



THE LIT AWARD WINNER

Sales Call

SCOTT LAX

W

e were sitting at the bar at a Holiday Inn in Lincoln, Nebraska. Snow fell in heavy wet sheets and the motel had filled up for the night. Cars were skidding all over the highway and even the truckers pulled off and rented rooms. The bartender told us that every hotel in town was booked.

I'd reserved my room a few weeks earlier. I made the once a year trip to Lincoln since graduating from college and going to work for a manufacturers' representative firm. This was the time in America when salespeople sold lots of things to companies that made products. Lincoln was a good place to sell fasteners. The buyers I called on liked to talk football, which was fine with me. They were all Cornhuskers football fanatics, but I managed to fake it, being a Cleveland Browns fan myself, because football is football.

The guy sitting next to me at the bar lit one cigarette after another. He turned to me and said, "What's your trade?"

"Manufacturers' rep," I said. Usually when someone asked me what I did, the questioner often didn't know what that was. "Do you make things?" he might then ask. "No; I sell one company's products to other companies," I'd reply. Sometimes my answer would be met with silence or another question. But this guy nodded his head up and down. He consid-

ered it for a while.

"I make rubber car mats. My problem is that I need to run my plant. If I'm not there they tend to horse around and I get behind on my orders. I could use a young fellow like you to sell for me, a self-starter, a commissioned guy. What kind of percentages do you boys make?"

I assumed the "they" he lamented were his current workers that were probably from generations of working men and women.

"Your generation," – he smiled – "present company excluded, is filled with spoiled brats that don't have a sound work ethic."

I figured his workers got stoned a lot, but didn't want to say something that might ruin his night. Instead I asked him his name. Harry was from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Business was decent, he said, but profit margins were so low that it was hard to justify a full-time salesman. I told him that our company didn't sell finished products, but "components and packaging for O.E.M.s."

Harry shook his head up and down again and said, "Uh huh. And we're a finished product. I get it. No problem, my young friend."

He took a long drink of whiskey. "I'll just stay on the road until I figure it out. I really do need to fire Rich. I promoted the son of a bitch from salesman to sales manager to help his – what do you call it? Self esteem. He's my only salesman and now he shows up drunk at sales calls. Can't have that. We all like our libations" – he held up his golden glass – "but not between eight AM and five PM. Am I right?"

I nodded yes. I was encouraged that he knew that O.E.M. stood for original equipment manufacturer, and that I was with one of my tribe; my tribe, I suppose, being lonely men out on the road trying to sell something they didn't really

At its best, "Sales Call" works like an update on "Death of a Salesman" as it explores a wintry Nebraska encounter between two salesmen, the narrator and "Harry," who peddles rubber car floor mats. As the evening wears on, Harry is astute in sizing up the young narrator, and a kind of decency is attained. "Sales Call" holds the reader's interest throughout. - KAREN LONG

care about and ending up snowed in at a Holiday Inn in Nebraska in the middle of winter.

Harry insisted on buying us another round.

“Good man,” he said, as I drank. “You’re not one of those Chardonnay drinkers. I don’t trust them fellows. That there’s a little light in the loafers for my taste, if you know what I mean.”

I told him I did. While I’d heard the term and knew he was talking about homosexuals, I had no idea if they drank Chardonnay. I didn’t feel like questioning Harry about it.

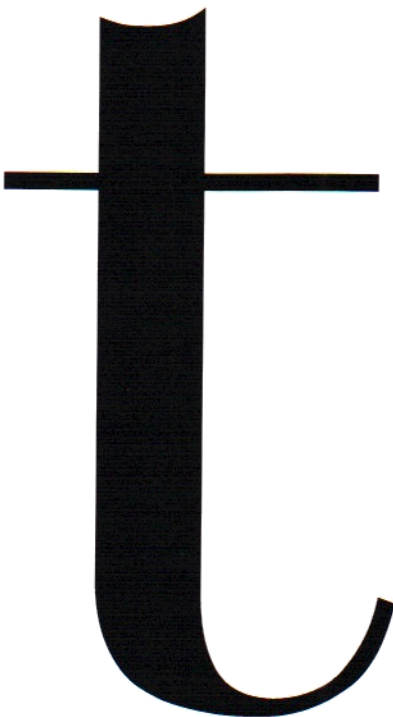
He smoked one cigarette after another. Finally, I bummed one from him. “You want to stay off them cancer sticks,” he said as I lit up with his Zippo.

I told him I was a social smoker.

“Well, don’t get started. Stick to the hooch.”

Harry looked like he’d never seen the inside of a gym or put on a jogging suit and he had a lot of dandruff around his shoulders. Both of us were wearing suits. My suitcase was sitting on my bed, where I’d tossed it before I came down to the bar. Harry wore a gray pinstripe that looked like he’d had it on for a week. I wore a new tan corduroy suit. I figured I needed a warm suit for Nebraska, and I’d been right. There’s no cold like prairie cold, when the wind is a knife blade sharpened by a medieval craftsman. No matter what you’re wearing, you’re an olive with no pit when you go outside and that knife cuts through you.

“Look here,” Harry said, ordering another Jameson’s. “You want to grab dinner in the dining room? They serve a hell of a sirloin. Nothing better than Nebraska beef. Neither one of us is going anywhere tonight.”



he bar was busy. Truckers were drinking shots and beers and getting hammered fast. The cocktail waitresses looked horrified at what the prairie storm had blown in. One had red hair stacked high on her head and green eye shadow. She kept saying to the truckers and salesmen, “Easy, there, fellahs, or I’ll call your wives.” She laughed after she said it, but I could tell she wasn’t happy about working

through a blizzard. It was only eight o’clock and she had a long night ahead of her with a bunch of drunken salesmen and truckers.

After a couple of Jameson’s, the idea of trying to tune my hotel room television in to one of the two stations that Lincoln had wasn’t attractive. I’d left my book, a Tom Clancy paperback, on the airplane, which annoyed me because I was two-thirds of the way through it. I had been looking forward to maybe taking a bath and reading the book, then watching some Johnny Carson and turning in. I had an eight o’clock the next morning with a company that made industrial shelving. They bought a lot of expensive screws that were made in Elk Grove Village near Chicago, where the company I worked for got our fasteners. Getting that account would be a real coup for me around the Friday morning sales meeting table.

Over dinner Harry showed me his left hand, which I hadn’t noticed at the bar. He was missing the tips of his little and ring fingers.

“Let me tell you about cold,” he said, holding them up like a trophy. “I lost these babies when my car conked out on my way home from work one night. No gloves. Six miles of walking through a blizzard. Can you believe that? Frostbite.”

“Man,” I said. I didn’t want to stare at his tip-less fingers.

“Where you from?”

“Cleveland,” I said.

“Then you know cold. But not northern Wisconsin cold. I’m talking twenty below and wind. I was lucky. Up where I live you see guys with missing feet, hands... those boys are usually the drunks that roll out of taverns thinking they’re warm. They wake up in snowdrifts – if they wake up – and they’re blue. They’re lucky if they keep their limbs. If not...”

He held up his hand again. “Like I say, I’ve always been lucky. At least I’m alive.”

The bar and restaurant was filled with smoke. There were arguments and apologies and laughing and shouting around us. Hanging out with Harry made me feel a little better about my life. At twenty-eight years old, I’d been divorced for a year. I still got carded at bars but I felt old. I thought Harry might have worse stories than I did.

“Not married?” he said, glancing at my naked ring finger.

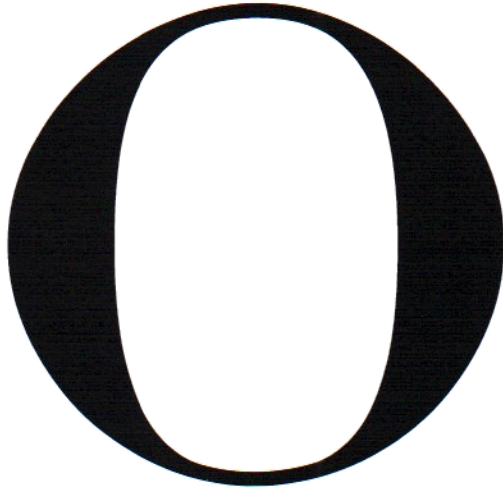
“Good-looking young fellow like you? You’ve got a good job. Sales is a solid occupation. People will always need to buy goods and you have to have salesmen to sell them goods. I’d think the ladies are knocking down your door. Am I right?”

“I had some bad luck a while back,” I replied. “I made a bad choice. It’s over and done. I guess you could say I’m gun-shy.”

“Ah, well. I guess you young folks are different from my

generation,” he said. “We hang in there through thick and thin. But things change. Hell, the wife and I do the disco every now and then.”

Harry was about six inches shorter than I, and the way he slouched in his chair made him seem even shorter. He'd combed what remained of his hair from one ear to just over the other ear.



ur steaks arrived and Harry was right; they were outstanding. I ate slowly, and drank my third whiskey even slower. I realized I couldn't hang in with Harry,

who had a hollow leg. I hoped he wasn't one of those drinkers that suddenly turned crazy or violent. But he just kept drinking and talking, mostly about the rubber car mat business and how he started it in his twenties, and how the Japanese were destroying the American car market. He told me about his wife and kids and how they were “the best family a fellow could have.”

“What do you drive?” he finally asked, not unpleasantly.

“An Olds Omega.”

“American.” he said. “Then you have one of my car mats.”

He looked proud. I didn't have the heart to tell him I had carpet car mats.

“I'm sure I do,” I said. “It's a very good mat. Never falls apart.”

Harry looked at me like I'd somehow made his life better, if only for the night.

“See? This is why I do what I do. Every now and then you meet someone who drives American, and knows quality. A rubber mat gets dirty, you wash it off. Am I right?”

I felt ashamed that I'd lied to Harry. But he seemed so happy. Dear Jesus, I thought. Rubber mats. This is my life.

“So you're a peddler,” he said. He smiled and wrapped his hand with the missing fingertips around his glass. He'd finally slowed down on the Jameson's. “Is this where you saw yourself ten years ago?”

I began to answer without knowing what I was going to say. But my voice had suddenly gone hoarse. It happened to me on sales calls; now it was happening to me with Harry, who made rubber mats for American cars.

“I...”

“Are you alright?”

I pointed to my throat. It was closing, constricting, and I was having a hard time breathing or swallowing. I began to panic.

“Drink some water,” he said. “Do you want me to get a doctor?” Harry seemed suddenly sober and concerned. “You choking? Maybe someone knows the Einstein maneuver.”

I tried to smile and nod and let him know I was okay. But it was a bad choke up – the worst I'd ever had. I couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe very well, and couldn't talk to save my life. I thought I might die at twenty-eight years old in a Holiday Inn in Nebraska, sitting with a guy with two bum fingers and who made car mats for shitty American cars like my Olds.

After a few minutes and making sure to breathe through my diaphragm and drink more water, I could finally speak. The Jameson's had kicked in, late, but hard.

“I hate it,” Harry,” I said. “I have no idea why I do what I do.”

Our waitress – she wasn't the one with the piled up hair and green eye shadow – came over. “Looks like you boys were hungry. Can I get you some dessert, another drink? I don't think anyone's going anywhere tonight. The highway patrol closed down the highway. We're socked in for the night, at least.”

Harry ended up paying the bill. I protested, but he kept apologizing for me choking.

“It's not your fault,” I said. “I get hoarse sometimes and have a hard time breathing. And talking.”

We left the restaurant. The bar was going into overdrive. Some of the truckers were arguing about something with a couple of traveling salesmen. Harry and I stood in the lobby.

“Look here,” Harry said. “I didn't want to say anything in the restaurant, but I want you to consider something.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You're too young to give up. That's what you've done, isn't it? Given up? You had a bad marriage. But you're what, twenty-five years old?”

“Twenty-eight,” I said.

“Good lord,” Harry said. “Twenty-eight years old. Now listen to me. You need to do what you need to do. You can't talk about your job and you can't make sales calls, because this isn't who you are.”

I stood there and looked at the tile floor of the Holiday Inn. Then I looked at Harry.

“What should I do?”

“You should go home and quit, and then do something you want to do. What do you like to do?”

“I was a guitarist in a band,” I said.

“Did you like it?”

“Sure. I loved it. But you can’t make a decent living at that.”

Harry looked at me. “When you lose your voice, it’s because you’ve lost your heart for what you’re doing.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve never lost my voice. I love what I do.” Harry smiled.

I’d told Harry over dinner that I’d left my Clancy novel in the plane. “Done it myself many times,” he’d replied. I assumed he’d forgotten it as small talk.

Harry said, “I’ve got a Newsweek I picked up at the airport. You want it?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “But what are you going to read?”

“I’m whipped,” he said. “I’m hitting the hay. Early day tomorrow.”

We walked to Harry’s room, which was close to the lobby. I glanced in at his room. It was a mess and stunk of cigarettes and dirty socks. Outside the snow was coming down so hard it looked like a white curtain had been drawn across the window. He isn’t going anywhere tomorrow, I thought.

“Here you go,” he said. He gave me the magazine. John Lennon, who’d been shot two weeks earlier, was on the cover. “One of your guys. I think you’ll enjoy this more than me. Shame about him, though.”

We shook hands and said goodnight. I didn’t think to ask him his last name.

After my bath, I dried off and got in my pajamas, which I always brought with me on overnight sales calls. I walked over and opened the curtains, which were made of vinyl. It was snowing hard outside. You could see the highway from my room, and there wasn’t a single car or truck light. The only lights were snowplows, with spinning yellow lights. I sat down on the one of the chairs at the little round table by the window and watched them on the highway, passing each other in both directions.

The next morning I got up at six, saw that the roads and airports were still closed and digging out of the snowstorm, even though it was bright outside. I called the company I had an appointment with, and left a message on their answering machine. I cancelled my sales call and went back to sleep.

At about ten-thirty I went down to the restaurant and figured I’d see Harry. I wanted to give his Newsweek back to him. But he wasn’t there. I asked one of the waiters if he’d seen him. I gave his description. “You mean Harry? He was out of here first thing this morning. Nothing stops that guy. He’s a true salesman.”

I checked out and caught a cab back to the Lincoln airport. When I got back to Cleveland, I gave notice. My boss told me he’d had great hopes for me. “You’re a natural at the sales game,” he said. “Sorry to lose you.”

Harry and I never crossed paths again. I ended up in a different world than him, thanks to him. What I remember most about Harry is the look on his face when I was choking. You don’t forget someone who actually gets as concerned about you as Harry was that night.

I figure Harry would be in his eighties by now, but I doubt if he made it this long. With all his smoking and drinking and extra weight – life in general – I’m not sure I want to know what happened to him. I prefer to think of him as a guy who loves his job, a guy I met at a Holiday Inn in Lincoln, Nebraska, when I was young; a manufacturer of rubber mats for American cars, which, I’ve always believed, is an honorable profession.

Lack in my room, I drew a bath. While I lay in the tub I kept using my big toe to add hot water. I could hear the TV in the other room. Listening to the local Lincoln, Nebraska news, like listening to the news in any other city than Cleveland, seemed exotic.

I still felt the effects of the whiskey. I read through the Newsweek and fell asleep a few times in the tub.