

Customer Service

By Matthew Baldwin

The telephone rings as I'm loading my gun. I jam the clip home, slap the pistol into my shoulder holster, take two short steps to the faux-mahogany end table, and glower down at the ancient, rotary phone.

There's no reason for this thing to be ringing. For starters, it's quarter of two on a Tuesday morning, well outside the acceptable hours for calling anyone. Furthermore, the phone's number is known only to the Client, and he's been instructed to never contact me again. I'll do the job, he'll learn of it later today, and our business will be concluded.

That's was the plan, anyway.

I arrived by plane yesterday morning, encumbered only by a change of clothes, some toiletries, and a paperback biography of Alexander Hamilton. My first stop was at the home of an associate, who gave me the Smith & Wesson he'd procured on my behalf. Then I drove to Seattle and checked into a small and shabby motel, just within the city limits. The clerk - a truant middle-school student, surely - assigned me to this first-floor room on the front of the building. With shag carpeting, a fraying floral comforter, a television that pre-dates the remote control, and a single faded seascape painting adorning the otherwise barren walls, it's as if I've taken up lodgings at a thrift store. Still, they accept cash and it suits my modest needs, so what do I care?

I could have completed the job hours ago, but felt no sense of urgency. Drive to the Target's home, fulfill the contract, arrange things to look like a burglary - by my reckoning, the entire operation would take little more than an hour. So I frittered away the evening, first reading my book, then alternating between the television's two stations. Procrastination is a bad habit of mine, and one of the many reasons I am self-employed.

Finally, five minutes ago, I decided to get on with it. I slipped on my shoes and jacket, started preparing the weapon. It looked to be a straightforward assignment, and I anticipated no difficulty.

But now the phone is ringing, and that *can't* be good.

I settle on the edge of the bed and study the telephone warily. It rings a fifth time, and a sixth. If someone has dialed a wrong number, they are in it for the long haul.

That, of course, is the likely explanation: a drunk in a bar, somewhere out there in the city, has accidentally punched a 7 instead of a 6 while calling a cab, and is too soused to even consider hanging up. But I know otherwise. Professionals in my field can sense impending complications like sailors smell rain.

I sigh on the eighth ring and pick up on the ninth.

"What?" I say without inflection.

At first I hear nothing but an intermittent hiss, the hallmark of a cell phone. Then, a voice I immediately recognize as the Client's. "Is...is this the, the person..?" He trails off, bewildered.

It's strange, though not unpleasant, to hear him at a loss for words. Whenever I've seen the Client on television - and when I briefly met him in person yesterday afternoon - he's been self-confident to the point of arrogance. Understandably, I guess, as one of the few dotcom billionaires to survive the crash in the late 90's. His website, Opulence Online, sells luxury items to the obscenely wealthy - art, yachts, jewelry, even

low-orbit space flights - and he currently presides over the company as CEO. While not the richest man in the country, he is rumored to be in the top 20.

So I let a couple seconds tick by before answering. Let him sweat, for once in his life.

“This is Xerxes,” I say at last. “Did you forget our arrangement? No more contact, ever. Those were the terms to which you agreed.”

“The..? Ah, yes! That’s why I am calling!” He instantly reverts to his typical, businesslike manner. “It’s off. I’m canceling the job.”

I shrug. “Okay, fine. It’s off.”

“Excellent.” The Client’s voice is fraught with relief. “I’m glad I caught you in time.”

“Just. I was walking out the door.”

“My lucky day.”

He hesitates, waiting for me to ask something. I don’t take the bait. “I suppose you want some sort of explanation,” he prompts.

“Not especially,” I reply. But I know he’s going to provide one. They always do.

It’s the same when they hire me: clients seem compelled to account for themselves. I tell them up front that I don’t give a damn, but they tell me all the same.

When I first started in this line of work, I thought they felt guilty, or didn’t want me to think them a bad person. But you become a pretty astute observer of human nature after a few years of doing this, and I eventually tumbled to the truth.

See, here’s the thing. To get to the point of killing someone, the typical person has to invest considerable time and energy into justifying their decision. They don’t call it ‘premeditated murder’ for nothing. By the time they contact me, clients usually have a nicely polished rationale all queued up and ready to go. A real labor of love. Something to be proud of.

And they want to show it off. Convincing yourself that murder is acceptable takes as much skill and dedication as building a ship in a bottle. My clients don’t want to set their completed project on a shelf somewhere; they want someone to admire their handiwork.

So I pretend to listen, assure them that, were I in their shoes, I’d be doing the same thing. They beam like they’ve won a blue ribbon at the fair.

I don’t often get to hear the other end of the story, where they explain why no longer want a target dead. Only three of my assignments have gone uncompleted - four, if you count the guy who keeled over from *e. coli* the day before I got to him. Even in the cases where a client calls it off, it’s never because of misgivings. It’s always for reasons as self-serving as the first.

This client’s tale is no different. The Target is a business rival who’d been blocking a key acquisition. Suddenly, the situation has changed. They’d been up all night negotiating a new arrangement, one in which the Target is now essential to the transaction’s success. Or something. I’m only half-listening, honestly, though I dutifully hold the receiver to my ear for the entire story.

He reaches the culmination of his narrative, and I utter some stock phrases to imply I’ve paid attention. My goal is to wrap this up as quickly as possible.

“Anyway,” the Client concludes, “our meeting just finished, and I’m on my way to your motel. I should be there in ten minutes.”

“Why are you coming here?” I ask. “Our business is complete.”

“Well, yes. Except for the refund.”

Huh. That’s a first.

I should simply hang up, but can’t resist a riposte. “Ah, yes, I see what the problem is: you appear to have confused me with a Radio Shack. I do not give refunds. Under any circumstances.”

“You never said that.”

“You never raised the possibility that the contract might be terminated,” I counter. “If you had, I would have made the policy explicit.”

“Your oversight,” says the Client, “not mine.”

At this point it occurs to me that he might be joking. It happens. Some clients, having hired a hitman, come to fancy themselves ‘hardboiled’, start thinking they can treat me like a drinking buddy. They pull out all the stock phrases they’ve heard on *The Sopranos*, asking what kind of “heat I’m packing,” wondering when I’m going to “whack the guy.” I had one client - a woman, even - who managed to cough out the phrase “25 large” with a straight face. You can see why I strive to keep my contact with these idiots to a minimum.

I have a hunch that The Client is serious, though. A refund is the sort of thing he would expect.

The customer service provided by Opulence Online is legendary. Small items are hand-delivered to the buyer within hours of purchase, occasionally by the Client himself; ownership of larger items is transferred with lightning speed. You can buy an island in the morning and be sitting on its beach in time for sunset. It’s often said that the company will bend over backwards for all their customers, and bend over forward for an elite few. And they never – never - refuse a refund.

But I have a different business model, a fact I reiterate.

He barrels ahead, undeterred. “Look, I know you had to fly out here and everything. And I’m sure you had other expenses, meals and your motel. I don’t expect you to pay for that stuff out-of-pocket. But there’s no way I’m going to let you keep forty grand for nothing. That’s outrageous.”

The Client pauses, as if considering. Then: “Let’s say you keep five thousand and return the rest? I think that’s more than fair.”

“How about I keep it all and you shove off?”

I appear to have touched a nerve. He abruptly shifts into Intimidation Mode, bellowing, “Do you know who I am?”

The question is certainly rhetorical, a line used to bully his way into restaurants and out of speeding tickets. But I decide to answer anyway. “As a matter of fact I do, Mr. O’Sullivan.”

I like to foster, in my patrons, the illusion of anonymity. I tell them not to reveal their names or any information that might enable me to identify them. It’s a charade, of course. As soon as my intermediary tells me that someone is interested in my services, I conduct a thorough background check on the potential client. The goal is to weed out the nutcases. Mr. Sullivan is proof that it doesn’t always work.

The legwork was unnecessary in this case, as the Client had delivered the money to my motel room himself. I told him to send it via courier. But when I opened my motel door yesterday afternoon, there he was, Steffen O’Sullivan, with his ridiculous hair and

trademark bomber's jacket, a duffle bag of money in hand. Behind him, in the parking lot, I could see his brand new Lexus wedged between a run-down pickup truck and a Datsun with a garbage bag taped over a missing window.

He was restless and giddy - nervous, I assumed. That was to be expected, meeting a guy like me in a neighborhood like this, with no visible form of protection. Then I realized he was exhibiting excitement, not fear. He cheerfully handed over the cash and attempted to make small talk; I cut him off and closed the door in his crestfallen face. Afterwards, I wondered if his primary interest in doing business with me was novelty, the thrill of purchasing one of those rare things he'd never bought before.

I'd given no indication during our meeting that I knew who he was. Maybe he thought I wouldn't recognize him, as unlikely as that sounds. Maybe he just didn't care.

Still, I expected him to drop the matter when I actually spoke his name. Instead he sounds pleased.

"Excellent," he says. "And do you know how I got be where I am today?" This time he doesn't wait for a response, answering the question himself. "Six simple words: 'Give the customer what he wants.' I've built an empire on that motto, and it's a good rule for any business. Even yours.

"Now," he continues, "I'll make this...hang on."

I hear honking horns and screeching tires, though no sounds of collision, alas. The Client swears colorfully at another driver, but I'll wager he was the cause of whatever happened. People who talk on cell phones while driving are a goddamned menace.

"I'll make this as clear as I can," the Client resumes when the crisis has passed. "I am your customer. And I am asking for my money back. What do you say?"

"What I've been saying all along. I don't give refunds."

The Client remains silent. I listen to the petulant hum of my room's decrepit alarm clock. Someone, a few rooms down, is watching late night television, and I can hear every line of dialogue through the paper-thin walls. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping we are done.

"Fine," says the Client, but I can tell he has some new subterfuge in mind. "However, most businesses that don't offer refunds at least allow exchanges. A substitution would be acceptable."

"A substitution for what?"

"The Target, as you call him."

"You want to switch the contract to someone else?"

"I don't *want* to," he says. "But will settle for that, in lieu of the refund you so stubbornly refuse to provide."

"Who?"

"I don't care. Anyone will do."

By now I'd decided that the Client never joked, even when jest seemed the only explanation for a statement. "You think it's that simple?" I ask. "Do you have any idea how much effort I put into planning an operation?"

"I'm not asking you to plan," he says magnanimously. "Just shoot the next person you see. Take his driver's license and mail it to me afterwards. I'll have someone verify that he was killed, and we're square. You keep the cash, I get my money's worth, everyone's happy."

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Listen,” I say. “I read the papers. I know how much you’re worth. If forty grand fell out of your pocket it wouldn’t be worth your time to pick it up. We made a contract, and you broke it. Write the money off. Why drag an innocent person into this mess?”

He barks out a theatrical guffaw. “Yes, heaven forbid an ‘innocent person’ gets involved. Everyone you’ve murdered in the past had it coming, no doubt.”

Well, he’s got me there.

I mull over his proposal. Targeting a stranger has some advantages, actually. For one thing, there will be no way to trace the victim back to me. With a hired hit, there’s always a chance that someone will blab, or the death will prove so convenient for a client that the authorities start poking around.

But I am hesitant to select the target myself, even at random. I wonder why. Maybe because doing so would run afoul of *my* nicely honed rationale: that I am just a gun to be pointed by others. Just doing my job, just following orders. Ultimately not to blame.

The Client remains quiet, patiently awaiting a reply. I curse myself for even considering the idea - my delay in responding implies that the ‘no refunds’ policy is negotiable.

I am about to say something, but sensing indecision, he pounces.

“I’m about a minute from your motel, so let’s cut the crap. I want my money back. Or I want another killing in exchange. If you don’t have the guts to do the latter, then I’m taking the cash. If you don’t do either, I’ll drop a dime on you.”

Drop a dime. Christ, I hate these people.

“And, what?” I say. “You think I’d just neglect to mention your name?”

He laughs, and it sounds genuine. “Say whatever you want; I’ll take my chances. In the unlikely event that anyone takes you seriously, I have the best legal team in the nation on speed dial. You don’t want to scrap with me, boy. You’ll come out the loser ten times out of ten.”

That’s the problem with these rich guys: they think they are above the law.

No, I take it back. The problem with these rich guys is that, by and large, they *are* above the law. He’s absolutely right about the odds. If it comes down to a legal pissing match between me and The Client, I’ll wind up in jail and he’ll come through unscathed. If anything, the rumors of dirty dealings will probably bolster his reputation as a hardball negotiator. I know it, and he knows I know it.

The blinds on the front window glow briefly as headlights rake across them. A moment later, through the phone, I hear the sound of a pulled emergency break. The purring of the car’s engine, which had served as a backdrop to our conversation, ceases.

“So,” he says lazily, “how about that refund?”

I consider my options one last time, but he has me over a barrel. I have no choice but to comply with his demand.

“All right,” I growl, “we’ll do it your way.”

“Excellent.” He speaks briskly, closing the deal. I hear him open the car door; when it slams shut a moment later, the sound comes to me in stereo: a sharp report from the receiver, a distant bang from the parking lot outside. “I knew you’d come around.”

A crescendo of footsteps, expensive shoes on asphalt, ceases outside my door. “Knock, knock,” says the Client into his phone before ending the call.

I cradle the receiver and yell, “It’s open.”

The Client, clad in the same clothes he’d worn yesterday, lets himself in. He takes two steps into the room, pivots, and closes the door. He is grinning when he turns back around, his face awash with triumph.

We lock eyes for a second. Then he breaks contact, glancing around the room in search of the duffle bag. “Is the money still here?”

“I think I’ve made my policy clear,” I say, rising to my feet. “No refunds.”

He continues to smirk, but his eyebrows knit in puzzlement. “I thought we were doing it my way.”

“Oh, we are,” I reassure him. “I believe your exact words were: ‘Shoot the next person you see.’”

His smile falters as I draw the gun.

“Give the customer what he wants,” I say. “That’s my motto.”

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