

# Chapter 1 from *Selling Fearlessly: A Master Salesman's Secrets for the One-Call-Close Salesperson*

- By Robert Terson

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***“I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.” – Christopher Reeve (1952-2004)***

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In the Introduction I quoted Olympic pole-vaulter Bob Richards: “Every day ordinary people do extraordinary things.” Now I’m going to tell you about an extraordinary event, 41 years ago, which turned my life around forever; I call it “The Mound Road Story.” It encompasses all three sides of the selling Triangle (see Chapter 9, “The Triangle”). I’ve told this true story, maybe, a hundred times; and each time I tell it, a tidal wave of incredulity sweeps me out to sea and I ask myself: Would my professional life have been markedly different, would the success I achieved been lessened, if that remarkable event had never taken place? It truly makes me wonder.

Here’s some background to help you appreciate that improbable night and morning. I trained four weeks before going into the field alone that Wednesday; my first town was New Lenox, Illinois, approximately ten miles east of Joliet. I lost two presentations that first day and two more the following day, Thursday. I also set up an appointment Thursday to present to two women, partners in a beauty salon; forty years have faded their names into oblivion, but we’ll call them Margaret and Joanna. They were in their mid-thirties and, as I recall, quite attractive. So I was 0 for 4, a bit shaky mental-attitude-wise—my fantasies had foreseen *instant* record-breaking numbers—and a dark shadow of desperation stalked me as I drove over to that beauty salon.

Bob Trudeau, who taught me the telephone-book-cover advertising business, used to say, “The first olive out of the bottle is the toughest; they start pouring out after you get that first one out.” I craved that first olive out of the bottle.

My subconscious must have been working in overdrive, because when I got there, I re-qualified them to make sure they were the sole decision makers; it’s a good thing I did.

“Well, actually,” Margaret said, “we’d have to get our husbands’ approval, too; it takes all four of us to decide anything.”

The sound you would have heard was air exploding from my lungs via my agape mouth. You've heard about the deer caught frozen in the headlights? Well, that was me. I thought I'd properly qualified them earlier, but obviously not—a rookie mistake. I was making too many of them. *Oh, God, what else can go wrong?*

"Is it possible to set up a time when I can show the program to all four of you?" I asked, thinking dejectedly about the long drive home to Skokie; the long, *blank* drive home. It was going to be excruciating to tell my wife, Trudeau, and new colleagues I still was a "virgin."

Joanna said, "I don't know when we could do it; they're really never here."

"No," Margaret added, "they both work at the plant. They don't get off until seven most nights—"

And then she threw me a lifeline.

"—in fact, we scheduled our monthly business meeting for tonight, right after they get off."

Oh? I gave it a shot—I boldly asked if I could give the presentation at their meeting. Was I clutching at straws? To put it mildly.

They looked somewhat dumbfounded at each other; Joanna hesitatingly said, "I guess...."

"I think it might be okay," Margaret said, "advertising is something we're planning to discuss; I don't think the guys would mind."

*All right!*

It was decided: after they closed the shop in about 45 minutes, I'd follow them—each had her own car—all the way to Joliet to Margaret's house, which she mentioned was on Mound Road. I left to get a cup of coffee, called my wife to let her know what her screwy husband was doing, ditto Trudeau, and anxiously waited for the time to pass. I wouldn't get home until God knows what ridiculous hour, *but I wanted that first sale.*

### **Setback One**

When I got back to the beauty salon, my heart sank down to my toes, because the shop was closed—lights out, door locked, Margaret and Joanna gone. They'd left without me. All I had now was their business cards and an empty promise of a presentation, which unfortunately wasn't going to take place tonight.

I doubt I was ever more discouraged (well, not for another 23 years anyway, but that's another story). I dragged my jilted body and soul back to the car and got onto I-80 heading east. I screamed a litany of curses; it didn't help. I told myself it didn't matter—I'd come out swinging tomorrow; that didn't help either.

There was a bitter taste in my mouth, an aching in my gut; I wanted to punch out a wall.

I'd driven about five miles when suddenly I yelled out, "*Damn it!*" and, my heart racing, spun off at the next exit, circled around heading west towards Joliet. I was *not* going to give up this easily. No, sir!

*You're nuts, Robert, you're absolutely nuts. You know that? WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*

I was forging ahead with aggressive ignorance, that's what I was doing.

I exited at the first Joliet off-ramp, looked for a gas station to get directions to Mound Road—cell phones and GPS systems didn't exist in those days. There were none in sight, but I spotted a tavern and thought, *What the hell, why not?*

It was so dark in that gin mill I could barely make out the two patrons at the bar nursing their drinks. On the jukebox Elvis was singing "Don't." Was God was trying to tell me something? I asked the bartender if he knew where Mound Road was. He gave me a strange look, said, "Sure," and proceeded to give me directions which I easily memorized. Luckily it wasn't far. Before I left, I used the payphone to call the home number on Margaret's card, but there was no answer.

### **Setback Two**

It took less than five minutes to get to Mound Road, but I was shocked out of my mind. Now I knew why the bartender had given me that weird look. It was a dirt road heading nowhere in the pitch-black moonless night, pockmarked with shadowy silhouettes of impoverished shanties. There was *no* way Margaret lived around here, not a chance in hell. This was one step above skid row. What in God's name was going on here?

With the aid of a flashlight I tried to catch an address on one of the shanties; the number was nowhere near Margaret's address. Well that was no surprise. This was nuts. Get me out of here.

### **Disaster Strikes**

Suddenly I heard a loud *POP* and the car went deader than a slab of granite.

For a second I thought maybe someone had fired a shot at me, but when I yanked open the door to generate some light, I saw a pool of liquid rapidly spreading out around and under the car.

*Oh my God!*

I slammed the door shut, cried out, "Please, God, get me out of here; if you'll get me out of here right now and get me home, safe and sound, I promise I'll never do anything so utterly stupid and idiotic the rest of my life. I promise!"

*What am I gonna do? I am so screwed. Oh, dear God, please help me.* I was so angry with myself I could've ripped my arms from their sockets: I could have been halfway home by now—safe, warm; instead I was here, on a miserable dirt road, in the black hole of hell, in a dead car, helpless, *totally helpless*. What was so bloody damn important about one lousy sale? What could I have been *thinking*?

I sat there about five minutes feeling sorry for myself before sanity kicked in. Flashlight in hand, I made my way to the shanty which had provided the address and knocked on the door. A tall, gaunt man greeted me with “Howdy,” and I rattled off my terrible misfortune. I begged to use his telephone to call the motor club.

*Please, let him have a telephone.*

“Course ya kin,” he said, sounding like a recent arrival from West Virginia or Kentucky. He stepped aside, said, “Ya’ll come awn in, pulease.”

Never in my life had I seen such poverty, not this up close. These were poor people, barely subsisting. In the tiny bedroom off to the left, there was a young boy and girl huddled together in a twin bed; they were staring wide-eyed at me through the open doorway. They reminded me of the cartoon characters in *Little Orphan Annie*. The entire shack could not have been more than 750 square feet, tops; the dilapidated, ink-stained sofa and mahogany rocker from Good Will maybe. A smell of bacon hung in the air.

I profusely thanked the man and his wife and asked where the telephone was. He said, “Ya know, Ah’m purdy good with cars; how ‘bout ya lemme take a peek at ‘er; mebbe I kin do somethin’; no harm’n tryin’, right?”

I probably embarrassed the man, the way I thanked him over and over again. I never was more grateful to receive aid from anyone. I handed him the keys and flashlight, and he ventured out to see what miracles he could perform.

I plopped down on the “sofa” and prayed anxiously.

The wife offered me a glass of water, which I accepted; what I really could have used was a straight bourbon, but I wasn’t about to ask. We exchanged a few pleasantries but mostly sat there in dumb silence.

He was gone about ten minutes—an eternity. When he finally returned he grinned, said, “Ya in luck, mah friend; taint nothin’ but a water hose come undone from the radiator. I’ll just git ‘er tightened a bit, fill ‘er with some water and she’ll be all fixt like new. Ya’ll’ll be on yer way in no time a’tall.”

I could have hugged that wonderful Good Samaritan, his wife, too. I owed them big time, truly I did. They may not have been educated, or have much materially, but they were what my father liked to call “a Class Act.” On this night they were a Godsend.

While he repaired my car, I called Margaret again; this time she picked up on the first ring. She was astonished to hear from me. It turns out she and Joanna had done an Alphonse-Gaston Act: Margaret had

been parked in front, Joanna in back, behind the shop; each drove off thinking I was following the other. After arriving at Margaret's house, which was on a different Mound Road across town, they were shocked to discover how mistaken they were.

I gave her a quick rundown of my adventure on the dirt Mound Road; she apologized for the mix-up, asked if I still wanted to give them the presentation—the guys would be there around 7:45.

You bet, I told her, and used my pocket secretary to write down the directions.

*Okay, let's do this.*

I tried to give my Good Samaritan some cash, but he waved me off, wouldn't hear of it. "Jus glad to help ya," he said. The next day I sent him a fifty, with no return address so he couldn't send it back.

### **The Other Mound Road**

Margaret's house was a two-story structure in a rather classy neighborhood. How many Mound Roads did this town have? The girls greeted me enthusiastically, apologized again for the screw-up; they were *so* sorry.

Not to worry, I told them, all's well that ends well. I had no idea how premature I was, because that's when they hit me with the bad news, as if I needed more bad news.

"The guys just called," Margaret said; "there's an emergency at the plant and it looks like they're not getting off until eleven-thirty now, probably won't get here until after midnight." She was *so* sorry. "*So* sorry," was beginning to sound like a recording; I wanted to *scream*.

Margaret asked, "What do you want to do?"

*How about shoot myself.* I felt like Job.

"Do you mind if I wait?" In for a penny, in for a pound, my mother, famous for her aphorisms, used to say.

"No, of course not," Margaret said.

Joanna added, "We hoped you would."

So I waited, from 7:15 to 12:15. I could bore you with what went on during those interminable five hours, but I'll be kind.

When the husbands finally arrived, they were *not* thrilled to see me, got angry when they found out why I was there; incredulously, the girls had not told them I'd be there. They'd had a tough night and the last thing they needed was a "damn lousy salesman" giving them a "damn lousy presentation" about some "damn lousy advertising." I had to use every dollop of persuasion I could come up with simply to get them

to listen for a few minutes. I promised, if at any point they didn't like what they heard, I'd shut up and leave.

Phew!

Maybe I should have opted for an academic career.

The average presentation in those days was about an hour-and-twenty-minutes; this one took *three-and-a-half hours*, I kid you not. Remember, I had *four* people asking questions and firing objections at me; for the first hour, the guys hostile as Yosemite Sam.

I walked out of there at 3:45 in the morning.

With my first sale tucked safely away in my jacket breast-pocket, over my gleeful pounding heart.

The dollar volume was \$463.16.

Not much compared to the huge sales I brought in years later, but it was, and still is, *the* most satisfying sale I ever closed.

## **Euphoria**

I drove home but could have flapped my arms and flown all the way.

*Euphoric*, that's what I was. There was no drug on earth that could match the high engulfing me. I had done it. I had withstood every roadblock the gods had strewn across my path...

...and was *Victorious*.

Trudeau was blown away. He followed up the sale for me (I slept all day Friday), and reportedly Margaret asked him, "Did he tell you what time he left our house?" My colleagues had a new found respect for me. I later found out all four had warned Trudeau not to hire me. Why? My weak handshake. Never again did I shake a hand without giving a firm, worthy squeeze.

Trudeau suggested I take the positive feelings from my extraordinary experience and store them in a "jug" for safekeeping, so when things weren't going so well, when I needed a lift, I could take a "swig" from that "jug" to lift my spirits. It was great advice.

If I truly am the man I was that fateful night and morning, then I'm always that man, true?

You're darn right it's true.

If you haven't experienced it already, somewhere along the way you'll have your own extraordinary story to tell, and won't that be something? Until you do, please, borrow the "jug" and take a "swig" on me

whenever you need one; and remember—it's overcoming those “insurmountable” hurdles which make a salesperson strong and sets the tone for his/her entire career.

**Order *Selling Fearlessly* Now!**