

A Job

Elizabeth Shove

Jo

I gazed out of the patio doors that led into the garden. It was sleeting outside. I turned back to the computer: only another nine to go. Three files to open for each: the CV, the letter of application and the form. Not for the first time I cursed the Human Resources software. Why didn't it put all these files into one document? At my most efficient I could read one application, make notes, and enter the scores on the software in something like seven minutes. I looked at my watch and made up my mind: I'd do another five and then make some food. 'That's it' I said to Orlando, my cat. 'Five now and then only four left to do'. Orlando blinked and looked away.

Peter Smith was next. A whole life set out on two sides of A4. I had the list of essential and desirable characteristics to hand, and I skimmed Peter's CV. Relevant qualifications, completed in less than four years, but not much of a track record. The application letter was predictable and dull. I made my comments and filled in the boxes. Peter's scores were in the middle: 'possible shortlist'.

There was always something intriguing about these glimpses into peoples' lives: where had they come from? What happened next? Was there any evidence of 'good citizenship' or maybe even fun? I had my own rules of thumb: more than four years training meant a zero, no relevant experience, the same. It was hard hearted, but with 24 to get through, I needed a method of ruling out those who had no chance.

I stood up and stretched. The sleet pattered on the glass outside. Someone had to be on these committees, but the burden was huge. I'd spend at least a day, maybe two on this task. There would be an interview panel and one of the candidates would get the job. They'd be happy to get the work and the experience, but it was a short-term contract. They'd soon move on and we'd have to start the process all over again.

Three more before lunch. I sat down again and dutifully opened the next file. Charlotte French. To my surprise Charlotte had been to the same school that I had attended many years before. She'd even taken the same A levels. Her letter of application was strangely familiar – it was as if I was reading about my former self. Diligent, well-organised and passionate. I completed the scoring and moved on to the next, but I was a bit unsettled.

The shortlisting committee met the next morning. It wasn't hard to pick the top two but there was some disagreement about who else to include. In the end Peter made the cut.

.....

Charlotte

I got to the right place half an hour ahead of time. I could see someone – probably another candidate - sitting on the sofa behind the glass wall. He was fiddling with his tie. A door opened, someone ushered him into a meeting room, and the door shut again.

I heard a voice behind me. 'Hi, I'm Katy the administrator. You must be Charlotte, do take a seat. You are early but they'll come and fetch you when they are ready'. I sat on the sofa and felt the rough fabric tickling the back of my legs. I knew who the members of the panel were, and I knew that Jo was the chair.

It would be so good to get this job. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I could imagine myself in the role: new challenges all the time and so many opportunities to carve out an exciting career. If I got this job, I'd never look back.

The door opened. The young man with the tie came out, a bit red in the face. He went straight to the lift, without saying a word. The door shut. Then it opened again. It was my turn.

Jo had ginger hair and green eyes, just like me – but a lot older. If she was surprised when I went in, she didn't show it. 'Thank you for coming up from Bournemouth. I do hope you had a good journey. I know it's a long way'. And so the interview began. I settled into the role. My responses were clear and confident. I listened carefully. I didn't talk too much. After maybe ten minutes or so, the committee members began to relax. I felt the mood change. I was doing fine. Towards the end of the allotted time, Jo asked what I hoped to get from the job. I had my answer prepared. 'I want to be like you!' I said without hesitation. The rest of the committee laughed at my youthful enthusiasm. But Jo frowned.

'Are you sure' she said. 'Do you have any idea what my job is really like?'

I replied, all of a rush. 'Oh, it would be fantastic, there are so many opportunities, and this is such an excellent department'. I meant every word of it. This was where I wanted to work.

.....

Jo

There was a short break once we'd finished interviewing. There was no doubt in my mind - Charlotte was by far the best - but you never can tell, selection meetings are very unpredictable. The members of the panel drifted back, chattering about the weather and the week-end.

.....

Charlotte

I got the call on the platform as I was waiting for the train South. 'Charlotte, this is Jo'.

'Yes', I said, 'I was hoping you would ring'. Jo paused: 'I'm sorry Charlotte, I've got bad news for you. We've offered the job to another candidate, and he accepted it right away.'

I was aghast. 'But no, that can't be right'. The future, what about the future. What will become of you?'

'Sorry Charlotte, I didn't quite catch that – what do you mean, what will become of *me*?'

It was my turn to explain. 'Jo, the thing is, I am not just another candidate. I am you. I am you as you used to be – energetic, optimistic and full of life. If you, don't get this job, I mean if you don't offer me this job, you'll be set on another path, your life will be different, the course of events will not unfold as it has'.

Jo

I shivered. No one likes making these difficult post-interview phone calls, but this was something else. I thought back to Charlotte's CV. The parallels *were* uncanny. Could I have ever been like her?

Had I ever imagined such a bright future for myself? I'd been over-ruled in the selection meeting. 'Too young' they had said, 'no sense of what the job involves: if we compare Charlotte with Peter, the difference is clear'.

'Charlotte' I said, addressing myself this time, 'Don't worry about the future, it is now that counts'.