

The Interview

Marnie chugs another generous sip of sherry from the standard hotel glass, brushes her teeth, then rinses to wash away the tell-tale musky, sweet odor. Not a single hair out of place in her new highlighted stylish bob with soft blond highlights. Her sable brown eyeliner is semi-straight. Is it too dark? Could be just a little lighter. Oh well. The mineral based foundation and pearl eye shadow cover the age spots on her eyes, face. Hmm... Not a day over fifty, she'd guess.

She dabs the desert bronze blush lightly on her nose, cheeks. Then gently brushes a dab on her forehead, chin, where the sun normally hits her face. After much deliberation, she picks the dark wine lip liner, then fills in the perfect shape with a lighter shade of Revlon's Bordeaux lipstick. Hmm, not bad for a grandmother, Marnie nods to her image in the mirror. If I could just get one of those new instant facelifts she murmurs, stretching her cheeks to her cheekbones - like this.

Marnie stands erect before the closet door mirror scrutinizing her interview outfit. Brown and white checked jacket, tailored chocolate wool pants, dark brown ankle boots all coordinated. Should she wear the Burberry scarf from Harrod's, or the fake ivory pashmina from Marshall's? How are hipsters wearing scarves these days, Marnie wonders as she flips each scarf around her neck before choosing the Burberry. The pale Burberry plaid will impress them, she decides, as she wraps it one more time, leaving the ends dangling.

Marnie had just arrived in Reston, Virginia the night before to interview for a high paying job with a communications firm. At home in Pittsburgh a week earlier, she had a phone interview with Helene Becker, the gregarious recruiter for the firm, whose questions Marnie could actually answer after extensive online research. Helene's vivacious demeanor was so contagious that even Marnie was excited after the call ended. It was the first response to Marnie's posted resume that her friend Bob had listed on multiple job sites. Near the end of the interview, Helene had actually that Marnie seemed a perfect match for the position. Even though the job didn't

quite fit Marnie's vision of writing magazine articles from home, the interview was so successful that Marnie said "wonderful, when and where?" when Helene invited her to the company's headquarters in Tyson's Corner for a personal interview.

It had all started a few months earlier when old friends met in Leesburg, Virginia for a weekend reunion at Bob Norman's house. They had all lived in the same boarding house in the 1960's on Columbia Circle in Washington, D. C. and worked for the FBI, U. S. Information Agency, Department of Defense. Some were government recruits fresh from high schools in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and some were co-op students from universities around the country. The plan for the reunion was to visit the old neighborhood in Washington, the Smithsonian, a few museums and dinner Saturday night at a French restaurant in Falls Church.

Bob had once been a co-op student from Georgia Tech. After many more degrees and government positions, he retired from a top secret position with the CIA. Unfortunately, just as he retired, his wife had become ill and passed away.

After a hearty breakfast, Bob made another pot of coffee and everyone lingered around the kitchen table reminiscing about their youthful escapades decades ago in Washington: when John Kennedy was president, when they were transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, and when they all eventually followed their individual dreams. Some remained in the area, but most had transitioned elsewhere to graduate schools, marriage.

That Saturday morning, it resembled the scene from *The Big Chill* when Glenn Close, Mary Kay Place, William Hurt and Kevin Kline reminisced about their college days - some happy memories, some sad. Suddenly they started singing *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*, lifting their spirits as they sang and danced around the kitchen table. However, no one in this group was dancing since Bob recently had knee surgery, two others: arthritis, a hip replacement.

During the course of conversation, Marnie casually mentioned that she was looking for a part-time writing job from her home in Pittsburgh so she could finally do

what she loved most - to write, after retiring from a long career in non-profit administration.

“You should look for a writing job in this area, Marnie,” Bob suggested, as he poured fresh-brewed coffee into the waiting mugs. “There’s an excess of high-paying government writing jobs around here. You could work here for a month, then request to work from home. Maybe fly in once or twice a month. Proposal writing isn’t rocket science, believe me. You could do it, make a lot of money.”

“Well, maybe,” Marnie replied. “We’ll see, proposal writing isn’t the kind of writing I was thinking about. More like writing articles for the New Yorker, Paris Review. How’s that for reaching for the moon?” They all laughed.

“Here, take my extra set of Brian Tracey tapes,” Bob said. “Come on, the money’s great. You can try it for a year, then quit if you don’t like it. Brian will convince you that you can do anything you want to do.”

“That’s the problem,” Marnie said. “I don’t know if I want to work full time writing government proposal. Anyway, if I did want a full time job, I’d only consider Washington, not Virginia or Maryland. Might as well work in the Capitol, where the action is.”

“Come on, give it a chance, it will be a good experience. Send me your resume. I’ll update it and insert necessary buzz words for each application. Then I’ll send it to 3-4 job websites. I’ll use my address and phone number so they think you’re local and when they call for you, I’ll say I’m your brother, you’re out of town, I’m taking messages for you.”

“I don’t know. Sounds unrealistic to me,” Marnie says, “that in this age of technology and cell phones, my brother is taking my phone calls? Let me talk to Jack,” she said examining the tapes. “I don’t think I want to move at my age, and neither would Jack as he’s really enjoying the grandkids since retiring, but we’ll see.”

Within weeks, Bob had transformed Marnie’s professional resume into an alien document that excluded her real skills, work history, and references. Despite the

skills the new resume boasted, she wasn't a technical writer or a proposal writer. She had never worked for a high-tech company in Virginia because she'd lived in Pennsylvania the last forty years. Her background was non-profit administration. The internet became Marnie's best friend as she researched proposal writing, technical writing, and companies she *supposedly* worked for as Brian Tracey slowly convinced her that she could learn the necessary skills, could rise to the top of government proposal writers.

Her fate was sealed when Linda the psychic at Cathe June's Christmas tea predicted: "You will be offered a very high-paying job in Washington. Everyone will love you in two months." "Hmm, why two months?" Marnie thought. "Yes, you will travel with your job," she said, answering Marnie's question before Marnie even asked, "and make much more money. Eventually, you and your husband will move there." But the clincher was, "your resume is perfect."

"Wow, really?" Marnie responded, stunned. "Do you want me to tell you how this all plays out?"

Linda smiled. "No, because I already know."

In the next few months, Marnie became a disciple of Brian Tracy's positive thinking, goal setting tapes. The last two reinforcement tapes were permanently imprinted on her brain as she sped down the Pennsylvania Turnpike enroute to Virginia for the esteemed interview that would seal her fate as a high-income, government proposal writer. "I am the best proposal writer, I can do this. Nothing will stop me," she repeated over and over again, mile after mile.

At last, she is on her way to the one o'clock interview a few miles down Route 7 from the Marriott. Siri is Marnie's only companion as she drives 40 miles an hour in the slow lane as local drivers whiz by. "*Drive three miles, then turn left* Siri orders in her monotone voice. Maybe I should change Siri to the male British voice, Marnie tells herself, but I probably couldn't understand him. Does Siri ever get excited, out of control? *No, don't turn that way you fool. You missed the damn street!*

Marnie is still mellow after the sherry. Wouldn't it be interesting if she is stopped, arrested for drunken driving on the way to her interview? A feeling of anxiety rises in her stomach, her chest. She could feel her heart racing. I can still cancel, I can call Helene, tell her I got another job, had to leave the country, or I was in a car accident on the Beltway. Then I could go sightseeing in Washington, visit the Holocaust Museum, the Smithsonian, something I haven't done in years. I could have a nice quiet lunch in Georgetown, especially since I haven't eaten for hours.

"You can do this, you can be anything you want to be," she repeats Brian's mantra to calm herself. "You can do this, you can do this."

Then suddenly there it is - a cluster of oppressive government buildings surrounded by lush lawns, trees - a country landscape. Just where she wants to work her ego quips. This is not Washington, it's suburban Virginia... Not where I want to work, or live.

It's too late to back out. She turns into the road and locates Building 2008, the parking garage Helene mentioned. "Well, parking is free anyway," she mutters as she parks her compact car, turns off the engine and pulls out the cheat sheet for one last look.

Now, where did I once work? Marnie tries to recall Bob's coaching tips. Here it is in my notes, Technology Made Clear in Falls Church, bought out by Aerospace Technologies in 2012. Where the hell is Falls Church from here, she wonders. Couldn't be that far. I now live on Old Dominion Road in Leesburg, her fake resume states. She doesn't live there at all. Bob, the resume fabricator, does. Her name and education are the only truths in the document. The rest is filled with lies (white lies, she likes to think) with enough acronyms to constitute a foreign language for the dyslexic. But they'll love me in two months, Marnie recalls what Linda said.

In Marnie's resume, she knows how to research/modify company boilerplate (Marnie *had to look up boilerplate as it sounded like a steel mill word*) to specifically address solicitation requirements: (*so impressive that they needed points.*)

- She has the ability to read, analyze, and interpret government solicitation documents.
- She also had the ability to write compelling proposals and boilerplate (*there it is again*) material.
- She also - Interviews SME's (*what's a SME?*) to develop an understanding of the solution and create a compelling proposal response that meets all solicitation requirements.

Marnie's head is crammed with so much bogus information. Bob keeps telling her that she's a good writer, has an MFA under her belt, that she could easily learn this job, so she wasn't exactly a fraud. "But very, very close," Marnie responds.

Bob had coached Marnie a few hours after dinner the night before. Hopefully, her short term memory is still intact. She also keeps in mind that Bob has four degrees in law, engineering, IT and science. He went back to work after his wife died and is currently a capture manager, whatever that is. Sounds like a job at a poorly run wildlife preserve.

Marnie takes a deep breath - deep breathing is the key to everything Deepak Chopra says - then pushes the heavy glass door open to the lobby, and prays on the elevator, *Please God, please let me remember all the white lies, just this once*. The elevator door opens to an ultra-modern utopic space - white leather sectionals scattered throughout an immense reception area while over-sized TV screens, like in a sports bar, stare at her from either side. A series of conference rooms visible through the clear glass walls make it seem like a never-ending space. The attractive African American girl at the receptionist desk hands her a visitors' badge, offers refreshments. Marnie is impressed.

Behind schedule, Helene, the recruiter who did the phone interview, barges through a side door. She's tall, dark hair slightly graying and frazzled, not at all like the bubbly woman on the phone like Marnie imagined. Marnie and Helene shake hands. "Bill Fordham will see you first, then J.B. and Veena," Helene says.

Originally four people were scheduled, now three, Helene explains before rushing across the room to another meeting. Marnie will take that and hope that they're all a bit dim-witted. Mr. Fordham arrives within minutes and leads Marnie to one of the glass-walled conference rooms equipped with remote projectors, window shades, and other gadgets beyond her understanding. Bill, as fate would have it, is Vice President of Satellite Communications, with an extensive career in Medical IT, and the Federal Business Capture industry. There's that word again, capture.

Tall, thin, balding, and business clad in suit and tie, he seems friendly, personable and smart. Really smart people often intimidate Marnie but the sherry is doing its job calming her, even when Bill Fordham pulls out his list of interview questions.

Bill leans forward and smiles. "Tell me a little about yourself. You have a lot of experience writing proposals and technical writing. Why do you want to work for us?"

Marnie smiles. "Well, I worked in the field for a number of years and have been consulting the last few years and would really like to work for a major company again. I miss being on a schedule, a fast-paced environment." *Who wants a full time job in a stressful environment at my age she wants to say. She really wants a part-time fun writing job working from home.*

"Where did you work previously?"

Marnie hesitates. Her fuzzy brain wants to say Technology Made Easy. No, that isn't it. Then her stable mind takes over especially when she glances down at the oversized notes in her tote bag. "Technology - Made - Clear," she says, emphasizing each word. *Selfie high-five. Yay, she remembered - with a little help!*

"Ah, yes, TMC, they were bought out by Aerospace," he says.

"Yes, absolutely, in September of 2013. I've been consulting since then," Marnie replies. *She had checked the history of these companies several times on the internet. Could she be sued for fabricating her work history?*

"What would you say is your expertise in writing proposals?" Bill asks.

“My strongest attribute is interviewing SMEs (*She just learned this acronym - and liked it as it reminds her of SMURFs, but much shorter.*) and extracting pertinent information from them, then writing logical, compelling proposals easy to understand in order to score high government ratings.” *So many words, so little time. Should she run for political office?*

“How do you extract this information from SME’s?” he responds.

“Well... my preference is to interview them personally, then further interview them by phone and finally, by email if I need more information.” *Does he notice that she never really answers his questions?*

“A lot of our clients are out of town...” Bill continues.

“Well, I would talk to them by phone first and of course, email them when necessary.” *She’s going around in circles and confusing herself. Does he notice?*

“Are you familiar with the Flagship Method?” Bill asks.

“Yes, I am. I took the course several years ago but would like to learn the latest material. I plan to enroll in a workshop for the 5th Edition, just to refresh my memory.” *Thankfully, Bob had suggested she research the Flagship Method before the phone interview.*

“Great, well know that we are not zealots and don’t use Flagship religiously but we do use a lot of the technology.”

“So, it isn’t your bible,” Marnie responds. They both laugh. *Excellent, she’s witty and maybe even on point.*

“Are you familiar with the software programs Word, Excel, Power Point, Share Smith?” he continues.

“Oh sure, I use Word mostly, but I’m very familiar with Excel, Power Point, Share Smith.” she says. *Share Smith, naught - never heard of it, but she could learn it - like she’d have to learn the entire job!*

“We do use Share Smith quite often to share proposal parts with other people working on it.” Bill explains.

“Of course. It’s a very useful tool,” Marnie says. *Another lie. Is this considered a venial or mortal sin?*

“Well, I have to ask you the typical interview question.”

They both laugh - again. She has no idea why she’s laughing.

“Here goes: Did you ever have a major problem writing a proposal and how did you resolve it?”

She takes a long pause, praying for a semi-sensible answer as she blanks out. “Hmm... Well, to tell you the truth, I never had to handle a major problem alone because I’ve always worked with a team and we’d work on solutions together.” *Good save - another non-answer, her stable mind responds.*

“Do you have any questions for me?” Bill inquires.

She wants to say, is this almost over? but instead, she says, “I notice on your website that you have an office in Aberdeen, Maryland and plan to open offices in New Mexico, California, Georgia, New York.” Take that! She did her homework and why not work in California or New York if not in D.C.?

“Yes, we do,” Bill explains. “Actually our web site has to be updated. We have those locations now. You’d actually be working in Aberdeen, Maryland, our closest location, a few days a week. We, of course, would provide transportation compensation, but you live close by anyhow.”

“Yes, I do. Aberdeen isn’t that far.” *Actually, it’s 76 miles from Leesburg and over 225 miles from Pittsburgh if she’s truthful! Driving back and forth to Aberdeen, Maryland, of all places - the proving ground for chemical munitions in WWI! - sounds dreadful.*

“I’m curious,” Marnie says. “Does the staff have to work overtime, nights, or weekends when there are deadlines?”

“We try not to and think it’s important to have family time. Recently we worked on a major deadline and worked over the weekend. I was exhausted. We really don’t like to overwork our employees and want them to take their PTO or they’ll lose it at the end of the year.”

She nods her head in complete agreement like a bobble head. Marnie’s actually starting to like this company.

“That’s all I have. I’ll have J.B. and Veena come in. Very nice to meet you,” Bill concludes. He stands up, bends down to shake her hand.

Marnie smiles at him. “You as well, she replies.” *Piece of cake. She likes Bill Fordham. He seems like a good person, a considerate boss.*

J.B. and Veena arrive minutes later. Marnie knows they’re staring at her resume when they open their slim laptops. J.B. is probably in his mid-twenties dressed in khakis, a sports jacket. He reminds Marnie of a young Steve McQueen, but not as handsome. Veena is East Indian, Marnie surmises by her name and physical features. She scrutinizes Veena for wearing black leggings much too tight for an office environment.

Both seem smart, very smart, maybe too smart as they stare at their laptop screens. What information do they have, Marnie wonders. Are they checking her profile on Facebook, her home address, her work history in Pennsylvania? Do they know that she knows what they’re doing? Marnie feels apprehensive, but fortunately, her mind is still foggy and she still believes that maybe, just maybe, she can pull this off.

J.B. is first: “What part do you play in writing proposals?” he asks.

Nothing like getting to the point. Marnie repeats her mantra: “My strongest asset is interviewing SMEs, extracting information from them, and writing logical and compelling proposals that receive high government scores.” Marnie wonders if he’s buying it. She is starting to sound like a parrot, but parrots are smart, right?

“Do you ever write T-4’s?” J.B. continues.

“No, not very often.” *Bob didn’t coach her on T-4s! Her resume didn’t mention T-4s! She has so much to learn.*

“Can you write all parts of a proposal?” he asks.

“Well, no, not all parts. I never work on financials, other staff members usually do that.” *Where did that come from? Wasn’t that asking a bit much of her? How many parts are there, she wonders. Besides, Marnie is not interested in numbers. She just wants to write magazine articles in the comfort of her home.*

“Where are you working now?” J.B. questions.

“Well, actually, I’m consulting for various companies. I did work for Technologies Made Clear.” *Pul-lease don’t ask for any more references, Marnie mentally begs. She doesn’t know any others!*

“How long did you work for Technologies Made Clear? he probes.

“About 2-1/2 years.” *He’s getting a little feisty, but her answer sounds good - not too long, not too short.*

“I’m confused about something you said about SMEs,” J.B. continues.

“Subject Matter Experts are often confusing. Sometime you have to delve deeper into the subject.” Marnie explains. *You’re confused, she wants to say. She feels like Alice in Wonderland drifting further and further down the hole.*

“Veena?” J.B. says.

Veena hands Marnie a list of everyday tasks for the job, which is very long and very tedious.

“Do you think you could you work this schedule, and is it much different from your other jobs?” Veena asks.

“No, no problem at all.” Marnie says shrugging her shoulders. “I adjust quite easily, and actually thrive on multi-tasking, a busy schedule. It makes the day go

faster.” *Clearly a home run for Marnie, but is Veena serious? Her long list is impossible!*

“You’d be working with a team of two others on the science projects, if you’re hired. Is that all right?”

“Oh great! I like to work on teams. I’ve always been a team player.” *Marnie sounds like Debbie Does Dallas. The science projects sound intriguing and Marnie wonders what they are, or if she’ll ever find out. But what did she mean by IF YOU’RE HIRED... How dare she!*

“Do you have any certifications for various proposal parts? It’s okay if you don’t,” J.B. interjects.

“Well, I have a BA in Business and Communications and an MFA in Writing. But no, I don’t have other certifications.” *So there are proposal section certifications? Marnie wishes she had just one...*

“Are you familiar with the Flagship Method?” J.B. inquires.

“Yes, yes, I am. As I told Bill, I took the workshop a few years back and plan to update my skills.” *Marnie wonders where she could get the 5th edition and how much it costs. This job will require a massive learning curve.*

“Tell me about a proposal you recently worked and what parts you worked on,” he says.

PAUSE. Marnie takes a deep breath like she’s deep in thought but she’s just trying to remember what Bob taught her. Then she remembers. “Well, truthfully I can’t tell you about the project I’m working on - it’s proprietary.” She’s learning so many ways to avoid answering questions. Yes, another home run!

“I understand,” J.B. replies, almost sympathetically. *He understands? Really? Marnie didn’t.*

“Do you have any more questions, Veena?” J.B. asks.

“No, I don’t think so.” Veena responds and closes her laptop.

J.B. follows suit and walks Marnie to the elevator.

“Someone will contact you after we compare notes,” he remarks.

They all shake hands. Marnie can imagine being a mouse in that meeting. She’s so relieved it’s over that she could fly to the ground floor without an elevator. And her husband said acting classes were a waste of time and money.

When Marnie returned to Pittsburgh, she wrote the customary thank you notes and sent emails to Bill, J.B and Veena. She waited for a response, any kind of response: a phone call, a letter with an offer, a rejection. But so far, no phone call, no letter, no email. Then it occurred to her. Linda said the job was in Washington, not Virginia!

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