

INSIDE JOKE

Dana showed up late for Leslie's job interview, the lateness of a busy executive with better things to do. Walking into the conference room to join four of her colleagues plus a sweaty Leslie clutching a spiral notebook, unapologetically seating herself in the back of the room with a noticeable scrape of the chair. Bored with the proceedings, but politely so.

Leslie's notebook, part security blanket, part note-taking device, was a silly conceit since the barrage of questions left her no time to transfer her thoughts into print.

However, she did well under pressure, and the interviewers were sympathetic. They were also not so interested. She wouldn't be their secretary. But her outward appearance was excellent. She knew the value of a good pair of shoes. A good pair of shoes elevated her Kmart ensemble onto a higher plane. They couldn't actually tell it was a Kmart ensemble anyway, since clothes were so cheap nowadays and the makers were so good at expertly faking the telltale details of a much more expensive garment. Nonetheless, it was best not to scrutinize the seams too closely.

There was laughing between the questions, but not at jokes. Not funny jokes anyway. Some were exchanges where one interviewer poked gentle fun at another, and the other interviewer feigned offense, or maybe they actually were a little. One interviewer accused

another of pulling strings to get on the interview panel and this was amusing to all because it was so *ironic*. These tiny breaks between multi-part questions and Leslie's long-winded answers gave everyone a chance to breathe. The interviewers then launched into a little back-and-forth about the fond but definitely not weird eccentricity of this or that particular employee. It was all meant in good fun. They wanted you to like them even if they didn't pick you, as if popularity was the goal of this exercise.

An awkward attempt at making her feel part of them perhaps, but by the end it seemed within the realm of possibility that soon even she might be giggling at Barry's crazy holiday ties or Mary Ann's tendency to bring in healthy but not necessarily tasty treats.

Was she self-motivated? Could she hit the ground running? Did she work better with a lot of supervision? Were they trying to trip her up with that last question because it seemed if you were self-motivated you wouldn't need a lot of direct supervision?

When she hesitated they encouraged her to continue. In the setup to some of the questions, they painted Creative Strategies, Inc. (aka CSINC—the "c" is silent) as a workplace with a mission. All its employees held an esteemed place within the organization. But it was the ones who toiled in the often forgotten positions, the administrators, the timekeepers, the assistants, who really kept the place running, freeing the higher ups to chip away at the creative aspects. These employees deserved more recognition, according to the interview panel, because their work was often invisible. They took care of all the little details that others took for granted. But if they didn't exist no one would get paid. The floors would be dirty. The bathrooms would stink. The paperwork would pile up into an unacceptable mass.

So she explained that she was very self-motivated but welcomed some individualized

attention at the beginning of any new position just to ensure that she was performing the tasks to standard—amend that, performing the tasks to a high standard. It was important to acclimate (good word) yourself to the company because all companies had their little quirks, which she phrased as: Their own individualized system of prioritizing tasks.

They chose her. And during her first days, it wasn't the amount of tasks that alarmed her, but the lack of distinction between them, their shapelessness. Figuring out how to seamlessly drop her contributions into the assembly slowed her comprehension and her progress. One secretary or assistant's work fed into another's with just the slightest overlap. It was a subtle thing, this business machine, and also an oddly complex one. People whose personalities meshed either through happy accident or sheer force of will. Employees with a sixth sense of where they needed to be, whom they needed to help. A compulsion, at least among the more generous, to help the most deserving weaker performers, gently drawing on their strengths and reinforcing with extra training those tasks that caused confusion.

You could really find yourself at sea here if the right person wasn't grabbing you by the hand and reminding you or calling you, saying—please don't forget such and such, the step-by-step instructions for that procedure are on the server under Group 5 administration, employee monthly tasks under time entry for worker's compensation situations. Don't worry you'll get the hang of this in no time. But pay attention to these things at first, so you're not overwhelmed. You could really understand how it was difficult to figure out who had these skills just from an interview. These murky skills—you couldn't hold them in your hand, you couldn't accurately describe them, you couldn't definitively test for them. *You just had to have them.*

So when Leslie made a misstep in her first two weeks on the job, Heather was there. It

was Heather to whom they all deferred, the person to whom they flocked for administrative professional guidance. Sometimes Leslie liked Heather. But she was still ashamed. She was hired for her perceived ability to walk into this job without a training period and she had disappointed already. She envisioned them calling back the other candidates in a couple of weeks, the other candidates who would have been and made better choices. She knew she was being watched. Their stated motive was not to trip her up but to instruct and check, but it didn't make the experience any easier. And when she was watched, the simplest tasks threw her, her hands sweating on the keyboard or fumbling helplessly while Heather stood over, and sometimes even took over, which was worse because Heather's hands flew across the keyboard and clicked through the steps to assemble the spreadsheet in no time.

Leslie's initial attempts to take notes on this particular troublesome procedure left off at the first click. Her mechanical pencil lead broke when she nervously pushed the tip hard onto the note pad as she tried to break down the flow of words. She hesitated. She forgot things just told to her yesterday. She referred to fellow employees as that man in the corner office or the woman in the yellow dress, you know the one.

She hoped they were saying the new girl is laughably nervous, not that she was stupid. But they were careful to keep her clear of their comments. Was she grateful for that?

In a scolding voice, Heather said, "You need to organize Dana's calendar according to the messages that come in. Most of the requests for speaking engagements and seminars come to our headquarters, and we need to schedule and prioritize each meeting according to a set of standards, asking the right questions: Is it career-enhancing, is it central to the CSINC vision? Make a list! If the booking is out of town does she have sufficient time to commute between

them? She won't be her best if she's tired. They won't call us back if we are sending out a ragtag group of people overtaxed and harried, not a good advertisement for the business. Call Dana at four o'clock each weekday to apprise her of her upcoming schedule and where each appointment, or as we like to say presentation, fits into the prioritizing hierarchy we have discussed. She expects the phone call or the voice mail. You will be checked for complying. Your mission is to be the first responder, the gatekeeper of the upcoming engagements. Simultaneously, you inform Dana of alternatives if either of you feels the particular event is not in keeping with CSINC's mission. Thanks, and please let me know if you have any questions."

Things slowed during the second week. Leslie might have been relieved if she hadn't been convinced she was missing something. She had somewhat mastered time entry with all its complicated codes and sequences. A thick book reminded her when she was stuck and she held onto it with tight fingers as she walked across the office to ask Heather a question.

Heather with her ponytail askew and effortless ability to make her feel dumb, made Leslie want to take the long way around in a pointless effort to avoid her desk, since Leslie always wound up there anyway. It bothered her that Heather was right sometimes. For example, one time she had remarked that she understood Leslie's need to write things down, but she felt Leslie wasn't paying attention when she did this and Leslie had to ask: What was that again?

When you asked her a question, she often said, "Didn't we go over that already?" And she wouldn't proceed until you admitted that perhaps you had. And then she said, "Well, please just admit it if you don't understand the first time. That way we don't have to have the same conversation over and over."

So Leslie always said yes she would remember that for next time, except for one time

when she explained that she thought she was clear on the steps until she actually had to perform them. Heather frowned at this and didn't answer.

If Heather hadn't been so damned good at her job, Leslie would have had a lot to say about her weird scrapbooking obsession, her loud gum smacking, and the way she constantly sighed loudly and shook her head at some disturbing scenario on the computer screen. But how could she? Heather understood things that she didn't. As it stood, it supremely annoyed her that this person easily did tasks that Leslie found difficult. This girl was smart. But wasn't *she* smart? If Leslie was, how could you explain the difficulties she had with picking up these concepts? Concepts that seemed easy but had unpredictable twists and turns, tasks of deceptive simplicity that often defeated her. Leslie's work performance often elicited the comment: You're over thinking this.

Leslie envied Heather's ability to administer and delegate three to four tasks at once, monitoring one, doing one, overseeing with less vigilance one delegated to a trusted subordinate and checking in on the phone with another person at a satellite office. She talked in an emphatic way with much shaking of her head and flapping of her mouth. She always seemed to be looking out of the corner of her eye at something that was deeply disturbing and needed to be rectified. When she stood by the refrigerator like an ordinary person searching for her yogurt or whatever, it seemed weird. Leslie wasn't used to her looking all relaxed, at least until she found out someone had stolen her yogurt.

Anyone with Heather's compartmentalized; orderly mind probably could have mastered any difficult subject. Leslie was no smarter, and probably dumber, than scrapbook girl. This was sobering. She didn't even have that.

Heather didn't look up as Leslie approached. But she saw her coming.

"Leslie, I need to talk to you."

"Uh, umm. Yes, of course, and I have a really quick question."

"From my experience, your questions are never quick. But fire away."

Leslie asked for a confirmation one more time on a particular time code. Heather complied but added.

"Now, I know you already know these things. Did you look it up in the index before walking over here or do you just like the exercise?"

"The exercise."

Heather made a little pained look and plowed on. "You know it's Dana's birthday next week."

"Should we get her a card?"

"More than that, there is specific birthday card protocol. You need to plan the birthday lunch."

Leslie took out her little note pad.

"Bosses get an individual lunch and usually they don't like to be too surprised. Secretaries and assistants have a group lunch in their birthday month. Everyone who has a birthday in that month picks a restaurant and the one who picks the highest number or the lowest number or whatever—you decide—gets to pick, and then everyone has to go to that restaurant. Every guest without a birthday in that month kicks in to pay for the birthday guests' lunches."

"Got it."

"For Christmas we do this: A few weeks before, we all decide on the top three stores

we'd like to receive a gift certificate from. Then we turn in a slip of paper with our name and the three choices listed. The slips of paper are shuffled and everyone picks one usually from a white plastic bag. Then we all buy a \$25 gift certificate from one of the stores on the person's list. So everyone gets a gift that's worth exactly the same amount from a store they like."

"So you're handing over twenty-five dollars, and then you're getting twenty-five dollars back."

"I don't know what you mean by handing over. This is a gift we're talking about."

She noticed a twitch in Heather's left eyebrow, Leslie's cue to rethink her statement. She took another stab at it. "Okay . . . then we're exchanging gift cards to show our appreciation of each other during the holiday season."

"That's better."

"Does she have any allergies?"

"Not that I know of, one time she was on a diet and she didn't eat much of it. But she's usually on a diet, no biggie. Just order a beautiful cake. It's there for meaning, as much as for taste. Heather handed her the purchase card.

Buying things was part of her job. The business credit card needed for purchases was now entrusted to her for printer ink, envelopes, ballpoint pens, and morale.

Leslie researched bakeries online and finally ordered a white chocolate cake encrusted with chocolate ganache with hazelnut filling between the layers. This cake, called the Nut Ella's was festooned with acorns and red, yellow, and brown autumn leaves made from marzipan in keeping with the autumn season.

When the day arrived, Dana walked into the office early complaining that she rarely

came in on Friday, and she hoped the meeting was important. She was all ready to attend a weekend seminar, wheeling in her little black suitcase, wearing her Aerosole pumps, dressed in her black suit with pink accents.

Everyone stifled giggles. The secret all of them kept was betrayed by knowing smiles and murmured assurances to each other that everyone had perfectly performed their individual piece of complicity. If Dana already knew, and Leslie suspected she did, she was doing a damn good job at hiding it. Of course Leslie had not breathed a word.

The restaurant had a cozy pub-like atmosphere and smelled like everyone had been sitting in the dark eating French fries for hours. The attentive wait staff asked if you wanted them to perform the birthday song. After the rendition with much clapping and laughing and an embarrassed but good sport Dana, they all ate, while in the background a modern take on an 80's pop song, slowed down and acoustic, played.

Dana was appreciative and admired the look of the cake, while mashing the crumbs into a chocolate paste on the side of her plate. Finally she admitted that she couldn't eat chocolate.

“Don't let me stop you, but I'm lactose intolerant,” she said. “I mean, I have been known to eat chocolate. It really is delicious. I used to carry around Lactaid for the exceptions. But it got too hard. This is lovely guys, really, and the hamburgers at this place—they're out of this world. Just don't ask me how old I am. Hah, hah. Okay, okay, you can ask me how old I am. Just don't ask me how old I feel.”

The party broke up soon after that. The cake got stuck in the break room where it lay untouched. Later when Leslie walked by, the cake was a ragged mess since several people had attempted to slice off pieces with a clumsy “knife” fashioned from the cardboard box it came in.

Leslie got to know Dana much better as her business trips decreased. It wasn't a demotion, at least never officially. There was no cut in pay; she was quick to explain. Dana spent her days on the phone while she coached less-experienced travelling creative consultants and wrote and updated lengthy instructional documents. CSINC had a new peppier, younger woman whom they wanted to put through the ropes. Dana's take on this was that it was all for the best. CSINC had been running her into the ground for years, and besides, her daughter needed her.

Leslie tried not to be too chatty. But when Dana had a look on her face that seemed sad and preoccupied and it went on and on for a couple of days, she had to ask. Dana replied, oh it's just my daughter, but it's nothing to worry about. And Leslie felt weirdly grateful it was not about her.

Dana talked of a private life with a daughter who was giving her no end of grief. It wasn't grief because of drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, or some similar calamity. It was more about her not living up to her potential and being blasé about it. Many problems centered on the borrowing of money, bad grades, and a string of unsuitable acquaintances, male and female. She sighed as she recounted the latest transgression. When others talked of their children's accomplishments she sometimes shook her head and said, "I hope Loretta eventually straightens out her life." Sometimes she seemed as eager to share her daughter's lapses as she would have been to share her triumphs, when she recounted the various episodes that hinted at complexity and drama, at what had occurred despite her sacrifices and her attention and her tears. This complicated life she led, the complicated life of a complicated woman, who struggled and persevered and had many worries.

Leslie was careful what she said, weighing each word carefully, murmuring

sympathetically when the daughter changed her major once again, lost her job, totaled the car, commenting that this was definitely the age to try out things, to make mistakes and move on. Dana accepted this and Leslie's bland prescriptive that Loretta would someday find her way seemed to successfully bridge the conversational gap.

Sometimes Dana said funny stuff about her former secretaries. She even imitated them in a high, screechy, Munchkin voice when it was something particularly egregious in her eyes, such as women who brought their boyfriend problems to work. Leslie's dad used to do this to her mother and sometimes she and her brothers and sisters had laughed along with him as he parroted her mother's request to take out the trash or whatever back to them.

Dana said women do this, women do that. She said this about romantic stuff that went badly. Usually the guy was acting like a jerk, but the woman was worse because she put up with it. Dana said these types of women had so much power that they weren't using. In the high Munchkin voice, she mimicked them saying: "But I love him!" The voice of a woman of low visibility, unattractiveness, and a minimal IQ. A woman who could not be trusted to make wise decisions, who got men to do things for her, but not things that needed doing, a woman who brought other women down and discredited the whole sex, because she was ditsy and slow and undoubtedly promiscuous and only cared about her makeup and her salads and her boyfriends.

Leslie knew it didn't matter about the timbre of her voice, however low, and lack of boyfriends; she might be mocked as that woman with the annoying voice, if she didn't hold up her end.

After six months Leslie still had no clear idea of how her work performance was viewed. They also poked fun at her now, labeling her as a flustered person who could be a bit absent-

minded, tempered by her generally acknowledged likability and willingness to stay after work at a moment's notice. This might be a good sign, Leslie thought. Also Dana seemed to depend on her more and more and even trusted her. Their talks were convivial and gossipy but never mean spirited, in the sense that they never talked badly of someone until they had left CSINC.

Dana typed on her computer, and then suddenly stopped. She scribbled on a piece of paper, and then raised her head to look at Leslie.

“What do you do all day? What exactly do you do?”

And Leslie just sat there, chilled to the core. Her breathing grew shallow as her imagination took hold and metastasized. She had her there. Where were her notes? She had to find her notes.

“I'm writing your evaluation, Leslie. I need you to tell me all the things that you do.”

THE END