

*The Call
Center*
Jan Coffey

JARED LOOKED AROUND THE FLOOR OF HIS office, his face twisting into a sneer. The office was one room and held 220 employees in little cages. Jared stood in his personal jail, shackled to a headset for another six hours and forty-three minutes. He let his gaze wander around the room while he waited on that old bitch to find her bill. He was tall enough to see above the tops of the tiny cubicles.

The office was awash in shades of beige; everything the same. One entire wall of the office was ceiling to floor plate glass windows that showed an uninspiring view of the freeway and parking lot. Covering the walls were cheaply framed motivational posters meant to inspire, rows and rows of puny cages just big enough to hold a computer and a phone. The office was spacious, yet suffocating.

Jared looked at the supervisors' corner, disgust deforming his handsome face. Through the wall of glass that served as his office, Mr. Fritzburg was working on his computer. Everything about the man made Jared angry. Mr. Fritzburg favored the '80's power look'. He had slicked back hair that always looked wet even after eight hours on the job. Jared had never seen him without a double-breasted suit that seemed to be custom fitted to his body. He even wore them on weekend overtime when casual clothes were accepted. He continuously polished his frameless glasses as though he might be able to polish away problem employees.

"Hello? Are you there? Hello?" *Ah, the old bitch, finally back on the phone.*

"Yes Mrs. George, I'm still here!" Jared forced the cheeriness from his throat. *I almost want to kill myself.*

"Are you ready for my account number?"

"Yes I am, ma'am. Go ahead when you're ready."

"Wait. I think I have the wrong bill. Are you with J and R Collections?"

Jared clenched his jaw against the violent things he

wanted to say to her.

“Are you there?”

Taking a deep breath, Jared stated in a flat voice, “Yes ma’am, I’m here. No ma’am we’re the cable company.”

“Oh I’m sorry! Hang on, let me go find that bill.” The old bitch let the phone drop to the counter with a loud clunk making him wince as the feedback drilled through his head. Jared closed his eyes against the headache that was trying to sink its sharp teeth into his brain.

“Bro!” Ty popped up from the little cell next to Jared. Ty exuded douchiness from every single one of his toner-tightened pores. He was tan, worked out three times a week, and had a BMW. He spent a lot of time in the bathroom working on his hair, which was a carefully styled disarray of sharp, inky spikes. His teeth were so white that Jared had to fight the urge to squint when Ty smiled. Ty had a palate of Easter colored shirts in his wardrobe and wore a bright pastel shirt almost every day. Today, it was a cotton-candy pink that was so vivid, it made Jared’s teeth hurt just looking at it.

“Bro!” Ty said again. *If I could just punch him in the face, just once, it would make my whole week*, Jared thought with amusement.

“What’s up Ty?” Jared said. Jared felt that he was supposed to be friends with this asshole because it was the “right” thing to do. He felt that most people were friends with other people that they seemed to have a lot

in common with. Because Jared was a perfectionist, he felt that Ty would have been a good “friend”. Like Ty, Jared also worked out three times a week, made sure that he was properly groomed and had a sense of style.

But Ty doesn’t have this damn demon on his shoulder. This little bastard is always trying to convince me that it’s okay to not care about people. They are all just living their stupid fucking lives, pretending to be perfect on the outside, but hiding their cruelty like rats hiding their food. Work, go home, go to bed, wake up, and repeat. How many of my fellow employees, who smiled and acted like they had perfect lives, would leave work each day and go home to beat their wives, kids, pets? How many went home and sought the company of a child through the Internet, tricking the poor kid into thinking that they had found a new ‘friend’? But I can see through their ‘public appearance’ bullshit. I can help them. I can free them from the hell that is their lives. The demon agreed.

“Bro! Do you wanna go out after work and get some fuckin Jager Bombs?” Ty asked excitedly. *I would rather poke my eyes out with my own thumbs. We are always getting drunk. Everything was a reason to celebrate and drink. His sister had a baby, we get drunk. Ty got a raise, we get drunk. It was Wednesday; we are going to get drunk. I hate alcohol.*

He felt that it was too easy to talk when the warm caress of the alcohol spread through his system. The

thought of someone really knowing how he felt about his plans made Jared go ice cold with fear.

It had happened once. Jared had stayed at the bar after Ty had talked some girl into going back to his place. Jared was sitting at the bar alone, nursing his fifth or sixth rum and coke when a girl sat down next to him. They began to talk and somehow Jared spilled his entire story while staring into his drink. He told her all about wanting to blow up the call center, his dark thoughts and the demon on his shoulder. It came pouring out. He tried to stop it, but his traitorous mouth would not be checked. Feeling aghast, he finally looked at her and was astounded to see a smirk mar her pretty face. "At what point did you find anything funny about what I just said?" Jared was incredulous.

"You can't be serious." She replied taking a large sip of her wine. "You sound like some kind of psychotic vigilante. Killing people to prove that their existence doesn't matter? A demon on your shoulder? Really?"

With glass in hand, she leaned back, crooked her arm over the top rung of the bar stool, crossed her legs and smiled at him. Jared could see the disbelief written on her features. For just a brief moment, Jared felt on fire with rage. *How can she not believe me?* He thought incredulously. His words had rung true while he vomited his story onto her unsuspecting ears. He wanted to wrap his hands around her throat until she took back her

words. As cold as a bucket of ice water being dumped over his head, Jared's next thought was like a life preserver. *She doesn't believe me.* He wouldn't drown in the sea of his admission after all. Relief was instantaneous.

"Alright, you caught me." He said with a flirtatious smile. "I was trying to get an unbiased reaction from you, but you already have it figured out. You're right I made it all up. I'm a writer and I was trying to get some feedback for my next book. I guess my idea wasn't so believable after all." He arranged his features into a look of disappointment. "Well, it's back to the drawing board then." He tossed back the last of his drink while signaling to the bartender for the next round.

"No! It's a great story; I really like the idea that someone could be so cold and calculating. It's completely different from the way I think about people. I think that everyone's existence matters a great deal, even if the live mundane lives. So your psycho thinks about all the bad people that work in his office, but what about all the good people? What about the people who work to support their family or help their parents with the bills? What about the guy fresh out of high school trying to pay for college? What about the single mom who just wants something better for her kids? Are you going to blow those people up too?"

Jared immediately thought of Annemarie, a co-worker of his who fit the description of a 'good person'. She was trying to get through a messy di-

voice and take care of her daughter all alone. Though, through all the stress in her life, Annemarie still found it in her heart to treat people like they mattered. Annemarie did things like remember people's birthdays, order Girl Scout cookies and support the school band by buying wrapping paper from their parents. She even seemed to like Mr. Fritzburg. Anytime Jared said something against him, Annemarie would defend Mr. Fritzburg by saying that he worked hard and Jared should cut him some slack. Jared wondered how he could keep Annemarie away from the call center when the time came.

"Well, I see you have given me a lot to think about. Thanks – I don't think you told me your name?" Jared assaulted her with his I'm-a-charming-guy smile again. Laughing, she replied, "It's Gwen and your charisma is starting to show, so it's time for me to go. My fiancée just walked in anyway. It was good talking to you too. You didn't tell me your name either."

"It's David. Too bad about the fiancée though." Jared said with a laugh. Gwen slid from the bar stool, wished him luck on his book, and threaded her way through the crowd. As Jared watched her leave, she turned back and glanced at him. In that moment, Jared could see the fear on her face and he knew that his lie about writing a book hadn't been bought at all. He watched her weaver her way to the exit, realizing that there was no fiancée. Feeling ill, he paid his tab and

left. He hadn't been able to concentrate on anything for days after that. He was so worried that someone would figure out who he was and that would be the end of his plans. No one had questioned him or found his apartment and eventually, Jared began to relax. He swore to never drink again. It wasn't worth it.

"Jared. Jared!" Ty said snapping his fingers in front of Jared's face. "Are you there? You kinda spaced out there for a minute."

"Sorry. I was just thinking about whether I can waste the money tonight. What's the occasion?"

Ty laughed. "Do we really need one, bro? I just wanna try to get some tail. If you're broke dude, I got you covered. It's not a problem."

Jared feigned a hearty laugh. "Sounds like a great plan."

Ty looked past Jared and said, "Here comes Annemarie. Man, she has a killer body. I wish I could talk her into spending the night with me. She always laughs whenever I suggest it, like she thinks I'm kidding. I've even asked her on a date a half a dozen times and you know I *never* date. I always get the same answer, 'Ty, I could never date you. Hearts would break all over the city if I did and I can't be responsible for the mass hysteria.'" Ty sighed. "But I always try."

"Hey guys." Annemarie said with a smile. After casting a quick glance toward Mr. Fritzburg's office to make sure he was still working, she leaned against Jared's desk. "What's

up?”

“Hello, you sexy thing.” Ty said raking his eyes over her body. “We were just talking about going to the bar after work. Do you want to go or can I just take you back to my place tonight?”

“Ty, you are never going to get me into bed, but I do like your enthusiasm.” She said with a laugh. “So, I will say no to the offer, but yes to the bar. Are you planning on going tonight?” She asked looking at Jared.

“Yeah. Ty is going to drive me.” Jared said smiling into her upturned face.

“Good.” She replied, beaming at him. Suddenly, she seemed to realize that she grinning widely and hastily looked away, but not before Jared noticed a faint rose bloom on her cheeks. “So Ty, which hell hole are we going to tonight?”

“Well, I was thinking about going to-”

“Hello people. What are we doing here? Shouldn’t we be taking calls?” Mr. Fritzburg said, appearing like a ghost directly behind Annemarie’s shoulder making her jump. Jared sighed and closed his eyes. *Here we go.* Mr. Fritzburg took his glasses off and began polishing them with a white linen handkerchief that he produced from the bowels of his suit. “Annemarie,” He said polishing furiously, “I’m disappointed in you. You know better than to be away from your desk without being on break. And to socialize with these...boys.” He seethed, staring

directly at Jared, his almost black eyes snapping with contempt. Jared felt the anger creep up his neck. The demon was dancing with glee at the prospect of Jared losing his control. With supreme effort, Jared managed to give Mr. Fritzburg and pleading look and said,

“She was just here asking me for my copy of the newsletter. She wasn’t here for long.” *I know he picks on her just to piss me off.* Every time she had ever been in there was because she had been caught talking to Jared and every single time, she left Mr. Fritzburg’s office in tears. She never would tell Jared what Mr. Fritzburg had said to her.

“I’ve been watching you three for the last few minutes and I didn’t see you hand her the newsletter. In fact, I don’t even see one on your desk.” He said and seeming to notice Ty for the first time, “Ty sit down and turn your phone on. If I see you with your phone off again, I’ll write you up.” Whirling on Jared, he said “Sit down and I don’t want to hear another word from you. I’m sure I’ll see you in my office again before the end of the week. Annemarie, if you will lead the way to my office, there are a few things we need to...discuss. Namely, your conduct and how who you socialize with can damage your career.”

“See you later guys.” Annemarie said glumly as she started toward Mr. Fritzburg’s office.

“God I hate that asshole.” Ty said angrily. “He Always picks on her.

I wish I could get him fired.”

“I wish I could run him over with my car.” Jared said flatly.

“I wouldn’t ruin my car for him.” Ty said with a laugh. Abruptly turning back to his computer, Ty said brightly, “Thank you for calling Baxter Digital, where we specialize in all your digital needs. This is Tyler, how may I assist you today?” Ty turned back to his computer and Jared tuned him out, staring blankly at his screen.

I could kill everyone in this office gleefully. Just blow them all away. I could die a happy man just to see this building reduced to a pile of burning rubble and bodies. I wonder what Ty would think if I just let my true self out and started blowing people away. Would he run? Would he cower? Would he piss his pants? The last thought made Jared smile. I bet he would, the little bitch.

Realizing that his call had been disconnected, Jared quickly turned his phone off and stood again, looking over to Mr. Fritzburg’s office. Inside, he could see Annemarie looking at the floor, slowly nodding at whatever bullshit Mr. Fritzburg was currently spewing. Fritzburg’s hands were gesturing wildly and his face was red from the force of his words. Jared looked away and again felt the rage come over him. He glanced back to Annemarie and was surprised to see her looking at him. Mr. Fritzburg whipped his head around and made eye contact with Jared.

“Sit down, Jared.” Mr. Fritz-

burg mouthed. Jared imagined pulling out an Uzi and wondered how many bullets it would take to saw him in half. He smiled a huge phony smile and held up both his hands in a gesture of surrender and sat down. He turned his phone on. Immediately the beep sounded in his ear, promising a new caller.

“Thank you for calling Baxter Digital, where we specialize in all your digital needs. This is Jared, how may I assist you today?”

“Finally! Do you know how long I have been on hold? *Do you?* I’ve been on hold for over ten fucking minutes! This is totally unacceptable, I want to speak to your goddamn supervisor right now!” A man screamed into the phone, making Jared’s headset whine again.

Jared sighed, wishing for what felt like the hundredth time that day the he could be done with the pain that plagued his mind. “Alright. Can you hold please?”

“No I can’t fucking hold! What do you think I’ve been doing for the last ten damn minutes? Sitting here with my thumb up my ass? Get him-”

Jared disconnected the call. *I don’t have the patience for this shit.* Looking at the clock, he realized that only seventeen minutes had pass since he last checked the time. *This is going to be a long ass day.* He thought bleakly as the incoming call beep sounded in his ear again like a death knell. Six hours and twenty-six minutes to go. Δ