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Selling Magazines to the Joneses

I.

I saw a flyer posted on a streetlight pole: *Earn, earn...travel, travel*. I knew it was a con – but I'd just been kicked out of the house and it seemed like something that would keep a roof over my head for a while. I called the number on the flyer. The voice on the other end gave me a room number at the Motel 6 out by the airport.

I was ushered into a tiny room on the motel's second floor by a guy in a rumpled suit. There were two others who wanted "to earn and travel" in the room with me, a girl and a guy, both around my age. Rumpled Suit launched into a little speech about the exciting career of selling magazine subscriptions door-to-door. He seemed genuinely excited.

2.

That night I was sitting in a white van with the other new recruits, heading north toward Oakland. We ended up at another Motel 6, located in a used-to-be kind of place, near a row of ancient warehouses and a crumbling off-ramp truck stop where no trucks stopped anymore. There was a pool hall next door.

Two middle-aged guys – one thin, one fat – ran the sales-game freak show. Bob and Terry. They gave us a short, stupid speech about how they would pay for our room and board for the first week but after that we had to score enough magazine subscriptions to earn our own keep. Hopefully, we'd earn far more than that, they said.

“We are giving you an opportunity to grow into wealth,” Bob said. “It’s up to you to grab at the chance we’re giving you. This is your chance to *make money and become somebody.*”

3.

After breakfast we were required to gather at the back of the pool hall for the morning pep talk. Bob stood up, talked about *the sell*. “Selling is about *you*,” he said. “It’s about how you feel about yourself.”

Withered old drunks played pool behind him. Their gaunt, hopeless faces sipped at cans of Coors at seven thirty in the morning; ancient shaking hands held cigarettes. It was exactly the place where my father would have ended up if he had not gotten right with Jesus. I imagined him, unsaved, staring out the pool hall window with bloodshot eyes, watching the dust pass down the street, brains too pickled to think clearly, his pants stinking of pee...

4.

My training partner that first day was Darwin – a chain-smoking, balding, redhead. The con: we were supposed to tell The Joneses that we were selling magazine subscriptions for school in order to win a trip to Europe. The more subscriptions, the more contest points. He pulled out a clipboard with an official looking sheet attached to it, said we needed to get someone in each household to sign it. Then we show it to the next door neighbor. “It makes The Joneses feel safer, you know?” he said. “If my friend Mrs. Smith next door signed something, then probably it’s on the up-and-up, right?” It sounded like a pretty lame con to me. Most of the people in those neighborhoods probably didn’t even know who the fuck lived next door.

5.

That first morning, Darwin didn't do very well. He blamed it on me. Darwin explained the Joneses to me: "If you believe in yourself, man, then they'll believe in *you*, buy whatever you're selling." He lit a cigarette, squinted at me through the smoke. "Do you believe in yourself?" "Uh, sure," I said. Whatever...."

6.

A tiny woman opened the door. A two-month old baby wriggled on the couch behind her. She listened politely while Darwin talked, nodding and nodding. She looked totally confused. Couldn't Darwin see that she could barely speak English? She reminded me of my mom. Darwin babbled on.

The baby cried and the woman turned, went to pick it up. Darwin quickly stepped into the house. "We can come in," he said, following her to the couch, "if you need to attend to the baby." She sat down next to the child, lifted her shirt, put the baby to her breast. Darwin looked away while he kept up his banter: "I've got a list of signatures from your neighbors attesting to their satisfaction..."

7.

Back in the street, I laughed. She'd bought subscriptions for *Good Housekeeping* and *Sports Illustrated* that was almost twice the regular price. Darwin said: "I believe in myself, that's how I sell shit. It's what I'm trying to tell you. You got to believe in yourself, otherwise you're not gonna sell shit and you'll end up in hock to Bob and Terry and you know as well as I do what happens then – you end up on your knees in their motel room doing shit you never thought you'd ever do. You don't want that, do you?"

I stared at him, unblinking. That's when it hit me – I had no idea where I was, what I'd gotten into.

“You don’t want that,” Darwin said, smug, his eyes roaming freely over my body, knowing he’d finally gotten through to me. “You’re with the best. I’ll take care of you.”