

The Job Interview

by

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Excerpted from the novel
“Self-Portrait of Someone Else”

<http://www.hidden-people.net>

The morning of March 13. Me and the international corporation. Been studying my books and business journals, memorizing catchphrases and extended commercial dogma. It's much like school: authority wants to hear what it already knows. Often, showing your boss you know the things he knows, but not more, is the right answer. The familiar soothes and reassures; it's what the business world calls *being professional*.

I get ready: shave, wash and scrub; pluck the hairs from my nostrils; pop the zits and shine the teeth. I put a tie on and look in the mirror. The tie hangs down my white shirt like somebody sticking out his tongue from the bottom of my throat. This is what men who earn money in business do for decoration.

I roam around the house, warming up for the interview, looking for a decision to make.

"I want eggs and bacon for breakfast."

Alisa Peck, my live-in fiancée, hurried by me. "Sorry, I'm late for work. You'll have to make them yourself. Good luck. You look great with a tie. 'Bye! And don't forget to mention my father."

A kiss, Alisa is gone.

So I have some cold cereal and sip my instant coffee and wonder whether what I'm about to do is something I really want to do. Or should do. But I have to do it. And it's already nine o'clock. In an hour I'll be in an office. With luck, in two hours I'll be out of the office and it'll be all over and I'll be free. Think positive.

Yeah, that's it, that's what one of my books told me. Positive. I'm getting the hang of being a business entity.

I rinse my coffee cup and pour the rest of the cereal down the drain. Better get a move on: got several L.A. suburbs and a couple of major traffic jams to get through before hitting Century Blvd and the money mile where this corporation calls home.

While driving I go over some lessons. Repeat after me, says a teacher in my mind: Planning, organization and control are three principal means of coordinating marketing activities.

Right. Got it. Click: I lock it into my brain.

The ideal management candidates who should be groomed are those with personal qualities like the ability to communicate and an inquiring mind.

Oh, dear, dear God, do I really think this - do I know it? Is this some species of knowledge that is replacing parts of my brain that used to be the real me? No, no, Tim, don't worry in that direction. All this you're repeating is just something to say in case the guy opposite me wants to hear that sort of thing.

I arrive: a big building swallowing up a whole city block of expensive business district real estate. At ground level little people disappear through two huge revolving doors.

I find a car park and sit there, taking out my folder of information - notes I've made on the business world and the things they want to hear. I scan them, my mind recognizing the syllables and the commas. They're me.

Inside the building, guards behind a chest-high desk check my reality. Who I am and where I'm going. One picks up a telephone, turns his back to me and begins murmuring so I cannot hear. He waits, listens, hangs up, turns to me, assured that I'm real and supposed to be there.

"Floor twenty-four."

He points toward a corridor where two rows of heavy metal elevators face each other. I join a crowd of businessmen with briefcases and women with tough looks. An elevator slides smoothly open and consumes me. We stand together listening to electronic music coming from invisible speakers meant to soothe the heart of the savage business person in search of the day's profit margin. Nobody in the elevator says a word. I'm not even certain they're breathing. Tim, somebody says in my head, you're now in the real world. At floor twenty-four, the elevator's mouth opens and spits me onto a carpeted corridor.

To my right there's a locked glass door and beyond that more corridor; to my left, at the reception desk, there are two females with fancy hair and exactly applied makeup: smudge-proof faces. I announce myself, and they check a list. They go through some more phone murmuring.

"Please wait there." They point me down another corridor where seats are arranged on either side. Two other males, young executive types who sit straight and silent, also wait. They nod as I sit with them. Underneath my butt the black cushioned seat sighs, letting out a tired, slightly exasperated sound as I sink in. I settle. I wait.

Bored after two minutes, I look at the two business types sitting there trying to look like each other. Determined and decisive, ambitious, forceful, scared shitless. And still no one says anything to anyone. We're the enemy, each sitting in his world, wanting the job the others want.

A door opens.

"Dick Young?"

The man opposite me springs up, nodding affirmatively to the open doorway. He touches his tie, straightens his jacket and puts on an earnest frown where his face used to be. A pudgy hand reaches from the doorway. Taking a step toward the threshold,

the young man undergoes another transformation: a large, engaging smile - grabbing that pudgy hand firmly: "Hello!" as the door shuts behind him.

Neither I nor the other fellow exchange a word or make a move. I glance at him; with small movements he chews the insides of his cheeks. He worries.

There I sit, breathing in and out in the modern steel and gray building, feeling crazily calm, waiting for someone to invite me into an office to question my mind and figure if it could make more money for the corporation.

Exactly what I've been avoiding all my life.

Think about it, Tim: going into a room where some interviewer probably has a Ph. D in corporate management techniques. He or she or it will know all about structuring the interview situation and reading my body language, and if you want the job, Timmy-boy, you've got to follow the goddamn yellow brick road, conform to the ABC specifications, read the same books, feed back the same garbage because that's what's expected, and then, oh, and then, Timmy-babes - you'll have your nine to five office job, hallelujah, goodbye, locked in, throw away the key.

I've got to get out of this place. Work would never work. Me sliced thin and slotted piece by piece into the corporate structure. Sounds like suicide without actually doing it yourself.

Then the same door swings open and that same young man comes out, sweat on his forehead and a fugitive look in his eyes.

"Tim Buckles?"

I leap up and straighten my tie, unwrinkle my jacket, and feel the second guy, who was here before me, fix me with a hate-filled stare.

As I approach the open door, I hear a noise within my head: "What are you doing to me?"

Another, smoother voice invites:

"Come in, come in."

He's round, small, bald, and moves like a well-oiled mechanism that was made for being courteous and professional. He glides to a chair and indicates the opposite one for me. I place my body obediently in it; the black leather of the seat still holds the

warmth from the previous applicant. There's a small visceral explosion within; my stomach does a slow flop.

"Mr. Buckles." He opens a file and shifts through its contents. *He's got a file on me?* Who told him what? "You're a special applicant, I must say.... Oh, excuse me. I'm Tony Welsh, director of human resources here at Nestor Richards. Been seeing so many people lately, I sometimes forget.... Expanding continually, hiring all the time.... But for your position - which at this point in time is not clearly defined - well ... we go through the motions for the extraordinary. You'll be moving straight through to Mr. Insko's office in a minute. General director for this division. Do I make myself clear?"

I nod, hoping I'll catch up somewhere along the line. For the moment I'm studying his sweat. Popping up all along his forehead are these bright beads; real live bureaucratic nervous sweat. Now, I always thought not sweating was one of the prime prerequisites for working within a gigantic corporation, especially in such a people-oriented position as human resources. And his verbal aptitude is severely lacking coherency and slickness. Rambles, doesn't finish sentences. Hmmm: his façade is neat and pin-striped, but it's got cracks all over it; he can't fake being real well enough. He must be some low-grade screener of people, not an essential component.

"Before I show you into Mr. Insko's office, I would like to know how much background you have on the Nestor Richards Corporation?"

"I've done some research."

"Well, let me fill you in from my perspective." He smiles, happy to do his job, his bald head glistening. His jaw goes up and down. "Nestor Richards is a multinational organization based in Los Angeles but with branch offices throughout all our major account areas, as well as regional headquarters in Europe, South America, Asia Pacific and of course all of North America. Our specific division in the corporation is dedicated to the dissemination of information and data supplied by our clients and customers to all corners of the globe. It is now commonly acknowledged by all of the most forward-looking experts that we live in an era of information technology - although some would claim it's an information glut. We combat this trend by focusing on the most strategic markets, prioritizing key target groups, defining the process of local dissemination and

then implementing well-defined plans and goals in order to maximize our own and our clients' success. That's where you come in."

I was afraid of that.

"But Mr. Insko, I'm sure, will want to fill you in personally on that end. The technical details I am not fully conversant with. I'm a general-overview man. But do you have any comments up to this point?"

I'd better, just to show some concern. "Well, actually, in my studies I have given extensive thought to the matters you've detailed. I fully appreciate the burden information must take, but another significant task is the focusing on the *quality* and *value* of said ideas. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I think so," he says doubtfully. Either he doesn't know or he just wants to see what I'm up to first. Give him some more data.

"Studying current trends leads one to the conclusion that the majority of ideas considered and adapted by individuals are not totally unique in their origin or depth. I think it is in the *collecting* and *implementation* of ideas that the main focus and importance should lie. It has been my conclusion that it is the careful collection and combining of the age-old with the brand-new that makes modern thought and commercial strategies unique and effective...." I move forward in my seat. "It is my contention that ninety to ninety-five percent of all ideas that are now established and in place as an integral part of our society have been around for many, many years, and that it is only a mere five to ten percent - if that much - which represent the truly new, the wholly innovative, whether it comes from individual minds and/or a group concept."

"Exactly." His little eyes brim with hope for my future at the Nestor Richards Corporation. "Couldn't agree more with the main thrust of your points, although I recommend one or two nuances concerning suggested application. We must discuss them. But for now, it's getting on to the hour where Mr. Insko is expecting you. You must tell him what you've told me. I'm certain he'll be excited. Come. Let's go."

In a strange, long leap he goes from sitting to standing at a door near the rear of his office, which I hadn't noticed. Ah, I am to be slid out a side door, where waiting candidates will not see me.

Outside this door is a land of quieting carpet. The acoustics of the corporation absorb the sounds of our movements. We move past a spacious intersection of corridors before making an abrupt left and coming up against a bank of elevators. Mr. Tony Welsh presses a button and another elevator mouth opens. Stepping in first, Welsh turns to me and extends an invitation. A warm fear twitches muscles along my back, little spasms begin in my body. Control, be normal, and into the elevator. Up, up, and up, we whoosh along, my ears popping from the altitude and pressure, up and up until I begin to think we're going to hit the roof, smash straight through the blacktop, off into the air like a launched cubicle, tumbling over and over, head over heels, until we lose momentum and begin to fall, fall and fall.

A soft jerk and we halt. The mouth opens and a corporate female is waiting there, expecting us.

"Good luck, and I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other, Mr. Buckles."

I turn back, to see Mr. Welsh waving goodbye as he's swallowed whole.

"Please follow me," says the woman, turning sharply to the left and rolling along on an invisible track on invisible wheels. I hurry to follow. This corridor goes on forever, past rows of doors, both closed and open. But this must be a far, unused, unfrequented corner of the corporation, because there's no one anywhere: just the silence disturbed by the slight sound of the cloth of my pant legs rubbing against itself as I move. The carpet here seems to grow up past my ankles.

Abruptly the woman up ahead brakes and takes a sharp right. She never glances back to see whether I'm following, just rolls steadily on, assuming I'm there and keeping up. We suddenly are enveloped by a large room where there's nothing but two blurred paintings, then go straight on into a second room with some chairs, a third room with huge, closed doors. She stops.

"Please wait here."

I nod and blink and I'm alone. I wonder if I could find my way out. Doubtful. So far, out here in the real world, I haven't been discovered. Everyone thinks I'm one of them. With my pin-striped suit, my hair combed right, and an automatic smile, the world thinks I'm real.

With a vengeance.

I hear something moving. I turn - there's humming and the sound of sliding. The wall is parting. There's someone standing on the other side, though I cannot see a face, only a human outline with a glow around it.

But I hear another set of smooth words coming toward me: "Come in, please come in, Mr. Buckles."

The person is all that I dread. Much like Welsh only a new, improved version. The supersonic professional business executive: an open, extended hand, a frank smile, and some invisible, pervading odor that gives off an artificial scent of warmth, coming from some gland that these guys have evolved in order to simulate the human touch. His hand is soft when I shake it, a built-in bureaucratic slackness, though I can feel sensors located just under the palm that are picking up my vibrations and decoding their meaning and sending them to a computer implanted behind his left ear. His smile flickers as he consumes my data. Behind the sharp pinkish eyes I spot the brain functioning and figuring, seeing already how I'm going to fit into company policy: will I be able to carry it out or create some more? His hair is a full crown of tightly curled and neatly clipped red. He has smooth, pink jowls. He asks me to sit down. He goes behind a desk, a huge desk, that takes some time to travel round.

But this guy's made for it - they were both probably manufactured at the same laboratory. He's a round pudgy man used to sitting behind a desk with papers and a telephone on it. He's been doing it for years. You can tell.

My stomach, unable to contain my feelings, sends up a bubble of bile. It travels along toward my throat. But I sit with my hands politely folded before me, and swallow.

He settles his body into the custom made chair behind his desk and examines me benignly. He has dim liver spots, like ancient faded ink marks, near his hairline, and on his temples and his sagging jowls. A round body encased in a business suit enthroned on a huge black chair that rises up high behind him. His face arranges itself into a contented smile of authority and welcome.

Without any introductions, he states, "I believe you do not possess much practical experience in the business environment."

Here I go.

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To get the job, I have to be who he wants me to be.

"Although I have not as yet held an official position that might be considered equivalent to the needs that the Nestor Richards Corporation requires, all my academic training and accomplishments--"

"You're acquainted with Mr. Peck, I believe?"

"I know his daughter well."

"Nice girl. I've known her since she was four years old."

In that case: "I'm engaged to Mr. Peck's daughter."

"Congratulations."

He smiles gently; it's like a flashbulb going off in my face. In that instant I realize that no matter what I say or how I perform, I'm going to be hired. Some sort of position is going to be offered. Alisa's papa has sent before me kind words in the form of praise; the rest, all this, is mere formality.

"What exactly do you know about the Nestor Richards Corporation?"

he asks.

"I've done some research," I say. "You're a multinational corporation and that your division deals primarily in information dissemination. You focus on strategic markets and..." I repeat most of what I was told by Welsh.

When I'm through with my verbal dance, I smile.

"Yes," he acknowledges, "but that's not all."

"Oh?" Noncommittal, inquisitive. Willing to learn.

"We want to be the best, we consider ourselves the best in the field, we want only to hire the best. We have high expectations accompanied by high rewards."

"I understand."

"That way, we will remain the best.... Now, I will fill you in on the rest: where we come from, where we expect to go, our worldwide impact plans and goals...." He places his double chin upon the top of his tie and launches into his presentation. He tells about the corporation's history, the original Nestor Richards, the human being who sold the company to the stock market and is now fishing permanently in Vermont; he explains

the company's workings, the connective tissue between the many divisions and their diversifications; he relates expansion plans, the Corporate vision, and the various skills required to ensure that plans and Vision coincide; tells about the many opportunities available and the possible positions I might find myself in. And all the while he smiles: smiling as he explains his serious business.

After a while I can no longer pay attention; his words become a blur of facts and figures; I can only watch and be fascinated. There have been certain people I've encountered in this world who are so very skilled and adept at performing smoothly, effortlessly, the ideal façade they've devised for themselves that I switch off from the verbal content yet remain wholly enthralled by the show. It's as if the guy has a script rolling past his inside eyes, which shoots the appropriate words from his brain and straight onto his tongue. His corporate personality clicks over like some automatic mechanism; and he hums, possessed, confident, professional. Slick talk. The hands folded like forgotten instruments on the table. Slick style. Yet so slick he slides right off.

Occasionally I receive the message to nod: whenever he pauses I know he is indicating a little silent recognition from me is required. So I nod.

He creates a significant pause: "But remember, this is a business. First and foremost: business."

Nod.

"Much money is involved so I'm afraid you'll find there's a certain amount of politics. Even intrigues. Understand?"

Nod.

"Dog eat dog." He stares at me, considering my fangs and my capabilities, my comprehension. His jowls tighten, his eyes narrow, his mouth pinches in concentration: he's looking inside me, checking my machinery, past my own façade and into the place no one sees, where I keep myself. Within, I cringe, trying to get out of his line of sight. Then, having seen what I've allowed, he relaxes his face; feature by feature, it goes slack and round. He smiles. "Good. You understand. Survival of the fittest," says the fat man.

For a moment I imagine him in my pool and me the lifeguard watching him smile and wave for aid as he sinks below the surface, calling out once, twice, and I do nothing about it.

His telephone suddenly gives a small, humble beep. He lifts it to his ear. "Yes?" He listens, turning from me slightly. To me: "Excuse me a moment." To the phone: "Okay." And he looks out his huge window at the L.A. area and listens, occasionally mumbling inaudible monosyllables as his part of the conversation.

I have time to check my pulse. Just a quick, discreet feel of a jugular. Still pumping away; yes, I'm still there, then.

He and his jowls swivel back round as he hangs up the phone.

"Fine." He takes a look at me. "Sorry about the interruption. Listen, it's coming on noon. Why don't you join us for lunch. Talk a few things over. Tony Welsh'll join us, as well as Larry Lume, our corporate psychologist who would like to meet you. I trust you don't mind. Standard screening procedure in today's business environment. Even for those who come with Mr. Peck's recommendation." Followed by an oiled wink. "Okay?"

We become four men in ties sitting round a table of food faking making light conversation, all the while measuring each others minds and personalities. Cutlery clicks and tinkles, food gets munched, liquid is sipped and swallowed. I sit there, docile, allowing these guys to ask me any- and everything they want; and I am obliged to justify myself. My neck and shoulders have gone very stiff. Business has begun to seep inside my bones. The big freeze as I become just another head, like them. Movement decreasing as photons and Buckle molecules are absorbed into the environment.

"Yes," I find myself now admitting, "I am qualified to be a research psychologist in the field of human resources." I don't like to reveal this; I've never wanted people to know; they'll find a use for it; yet that's what this is all about. What they need is what I must say. "I am able to perform analysis on particular skills and abilities in individuals and assess the results."

Lune, the in house psychologist, is all thin intensity and wispy blond hair, with big blurry blue eyes behind thick, rimless spectacles. He leans forward and drops the word

"Psychomatic?" into my dish, hoping to see some ignorance and thus my incompetence. Fool, I've been studying the modern world of late.

"What about it?" I reply. "This is a new method based on old formulas. It concerns evaluating statistics pertaining to individual talents and correlating the career achievements and latent performance capabilities...." Help! Someone get me out of this labyrinth of verbal garbage I've allowed the modern world to teach me.

"Yes?" someone says, wanting more.

More: "I am competent in testing computing skills, logical thinking aptitude, lateral conception ability, verbal communication skills. I am confident of being able to sort through a large assortment of dissimilar information and delivering concise results on the functional abilities of present and potential employees."

Lune and Welsh sit there stunned, their mouths just about on the verge of plopping open; they probably didn't know there were human beings who could talk so efficiently about their nonsense. Only Insko, the huge head, remains unmoved and unblinking, the only one who assumes my behavior is normal and expected. I keep it rolling.

"If we consider the ideal management candidates, for example, those who should be groomed are those with personal qualities such as the ability to communicate and an inquiring mind. The first of these, together with the ability to integrate with other members of a project team, is usually high on any corporation's list."

Breath.

"Personality tests should always be run concurrently with skills tests to measure accurately the overall motivated ability. I believe behavioral tests have their necessary place in team-building circumstances, to make sure that individuals integrate. This is a major consideration, don't you think?"

Insko the businessman nods, a slow smile spreading on his face like butter on a spongy muffin.

"You communicate very well."

But I don't know what I'm talking about. "Thank you. As mentioned, I have been well trained."

"But if I may say," Welsh the human resources director butts in, "it all sounds just a bit inhuman. People are people after all." I instantly see that he just wants to show the

boss man that he's not completely worthless; that he is able to contribute an independent opinion and earn his money during this supposedly harmless, relaxed lunchtime screening process.

Aaaahhhh! Attack with earnest tones. "Yes, sir," I actually say, turning my stiff neck and openly honest face toward him. "I certainly do not wish to give the impression that scientific tools and methods are to take the place of the personal interview. Otherwise I wouldn't be here with you gentlemen at this table." And smile all around, to show how subtly clever I am and that I understand the situation. Just scoring points. "Empathy is a key factor that must always be kept in mind in interpersonal relationships."

"Exactly."

Welsh sent out the message that he needed a humanistic angle; I gave him one. He believes my noises, nodding away over there in agreement.

"I have a growing interest in this area," Insko suddenly says, actually adding to the conversation for the first time. All heads swivel quickly on their stiff necks to hear God speak. Pay attention, reverently. "There is a potential for misuse, though."

Have to judge this one.... No, he doesn't want any comment. He wants to hear his own voice within a respectful silence; he's only gearing up to speak.

But when he opens his mouth, I don't hear a thing. The other two are leaning forward intently, though; they must be receiving aural information. My God, I've gone away. The insides of my head are blocking sound; someone's rearranging my matter. There's someone in here that wants my full attention, to point to knowledge I possess but cannot allow to trespass on my flow of bureaucratic words. *The longer you spoke, the less sense you make to yourself; as the words tumbled out, the less urgent the subject seems.*

Was that me, him or someone else? The insides of my head are twisting out of control.

Just as suddenly, the businessman's voice breaks through: "...individual resources - say, land or oil - are finite; but information is infinitely expandable. That's our job, fill the marketplace with usable, precise knowledge. Now perhaps I'm just an old American idealist - you two tell me, you're the experts in the mind - but are we or are we not in our

own ways, through the Nestor Richards Corporation, performing a valuable function for the future of the United States?"

Then it's gone again. Absolute silence. I'm going in and out. Lume's looking at me to respond so I let out an extended comment while trying to figure out what's happening in me. But I cannot hear myself speak; no resonance or echoes to reassure me that coherent speech is issuing from my mouth. Yet someone inside me is yelling at me: "Don't worry! You were right - it's just like school! They don't want to hear what you know, only what you can repeat!" *Who is that?*

The people around the table are nodding in agreement. I must have made sense; somebody somewhere must still be in control. But I'd better shut my lips while I'm ahead. I move my fingers toward my mouth and, touching the lips, make certain they are no longer moving.

AAAAhhhh!

My God, who was that?

It's as though there's a crowd inside my head. Different voices, from unknown portions of me, yelling, wanting attention, taking control.

Somebody's saying, "... problem solving requires a clear understanding of the objective, an appreciation of the context and of..." that's either them out there, or me continuing my automatic spiel for them, or it's unused words here inside my head that have yet to be spoken and are floating through my consciousness, seeking egress. My hands slip underneath the tablecloth to grip my thighs. Hold on.

I blink, and they are halfway through dessert. So am I. Where did I go? What happened?

And I thought I'd gone beyond madness. But now these blackouts. Ear-outs. Mouth-outs. Out--

"Now, since you've agreed to our terms, I need you to sign a couple of forms...." I'm back in an office; when did this occur? Just Welsh and me. What happened to the others? Did we shake hands; was parting cordial; did they like me; do they want me; have I a job?

Welsh has spread some papers before me. He's patting his pockets, looking concerned. "... now where's my pen?" There's an ever so slight edge of panic to his voice. A business entity without a pen is like a male hustler without a penis: he can't do his job. His creased little face peeks under my papers, then under some other papers; he checks his desk drawers. A miffed panic is now setting in: without a writing implement he can't initial things. Can't prove he's alive. Welsh looks around helplessly at the four walls. Just before he goes crazy, he gets an idea. He moves toward a low cabinet at the rear of the office. He slides open a door; his hands disappear within; he rummages; his head goes inside; he looks as though he's about to climb all the way in, slide the door shut behind, evolve into a file, attaining bureaucratic perfection.

"Aha!"

The businessman returns, armed with a pen.

"Please sign here. And here."

Lying on the couch, staring at the ceiling, home again and safe. The voices, the timelessness, the bits of death, are gone now. I am lying here, breathing in and out in the large silence of my clear, empty mind. I've come through the other side.

Hours pass; I lie still, exhausted.

Alisa arrives home from work. "Well?"

This is the last and only thought I have in my head:

"I start on the first."