

## Lesson #1

# THE BOSS DOESN'T LOVE YOU

It is true that before moving to New York City in May of 1985, I turned my back on a six-figure trust fund. I was seventeen, and I wanted to be able to lay sole claim to my successes and failures. My parents considered me foolish, stubborn, and, worse yet, ungrateful. “You’ll regret it,” my mother told me. Yet I didn’t miss the money—at first.

Here’s what I do wish I’d brought with me when I boarded a Greyhound bus in Indianapolis bound for the city: a working knowledge of how to operate a laundry machine; experience writing checks and balancing a checkbook; familiarity with padlocks and dead bolts; the rudimentary cooking skills to fix a grilled cheese sandwich without setting off a smoke detector; and the ability to sense when I was being hustled.

Savings from summer jobs and a lifetime of birthday money left me with \$2,327 to my name. I burned through it quicker than I should have by renting a room by the week at the Chelsea Hotel. I had read about the storied hotel in *Rolling Stone*. Dylan Thomas, Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and Madonna all called the place home at one time or another. I never saw any of them in the halls.

I did cross paths with heroin addicts who dozed off on the furniture in the lobby. I shared elevator rides with agitated schizophrenics. I met a pimp who got quite hostile when I declined his proposal that

I should become a sex worker and allow him to represent me. Despite my longing to make friends, I kept to myself.

The best thing to come my way at the Chelsea Hotel was Gregory Yester. He was gorgeous. Haitian. Six foot two. Three years older than me. Broad shoulders. Dark skin. Hazel eyes. Dimples so deep that they showed even when he wasn't smiling. Gregory said whatever was on his mind, which is a habit that society punishes, but I found it exhilarating to be around. He helped bash the repression of prep school right out of me.

Gregory approached me while I was checking my mailbox one night, and he was shameless in his appeal. "Can I borrow five bucks? I owe my dealer, and listen, lil man, do me this solid, and I'll not only pay you back, I'm gonna roll you the best fuckin' joint you ever put between your sweet lips."

"Okay, let me see what I've got," I said, pulling my leather wallet from my pocket, opening it in front of him, and fishing through the two hundred dollars in cash I kept on my person. "Here, take a ten."

"Really?"

"I don't have anything smaller."

"You serious? I get the whole ten?"

"Yes," I insisted.

I held out the ten-dollar bill, and Gregory plucked it gently from my fingers.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Earl, but everyone calls me Trey."

"Trey, I'm Gregory." He put a hand on my shoulder, kissed me on the cheek, and whispered in my ear, "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"You're welcome."

I leaned forward to kiss him back but stopped myself. He had already stepped to the side and turned away to put my money in his wallet.

“Which room are you staying in?” I asked. “I’m in 315.”

“Oh, I don’t live here,” he explained. “My dealer does. I’ll catch you later, Trey.”

Then he took off up the stairs. I wasn’t sure I’d ever see him again. But he’d been so charming and sexy that I wasn’t angry at him.

Gregory, bless his heart, did track me down in my apartment a couple of days later, and he rolled me a joint. He smoked half of it with me as we sat shoulder to shoulder on my stiff orange futon. I tried to act casual, despite my fervent hope that getting high together would lead to sex. Sylvester’s album *All I Need* was under the needle on my record player.<sup>1</sup> I pressed my left knee and thigh against Gregory’s right leg.

“Got you a nice place here,” he said, eyeing my apartment. “Who’s the daddy payin’ for all this?”

I misunderstood the question and answered, “My father is Ward Singleton, but my parents aren’t supporting me.”

“Nah, I’m not talkin’ about them.” Gregory handed me the joint. “Your *daddy*. The man turnin’ you out and payin’ your bills. What’s his name? I probably know him.”

“I don’t have a daddy,” I said, realizing that once again a man was assuming that I had a calling in the sex trade. “I’m not doing that. Do I look like I do that?”

Gregory smirked. “Yeah. You’re gay, and you ain’t hidin’ it. Hell, you advertisin’ with them tight pants and the way you sway your ass

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1. Sylvester (1947–1988), an African American singer-songwriter who performed an avant-garde blend of R&B, soul, and disco music, was open throughout his career about his homosexuality and was forthright when he was diagnosed with AIDS. In an *LA Times* interview two months before he died, Sylvester drew attention not only to his personal plight but to how the AIDS epidemic was disproportionately ravaging the African American community while mainstream coverage was focused elsewhere. Sylvester said, “It bothers me that AIDS is still thought of as a gay, white male disease.”

when you walk. Plus, you got that clean, young look that chicken hawks go crazy over.”<sup>2</sup>

“Well, I’m not into that.”

“Okay.” Gregory pointed to the joint dangling between my fingers. “You just holin’ that to look pretty or what?”

I put the joint to my lips and enjoyed it. The weed that Gregory had scored was sublime: a mellow ride that not only banished worries but induced easy laughter. Gregory and I got increasingly comfortable under its influence. He put an arm around my shoulders. I draped a leg across his lap. He quizzed me about my plans in New York City, and I had to admit that I hadn’t thought much beyond just arriving and finding a place to live. I didn’t have a job lined up. I didn’t have a network of contacts to help me find my way. I didn’t have a master plan. As we finished that first joint, Gregory and I found my aimless existence hilarious.

I didn’t know Gregory well enough yet to tell him that actually I felt quite accomplished having escaped a life in Indiana among the damned: the fallen women, the broken men, and the godless sex perverts. Public sinners. Cautionary tales to the good people I grew up among. Lessons apparently lost on me because by the time I reached high school, I was considered destined to dwell on the outskirts of polite society.

There were no two ways about it. I was gay and notorious. Mind you, I didn’t come out as a homosexual while living in Indiana. Given my mannerisms, that step wasn’t necessary. I was fooling no one, and before I reached puberty, I stopped denying the playground taunts.

As for my notoriety, it stemmed from a family tragedy. My younger brother, Martin, died when he was nine years old. His death would have been harrowing enough to process had it remained a private matter. When it became a news story, my pain was amplified,

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2. *Chicken hawk* is a slang term, popularized in the 1970s, for an older homosexual male who prefers (often exclusively) and pursues (often aggressively) younger sexual male partners (who in some cases are underage).

and my grief was distorted. I was eleven years old. I didn't know how to handle the whirlwind. Along with the other surviving members of my immediate family—my mother, my father, and my younger sister, Jackie—I was initially the recipient of unrelenting pity and curiosity from locals who followed the story of Martin's loss. But I managed in short order to dash the sympathy that people held for me, and I seemingly confirmed, to all who suspected, that my homosexuality was indeed a sign of my depraved soul.

Since it was already clear what my fate would be on Judgment Day, the good people of my hometown wouldn't dream of associating with me. I was a social leper. My respectable family—pillars of the bougie Black community—would see to it that I didn't starve, but my days were to be lonely and squalid. I was taught there was no place on Earth that would accept me—a queer marked like Cain. And that message was unrelenting. For years, I ingested so much hate, and in a thousand painful ways, I prepared myself to be the subject of whispered gossip, the target of gay bashings, and the recipient of shameful sex.

Only in my senior year did another path begin to emerge: New York City. No one I knew had anything good to say about the place. It was crime ridden and drug addled. It was the epicenter of moral decay. I set my heart on living there, and for a while, doing so felt like enough.

As we puffed our way through a second joint, Gregory explained, "I'm kinda in a jam, Trey. You see, I can't crash where I've been stayin' 'cause the guy's wife is comin' home from the hospital, and I had a new spot lined up, but the renovations ain't done yet. Can I sleep here for a few nights?"

I blamed the weed for my momentary struggle to process everything Gregory said. Was he really asking me for another favor, despite this being only the second time we'd interacted? Who does that? And who was this man that had let Gregory stay with him until his wife was discharged from the hospital? And why was she in the hospital in the first place?

“What do you say? Three, four days, tops,” he pleaded. His voice was deep and hypnotic, and he smelled like baby powder and cocoa butter.

I told him, “You can stay as long as you want.”

Gregory kissed me on the lips, finished the joint, and left me with blue balls while he went to take a shower. We didn’t have sex that night or any other. I wasn’t his type. Gregory was only twenty, but he loved topping white closet cases who were forty-plus. Looks weren’t what turned him on. He was attracted to drama and power, and secrets, and hurried sex, and the contrast of Black skin against white flesh. That’s why he was willing to be the clandestine, Black fantasy for someone as decidedly ugly as Mayor Ed Koch.<sup>3</sup>

Being a dominant top wasn’t Gregory’s only skill. He could also type 120 words a minute, and his fast fingers enabled him to work whenever he felt like it for a temp agency that staffed law offices. Otherwise, he made a living as a sex worker, sharing his time and affections with old, rich, married white men. He considered it a fair deal.

Gregory broke it down like this: “If they wanted they wives and they wives wanted them, then there’d be no need for *me*. I’m the answer to *alllllll* they prayers.”

I was having a harder time earning money. My dream was to work in radio. As what exactly, I didn’t know or care. I was just crazy about music. Chaka Khan, Patti LaBelle, and Stephanie Mills were the goddesses I prayed to. During my boring teenage years in Indiana, I read *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard* religiously, and I could recite the number one songs on the Top 40 and R&B charts for the past four years.

There were nearly a dozen Black radio stations throughout the five boroughs. I typed up my résumés, put on one of the tailored

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3. Claims that Mayor Ed Koch (1924–2013) was homosexual were never substantiated, and Mayor Koch addressed the rumors with an unequivocal denial: “No, I’m not a homosexual. If I were a homosexual, I would hope I would have the courage to say so.”

dress shirts that my thirteen-year-old sister, Jackie, made for me, and presented myself for employment. My sales pitch was simple: I'd do the lowliest work for minimum wage.

I got to the interview stage on several occasions. Assistant programmers or deputy station managers would question me about music, and I'd get so excited to show off what I knew that my hands would wave this way and that, and my body would sway and rock, and I'd shout things like, "Tina Turner in *Mad Max* is sure to be the living end!"

My hetty inquisitors would grin at me and nod. One time, a station manager brought in a couple of other employees to sit in on the interview. I quickly realized that they considered me a flamboyant spectacle. My mannerisms were their amusement. I wish I'd had the courage to curse them out, but I did have enough self-respect to stop talking mid-sentence, stand up, and leave. I heard them laughing as I headed for the exit. I'd assumed that people whose work revolved around music would be more liberal minded.

Gregory set me straight. "Trey, you ain't nothin' but wastin' time with those people. They don't want your gay ass around."

I insisted, "I don't see why it should matter. I can do the job."

"Bein' able to do the job is never enough," he said. "You gotta give them somethin' they can't get from no one else."

What unique skills did I have to distinguish myself from every other job seeker in the city? Damned if I knew. I was unemployed through May, June, July, and August. Instead of working, I spent money palling around with Gregory, who slept cuddled up next to me off and on for the summer. During the day, we'd smoke joints together and go share sandwiches at diners, where I'd pick up the tab, or we'd watch shirtless b-ballers hoop at Rucker Park, or we'd kill hours wandering through art museums or listening to albums in my room. He taught me how to get around on the subway lines, bus routes, and surface streets. We cut each other's hair with clippers that Gregory stole from a drugstore on the corner.

At night, Gregory talked bouncers and doormen into allowing me

into gay bars and clubs—Private Eyes, Uncle Charlie’s, Rawhide’s, and Alex in Wonderland—despite my being a minor without so much as a fake ID. We danced with our shirts off until men bought us drinks. If we didn’t land a benefactor, we’d steal unfinished drinks from patrons too sloppy drunk to catch us in the act.

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I moved out of the Chelsea Hotel in September and split a studio apartment with Gregory in SoHo. We made SoHo our home a decade before reasonable people deemed it a desirable neighborhood. Paying my half of the October rent was going to wipe out the last of my savings. I’d applied for jobs in retail and in restaurants. No takers. It was Gregory who hit upon a solution that had been whizzing by me since I’d stepped foot in Manhattan.

“Can you ride a bike?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said.

Gregory punched me in the shoulder. “Okay, then, lil man, you can earn.”

Bike messengers were ubiquitous in the days before emails and Amazon drones. They weaved through traffic and onto sidewalks with a single-minded savagery. Few used helmets. All of them wore scars, burns, and tattoos like badges that separated them from regular people. This was to be my new tribe.

Except the first four bike messenger companies that I applied to rejected me. Gregory thought it was because I appeared too short, too young, and too preppy. He dressed me for my fifth interview. Laced in thick-soled high-top sneakers to elevate my five-foot-seven frame, and sporting ripped, gray jeans and a black T-shirt, I looked like a baby-faced punk rocker, especially once Gregory applied the eyeliner. We hotboxed a joint together so that I smelled of weed. Then I walked over to Swift Pedal Delivery on Mott Street in Chinatown.

It was a small, gutted garage. Bike messengers not out on assign-



ment were sprawled around like junkies in the park. They played cards, drank beers, arm-wrestled, bragged about who they fucked last night, and reminisced about their best acid trips. White, Asian, and Latinx—not one of them was Black, and not one of them looked at me twice.

Swift Pedal was owned and operated by Zhilan Mah, an abrasive Chinese woman in her sixties. Everyone called her Zee. She spoke English with a British accent and chewed gum every minute of the day. She rarely, if ever, made eye contact. There was always a pile of paperwork that she found more riveting than whoever she was speaking with. Zee was perched on a stool behind a podium against the back wall of the garage. Her posture was ramrod.

My interview was short. Zee sized me up in a glance as she filled out some form. “You’ve biked in traffic?”

“Yes,” I lied.

“How long would it take you to get from here to Harlem?”

“Forty minutes,” I guessed.

“Thirty is ideal.”

“I’ll get faster with experience.”

“Or you will get terminated with failure.” Zee handed me a start-work packet that consisted mainly of various liability waivers. “Sign every document. Find a bike, and you can start today. I can pay you on or off the books. In cash if you like, but there are fees, understand?”

“Which way do I get paid the most?” I asked.

“Off the books pays more, but if you want to file taxes, stay on the books.”

“Pay me off the books.”

“Smart move.” Zee gave one last look at my résumé before sticking it into a stack of papers. “So, Mr. Earl Singleton III, what do you like to be called?”

“Trey.”

Zee spit out a worn wad of gum into a wastepaper basket. “Word to the wise, Trey.” She put several sticks of Wrigley’s Doublemint into

her mouth and chewed them into one cohesive mass while I stood at attention. "I'm the only friend you must have in this dump."

Zee needn't have worried about me getting too chummy with my coworkers. The other messengers paid no attention to me for weeks until I learned to make myself useful. I carried tire patches, a lighter, and Newport cigarettes, and I shared them upon request. Despite my generosity, a loving kinship never developed between me and the seventy-five bikers in Zee's revolving fleet. That was a bit disheartening. Even this group of renegade misfits didn't know what to make of me.

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Zee was shrewder than I'd realized at the time. She sent me for pickups and deliveries in Harlem, but never to Skadden or Cravath or other leading law firms in Midtown, or to Goldman Sachs or Lehman Brothers or their ilk on Wall Street. She handed me assignments that took me to Bedford-Stuyvesant. She drew me a map that led to Jamaica, Queens. Zee grinned when I returned from a ride. I thought she was happy to see that I was safe. Chances are she was just pleased that I'd completed my assignments.

Within a month of hiring me, Zee brought on five more young Black men to join the fleet. I was the test case that proved to her that Black messengers could go into Black neighborhoods without getting jumped and robbed. This opened a new frontier for Zee. For years, she'd occasionally dared to send white or Latinx riders into the Black hoods, and she lost not only employees and packages but also dozens of perfectly fine bicycles. Now she had a way in.

I became one of Zee's favorites. She smiled at me when others got nothing except grunts or dismissive flicks of her hand. She padded my pay with bonuses. Twenty-five dollars here and there. When I turned eighteen on January 11, 1986, Zee presented me with a lemon cake that she'd baked herself, and she made every messenger in the garage gather around and sing "Happy Birthday." I thought

she appreciated that I was reliable, uncomplaining, cute, and, above all, quick on a bike. The truth was much more superficial.

It was Monday, March 3, and I felt settled into the job. I'd biked through the worst of the winter, which had earned me frostnip on three fingers and two toes. Spring was arriving. Riding was getting easier as my mile count climbed into the thousands and the bike shaped my body to meet its needs. My pencil legs grew thick and defined, and my torso, once baby-skin smooth, was scaffolded with hard ribbons of muscle. I felt confident, perhaps too much so.

I was zipping down West Broadway on a one-way, just past Canal Street, when an asshole getting out of a cab swung the passenger door open into the street. Why this dipshit didn't get out curbside, I'll never know. I had a split second to avoid ramming into the open door.

I didn't panic. This sort of thing was routine. I had dodged hundreds of doors by then. I swerved around into the center lane—just as a town car started to fill the lane from the left. A bystander on the corner saw the whole thing, and she shouted, “Oh, fuck!” in anticipation of a collision that could easily kill me. I glanced down, and my bike pedal came within a rat's whisker of scraping against the side of the honking town car.

I held steady. The town car came no closer. Within five feet, the town car sped past me, and I exhaled just as my front tire hit a pothole as wide and deep as a kitchen sink. My bike flipped, and I went flying. Before I smashed into the pavement, a simple wish came to mind: *Don't let the street knock my teeth out.*

My left collarbone was broken clean through, and my left radius sustained a hairline fracture. I probably suffered a concussion, but no one checked me for that. Unconscious, I was admitted into St. Vincent's Hospital. Since I was separated from my wallet during the accident—whether by the force of my fall or by a pickpocket—I had no ID on me, and the medical staff warehoused me on a floor with disturbed vagrants who didn't know their own names. I didn't wake until the following morning.

No one knew what had happened to me or where I was. Gregory got worried about me when I didn't return to our apartment in the evening, but he silenced his concerns by chain-smoking several joints. Zee, of course, noticed that I failed to complete my delivery. She called the police—and reported the bike I was riding stolen.

An hour after I awoke in St. V's, I was discharged under the name John Doe 1347 so that I wouldn't receive a bill. That was the only kindness I can recall the hospital showing me. No one talked to me about how to care for the cast on my left forearm, or about follow-up appointments, or about pain management.

I self-medicated in my apartment with tequila and weed, and slept as much as possible. Three days after the accident, I took the subway to Chinatown and strolled into Swift Pedal to collect my paycheck. I was higher than the skyscrapers.

Zee greeted me by demanding to know, "Where's my bicycle?"

I explained the situation as best I could. She was not sympathetic.

"You should have slammed into the cab door," she said, adding another stick of gum to the wad in her mouth. "I could have sued the taxi company for damages. Maybe even gotten you some money, too."

"Sue the city," I said. "I hit their pothole."

"The city never accepts blame."

"Then I don't know what else to tell you. The bike is gone, and I'm hurt."

"This is all on you," she said. "You're in no condition to work, so you're fired, and I'm docking your last paycheck for the cost of my bicycle."

I was too hazy to muster much of a coherent defense, but I did yell, "That's bullshit!"

Zee looked down at her paperwork as she spoke her final words to me. "Go see Jason about your final check. Otherwise, I will call the police."

On my way home, I considered what Zee had said to me, and I concluded that she was right. This was all on me. Not just the ac-

cident but my life. I needed to assert myself more in times of crisis. Because the average person was never going to bestow pity or mercy on me. The average person—depending on his or her social status, age, sexuality, or race—dismissed me as an expendable worker, or a social delinquent, or a faggot, or a nigger, and if I was bleeding to death in the middle of the street, the assumption was that I must have done something to deserve it.<sup>4</sup> Other people suffered misfortune and received sympathy; not me. Other people made mistakes and were granted second chances; not me.

I finally accepted, once and for all, the harsh truth of my standing in our society when Zee fired me, but I'd already been shown in the spring of 1979 how very cruel the world could be to me, even when I was vulnerable and distraught. I was eleven years old when infamy attached itself to my name. My mistake in '79 and with Zee had been expecting anyone else to look out for me ahead of their own interests.

Zee had only grinned at me when I was valuable to her. I'd go on to tangle with other bosses and authority figures, and that dynamic never changed. Affection never outlasted need. This was the first lesson the city taught me the hard way. The vast majority of us are merely pawns in someone else's game. Don't get defensive over this point. Embrace it. Once you do, you can begin to manipulate the board. Positioned correctly, pawns can checkmate kings.

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4. Trey's and his contemporaries' use of derogatory language like *faggot* and *nigger* (or even less heated, but still objectionable words like *sissy* or *twink*) are presented to provide an accurate view of Trey's and his contemporaries' mindsets and worldviews—outdated and offensive as they are to many people.