

## Time Management

They pull up to the address, 732 Madison Street, in their government-issued black Buick. The two men linger in the car for a bit.

“Listen, just take notes on how I do it, OK? These first couple of times, I want you to observe how an audit goes. Pretty soon, I’ll let you run one, and I’ll watch and give you feedback. Sound good?”

“Yes, Mr. McIntyre.”

“You don’t need to be so formal,” he says, rubbing his haggard face. His hand stumbles over his goatee, but slides smoothly over the rest of his shaven cheeks. “Look, kid...sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Griffin Pulfroy.”

He looks at Griffin, all blue-eyed, blonde and youth. He tries to see himself when he was that age in Griffin, but he can’t remember how exactly he felt about the position back *then*.

“Griffin, when it’s just us, you can call me Howard. When we’re with an auditee, however, then it’s Mr. McIntyre, my partner, or just McIntyre. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

He sees Griffin as obsequious, yet earnest. *He’s still green, that’s all*, he reminds himself. *Just wants to do a good job. Nothing wrong with that.* He gives Griffin an approbating smile.

“You ready for your first audit?” Griffin nods, though his thick blond hair remains perfectly still, as if it’s plastered to his head. “OK. Let’s head in. Grab the briefcase.”

The two get out of the car and walk toward the house. The home is nothing fancy—two stories, canary yellow siding on the house, a few windows, which leads Howard to believe there are 8 rooms total in the house. He’s done this for so long it’s easy for him notice how houses are

connected—four windows usually means living room, dining room, kitchen, two bathrooms, two bedrooms, and a basement or attic.

“You know his name, right, Griffin?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Always make sure you know it before you get to the door. It makes them a bit more comfortable.”

Howard feels the warm sun on his black suit. It makes him flushed, and sweat starts to bead on his forehead. He looks up at the cloudless blue sky, and a tiny smile that he tries to hide from Griffin appears. *I'd love to be on a beach right now with a cold drink in my hand.*

They reach the door, and Griffin knocks forcefully. “Easy, kid. You’re not invading France.” Griffin turns slightly sheep doggish, and Howard smiles briefly. *I don't remember ever being THAT worried over my performance.*

A woman in her early 40s opens the door. Her auburn hair is slightly frayed, and her blue jeans and white t-shirt are weathered. Howard can tell that when she has time to put in the effort, this woman is a knockout. She’s still fit, and there’s a glint of sparkle in her eyes, one that he’s sure is more noticeable on special occasions. She looks apprehensive, so Howard flashes her a smile to try and calm her down.

“Are you Mrs. Bloom?”

“Yes, and you are?” she says with a bit of an edge, which Howard is used to hearing in these situations by now.

“I’m Mr. McIntyre, and this is my partner, Mr. Pulfroy. We’re with TMS, and we’re here to speak with your husband, Rodney Bloom. You received a notice in the mail six weeks ago about an audit, correct?”

“Oh, right, that’s today... shit. Oh, sorry, excuse my language.”

“Quite all right, Mrs. Bloom,” Howard says. “Believe me, I’ve said worse.”

She gives a perfunctory smile, and she tries to fix her hair. “Please, come in and have a seat in the living room. I’ll get my husband right away. Hopefully, he didn’t forget too.”

She takes a step back and rests against the door to invite them in. Griffin walks in first, then Howard. Mrs. Bloom points toward the green couch in the living room, and Griffin and Howard walk to it. As he walks in, Howard stares at the big screen TV set up on the opposite side of the room from the couch. *That must be at least sixty-five inches.* Next to the couch is a recliner, also green. Most of the floor is covered by a white throw rug, but on the outskirts is beautiful hardwood floor. *Pretty comfortable living. I wouldn’t have guessed this to be so nice.* The two sit, and Howard gestures at the briefcase, so Griffin hands it over to him. Howard removes the contents—a manila folder containing lots of documents, a legal pad, pen, and tape recorder. He places them meticulously on the coffee table in front of him.

“I’ll go find my husband. Can I get either of you something? Water, coffee?”

Griffin is about to speak, but Howard answers before Griffin can say anything. “Nothing for us, thank you. You have a lovely home.”

She begins to walk upstairs, and Howard watches her to see when she’s out of sight.

“You don’t want to ask for anything—they view this procedure enough as an inconvenience, so we don’t want to add to that.”

“That makes sense.”

Howard continues to prepare for the audit, but he feels Griffin fidgeting next to him. Out of the corner of his eyes, he looks over and sees Griffin shifting on the couch. “What are you so nervous about? All you have to do is watch.”

“I always get like this before big situations. You should’ve seen me in the locker room before a lacrosse game. I’d sweat through my jersey before we even took the field.”

“Well try and work on that. You need to be calm and in control. Let them be the ones who are a wreck. If you stay even-keeled, you won’t say or do something you’ll regret.”

Howard gets a whiff of something cooking. He smells garlic and tomatoes. He breathes it in. His attention is drawn to Rodney Bloom walking down the stairs. Rodney is dressed in clothes that look like they were bought ten years ago—skin tight jeans and black shirt with a graffiti-looking design on it, both cling to his skinny frame. His blonde floppy hair makes him appear as if he’s an aged surfer.

“Mr. Bloom? I’m Mr. McIntyre. This is my associate, Mr. Pulfroy.”

Howard stands up to meet Rodney as Rodney enters the living room. Howard’s impressed with how firm Rodney’s hand shake is, and he notices how muscular Rodney is. *He must spend a lot of time working out.* After the handshake ends, Howard sits and jots down that note on the legal pad. He checks quickly and sees that Griffin also shakes Rodney’s hand.

“Shall we begin?”

Everyone sits, and Rodney looks strangely at ease. Most men are very tense during the audits, but Rodney reclines in his chair and crosses his legs. *I bet this guy never breaks a sweat.* Howard starts leafing through Rodney’s file.

“So Mr. Bloom,” Howard begins, “you are a music teacher?”

“Yes. I give guitar lessons.”

“Interesting. How often do you give them? Give an estimate—is it 20 hours a week? 30?”

Rodney runs his hand through his hair, scratches the back of his head, and searches for the answer. “I’d say...about thirty hours a week, on average. It depends on the week, though.”

Howard writes this down. “Very good. And where do you hold them?”

“You’re sitting in my office,” Rodney says and flashes a big smile. Howard can sense the charm that Rodney possesses. “My flock, what my wife calls my students, are as young as 6 to as old as 60, so it’s just easier to have it here. Plus, it lets me keep an eye on the little ones.”

“Little ones?” Griffin asks.

“My kids. Trent and Gwen. Trent just turned 5, and Gwen is 2.”

“Do you have them playing yet?” Griffin says. Howard is pleased by Griffin’s initiative.

*Always good to make the person feel comfortable.*

Rodney gives an electric smile. “Trent yes. Just starting with the basics though—major chords, progressions. Nothing too fancy yet. Gwen’s barely talking, so we’ll give her a bit more time...like a week.” He smiles at his own joke, and Griffin lets out a little chuckle. Howard smiles, partially perfunctorily, partially amused.

“OK, so, on average, 30 hours a week. And you said you also watch your children?”

“That’s correct. My wife’s a lawyer. She’s my sugar momma, so I just have to stay fit and be her trophy husband as I take care of the house.” Howard laughs at this as he writes the information down.

“Very good, Mr. Bloom. OK, let me just check my math here to make sure it adds up. On a typical week, 30 hours is spent working, let’s say 20 hours of house responsibilities. Would you agree with that assessment?”

“Yes, that sounds about right.”

Howard nods, makes a note of it. “As you are aware, the Responsible Citizen law, passed in 2015, mandates that all citizens of society be a productive member of it. This means that a

minimum of twenty hours be spent working in some capacity. Clearly, you've achieved that aspect."

Rodney puts his hands behind his head, then nods.

"Now we have to talk a bit more about your personal life. Again, as stated by the law, you are allowed 10 hours a week of leisure activities. This includes hobbies, physical fitness, et cetera. Can you walk me through a typical week for you in those regards?"

Rodney removes his hands from behind his head and slaps them gently against his legs. He starts shaking his legs a bit, then begins rubbing his hands together. "Let's see. I work out for one hour five times a week. I play guitar one hour a day, every day when I wake up. Um...oh, my wife and I watch quite a few TV series. Usually it's a lot of reality shows like *Who's Desperate Enough to Be on TV?* Stuff like that."

Howard doesn't need to look up from his legal pad to know that Rodney is showing off those pearly white teeth. "By my calculation, then, that puts you at 14 hours a week of leisure time. Is that correct?"

"I'd say so, yeah."

"You do know that the maximum amount of time that we at Time Management Service allow for what's considered 'wasted time' is 17 hours a week. Usually when doing an audit, I always give 1 hour to the person for miscellaneous activities. That can include things that you may not have remembered to tell us, times where you spent a bit longer than usual doing something, and so on. Also, it helps because it accounts for sexual intercourse."

"Only an hour?" Rodney says, this time with a smile slightly devious.

“The average sexual performance by a male is between 3-5 minutes. Given that couples tend to have sex 4 times a week, this is a more than generous estimate for *most* people. Obviously, there are always exceptions.”

“Obviously.”

“Can we then agree that you use 15.5 hours a week of your leisure time?”

“Yes, that sounds about right.”

Howard puts down his legal pad to read Rodney. Rodney, unflappable, sits in his chair, fiddling with his fingers. “Is there anything else you can think of?”

Rodney looks up from his hands and at Howard. Howard has seen a lot of people react strangely to this part of the audit—people with some of the most powerful jobs always seem to crush under the weight of not declaring some activity, under the pressure of being under the microscope. But Rodney remains calm. “The only other thing I can think of is that I listen to music.”

“Very good. I’m glad you brought that up, considering we have your receipts for your music purchases from the last six months. That will be another 1.5 hours a week. Perfect—17 hours exactly!”

“What can I say? I don’t waste my ‘wasted time.’”

Griffin laughs loudly at this. *He’s getting a bit too sucked in by Mr. Bloom’s charm. He’ll have to learn to keep his distance a bit more.* Howard picks up the legal pad. He reviews his notes, but everything seems to check out.

“Well, Mr. Bloom, my colleague and I have everything we need. Everything seems to be in order, so if you won’t mind just signing this document that says you agree with our audit that

you are contributing the correct amount of productive work hours to society, we'll be on our way.”

Howard turns the form toward Rodney, who picks it up. Howard also places his pen on the table for Rodney to use. Rodney doesn't even read over the document, but quickly signs the bottom. He hands the pen and document back to Howard. “Thank you.”

“So that's it? Not too bad.”

“Thank you for your time. You have a lovely home.” Howard begins to put everything back in the briefcase.

Rodney smiles happily. “Yeah, I really lucked out.”

Griffin smiles widely and extends his hand. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too. And you as well, Mr. McIntyre.”

Howard and Rodney now shake hands. “Before we go, I must ask—what's cooking in the kitchen? It smells terrific.”

“I'm making homemade tomato sauce for a goat cheese and vegetable pizza.”

“That sounds delicious,” Griffin adds.

“Thanks. Yeah, when I have a show, I like to cook before since my wife has to watch the kids by herself.”

Howard's brow furrows slightly. “I'm sorry, did you say you have a show?”

“Yes. I'm in a band. We're called 30 Pieces of Silver.”

Howard takes out the folder. “How long have you been in this band?”

“Oh...God, 15 years now. Fuck I'm getting old!”

*Well the charm and the outfit make more sense now—he's probably the front man of the band.* “And how often does your band perform?”

“Twice a month, sometimes more.”

Howard is writing all of this down. He notices Rodney eyeing him suspiciously, the first time that Rodney hasn't appeared confident.

Without looking up, Howard continues his questions. “How much do you get paid per gig?”

“After we split up the fees, each member gets between \$50-100, depending on the venue. Is that an issue?”

Howard does the math without acknowledging Rodney's concerns. Rodney is staring down at the legal pad, doing his best to try to discern what Howard is writing. Griffin watches with interest, transfixed by every minute note Howard scribbles. Howard can see Griffin's posture become more rigid.

“Even if we do a liberal estimate, you make between \$2,000-\$3,000 by playing in this band. A person needs to make a minimum of \$10,000 per year in order to have it qualify as a job.”

“So? I do it for fun. What's the harm in that?”

Howard puts the legal pad by his side and stares sternly at Rodney. “The problem, Mr. Bloom, is that this means this activity falls under the stringent guidelines of a hobby. And as we've already discussed about the hours per week you devote to those...”

Rodney runs his hand over his face, pulling down on his cheek. His eyes dart back on forth. Weirdly, this comforts Howard. *This is what I'm used to dealing with.* It allows him to detach his emotions more easily from the audit.

“What are you saying?”

Howard puts the pad in his brief case. Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees that Griffin stands with arms folded, facing Rodney.

“You have to quit the band,” Griffin says.

Rodney places his hands on his head again, though this time not as a relaxed pose. “You can’t be serious. But music is my passion! It’s my dream...”

“Though the 17 hours are considered wasted by the government, you are aware, Mr. Bloom, that physical activity helps continue to make you a productive member of society, so it’s *strongly encouraged* though not required by TMS. Since your wife is the breadwinner of the household, other allotted time cannot be changed. And yes, you can cut back on your TV watching time, which may give you an hour back, but...I’m assuming your band practices in order to prepare for shows, correct?”

Rodney does not move, though his face blanches. Howard stares for a few more seconds, then nods in understanding. “Unfortunately, you can see that there is no other way. You don’t make enough money at it to justify it as your career, and it eats up too much of your free time to allow you to continue it as a hobby.”

“A rock and a hard place,” Griffin adds, and Howard can detect a bit of pleasure in Griffin’s tone.

“Look, can’t you pretend that I never said that? I already signed the document. That has to mean that the audit was over when I told you, right?”

Howard feels Rodney’s eyes pleading with him. He hears the desperation in each syllable of Rodney’s words. Howard feels sorry for Rodney, for the hundreds, if not thousands, of Rodneys he’s dealt with in his career. He’s about to open his mouth, but Griffin speaks. “Rules are rules.”

Rodney's hands fall from his head. His eyes follow to the floor. After a few seconds, he looks up behind glassy eyes. "I'll kill myself if you make me quit playing. I'll put a fucking bullet in my brain. Do you understand?"

Howard senses, so slightly, the tear fall from Rodney's cheek to the floor. *Why did I have to ask about the stupid fucking dinner? What has it gotten me, caring?* "Expect an official notification about terminating your involvement with the band within the next 5-10 business days. If you do not comply within 30 days, we will be forced to issue a warrant for your arrest."

Before Howard can even think about extending his hand to shake Rodney's or offer any consoling gesture, Griffin walks out of the house. Before Howard follows, he looks at Rodney, standing lifeless, upper body drooping to the floor under its own weight. A sight Howard has seen too many times in his career.

He leaves the house to find Griffin standing by the car. He unlocks it, and Griffin gets in the front passenger seat. Howard hands Griffin the briefcase before he sits in the driver's seat.

"Can you believe him? I hate people like that."

Puzzled, Howard turns his whole body to face Griffin. "Like what?"

"Those who think that they can charm their way out of anything. What he's doing is illegal, and he thinks if we like him enough we'll let it slide."

Howard turns his body back to face the steering wheel. "You need to learn to not let your emotions get the best of you. Unfortunately, with this job, you're going to have to do things that you may or may not agree with. Comes with the territory."

Griffin nods with a slightly apologetic look on his face, but after a couple of seconds of acting sheepish, he returns to his earlier state. "I don't get it. He should be spending more time *teaching* and focusing on his family. That's where he's making his contribution to society!"

Howard mulls this over as he starts the car.

“Look, Griffin, you have to realize something—some people are fortunate enough that what they do for a living is their career, it’s what they love.” He stares out the windshield. *It really is a beautiful day.* He releases the parking break, puts the car in drive, and leaves his foot on the break. “For others, it’s just a job.” He puts his foot on the gas, and they drive off.