

## THE CANDIDATE WAS TERRIFIED.

He was dressed in Gunnar Øye attire: grey Ermenegildo Zegna suit, hand-sewn Borelli shirt and burgundy tie with sperm-cell pattern, I guessed Cerrutti 1881. However, I was certain about the shoes: hand-sewn Ferragamo. I once had a pair myself.

The papers in front of me revealed that the candidate came armed with excellent credentials from NHH – the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, in Bergen – a spell in Stortinget for the Conservative Party and a four-year success story as the managing director of a medium-sized manufacturing company.

Nevertheless, Jeremias Lander was terrified. His upper lip glistened with sweat.

He raised the glass of water my secretary had placed on the low table between us.

‘I’d like . . .’ I said with a smile. Not the open, unconditional smile that invites a complete stranger to come in from the cold, not the frivolous one. But the courteous, semi-warm smile that, according to the literature, signals the interviewer’s professionalism, objectivity and analytical approach. Indeed, it is this lack of emotional commitment that causes the candidate to trust his interviewer’s integrity. And as a result the candidate will in turn – according to the aforementioned literature – provide more sober, objective information, as he has been made to feel that any pretence would be seen through, any exaggeration exposed and plays punished. I don’t put on this smile because of the literature, though. I don’t give a damn about the literature; it is chock-a-block with various degrees of authoritative bullshit, and the only thing I need is Inbau, Reid and Buckley’s nine-step interrogation model. No, I put on this smile because I really *am* professional, objective and analytical. I am a headhunter. It is not that difficult, but I am king of the heap.

‘I’d like,’ I repeated, ‘I’d like you to tell me a little about your life, outside of work, that is.’

‘Is there any?’ His laughter was a tone and a half higher than it should have been. On top of that, when you deliver a so-called ‘dry’ joke at a job interview it is unwise both to laugh at it yourself and to watch your interlocutor to see whether it has hit home.

‘I would certainly hope so,’ I said, and his laughter morphed into a clearing of the throat. ‘I believe the management of this enterprise attaches great importance to their new chief executive leading a balanced life. They’re seeking someone who will stay with them for a number of years, a long-distance-runner type who knows how to pace himself. Not someone who is burnt out after four years.’

Jeremias Lander nodded while swallowing another mouthful of water.

He was approximately fourteen centimetres taller than me and three years older. Thirty-eight then. A bit young for the job. And he knew; that was why he had dyed the hair around his temples an almost imperceptible grey. I had seen this before. I had seen everything before. I had seen applicants afflicted with sweaty palms arrive with chalk in their right-hand jacket pocket so as to give me the driest and whitest handshake imaginable. Lander’s throat issued an involuntary clucking sound. I noted down on the interview feedback sheet: *Motivated. Solution-orientated.*

‘I see you live in Oslo,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘Skøyen.’

‘And married to . . .’ I flicked through his papers, assuming the irritated expression that makes candidates think I am expecting them to take the initiative.

‘Camilla. We’ve been married for ten years. Two children. School age.’

‘And how would you characterise your marriage?’ I asked without looking up. I gave him two drawn-out seconds and continued before he had collected himself enough to answer. ‘Do you think you will still be married in six years’ time after spending two-thirds of your waking life at work?’

I peered up. The confusion on his face was as expected. I had been inconsistent. Balanced life. Need for commitment. That didn’t add up. Four seconds passed before he answered. Which is at least one too many. ‘I would certainly hope so,’ he said.

Secure, practised smile. But not practised enough. Not for me. He had used my own words against me, and I would have registered that as a plus if there had been some intentional irony. In this case, unfortunately, it had merely been the unconscious aping of words used by someone considered superior in status. *Poor self-image*, I jotted down. And he ‘hoped’, he didn’t know, didn’t give voice to anything visionary, was not a crystal-ball reader, didn’t show that he was up to speed with the minimum requirement of every manager: that they must appear to be clairvoyant. *Not an improviser. Not a chaos-pilot.*

‘Does she work?’

‘Yes. In a law office in the city centre.’

‘Nine to four every day?’

‘Yes.’

‘And who stays at home if either of the children is ill?’

‘She does. But fortunately it’s very rare for Niclas and Anders to—’

‘So you don’t have a housekeeper or anyone at home during the day?’

He hesitated in the way that candidates do when they are unsure which answer puts them in the best light. All the same, they lie disappointingly seldom. Jeremias Lander shook his head.

‘You look like you keep yourself fit, Lander.’

‘Yes, I train regularly.’

No hesitation this time. Everyone knows that businesses want top executives who won’t fall victim to a heart attack at the first hurdle.

‘Running and cross-country skiing perhaps?’

‘Right. The whole family loves the outdoor life. And we have a mountain cabin on Norefjell.’

‘Uh-huh. Dog, too?’

He shook his head.

‘No? Allergic to them?’

Energetic shaking of the head. I wrote: *Lacks sense of humour?*

Then I leaned back in the chair and steepled my fingertips. An exaggerated, arrogant gesture, of course. What can I say? That’s the way I am. ‘How much would you say your reputation was worth, Lander? And how have you insured it?’

He furrowed his already sweaty brow as he struggled to give the matter some thought. Two seconds later, resigned, he said: ‘What do you mean?’

I sighed as if it ought to be obvious. Cast my eyes around the room as if searching for a pedagogical allegory I had not used before. And, as always, found it on the wall.

‘Are you interested in art, Lander?’

‘A bit. My wife is, at any rate.’

‘Mine, too. Can you see the picture I have over there?’ I pointed to *Sara Gets Undressed*, painted on vinyl, over two metres in height, a woman in a green skirt with her arms crossed, about to pull a red sweater over her head. ‘A present from my wife. The artist’s name is Julian Opie and the picture’s worth a quarter of a million kroner. Do you possess any art in that price range?’

‘As a matter of fact I do.’

‘Congratulations. Can you see how much it’s worth?’

‘When you know, you can.’

‘Yes, when you know, you can. The picture hanging there consists of a few lines, the woman’s head is a circle, a zero without a face, and the coloring is plain and lacks texture. In addition, it was done on a computer and millions of copies can be printed out at the mere press of a key.’

‘Goodness me.’

‘The only – and I do mean the only – thing that makes this picture worth a quarter of a million is the artist’s reputation. The buzz that he is good, the market’s faith in the fact that he is a genius. It’s difficult to put your finger on what constitutes genius, impossible to know for sure. It’s like that with top directors, too, Lander.’

‘I understand. Reputation. It’s about the confidence the director exudes.’

I jot down: *Not an idiot.*

‘Exactly,’ I continued. ‘Everything is about reputation. Not just the director’s salary, but also the company’s value on the stock exchange. What is, in fact, the work of art you own and how much is it valued at?’

‘It’s a lithograph by Edvard Munch. *The Brooch*. I don’t know what it’s worth, but . . .’

With a flourish of my hand I impatiently urged him on.

‘The last time it was up for auction the price bid was about 350,000 kroner,’ he said.

‘And what have you done to insure this valuable item against theft?’

‘The house has a good alarm system,’ he said. ‘Tripolis. Everyone in the neighbourhood uses them.’

‘Tripolis systems are good, though expensive. I use them myself,’ I said. ‘About eight grand a year. How much have you invested to protect your personal reputation?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Twenty thousand? Ten thousand? Less?’

He shrugged.

‘Not a cent,’ I said. ‘You have a CV and a career here which are worth ten times the lithograph you mentioned. A year. Nevertheless, you have no one to guard it, no custodian. Because you think it’s unnecessary. You think your success with the company you head up speaks for itself. Right?’

Lander didn’t answer.

‘Well,’ I said, leaning forward and lowering my voice as though about to impart a secret, ‘that’s not the way it works. Success is like Opie’s pictures, a few lines plus a few zeros, no face. Pictures are nothing, reputation is everything. And that is what we can offer.’

‘Reputation?’

‘You’re sitting in front of me as one of six good applicants for a director’s job. I don’t think you’ll get it. Because you lack the reputation for this kind of post.’

His mouth dropped as if in protest. The protest never materialised. I thrust myself against the high back of the chair, which gave a screech.

‘My God, man, you *applied* for this job! What you should have done was to set up a straw man to tip us off and then pretend you knew nothing about it when we contacted you. A top man has to be headhunted, not arrive ready-killed and all carved up.’

I saw that had the desired effect. He was rattled. This was not the usual interview format, this was not Cuté, Disc or any of the other stupid, useless questionnaires hatched up by a motley collection of, to varying extents, tone-deaf psychologists and human resource experts who themselves had nothing to offer. I lowered my voice again.

‘I hope your wife won’t be too disappointed when you tell her the news this afternoon. That you missed out on the dream job. That, career-wise, you’ll be on standby once again this year. Just like last year . . .’

He jerked back in his chair. Bullseye. Naturally. For this was Roger Brown in action, the most radiant star in the recruitment sky right now.

‘Last . . . last year?’

‘Yes, isn’t that right? You applied for the top job at Denja’s. Mayonnaise and liver paste, is that you?’

‘I understood that sort of thing was confidential,’ Jeremias Lander said meekly.

‘So it is. But my job is to map out resources. And that’s what I do. Using all the methods at my disposal. It’s stupid to apply for jobs you won’t get, especially in your position, Lander.’

‘My position?’

‘Your qualifications, your track record, the tests and my personal impression all tell me you have what it takes. All you’re missing is reputation. And the fundamental pillar in constructing a reputation is exclusivity. Applying for jobs at random undermines exclusivity. You’re an executive who does not seek challenges but *the* challenge. The one job. And that’s what you will be offered. On a silver platter.’

‘Will I?’ he said with another attempt at the intrepid, wry smile. It no longer worked.

‘I would like you in our stable. You must not apply for any more jobs. If other recruitment agencies contact you with tempting offers you must not take them. Stick with us. Be exclusive. Let us build up your reputation. And look after it. Let us be for your reputation what Tripolis is for your house. Within two years you’ll be going home to your wife with news of a better job than the one we’re talking about now. And that’s a promise.’

Jeremias Lander stroked his carefully shaven chin with his thumb and forefinger. ‘Hmm. This interview has moved in a different direction from the one I had anticipated.’

The defeat had made him calmer. I leaned forward. Opened my arms. Held up my palms. Sought his eyes. Research has proved that seventy-eight per cent of first impressions at interviews are based on body language and a mere eight per cent on what you actually say. The rest is about clothes, odours from armpits and mouth, what you have hanging on the walls. My body language was fantastic. And right now it was expressing openness and trust. Finally, I invited him in from the cold.

‘Listen, Lander. The chairman of the board of directors and the finance director are coming here tomorrow to meet one of the candidates. I’d like them to meet you, too. Would twelve o’clock be convenient?’

‘Fine.’ He had answered without checking any form of calendar. I liked him better already.

‘I want you to listen to what they have to say and thereafter you can politely account for why you are no longer interested, explain that this is not the challenge you were seeking and wish them well.’

Jeremias Lander tilted his head. ‘Backing out like that, won’t it be seen as frivolous?’

‘It will be seen as ambitious,’ I said. ‘You will be regarded as someone who knows his own worth. A person whose services are exclusive. And that’s the starting point for the story we refer to as . . .’ I gave a flourish of the hand.

He smiled. ‘Reputation?’

‘Reputation. Do we have an agreement?’

‘Within two years?’

‘I’ll guarantee it.’

‘And how can you guarantee it?’

I noted: *Quick to regain the offensive.*

‘Because I’m going to recommend you for one of the posts I’m talking about.’

‘So? It’s not you who makes the decisions.’

I half closed my eyes. It was an expression my wife Diana said reminded her of a sluggish lion, a satiated lord and master. I liked that.

‘My recommendation is my client’s decision, Lander.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘In the same way that you will never again apply for a job you are not confident of getting, I have never made a recommendation a client has not followed.’

‘Really? Never?’

‘Not that anyone can remember. Unless I am one hundred per cent sure the client will go along with my recommendation, I don’t recommend anyone and prefer the job to go to one of the competitors. Even though I may have three brilliant candidates and am ninety per cent sure.’

‘Why’s that?’

I smiled. ‘The answer begins with *R*. My entire career is based on it.’

Lander laughed and shook his head. ‘They said you were tough, Brown. Now I know what they mean.’

I smiled again and rose to my feet. ‘And now I suggest you go home and tell your beautiful wife that you’re going to refuse this job because you’ve decided to aim higher. My guess is you can look forward to a pleasant evening.’

‘Why are you doing this for me, Brown?’

‘Because the commission your employer will pay us is a third of your first year’s gross salary. Did you know that Rembrandt used to go to auctions to raise the bidding for his own pictures? Why would I sell you for two million a year when, after a little reputation building, we can sell you for five? All we are asking is that you stick with us. Do we have a deal?’ I proffered my hand.

He grabbed it with gusto. ‘I have a feeling this has been a profitable conversation, Brown.’

‘Agreed,’ I said, reminding myself to give him a couple of tips on handshaking technique before he met the client.