sir. I do not appreciate your language, though. I'm sorry I will have to let you go at this time —"

"No, please! Sorry. I won't swear again. I just want help is all." He said calmer, not perfectly so, but calmer.

"Okay, sir. I will give you one more chance. I will just warm-transfer you to my supervisor and have him better assist you. Okay?" She strangely seemed unphased, though working a job she does, Zach supposed she must have thicker skin than most.

Zach squeezed his eyes shut as hard as he could before opening them to the ceiling of the 'cave'.
"Sure, that's fine. Thanks."

"You're very welcome, sir. Have a good rest of your day." Her tone implying, she didn't care one way

or the either.

The piano was back. Kris still hadn't made a peep. Usually there was a muffled, 'what?' or even a 'busy' if she didn't hop to, but all he could hear was the music from the landline. Odd. He kept her around because she was good to him. Subservient even. She hardly even bat an eye walking in on him and her best friend tangled up in their bed coming home from work early. There had been a fight, sure, but an hour later it was her tangled up with him, screaming his name at the top of her lungs. Begging.

His boots had been under plenty of strange beds during their three-year thing, a fact she'd been aware of from nearly the beginning. The rock he'd put on her finger last year with that beautiful empty promise was enough to shut her up most days. When it wasn't, a simple, "I'll try harder, babe. You'll see, I will." with enough heartfelt emotion to win an Emmy did the trick.

After that she was back to his blue-eyed barbie doll, nodding along and doing as told. That was the quality that made Zach want her, helped some that she had an ass that couldn't be rivaled with. She would be perfect if her aversion to smoking wasn't what it was.

"Kris, dammit! What the fuck are you doing up there?!"

Still no reply. Between the customer service reps and his beloved 'fiancé' his top was about to pop. Subconsciously, he begun bouncing a leg to the rhythm of the hold music, which in his opinion, was leagues worse than elevator music. He couldn't even remember a time in which elevators had music in them, save for movies he'd seen as a kid with his grandfather.

The music stopped for a brief second and he placed the phone back up to his ear, ready for this shit-show to be over with already. Sunday was a few days away and dammit he wanted to make the guys jealous over something that wasn't skin and bone attached at his hip.

A 'male' voice swam over the telephone lines, aggravating him further with a, "We're sorry, all of our operators are currently busy assisting other callers. Your call is very important to us—" Blah, blah, blah. The music continued after 'he' was through with the automated response.

True to form, just as he was about to get up to see what in the actual blue devil was taking her so long, an actual living voice rang through his side of the connection.

"Hello?" The man, seemingly bored, probed to see if the man he no doubt was informed was rude, was still there.

No such luck today pal, y'all are stuck with me. "Still here." Zach replied in the same uninterested tone as the other man.

"Yes, I've been told you have been having trouble with your television?"

Probably told more than that, but at least this guy wasn't as hard to understand as the woman had been. Normally the more you're transferred, the more you feel obliged to ask for an interpreter.

"Not the remote, the television."

"Yes, what about the television, sir?"

"Oh, for crying out loud, I meant the remote! I've been having trouble with the remote! Remote! The clicker doesn't work!" Though the 'help' couldn't see him, Zach pressed the tiny black device's buttons in random order. Half out of anger, half in hopes the TV would magically turn on and he could simply hang up. There. Done.

No such luck.

"Okay, sir. Is it the remote that came with the television you purchased?"

"Are you people really that stupid?! Why would I call if it wasn't?!"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask that you calm down—"

"Calm down?! Do you know how long I've been on the phone with you guys?! It feels like forever! I even had time to take a nap for crying out loud! All I wanted, was to be able to use my fucking TV with the remote it CAME with! But, no! Heaven fucking forbid I should want such a thing!" Zach's cheeks were filling with blood, blood that was starting to boil hot under his skin. "I've talked to enough of you guys over what's at least been two hours, and no one knows how to fix my problem or ask an original question!"

"I'm sorry, sir I—"

"Like hell you're fucking sorry!"

"Could you please not—"

"Not what? Swear? I don't know where you're from pal, but America is a free country! So, fuck you and fuck your mother! I'm done! Hear me, buddy? DONE!"

With that, he slammed the phone against the transmitter, cracking the plastic with the force, not that he noticed. He threw the remote across the room, who the hell would care if he broke the TV? Maybe he could get a refund and get a new remote that doesn't have problems. The remote narrowly missed the TV though, clattering to the floor after bouncing off the gray-ish cement wall, the back flying off in a different direction than the batteries.

Blood pumped crazily under his flesh, the need for relief in the form of a thin, white paper roll growing insatiable. He needed it just as much as he needed a good reason as to why Kris had blatantly

ignored him. Kicking the coffee table out of his way while getting up, his lighter and ashtray took a trip to the floor. The ashtray spilling its contents all over the place, making a cloud of smoke he wished was in his lungs and not on the floor of his cave. After he made Kris sorry for not paying attention, he'd have her clean it up.

“KRISTEN!” He bellowed, making sure she could hear him this time. She would have to be deaf to have not. He marched up the few steps to separate his cave with the rest of the house, each individual step squealing its protest under his heavy-footing.

He placed a hand on the door knob ready to rip it from the hinges and go hunting. Locked. The door was locked. Locked from the outside, Zach had never given it much thought before, but the straw had been placed on the Camel's back. He could practically hear its back giving way under the weight. His eyes burned in his head with rage.

Caution thrown to the wind, he tried one last time to turn the door knob with no success. The gentler movement followed by his meaty fist balled up, pounding against the solid wood in repetition.

“Open the fucking door, bitch! I won't ask again!”

Complete silence. Somehow, that enraged him more. Fully knowing the door opened in, toward his hollowed room, Zach threw himself against the door anyway. Some small part of his brain telling him he might be able to knock down solid oak from the wrong side of the hinges. He tried until his arm stung, even walked down a step to jump into it, hoping to create more momentum, to no fruition.

It struck him as he was about to run full throttle at the damn thing again.

Call someone.

He could call one of his buddies to let him out, and Kris had better fucking hope she wasn't hanging around when he was free. Not until he stopped seeing red, anyway. Nothing a good, long hard fuck couldn't fix. Maybe he'd make her watch him do someone else, this time on purpose.

His brain filled with appalling ideas on how to 'pay-her-back', practically greedy with lust from it. Zach didn't even notice the ash-tray flipped upside down, his eyes on the prize instead. Didn't notice it until it was too late.

Zach stepped onto the plastic ash-tray, the speed of his pace causing the thing to force him into slipping, one foot toppling him like a fell tree. No, timber ! No, everybody scatter ! Instead, it was a quiet thud. Zach's skull collided with the edge of the beaten-up, old coffee table, just above his right temple, splitting it wide open. Blood poured from his head as he slumped to the ground, warmth pooling beneath him.

From the ground he could only see under his couch, the remains of his to-the-filter smoked butts hiding like cockroaches under it, ashes mixing with the crimson of his blood. He managed a gurgled

chuckle, blood filling in his mouth.

Kris always said smokes would be the death of me. The thought brought another gurgled chuckle, followed by a cough. A spray of red speckled the leather of the couch, a few droplets reaching the butts under it. Zach might have chuckled at that, but his vision was giving out, the black spots turning into patches. Patches turning into nothingness, until the nothing was all that remained.

2

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“How long until he realizes what’s going on, ya think?” The inquisitive tone in her voice had driven it up an octave as she sipped at the cold coffee in her mug, turning in her swivel chair to face her partner.

He shrugged, staring forward, outside of the glass to the room on the other side of it. “Another fifty years?”

“You said that fifty years ago!” She laughed, shaking her head in amusement.

“Yea, well, I’m saying it again. Why, what do you think?” He asked, quirking an eyebrow as he faced her.

“At least a hundred.”

“You’re crazy woman.” It was his turn to laugh.

“Listen chuckles, he hasn’t even looked at the mirror behind the couch yet, much less figured out anything else. Probably thinks it’s a window or something”

“Okay, okay. I’ll change my answer to seventy-five then.”

“Gonna put money on it this time?”

“Nah, ruins the fun. Besides, it’s more fun when they’re oblivious isn’t it? It’s fun to watch them go insane in a new way each time or play the old records when you get bored. When he finally realizes, I bet he just cries for the rest of eternity.” The empty sound to his voice returned.

“Are you actually betting this time?” She asked, staring at him in astonishment.

The man put a hand into his pocket, pulling out a five-dollar bill. “You know what? Yea. I am.” The spark was back in his eyes, a grin sweeping across his face.

“OOoo, a whole five dollars. Big spender.”

“Ah, hush. So are you taking the first call again?”

The woman folded her arms across her chest, leaning back in her chair, staring at the ‘man-cave’ Zach adored. “I’ve gone first for the last fifteen years. It’s your turn for awhile.”

The man sighed, nodding in defeat. “Fine, I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right. Pick it up.”

The phone sat between the two of them, perched on a small desk so they could take turns in their leading roles. He grinned at her before grabbing the receiver and pressing the button to take the chap in the other room off ‘hold’.

“Sir, hello, are you still there?”