



For Security Purposes

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They're always angry when they call, so my main job is to calm them down and move through the script until they hang up or are bumped to a Level Two supervisor. Most people just want to bitch about our service, which can be pretty crappy, I'll admit. People need the internet, and if I were them, I'd find another carrier, but I can't tell them that. I'm the voice at the end of the line, here to smooth the waters and string the poor suckers on for another month, to make sure they don't bolt because of our inaccurate billing, frequent outages, slow response times, and lack of service during storms, even though the cable is buried deep underground. I have eight minutes to complete my mission.

We're supposed to dress for work, as if we were going to a real job instead of a converted warehouse full of computer screens and headsets. Apparently when you're wearing a tie, it makes you sound more professional on the phone, so ties are required for the men, skirts or dresses for the women. I got mine at Goodwill. It's pale yellow with coffee stains splattered down the middle, and I outlined the drips with a red marker to make it look like a map of Japan. At work they call me Japanese Jack.

The beauty of this job is the anonymity; the customers don't know who we are. They don't know my record, about the statutory charges I got slapped with when the dad caught me in the cabana with his daughter instead of where I should have been—mowing grass and whacking weeds around their pool. She was seventeen but looked twenty-five, and when she invited me in after slicking up with tanning oil, what would you expect? I didn't expect three years for a straight conviction, or five years' probation if I pled guilty and kept a full-time job that had no direct access to minors. Without the job, I'll still get the three years, as if I'm a real rapist.

On days when the callers are especially pissy, I fake a Japanese accent just to screw with them. Of course, we only have American-accented employees—that is, if you're on my floor. We're the ones who get the "press one for English" calls. The Mexican dudes are on the fifth floor and they get the "two for Spanish" calls, but we don't mix with them. They

don't wear ties, and the women roll in wearing sweats and oversized t-shirts. I guess their callers don't expect much in terms of professionalism.

“Good afternoon, Cheetah High-Speed Internet. My name is Jack. May I have your name and customer number?”

“I already gave my name to the automated lady.”

She sounded young—feisty. I pictured a hot blonde with spectacular breasts and a one-handed ass that begged for the grabbing, dressed in a tank top and fitted skirt. I like to visualize my customers, and if I can conjure up a chick I'd like to bang, the call goes faster.

I smiled and pictured her naked. “Thank you ma'am. For security purposes, I must verify your name and customer number.”

“What does that mean—for security purposes? That my account won't be secure if I don't tell you my customer number? I don't know my stupid customer number.”

“Okay. What's your name?”

“Stella Murphy.”

Cool. Stella. It fit my picture—Stella in stilettos. “Ms. Murphy, you can find your customer number on the top right-hand corner of your bill. It's a fourteen digit number that starts with the letters 'CI'.”

“What kind of retard are you?” she asked. “You think I carry around my freaking bill? Besides, 'CI' isn't numbers—it's letters.”

If the customer gets personal, we're supposed to laugh it off, so I chuckled at the retard comment and pictured Stella stretched across my futon, skirt riding high, nipples straining against her thin white tank. I hadn't decided if she was wearing panties yet.

“How about your security phrase? It's the make and model of your first car.” I like it when the security phrase is not ‘mother's maiden name’ or ‘favorite teacher.’ I was hoping for a foreign job, something with a stickshift, maybe even a convertible—a ride that fit the wildhaired woman on my bed.

“Dodge Dart Swinger.”

Damn. A Dodge. The only Dart Swinger I ever saw was eggplant purple and ugly as a bucktoothed virgin. I keyed in DODGE DART SWINGER and bang! We were in: I had her name, address, building name, unit number—the works. One minute, thirty seconds.

“How can I help you?”

“I told you, Einstein. I don’t have any internet.”

Stella clearly wasn’t going to be any fun. “May I put you on hold while I check for reported outages, Ms. Murphy?”

We’re supposed to express empathy towards the customer and use their name frequently, so they don’t feel like the random piece of crap caller that they are. What really kills me is the company makes a big deal about our operators speaking English, and then we get these yo-yos that press one for English, but can’t speak it themselves. They have names like Behrokh or Aafiya or Jayaprakash, and we’re supposed to repeat their name in conversation as often as possible. That’s screwed. I just call them “sir” or “ma’am,” and hope that even though the call was announced as being recorded for quality purposes, it isn’t. Two minutes, fourteen seconds.

“Don’t put me on hold again. I held sixteen minutes before…”

Punch. Suspended for as long as I wanted, while I didn’t look up any outages. Of course there were outages in her area. We had them all the time around the campus, but never knew why. Sometimes we said there was an unusually high mole activity, that the lines had been damaged by their tunneling. Or that a junction box had been struck by lightning and was under repair. My favorite was that a hacker had spliced the line and taken down the whole block or, in her case, the whole dorm. We could say whatever we wanted, as long as the call was completed within the eight-minute target. I wanted Stella off my line; she’d ruined my fantasy with her damned Dart Swinger.

“Sorry for the wait, Ms. Murphy. A defective transformer is being repaired by the electric company, as we speak. They should have it fixed shortly.” Three minutes, thirty-four seconds. I waited for the click of her disconnect.

“That’s a lie,” she answered. “I can see the transformer from here, and there’s nobody working on it. I want to speak to your supervisor.”

We actually didn’t have Level Two supervisors. To escalate a call, we simply put the customer on hold and either had the guy in the next cube act like a supervisor, or we would don another persona and screw with them ourselves. That’s when I became Japanese Jack. I was under four minutes, so I could afford to let Stella wait a bit before punching back on.

“Lever two Chee-tah In-tah-net.”

I loved how my accent made “Cheetah” sound like “cheater,” which is what we were. We cheated. Our customers paid for services they didn’t get, and since our billing was so cryptic, they rarely figured it out.

“May hep you?”

“Don’t you speak English?” Stella barked.

“May have you cust-o-mah numbah prease?”

“No. You can’t have my customer number. You can’t have anything from me. You can give me something. What is your name?”

I’d never been asked my name on a Level Two call, and was unprepared with an Asian handle.

“Tell me your name,” she repeated.

“My name Phan,” I answered, remembering a Vietnamese kid from my high school. I honestly didn’t even know any Asians, so I was rather pleased I’d thought of him.

She sucked in a lungful, then blew it back out.

“Your name isn’t Phan,” she said, “it’s Jack. You’re the same guy I’ve been talking to this whole time.”

I had the strong urge to disconnect the call, but in an inbound call center, calls only terminate when the customer hangs up.

“Solly miss, this Phan. You give cust-o-mah numbah and I hep you with in-tah-net.”

“Cut the crap, Jack. I’m not letting you off the hook.” Five minutes. “You have to fix my internet,” she insisted. I could have continued my Asian act, but I needed to wrap this up.

“I ... I can’t,” I answered, American Jack back in the saddle.

“Then get someone who can.”

“We can’t,” I told her. “We can’t fix it.”

Silence. Five minutes, fifty seconds.

“Try again in a few minutes,” I suggested, “then call back if it isn’t working.” I fingered my tie and cleared my throat, expecting to push her off. Instead, she laid the phone down.

“Ms. Murphy?” I called. “Are you there?”

No answer.

“Stella?”

I heard Seinfeld in the background, and her nails clicked on the keyboard, oddly synchronized with the ticking clock. Six minutes, ten seconds.

“Ms. Murphy, pick up the phone!” I shouted. Several heads turned my way.

Stella picked up. “You told me to try again in a few minutes. I’ll let you know when it works.”

I was a dead man. All that mattered was my ratings report, the daily report that measured calls per hour and average time to resolution; in other words, how many calls did I handle, and how long did it take. We were ranked weekly, and on Fridays, the dude at the bottom of the list was put on probation, although any call over ten minutes was an automatic axe. I wasn’t about to spend my next three years regretting this call.

I tore off my headset and bolted outside. The air was heavy with humidity, and low clouds obscured the moon. The streets were dark, save the luminous glow from the lights at [St. Francis Xavier Church](#). I ran two blocks west towards [St. Louis University](#), then from the church, it was only a couple more to her building. I sprinted to the center of campus and slipped inside [Marguerite Hall](#), catching the door as a bookish couple came out; the girl stunk of too much Tommy Girl and the guy seemed to inhale it. I caught the stairs to the second floor and banged on the door, huffing for breath. There was the scrape of a chair, footsteps, and then the door—it opened. Stella wasn’t blonde. She was squat with John Lennon glasses, barefoot and wearing gym shorts.

I pushed past and grabbed the cell from her desk—an iPhone I didn’t know how to operate. The screen was dark, so I thrust it at her. “Hang it up!”

She was absolutely inert, nailed to the floor.

“Hang it up!” I screamed in her face. She reached out and fumbled to end the call, then flattened in the corner as I charged out.

I didn’t know the time, but felt sure the call had exceeded eight minutes. I prayed it hadn’t been ten. I ran so hard my nose dripped, so I wiped it on my sleeve, then blew it outright into my tie. Screw Japan. If I beat this, I’d buy a real tie from WalMart, maybe even get a decent shirt to go with it. I heard the faint wail of a siren, and my legs pumped a burning pace for the final blocks. I burst back in the building and collapsed at my station. Nine minutes, fifty-two seconds; that’s when she’d disconnected. I slicked back my hair and wanted to get water, but there were four calls in my queue, so I stayed in my chair. I put my headset back on, and just as I punched on the line, my skin began its crawl.