

DIRTY ROTTEN RECRUITER TRICKS



Elaine Delanna Priestly

BOSON BOOKS



Dirty Rotten Recruiter Tricks

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***An Insider Describes How Recruiters
Deceive Job Seekers, Cheat Companies,
and
How You Can Keep from
Becoming Their Latest Victim***

by

Elaine Delanna Priestly

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The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win you're still a rat.
—Lily Tomlin

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Author's Commentary

This book is an exposé of unscrupulous recruiters, those who deceive job seekers and cheat client companies. It is a fictive memoir of my early years in the recruiting business. And I know what I'm talking about. I'm a woman who rose to the top of my profession and learned every deceptive practice and dirty recruiter trick imaginable along the way. *Dirty Rotten Recruiter Tricks*, dramatized through embellished dialogue, gives you a peek inside the grubby end of the business where recruiting charlatans practice their wily crafts. Honest recruiters who provide genuine services to job seekers and client companies alike find their reputations tarnished by such frauds.

At the conclusion of each chapter, you will find **Elaine's Diary**, a summary of salient points that provide solid advice to help both job candidates and hiring executives avoid the kind of recruiter scams described so graphically in the book. In essence you're getting both an entertaining story along with some valuable advice.

Obviously, the name Elaine Delanna Priestly is fictitious since I'm still engaged in my profession. And there are no such companies as Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, Breckinpell Industries, or Porter, Morrison, and Swan. Nor does this book contain portrayals of specific organizations or actual people who work for them other than occasional reference to a nationally recognized company like Men's Warehouse. Places in Atlanta, with the exception of well-known landmarks such as Northlake Mall are fictional.

THE WORLD'S SECOND OLDEST PROFESSION

I'll bet not a damn one of you, guys in particular, would ever have believed a woman could rise to the top of the world's second oldest profession. The difference between the first and second being that in my profession, the second oldest, we sell other people's bodies, not our own (although some cynics would claim otherwise).

Anyway, I made you look like a bunch of thumb-sucking idiots, didn't I? Because guess where yours truly, Elaine Delanna Priestly¹, is perched right now, today? In the rarified upper ranks of Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, arguably one of the world's largest and most powerful headhunting companies in the country and the world. Our company is headquartered on Park Avenue in the Big Apple, with offices in every one of the fifty states as well as thirty-six countries around the globe. That's where I work. Me. Elaine. Chairman and chief executive officer. Top dog. In the building's posh penthouse suite. Took twenty years to get here, but it was well worth the trip.

And just to demonstrate my power, I had the board change my title from chairman to chairwoman. Not a whimper from that starched collar bunch. Not as long as I suck in the bucks, produce more income and profits every quarter. The name of the game in business. Better fucking believe it.

Not bad for a simple country girl from the hills of Georgia, uneducated, formerly barefoot and pregnant as the saying goes, and once as unsophisticated as a hog slopping in a trough. But no longer. No siree, no longer. Just like the old saying goes, "I may be Polish but that doesn't make me stupid," well, I'm country but that doesn't mean I can't change. I put my 160 IQ to work and studied hard at nights, reading high-toned books such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Plato's *The Republic* (whew, was that tough sledding), as well as other books on culture and history. That tattered ten-year-old *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* I own (three bucks from a used bookstore) took one hell of a pounding. Hell, I even watched old Cary Grant drawing room comedies on Turner Classic Movies to learn how to talk proper and behave in social situations. This country girl learns fast.

A characteristic, I might add, that disarmed everybody, made them vulnerable to my numerous charms and machinations. My fresh-scrubbed innocent look fooled a whole bunch of smug men, not to mention a whole lot of otherwise sharp women. Gave me a leg up in the business, if you'll excuse the expression.

The business: Recruiting. Headhunting. Body snatching. The words connoting an industry widely regarded by the public as peppered with unethical practices. An opinion supported by legions of job candidates and company executives who used headhunters or, more correctly, were used by headhunters. According to these victims, an industry of cutthroats, thieves, back stabbers, and players so hungry for money they'd pimp out their own mothers to get a job order². An industry where many view the term honest recruiter as a flagrant, laughable dichotomy.

Look, I'm not saying every recruiter is a crook. But it's a fair enough description of enough of them I've worked with over the years. From managing a recruiting desk to managing an office to managing a region to managing an entire company, I found dirty rotten recruiter tricks as commonplace as a Starbucks

coffee break. Particularly at the bottom of the organization where the rubber hits the road, as the clichéd saying goes. Where deception is too often the name of the game. Where glib recruiters (today's version of the slick fast-talking snake oil salesmen of old) sell questionable job candidates to company executives. Where hapless job candidates are disposable commodities, to be used by unprincipled recruiters and discarded at will. Where many recruiting agency managers don't ask enough pointed questions about ethical behavior as long as their recruiters are making money for them. Where recruiters who don't produce find themselves hot-footing it to the unemployment office in record time. This is not an occupation that tolerates failure. My world. That's been my experience, and I'm about to reveal all.

Neither is this a book for innocents. What you're going to read is not *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, but more in the order of *American Psycho*. Stark portrayals showing luckless victims of recruiting dirty tricks: company executives who hired recruiters to fill slots and job candidates seeking meaningful work. Both who got screwed without being kissed.

Hey, you counter, let's keep things in perspective. How about the success stories? I agree, there are many recruiting stories with happy endings, those where recruiters behave ethically and fill job vacancies with the best of all available candidates. Stories where all parties to the transaction make out: recruiter, job candidate, hiring company. Yes, most job assignments do have happy endings.

But tell that happy horseshit to the company that was cheated by a recruiter or a job candidate who was screwed over. They know that every experience is a personal one. Get cheated once by a recruiter and all recruiters are corrupt. That's the way it goes. Just as one sour pickle spoils the barrel, enough sour pickles spoil the appeal of the rest of the pickles. And there are lots of sour pickles out there.

My purpose here is not to discuss the pickle barrel. My purpose is to tell you about the sour pickles. To expose the unethical recruiter's bag of dirty tricks, so both company hiring authorities and job applicants can avoid traps. I'll do so by telling you about my early experiences at Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, when I was a young woman on the make, busy absorbing lessons on how to become a headhunter and moving ahead fast.

Most important for you, I'll show you how to counter dirty rotten recruiter tricks. These lessons follow most chapters of the book under the title **Elaine's Diary**, where I reflect on and record what I learned about the business. Insights and lessons to help you avoid recruiter scams, whether you're a job applicant searching for a position or a manager inside a company seeking to fill a job opening.

Hop aboard; the journey is about to begin.

GETTING MY FOOT IN THE PICKLE BARREL

"There's one inviolate rule in this business, Elaine," Charley Morgan said. "Our guiding principle. Can you guess what it is?"

In an interview it's always best to fess up instead of faking it and look like an absolute jerk. "No, Mr. Morgan, I don't."

"Call me Charley," Morgan said and smiled.

"Charley." I had difficulty using his first name. He was an experienced sixtyish manager of a recruiting firm branch office and I was an unpolished twenty-year-old candidate who had answered an ad in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for a job as a recruiter. I wasn't sure exactly what the job entailed but I knew you could make tons of money at it. And I was desperate for the security money could buy.

"You can throw so much shit at a screen and eventually some of it filters through."

I nodded my head wisely as if I knew what he was talking about, not having the faintest idea what slinging shit at a screen meant.

"In other words, the more candidates you send out to interview for a job, the greater the chance that eventually one of them will stick." He leaned back in his worn leather executive chair and grinned. "Recruiting 101."

We were sitting in his tiny, cramped office with a solitary window in a rundown office building near Northlake Mall, overlooking a community composed of small businesses, retail shops, and snarled traffic twelve hours a day.

I took the opportunity to examine Charley. Medium build, slightly stooped, dressed in a blazer and ascot, wavy white hair that looked as if it he set it with a curling iron, trimmed white mustache. Warm, pleasant smile. The picture of a doting grandpa, albeit a vain one.

"Oh, I get it. The job of a recruiter is to find as many candidates as possible and keep sending them to clients until the sale is made."

"The candidates have to be qualified of course." He winked at me and made quote signs with his hands when saying the word "qualified."

Well, Mrs. Priestly hadn't reared a complete dummy. In other words, if a candidate could walk, talk, and resist the urge to scratch his ass in public, send the dummy in. I smiled to indicate I had heard Charley loud and clear.

"Let me take a few seconds to look over your resume."

While he did, I caught a glimpse of myself in the window's reflection. Slender, 5' 10" (in business tall is better than short), corn silk blonde hair cropped at fashionably shoulder length and held back in a bun, movie star nose, nice set of knockers, curves all in the right places. The curves toned down by midnight-blue jacket and slacks: standard business dress code. In preparation for this interview I had studied lots of women entering and leaving office buildings in the downtown Atlanta business district and modeled myself accordingly with clothes direct from the high couture section of Wal-Mart.

Charley set the resume on his desk. "Why do you want to be a recruiter, Elaine?"

That question might have startled me if I hadn't been prepared. "I like selling things to people. Started when I was ten, selling lemonade in front of my house,

then at fourteen sold subscriptions for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* door to door—”

“Says here on your resume you lived not that far from Lake Lanier. Sounds upscale.”

Mention Lake Lanier and people automatically picture summer cottages set in the morning mist, wooden boat docks creaking under your feet, expensive speedboats tethered to piers. That kind of nonsense. Where I came from back in the hills of Northeast Georgia outhouses were not uncommon, and electricity and indoor plumbing were a treat for many. I mean to tell you I lived way back in the woods. If you ever saw the movie *Deliverance* with Burt Reynolds you know what I mean. Portions of that movie were shot not five miles from my home.

“I was brought up in a nice community of Christian folks, Mr.—I mean—Charley.”

Morgan frowned. Shouldn’t have thrown that Christian folks line at him. My mistake. Hell, give me a break, I was learning.

I hurried on. “Soon as I got out of high school, I went to work at Rowling’s Poultry Processing Company.” I didn’t tell him that I never graduated from high school, that Leroy T. Grimes, the football team’s star running back got me with child. I had to drop out without graduating after I suffered a miscarriage and developed blood poisoning, a combination knockout punch that left me in the hospital for a month. Nor did I tell him that at Rowling’s, a large chicken processing plant, I mopped floors in the plant and offices. Some things are better left unsaid.

“For a young lady you have an impressive resume.”

Most of it as phony as a politician’s smile. “Thanks, Charley. I’ve accomplished a few small things, but I’ve got a long way to go and I’m always open to suggestions for improvement.” Fancy words said in a fancy way, the kind of chatter that pours out of the mouths of astute job applicants trying to act modest. The drivel interviewers love to hear. Like I said, Mrs. Priestly hadn’t raised a complete ninny. The library’s full of books like *What Color Is Your Parachute?* telling you how to behave on an interview and what to say.

Charley beamed at me. The crinkly lines in his face brought to mind Santa Claus. “Got to admit, I really like working with younger people. They’re not set in their ways like some of us old fogies.”

“Gee, Charley, you’re not old. I’ll bet you’re not a day over...let’s see...forty-eight?” Yeah, sure.

Charley’s smile broadened and he chuckled. “Oh, you’re going to be a hand full, all right. But let’s get back to business. Do you have any idea the kind of money a good recruiter makes?”

“No, I don’t.”

“It starts at twenty percent of billing during an orientation period, and climbs to thirty percent as a recruiter proves herself.”

I noticed he used the word herself not himself. A good sign. I made a silent prayer to the god of interviewing. Wherever she was.

“It works this way. Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz bills the client company, say twenty percent of the gross income of the job applicant placed. Assume the applicant is hired at fifty grand total compensation for the year. So our firm bills the client ten grand. An experienced recruiter gets thirty percent of that, which amounts to \$3000. That’s assuming once you get your feet on the ground you

place two job candidates per month. Incidentally, two placements a month are a minimum requirement for our recruiters if they want to remain with this firm. After a break-in period, of course.”

I didn’t tell him that I’d move the fucking earth to crack that nut.

“It’s a big nut,” Charley said as if reading my mind, “but one that separates performers from fakers. In any case, assume you average a thirty percent commission rate and you’re placing job candidates in the fifty grand range, you’d pull in \$6000 per month.”

I almost jumped out of my chair. Six grand was more money than I’d possessed in a lifetime. Twelve times that, seventy-two grand, was a number so far in the stratosphere it was difficult, if not impossible, to visualize. Dollar signs floated merrily by as I gazed adoringly at Charley.

He must have read the look of surprise and delight on my face. “Take my word for it. That’s standard pay for somebody who can sell to client companies and place top quality job candidates. Multiply \$6000 by twelve months and we’re talking serious money, \$72,000. Of course that further assumes the company charges the client at the standard rate, which doesn’t always happen. And that the average placing of job candidates is at the \$50,000 bracket. And that doesn’t always happen. Depends on the job you’re trying to fill.”

Big *ifs*. But the numbers staggered me, took my breath away. Not bad for a dirt-poor country girl who never had two dimes to rub together. Assuming I could handle the job, of course. I had a big set of balls but this was the big league and I had been playing class A ball until now—the lowest place in the farm team hierarchy.

In terms of material well-being, I was living as low as a snake’s belly, so the only way to go was up. Before coming to Atlanta I had squirreled away enough cash to last a year, provided I lived like a monk. I was paying \$200 a month for a cramped room the size of a prison cell at the back of a decrepit frame house. The owners, a kindly old couple, wanted to supplement their retirement income and I fit their needs perfectly. I paid in cash on time, had no visitors, and was in bed every night by 10:00 p.m. Alone. The life of a monk: no booze, no drugs, no sex.

My food bill was slight since I could afford to eat only twice a day, and I ate like a bird anyway. My one treat was the fifteen-year-old Honda Civic a rich classmate had generously given me when she traded up to a five-year-old Chevy. The car had no trade-in value anyway. In fact it was a pile of junk and a safety hazard, but I was still gladder than glad to get it. It was dented on the outside with torn cushions on the inside, but the engine and drive train were reliable and the car was cheap to run. Other than rent, food, car insurance, and gas I had no real expenses.

My evenings were spent studying. Thankfully, the nearest county library was a half-mile away so I was able to spend a lot of time there, cramming information in my skull, learning all sorts of wonderful things about the business world, in lieu of a formal education.

Charley said, “Not that you’ll make seventy-two grand your first year in the business, Elaine. There’s a learning curve.”

“What’s that?”

"How long it takes you to pick up the ins and outs of recruiting. You'll hear our staff jokingly refer to those ins and outs as dirty tricks." Charley winked at me, again. I was beginning to catch on.

"Tricks of the trade?"

Charley grinned. "You could call it that."

"I'm a fast learner, Charley."

"I'm sure you are. How does it sound so far, Elaine?"

"I'm speechless."

Charley smiled again and picked up my resume. He read it and paused. His expression turned serious. "You were a supervisor at Rowling's. That's impressive for somebody so young. I would have thought most of their supervisors were older and had more experience."

"Well, most of them do."

"Your resume is a touch vague here. It says you were a supervisor, but doesn't say a supervisor of what."

Uh oh. "You know, cleanup work. I supervised a small crew."

"Do you know Dutch Martin?"

I tried to suppress a gasp. Dutch Martin was administrative manager for the plant, the guy in charge of human resources, the guy who hired me to clean toilets and mop floors. I should have figured it was odds on that Charley would know him, being in the recruiting business. The last thing I wanted was Charley talking to Martin and finding out my supervisory duties were confined to cleaning out the plant's filthy, stink-ridden bathrooms.

"Oh yeah, sure. Nice guy," I answered to Charley's question. That toad-face bastard Dutch Martin was a real meany, but I knew instinctively it never pays to badmouth anybody in an interview. The interviewer might think, "If she's badmouthing her former employer, will she someday badmouth me?"

"Tell you what, Elaine. I'll call Dutch and fill in the blanks if you like, save you the time on your employment application."

I felt the blood rush out of my face. "What employment application?"

"Most companies nowadays have new employees fill out employment applications. Things like you have in your resume: dates of employment, salaries, duties, job titles, education, those sort of facts."

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Charley. I'll fill out the application myself."

Charley leaned forward and his eyes bored into mine. "One thing a recruiter needs to know, Elaine, is employment law. Recruiting 101. Lying on an employment application is automatic grounds for dismissal. Under some circumstances, even jail time."

The back of my neck started to sweat.

"Anybody who lies on a resume better be pretty damned slick. Nowadays most companies take the time and trouble to check a person's background. Some even hire firms that specialize in detecting resume fraud. They're called pre-employment checkers."

My heart jumped from third gear to overdrive, zoomed down the track fast enough to compete in the Indy 500. I tried to conceal the slight tremble developing in my lips.

"Sometimes it's easy to fool a young human resources interviewer because he's inexperienced, naive. But not often."

"I see what you mean."

"It's pretty darn difficult to slip something by an old codger, somebody who's been around a few years and has seen all the tricks...somebody like myself."

Like I said, there's a time to bullshit and a time to fess up. This was one of those times. "Mr. Morgan, I've got something to—"

Charley put up his hand in a stop gesture. "Don't bother. As I'm sure you've guessed, I already know."

What else could I say? It was too late. I reluctantly stood, preparing to leave his office. Already my mind was racing ahead: fix the resume so the bullshit wasn't so apparent, check the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for job openings, get a list of other recruiting firms...

"Where you going?" Charley asked, looking surprised.

"You caught me with my britches down. Guess it's time to go."

"Did I say go?"

"In so many words. I'm embarrassed."

"As you should be. Do you know why?"

"Sure. You caught me trying to slip one past you. Flat out, I lied and got caught."

Charley smiled. "C'mon back and sit down." He waved his arms in a welcoming gesture.

I hesitated, then sat down.

"Getting back to why you should be embarrassed. It's got nothing to do with lying and everything to do with getting caught."

"I guess one follows the other."

"Do you have any idea how many people lie on their resumes?"

"No, but I imagine it's a lot."

"The latest recruiter news estimates something like sixty percent."

"I didn't realize it was that high."

"The most frequent lie is about education, people stretching their credentials. Claiming college degrees that don't exist. The next biggest lie is about money. Exaggerating salaries, bonuses. The third is exaggerating accomplishments. The fourth's adding job titles that never existed. The fifth is covering up short stays at companies, pretending they never existed."

"And they all got caught."

Charley leaned forward again and pierced me with his eyes, this time without their customary twinkle. On such a nice old guy the gesture was startling...and revealing. Charley was maybe a lot smarter than his aw shucks manner had let on. "Wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Not all of them got caught."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. But the fact remains that clever liars know how to lie and cheat without getting caught. And you know something, Elaine?"

"No, what?"

"I'm going to teach you how they do it. That and every other dirty recruiting trick in the book."

I was floored, absolutely floored. "You are?"

"You bet. Under ordinary circumstances I would have kicked you out of this office, but I won't. Know why?"

By now I could see Charley used the Socratic method of asking questions to drive to the heart of a matter and expose its core truth. “No, that one I can’t quite figure out.”

Charley chuckled. “Because I see in you the making of a great recruiter. You’re hungry for money and success. By lying on your resume you’re showing me you’ll do anything to make it happen, and I’m guessing you’ve got the business scruples of a billy goat. Most of all, you’re bright. In this business a bright person stands out. The way I read you, Elaine, you’re a hundred watt bulb in a business populated by twenty-five and forty watt bulbs. You’ll go far with the proper coaching.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Charley rose and reached across the desk. We shook hands. “I do. Say yes.”

“Yes.”

“I’m your new coach. Welcome aboard.”

Elaine's Diary

(Elaine may be nothing more than a simple country girl—some might even call her a hick—but the gal was smart enough to record her observations of the recruiting profession and what she learned from life on the job. Although recorded in a curious intermingling of down-home talking and self-taught erudition, readers can't help but benefit from her conclusions. Her diary follows each chapter of the book and amplifies and explains what both companies and job hunters should know when dealing with recruiters.)

Wow, was that interview with Charley Morgan ever an eye opener. What I learned from that conversation and my later experience reinforces what Charley told me during my first day on the job: the business is peppered with recruiting agency managers who firmly believe in slinging shit at a screen as the only true method of recruiting—and they train their new headhunters accordingly. This method reached its pinnacle of popularity (my nights at the library are paying off; you can tell by the fancy words I'm learning. I can even string two or three of them fancy words together, by golly) in the late nineties when information technology professionals were as scarce as genuine silver dollars, and both recruiters and client companies accepted half-trained, poorly experienced job applicants in lieu of the real thing. The old law of supply and demand at work.

No longer. As my library studies of *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, and *The Wall Street Journal* point out, the business decline of the early 2000s wiped out demand, and a buyer's market followed in almost every job category, information technology included. But that didn't hinder those recruiters whose income depends on dirty tricks; they continue to try to sneak poorly qualified or inept job candidates past unsuspecting or gullible human resources interviewers.

Here's what I concluded before long in the business: companies can neutralize this age-old recruiting tactic by insisting beforehand on interviewing only those job applicants who meet all job specifications. Those same companies must be prepared to fire recruiters who continue to submit poorly qualified job applicants. Flagrant disregard of client wishes is a sure sign of recruiter stupidity or arrogance (or, worse, both) with consequences both expensive and time consuming. Drop kick the bastards to Cleveland!

Another smart move: companies should learn more about their recruiters than the simple bullshit recruiters hurl at them during introductory telephone calls. Before handing out business to recruiters it pays to review their backgrounds with the same thoroughness as if they were being hired as company employees. Believe me, this provident move will yield crucial information about the abilities and trustworthiness of recruiters. As grandma used to tell me, "You can separate the goose from the gooseshit if you pay close attention to how people act, not what they tell you." If recruiters lie, or even stretch the truth about any aspect of their backgrounds, chances are they'll be equally willing to accept lies from job applicants. It would prove to be my experience during my years in the business that hiring companies rarely take this precautionary step, depending instead on the honesty of recruiters at the other end of the phone. A potentially big mistake, as many companies can testify to. Any recruiter refusing to be subjected to this scrutiny has something to hide.

So, if you're a hiring company executive and a recruiting firm has sent you more than one job applicant who has lied on his resume, stop doing business with that recruiting firm. A recruiter who passes through one job candidate one time with a fraudulent resume can be written off to an oversight; twice is a sign that the recruiting company is either not checking its applicant pool thoroughly or, that it's knowingly sending out fraudulent job applicants for interviews. If you're convinced of the worse case, consider legal action, or at least, threaten it. Nothing scares a recruiting agency manager more than the threat of an expensive and public lawsuit splashed across the front page of the business section of your daily newspaper. Not really good for business.

Now, boys and girls, here's the most important point. Applicants caught lying on their resumes, recruiters included, should know up front they risk being fired, sued by clients, even prosecuted for criminal conduct in the event of lying to fill crucial jobs where careers, even lives, depend on honesty. But honesty is a principle seldom upheld by those recruiting managers intent on grabbing job orders at any cost. So the object lesson here is stop doing business with the recruiting agency as well as the recruiter who's trying to dupe you.

Needless to say, companies should thoroughly vet their job applicants. Depending on recruiters to perform this vital task is akin to the age-old adage of asking the fox to guard the hen house. A small amount of money invested beforehand to verify resumes and employment applications will save potentially huge gobs of money if resume cheats are hired to fill jobs they are not capable of handling, or if they're missing the necessary credentials (college degrees, professional licenses, etc).

A recruiter who is a cut above the pack will forge alliances with hiring executives resulting in repeat business. A hiring company will do well to check a prospective recruiter's repeat business record with several of the recruiter's client companies. Be wary of recruiters dependent on too much first time business.

MINING FOR GOLD IN THE SEWER

Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz. The recruiting company I now worked for. Northeast Atlanta branch. A company with over two hundred offices in the USA alone, maybe two thousand recruiters worldwide. A recruiting firm with a strong focus on placing top and middle managers in a variety of manufacturing and service businesses. Reputedly the largest recruiting organization in the world, although I couldn't be sure since the company is a privately owned corporation and not required by law to reveal its sales or earnings. It keeps those numbers hidden from public scrutiny.

This was not a company with the most impeccable reputation, just the hungriest. Where every recruiter, from the president on down, runs a desk³, and God forbid anybody who misses his quota. Of course, the guys at the top don't fill that many job orders, but then again they're not supposed to. They search exclusively for chairmen and CEOs of the largest companies in the world. Not a very big market, but a market in which every such placement lands the company on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* and generates a ton of free publicity, not to mention big bucks and more business for the firm.

The unrelenting pressure to produce helps feed the company's seventy percent turnover rate, although as I was soon to find out, even successful recruiters move frequently from one shop to another in their eternal quest for more money. My opinion: company loyalty in the recruiting game is hard to come by in a business so excessively focused on dollars.

Our branch employed four recruiters (including me), a receptionist/clerk/Gal Friday, and Charley Morgan who ran a desk and managed the branch. The company provided a desk, phone, and computer for me in a cubbyhole office shared by three other recruiters, our desks separated by soundproof partitions that weren't truly soundproof. (When all the other recruiters were gabbing on the phone I had to press the phone to my ear to drown out their babble.) Telephone expenses were borne by the company. All of us were titled vice presidents since high-sounding titles captured the attention of both clients and applicants, or so the belief was. After joining the company, it took me three weeks to stop corralling strangers at Wal-Mart and showing them my business card. Well, what did you expect from a twenty-year-old country girl with stars in her eyes? I hadn't yet earned one cent, yet I was happier than a hooker with a clientele of rich and horny corporate chieftains.

Speaking of rich corporate chieftains, it didn't take an Einstein to estimate the branch office's billing. Because of the company's dominant position in the recruiting industry it was usually able to charge thirty percent of the salaries of most of the job candidates it placed (in contrast to many recruiting companies that received twenty percent, often lower), with the average starting salary of placements in the \$50,000 range. Being the inquisitive type, I figured that the company hauled in roughly \$15,000 for every placement. (As contrasted with the information Charley gave me during my initial interview of an average of \$10,000 per placement.)

Ten placements every month (five recruiters x two placements each) amounted to \$150,000 income a month. For twelve months the branch's sales volume was \$1,800,000 (\$150,000 x 12). Not bad for a tiny cramped office in a

section of Atlanta not considered the swankest location. Projecting the office's low overhead to the firm's other branches (low overhead being a trademark of our company), it was obvious as hell that Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz was a very profitable organization.

When I got through climbing the walls imagining how much of that money I was going to call my own, Charley assigned one of the other recruiters, Bernice Alterman, to teach me how to get leads for cold calling⁴.

"Ever cold call anyone?" Bernice asked me. She was a late-thirties brunette with a soft embracing voice that disputed the tough look in her eyes, the creased lines around her mouth, the perpetual scowl. She looked to me like a woman who had learned many lessons over the years, all of them the hard way.

"Not really."

"What does that mean, yes or no?"

"No."

The lines around Bernice's mouth tightened. "Let's you and I get off to the right start, gal. Don't try to bullshit me. I'll see right through it."

"I hear you."

"What?"

"I mean, yes, I'm not going to bullshit you."

Bernice frowned as if deciding whether or not I was fucking with her mind. She must have decided I wasn't, because she said, "Most recruiters start in this business by getting leads the hard way: through published information sources such as you'll find in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle's Book of Lists*. That lists local businesses and their top management teams along with contact information.

"For people like us, those lists aren't worth the gunpowder to blow them away, simply because everybody and his uncle uses them. Which means that the theoretical Mr. Jones, vice president of human resources for the theoretical Fritters International, will be inundated with telephone calls from telemarketing boiler rooms, stockbrokers, recruiters, and every other hustler trying to sell something. Anticipating the flood, he'll have his secretary screen his calls and you'll never get through to him."

"How about making personal contacts?"

Bernice looked me over with a jaundiced eye. "You got any, gal?"

That made me blush. "I guess not."

"Now that we got that crap out of the way, let me show you how to get leads for making cold calls. What I'm going to do is make a call myself and have you listen in." She motioned to an extension phone on her desk. "Pick it up. It's the same line."

I did and Bernice dialed a number. The following conversation ensued:

"Is this Roy Shandler?"

"Yes it is."

"Mr. Shandler, my name is Bernice Alterman. I'm a vice president of Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, the largest recruiting organization in the country. You've heard of us, I assume?" She sounded warm and sincere and professional, the kind of voice that

disarms both human resource functionaries and job candidates alike.

"Yes indeed." Shandler's voice revealed a quickening of interest. "Nice to hear from you."

"You sent us your resume. Do you have time for a few questions?"

"I certainly do, Ms. Alterman."

"Our research department matched your name with a few high level job openings in your field of expertise and identified you as an ideal match."

"Are they local firms? My wife and I don't want to move. I've got kids in high school that—"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, they're all local."

"Well, that sounds wonderful. Could you tell me who those companies are?"

"I'd like to, but our clients have us sign confidentiality agreements which precludes us from revealing their names until interviews are arranged. I hope you understand."

Sound of a nervous chuckle. "I certainly do. No problem."

"We're anxious to proceed, but we never bring applicants in for interviews until we've had the opportunity to check their references. As a professional, I'm sure you can understand our position."

"I do, I do."

"Do you have yours handy?"

"My what?"

Bernice rolled her eyes and covered the phone's mouthpiece to hide a sigh of frustration. She pulled her hand away. "Your references."

"Oh, sure. I've got them right here. Just a second." Sounds of paper being shuffled around.

"I'm assuming your references are decision-making executives, because frankly, lower level references don't carry the same weight as those higher in organizations."

"They are...I mean they do...I mean—"

"That's good to hear. Please read them off along with their companies, titles, and phone numbers."

Shandler did exactly that while Bernice scribbled the information on a pad of paper.

"Good start, Mr. Shandler. We'll be contacting them right away. I'm assuming you're still in the job market."

"Yes, indeed, I am."

"Something else that will be helpful and save us both some time. Give me the names and telephone numbers of your bosses, starting with the last company that employed you, then working backward."

"Is that necessary?"

"It's standard policy at Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz. We pride ourselves in offering only job candidates who've been thoroughly vetted."

Shandler reluctantly told her the names while Bernice wrote them down. She winked at me and covered the mouthpiece again. “Asshole’s got something to hide. See how I had to drag his bosses’ names out of him?”

I nodded and gave her a thumb’s up.

“One more thing, Mr. Shandler. I need to know the companies you’ve already contacted so we don’t make the embarrassing mistake of contacting them again, which incidentally, could cost you a job interview.”

Shandler supplied that information including contacts at each of the companies.

“Mr. Shandler, you’ve been most cooperative. Rest assured we’ll contact you at the appropriate time.”

“Is that far off, Ms. Alterman?” A note of desperation had crept into his voice.

“Not to worry. These things take time. Guaranteed we’ll be in touch as soon as possible.”

“But—”

Bernice hung up the phone. She turned to me. “Boy, what a fucking jerk...Okay, tell me what you learned from that conversation.”

“You’ve got a bunch of people to contact, to cold call.”

“Gal, I rarely cold call anymore. I’ve been at this business for eight years now and I’ve developed my own network. But what I just did, you’re going to have to do the same. Develop your cold call list and make your own contacts...I hope you were paying attention.

“Now, if you noticed, I got a list of”—she stopped for a moment and counted the names on the pad of paper—“looks like eight names. All of them top level executives, the kind who make hiring decisions. The kind of people you want to get to know. At Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz we call this process ‘mining for gold in the sewer.’”

I wrinkled my nose. “Not a very nice phrase.”

“But an appropriate one.”

“What was the purpose of asking Shandler where he’s interviewed?”

Bernice winked at me. “Now I’ve got a few leads into companies that are looking for people. Maybe I can get my foot in the door, steal a job order from another recruiter.”

“I never thought of that.”

“In this business you’ve got to keep your eyes and ears open and snatch at every opportunity. Remember, there are hundreds of other recruiters going after the same business. Question is, which one of you is going to bring home the bacon, you or those other assholes?”

“How about Shandler?”

“What about him?”

“Will you get back to him?”

“Sure, in the remote event a hiring company is interested in him. Which probably ain’t going to happen. His resume sucks. His background sucks. His credentials suck. Another old jerk desperate for work.”

“Then what you told him about companies having an interest in him

is—”

“Bullshit, pure and simple.”

“Won’t he call back?”

“Our receptionist, Janey, knows how to handle those kind of calls. She tells losers like Shandler we’ll get in touch as soon as we’ve firmed up an assignment. Whatever that means. It keeps them off our backs.”

“Is Shandler a loser?”

Bernice snorted. “Does a puppy crap on your living room carpet?”

“What makes him a loser?”

“Just look at his resume. He’s fifty-five and struggling along as a middle manager. With a history of having worked for about a dozen companies, each one of them progressively smaller than the one before. Worst of all, he’s out of work. Nine times out of ten that means he was doing a piss-poor job. If he was worth a shit, would he be out on the street? That’s just about always the sign of a loser.”

“What other signs do you look for?”

“To find out if the job applicant is a loser? Well, just like I said, match the guy’s age against how much money he’s making, the kind of position he holds. A thirty-year-old with the title of cost accounting manager is a lot different than a fifty-five-year-old holding the same title. You know damned well this guy’s peaked long ago. A job candidate at fifty should be near the top of his organization, a vice president or division manager or something like that.”

“But say he’s a scientist or a technical specialist. Does the same measurement still hold?”

Bernice considered that. She tapped the eraser from a lead pencil against her teeth. “You’ve got a point. Say the guy is fifty and a pharmaceutical research engineer. Chances are the demand for that type of person is pretty high. He’s marketable. Actually, a lot of those technical types never go into management. The more technical the work, the more likely the candidate is a career technician, not a management person.” She looked me over with new respect. “So you’re right. If the guy is in a technical specialty, it doesn’t pay to write him off without making sure he isn’t in demand.”

“What else should I look for?”

“The number of jobs he’s held. Normally, a job applicant his age will have worked for maybe two to four companies during his career. But I see resumes cross my desk with applicants listing a dozen or more companies. That’s another sign of a loser, the exception being contract employees who move from company to company on special assignments, like the information technology specialists did before the millennium.”

The conversation was making me uneasy. I didn’t feel comfortable talking about people as if they were disposable commodities. “Isn’t there some job Shandler could handle?”

Bernice puffed out her cheeks impatiently. “Sure, but it’ll take a year or so of monumental effort to find him something, and that something won’t be much in terms of the commission you earn from it. Your time is too valuable to waste. Focus on losers like Shandler and you’ll starve. This is not a business for Mother Theresa types.”

I fidgeted in my chair. As much as I hated to admit it, Bernice had a point. I turned the conversation back to the subject of cold calling. “When you call

executives from a list such as Shandler gave you, do you tell them where you got their names?”

“I tell them I overheard their names in a conversation I had with the CEO of a competitive company. Of course, I use that competitive company CEO’s actual name. That always grabs their attention. Everybody wants to be known throughout his industry, and knowing a recruiter who’s on familiar terms with the top people in his industry assures they’ll listen to my pitch, maybe even throw some business my way.”

“But you don’t really know that CEO, correct?”

“Correct, you usually got to fake it. Not always, of course. As you develop your own list of clients, chances are you’ll be able to say you know the executive and mean it.”

I nodded to the leads Bernice held in her hands. “What are you going to do with those?”

“Just what you thought. Use them to get some more job orders.”

“But you told me you don’t cold call anymore.”

“Girl, you weren’t listening. I told you I rarely cold call anymore.”

“How about sharing them with me?”

Bernice snorted. “Listen, I did the work, I get the leads. In this business it’s everybody for herself. You want to succeed as a headhunter, you better learn that goddamn fast.”

Elaine's Diary

Got to admit, I learned a lot from Bernice. Or should I say Nasty Bernice. Well, maybe not. My daddy always taught me to be charitable; that throwing stones might earn you one back—in the eye. So I'll drop the "Nasty."

Anyhow, as they say back in the hills, let's git to it. If you're a job applicant and you receive a call from a recruiter asking for (a) references, (b) the names of former bosses, and/or (c) names of companies you've already contacted, plain and simple, do NOT supply the information unless the recruiter tells you about an open position you're qualified to fill and convinces you it's real. Believe me, if the recruiter actually has a job order and thinks you're right for the job she'll be delighted to share job details with you such as the name of the company and the hiring executive. That specific information will reveal a genuine opportunity as opposed to a bullshit call designed to gather leads at your expense. Don't become the recruiter's patsy.

When you're in the job market it's particularly incumbent upon you to hand out the names of references and formers only when you absolutely need to. Otherwise these valuable people (essential to your landing the next job) will be swamped with telephone calls by recruiters anxious to use them to get job orders. And nothing's going to piss off your references and former bosses more than getting too many calls on your behalf. Guard their identities carefully and hand out their names only when you're absolutely assured they'll be used on your behalf, and then only sparingly.

The point is, don't allow the recruiter to use you. You can politely decline to supply the information she's attempting to pry from you, thereby letting the lady know you're not going to rollover and let her have her way without a fight. She'll wind up respecting you, and if she's the type who doesn't, you don't want to do business with her, anyway.

Other side of the coin. Say you're a hiring executive and you receive a phone call from a recruiter claiming to know the CEO or any other top executive in your industry, or elsewhere for that matter. Before you throw some work to that recruiter call the CEO he claims to know and verify that the exec truly knows the recruiter. This is a quick and easy way to determine if the recruiter on the other end of the line is honest. Remember, if he's lied to you to get your business, he'll lie and deceive you again and again. If you're smart (and I know you are) you won't let him use you. That recruiter simply can't be trusted. Throw him to the curb.

MY CINDERELLA STORY

I'm sure by now you're curious about my Cinderella story. How this innocent country gal magically transformed herself into a high talking, high performing star recruiter.

Of course, you've got to understand that I've always been a good talker. I kept the conversation alive and kicking every night over the dinner table until my stepmother (my real mom died giving birth to me) shut me up. Then I'd spend the remainder of the night jabbering away on the phone with friends. In high school I was known as Gabby. Given half a chance, I managed to monopolize most conversations. In social studies class, I just loved making presentations and excelled at it because it gave me the opportunity to stand up in front of the class and feed my starving ego.

In school, I was also a bit of a rascal; I took great joy in outfoxing my classmates. For example, I had been elected president of my class in my freshman and sophomore years. At class election during my junior year I faced stiff opposition from Wilma Jones, homecoming queen and the most popular girl in the school. You know the kind of gal I'm talking about: all sparkling white teeth, dimples, boobs with quarter-size nipples, and legs that go on and on and on. Forever gushing about this and that. Making damn fools out of the boys as they slobbered over her overripe bosom, which she displayed with low-cut blouses that stopped just short of nipple city. Not that I myself was lacking in the boobs department, but no way could I compete with Wilma, who the boys adoringly referred to as the football team's punchboard. I knew I'd lose the election unless something happened to either dramatically improve my popularity or dramatically decrease Wilma's.

To counter Wilma's natural advantage, during an assembly I broadcast that if elected class president I'd make sure the whole school was let out early Friday afternoons. Needless to say, that got everybody's attention and shifted the advantage back to me.

Unfortunately, the school administration didn't take kindly to this, and threatened to kick me out of the election unless I publicly recanted my offer. I did, and blamed it on the school board, but in a fiery talk before a subsequent school assembly, I promised to consider other similar issues in the student's favor.

The upshot: I narrowly beat Wilma and retained my class presidency an unprecedented three years in a row. The phony issue I created about cutting the school week short was indeed just that: a phony issue designed to garner votes. Even back then I acted like a budding politician, lying through my teeth, making me wonder to this day if perhaps I missed my true calling.

Getting back to the subject at hand, my conversion from good 'ol country girl to crass and cynical city slicker started that momentous Sunday night in March of my junior year when Leroy Grimes had his way with me on the tailgate of his Ford F-150 pickup truck and planted his seed. The old case of knocked-up and nowhere to go. I managed to conceal the pregnancy until my sixth month when it became obvious that I was either (a) a chug-a-lug beer drinker, or (b) a dumb country girl who, in the heat of the moment, hadn't insisted on Leroy using a condom. Of course, my wily stepmother guessed the right answer. She pitched a

fit. My daddy, an uptight backwoods Baptist preacher, too wrapped up in bible thumping to take his daughter's side, stood by while his frumpy wife threw my meager things into a couple of dilapidated suitcases and ushered me out the back door and slammed it behind me for emphasis. With a warning never to darken her path again. The bitch.

While a knocked-up teenager isn't exactly a rarity anymore, back in the hills it's still a violation of what hill folk consider acceptable behavior. I was reared in that kind of environment where bearing children out of wedlock is a sure fire ticket to social ostracism, and remains that way until you issue your final gasp of air and descend into the fiery pits below.

So when Leroy Grimes skipped town rather than face the music, neighbors turned away from me as if I were on an express train to hell and nobody wanted to hop aboard and accompany me. I went to live with Jennifer, my closest friend in school and fellow cheerleader. Her parents, Yankees from Pennsylvania, took me in without asking questions, fed and clothed me, and encouraged my return to high school. I did for about six weeks until I miscarried and developed a real nice case of blood poisoning, which almost did me in. It was touch and go for a while until I turned the corner and recovered.

But I had no incentive to return to school, not after what I had been through. So Jennifer's daddy, who was accounting manager at Rowling's Poultry Processing Company, the local chicken plant, got me a job cleaning toilets with his employer. I was on my way.

I worked at Rowling's until that day I read the ad Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz ran in the Atlanta newspaper for new recruiters.

Elaine's Diary

Unbeknownst to me during those teenage years, I was setting the stage for becoming an outstanding recruiter. I had all these things going for me:

- Outsider status. Which translates to envy of those who were accepted by society without question, like most of my classmates at high school.
- The hunger to make good and the drive to succeed to show everybody else I could do it, along with the ability to absorb a lot of criticism and punishment and stick it out.
- A burning desire to make money, gobs and gobs of it, and not think twice about how I got it or whom I got it from.
- Lots of natural smarts, a presentable appearance, and the ability to come across as sincere, even when I wasn't.
- A pair of balls larger than ever graced a bull. It takes what my pa used to call gumption for an inexperienced twenty-year-old recruiter to talk "man to man" with the CEO of a company and feel at ease.
- The gift of gab or, as some might put it, the ability to bullshit my way through any situation.

• ***I LOSE MY (RECRUITING) CHERRY***

Most people don't know this, but in the headhunting game recruiters seldom meet the company executives who give them job orders. Of course, personal meetings are often impractical when the two parties are separated geographically. But, like politics, most recruiting is local, and more often than not there usually are opportunities for recruiters to meet face to face with company executives. Even when close-by, their contact is generally ninety percent by phone and ten percent by fax and e-mail. It's the nature of the business: to make a living most recruiters cram each precious minute on the phone to get and fill job orders.

Regardless of how geographically spread the two parties are, when a hiring company executive is seeking to fill a key position like a vice president, it needs to meet with the recruiter. Period. The hiring executive needs to know whether or not the recruiter presents an acceptable image (nothing's worse, for example, than asking a candidate for an executive position to meet with a zit-laden recruiter with a set of headphones glued to his ears who jiggles to the rap music buzzing his ears; that's the way to lose good candidates). He also must assure that the recruiter fully understands the nature of the job opening and the type of candidate the company seeks to fill the position. And the company executive needs to determine just how good the recruiter is at separating viable from second-rate candidates. Too much is riding on the outcome to do otherwise.

Still, face-to-face contact is the exception, not the rule. A hiring company often relies on the "name" of the recruiting firm. If it's known throughout the business community the telephone remains the main point of contact.

Tacit acceptance by companies of telephone contact alone with recruiters explains why somebody like Bernice with her sour attitude and equally sour face could make a living selling (usually) warm bodies. If recruiting sales were dependent on personal face-to-face contact with executives and applicants, Bernice, as the saying goes, would be shit out of luck. It's easy to fake out human resource managers when they can't look into your eyes and see the bitterness, the disappointments, the phoniness. Face to face it's almost impossible to hide.

The same problem applies to many recruiters, in my opinion a slovenly and often unruly bunch, many of them unable to operate on the same cultural or intellectual level as the executives or human resources managers they conduct searches for. That's why the business of recruiting, absent entry requirements in the traditional sense (a college degree, years of successful experience, professional standards, licensing, and so forth), is so perfect an occupation for those without any credentials to their name other than a burning desire to make a fast buck.

I was the perfect example. Hell, I didn't even have a high school diploma, much less a college degree. I had no recruiting experience. I was so young and wet behind the ears you could have planted rows of corn there. To sum it up, I was from nowhere, knew nothing or nobody, just another redneck escaping from the hills. But I was starving for money, recognition, and would do anything to anybody to make it in the big city. Or so I thought at the time.

Look at it this way: recruiters come from all sorts of backgrounds. There's no academic education aimed at recruiting, no years of required experience working as an apprentice recruiter, no extensive formalized body of knowledge to

master—unless you want to consider skills aimed at getting past gatekeepers or shoveling shit at a screen as Charley Morgan put it. Many of the recruiters I’ve worked with over the years do not have college degrees. Some, like myself, never finished high school.

Based on my experience, here’s what I think many potential high-performing recruiters bring to the table: (1) An insatiable hunger, almost a lust, for money, (2) the ability to think fast and exaggerate (lie) glibly, (3) business morals suitable for an alley cat, and, (4) the willingness to sacrifice anything and anybody to land that next job order. Strictly my opinion. I’m sure many will disagree. I’m equally sure many more will think I’ve nailed it.

Bernice was typical. Like me, she had quit high school after getting pregnant, then lived with her boyfriend for a year before he ran away with a younger girl he found behind the counter at Wendy’s. Forced to earn her own way, Bernice became a waitress and worked at it for ten years in several restaurants in the Northeast Atlanta area, some of them good ones, most not, before deciding to plunge into recruiting. Within six months in her new occupation, she was already making twice what she had earned in her best year as a waitress.

Or take Sam Nesbitt, one of the other recruiters I worked with. Before landing a position as a recruiter, Sam had been a barber. He cut hair for a living in a three-man barbershop in a seedy section of Atlanta. His barbering skills were minimal, but he sure knew how to sling the shit. Sam was famous for talking your ear off. His customers knew that to get a haircut from Sam didn’t mean they had to be sparkling conversationalists. Sam monopolized the idle chatter, filled every sound void. An occasional judicious nod from a customer was all that was needed to keep Sam babbling away.

That same gift of gab, a minimal asset in barbering, was a prerequisite for success in recruiting. Sam wasn’t exactly the shy type. He was equally comfortable talking to human resource interviewers and chief executive officers. Before many months on the job Sam brought in lots of new business and became the office’s top performer.

The fourth recruiter, with the improbable name of Rupert Randolph Robertson, was a tongue-tied twenty-eight-year-old who formerly sold ready-made suits at Paulie’s, a local suit store that competed with the Men’s Warehouse chain. Rupert had a pronounced cleft lip and was slightly cross-eyed. From what I heard, Triple R, as we called him, had missed his quota for the past two months and was in danger of losing his job.

I considered myself different than most recruiters, Bernice, Sam, and Triple R included. I was young, smart, and had a cheerful disposition that people related to. I also instinctively wanted to avoid the sham and pretense associated with the business, realizing intuitively that in the long run it would damage my career. Despite my ambiguous beginning with the phony resume at Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, or maybe because of it, I made a conscious decision to play it as straight as possible.

That’s why I decided to meet as many potential clients as time would allow. It might cost me short term because of the time involved in sitting down with my contacts for lunches and meetings at their offices, but I figured it would pay off long term because of the personal relationships I intended to forge. Relationships that hopefully would garner repeat business, the hallmark and lifeblood of successful recruiters.

I had thought long and hard about it. In my favor was the fact that I was attractive, always an asset in business. I was also bright and focused, intent upon delivering what I promised; company managers who did business with me would appreciate that. Riding against me was my tender age. I neutralized that negative with a sharp no-nonsense business suit and topped it with an all-business attitude. No girlish giggles, no batting my eyes, or any of that other teenage chick nonsense.

Let me explain what I mean by costing me short term. On my second day working for Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, Charley and I had lunch in his small, cramped office. Over a Big Mac, small fries, and a Coke, he explained what he called the numbers pyramid.

“Look at it this way, Elaine. A recruiter lives and dies by the numbers.”

“What numbers?” I mumbled, my mouth jammed full of hamburger.

“The number of phone calls a recruiter makes to company prospects to get job orders and the number of applicants she contacts.”

“Sure, that makes sense.”

“I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but telemarketing owes its very existence to recruiters.”

“I didn’t realize that.”

“Telemarketers use the very same phone techniques recruiters developed and perfected for their own businesses.”

“Ah ha! Recruiters are to blame for all those annoying calls telemarketers make, disturbing my evenings.”

Charley wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and grinned. “No longer, not with the recent federal laws restricting telemarketing.”

“I was just kidding.”

“Getting back to recruiting, let’s suppose you make two hundred calls a day—”

I whistled. “Wow, that’s a lot.”

“It’s what this business is all about, Elaine. At the beginning you’re on the phone grubbing for cold call leads and job orders. Then as you get your network established you’re on the phone soliciting more job orders and finding job candidates. It’s never ending. It only gets more intense. Look at it this way, phone work is a recruiter’s lifeblood. Without the phone, a recruiter dies.”

“How about visiting company contacts? Doesn’t that play a role?”

“Most successful recruiters keep their ears jammed into phone receivers, ten, twelve hours a day. Let me explain why. For every four hundred calls you make you can expect to find one company willing to give you a job order. That’s in tough economic times, of course. Like the market today.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad. If I make two hundred calls every day I can expect to land two to three job orders for the week.”

Charley leaned back in his chair and looked at me with wonderment. “Oh, to be young and innocent again... See, where you’re missing the point is for every job order you get, maybe a dozen other recruiters get the same job order. That’s quickly becoming standard practice among companies seeking to fill positions. They figure let the bastards fight it out. It’ll get companies the candidates they want quicker. The first recruiter to fill the job earns the commission. The rest are spinning their wheels. That’s the way many human resources managers operate.”

“Sounds to me like a vicious cycle. Maybe it’s an argument for personal face-to-face contacts.”

Charley waved my comment away. “Realistically, you can expect to fill one job order for every two thousand calls you make. That’s what I mean by the numbers pyramid. Two thousand calls yields five job orders, from which you can expect on the average to fill one. That comes out to your required two sales per month.”

I didn’t say anything, but it struck me that the entire process was superficial at best. The sheer number of calls forced a recruiter into hasty conversations and abbreviated relationships. It reinforced what Charley told me during my original interview about throwing shit at a screen. That might work well when you’re trying to fill a twenty-five thousand-dollar position because the commission is small, but at the upper end of the compensation scale, a recruiter could afford to invest a little more time getting to know the hiring executive and job candidates. So much of the day was consumed on the phone that a harried recruiter couldn’t, or wouldn’t, squeeze out the necessary time to properly check the background and credentials of job candidates and prepare them for interviews. And that could lead to trouble.

So, advice from Charley to the contrary, I decided to opt for some face-to-face contacts, in the hope that it would yield a higher rate of repeat job orders.

With great trepidation, I pulled a few resumes from the pile already accumulating on my desk (the newest recruiter gets to handle all the garbage resumes) and got to work applying the cold call technique Bernice had taught me to mine executive contacts.

Although I was a little shaky at first, I soon warmed to the task and found myself spouting the same line Bernice had, but ever more skillfully. Bernice was adept at cold calling for leads, but she lacked a basic ingredient. What I added to the mix was—are you ready for this?—honesty. I told job candidates up front that I was new to the business and had no job openings now, but as soon as I came across something appropriate I’d contact them. I told them if they supplied me with cold call leads I’d be favorably disposed to help them out whenever I could. In other words, the old quid pro quo.

Wow! Did I ever get a positive response. Of the ten people I called that morning only one refused to provide names. That guy I could tell was a real hard ass; the type recruiters hate to have anything to do with. Five of my other cold calls told me they found my honesty refreshing, that they hadn’t expected such frankness from a recruiter. Four poured their hearts out; they told me how they had been screwed over by recruiters who were fishing for names and lied to about openings, and how those experiences had triggered their resentment of recruiters in general.

Bottom line: I gained nine potential allies and job applicants, people who I knew would help me whenever I called. I sent each my business card in the mail with a personal note thanking them for their cooperation.

About lying: until I joined Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, I was a consummate liar. It came naturally to me, and after a time I managed to dissemble with the best of them. At least during my high school years. Then, after observing other recruiters lie themselves into losing job orders, I had an epiphany: in the long term, lying defeated the efforts of recruiters. Client companies, burned once, refused to deal with those recruiters or their agencies. And since repeat orders are the hallmark of high-earning recruiters, dishonesty kept deceptive recruiters scrambling for new clients and kept a lid on their commissions. This realization turned me around, made me see the light. Okay, go ahead and criticize me for being an

opportunist, but my alternative seemed more promising. Dealing honestly with job applicants during cold calls also gained me several good leads, two of which led to job orders.

What follows is a replay of the conversation I had with my very first executive contact obtained from a cold call lead. Needless to say, although I had fairly well scripted what I wanted to convey, my heart was in my throat for the entire conversation. Here is where I found out if I could use the telephone to my advantage.

“Mr. Larson, my name is Elaine Priestly from Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, the recruiting company.”

“How did you get through to me?” Voice as cold as a February night in Alaska.

“You picked up direct, Mr. Larson. I guess your secretary’s stepped away from her desk.”

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“Sir, may I be frank with you?”

“Frank about what?” Voice bristling with impatience.

“Your name was given to me by a former employee who has the greatest respect for you. He recommended that I call you.”

“What employee?” Voice curious now, more willing to listen.

“Richard Markles.”

“Oh, sure, I remember Richard. Good employee, good guy.”

“The reason I’m calling, Sir, is to see if I can take ten minutes of your time in person.”

“That’s going to be hard to do.”

“I won’t ask for a job order. Won’t even mention one, since I don’t have the faintest idea what your needs are, or even if you have an opening I could work on. But I would like to tell you a little about myself and learn something about you.”

“Learn about me?” He snorted. “That’s a first.”

“A first?”

“A headhunter wanting to know something about me. That I’ve got to see. Promise it won’t take more than ten minutes?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Also, no discussions about job orders?”

“Not a one. You have my word.”

“Okay, then let’s set something up for this Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. Know where I’m located?”

“I do.”

“Ask for me at the reception desk. See you then.”

If you guessed that I received my first job order from Mr. Larson, you’re right. And I did it without having to resort to lying, fabricating, stretching the truth, or deceiving the man. My first job order in the business. One cherry lost. It was time to celebrate.

Elaine's Diary

Okay, you're a hiring company executive seeking job applicants to fill open positions. If the recruiter who solicits your business resides within your geographical area and elects to do business by phone without first meeting you for twenty minutes, slam the phone down and instruct your secretary never to put through that recruiter's calls again.

After all, what is the recruiter attempting to hide? His slovenly appearance? His unprofessional attitude? His lack of qualifications? That he doesn't have time because he has a zillion other calls to make? That his last job was slinging hamburgers at Burger King? Do you want somebody like that recruiting for you? If not, talk to the recruiter face to face before handing over a job order.

Believe it or not, crazy things like that happen in the recruiting game all the time. Most recruiters, at least those who are successful, have outsized balls that would put an elephant's to shame. Which means they often outreach themselves. There's nothing wrong with recruiters stretching toward the heavens, but as a hiring authority you must assure that your headhunter can garner instant respect from job candidates. Remember, to job candidates the recruiter represents your company, even though he's not an employee. So award job orders wisely.

If you're hiring low-level employees, it's not always necessary to have face-to-face contact with a recruiter. But if you're hiring a high level manager or skilled technical specialist, either of whose impact on your company's sales or profits would be substantial, insist on meeting the recruiter even though you're in Boston and she's in San Francisco. If she wants your business badly enough, she'll make an effort to meet with you.

Another important point: recruiters live and die by the numbers, just as telemarketers do. Those numbers form an inverse funnel starting with the highest number and progressing to the smallest: telephone calls made to job orders received to job orders filled. This principle is as sacred and inviolate to the recruiting profession as the Bible is to religion. Indeed, it is a catechism that is core to the recruiter's religion.

It holds that the more calls recruiters make the greater their chances of securing and filling job orders. In essence, the numbers pyramid is a logical extension of the concept of slinging shit at a screen (The more calls made and more job candidates sent out the better the chance of getting and filling job orders. Read the earlier chapter, "Getting My Foot in the Pickle Barrel"). When dealing with recruiters always keep this foremost in mind, and at the first sign of shit being slung your way, throw those dastardly recruiters to the curb.

And don't forget that the telephone dominates company-recruiter, job candidate-recruiter relationships. The demands of gluing one's ear to the phone twelve hours a day means that many recruiters won't take the time to meet job applicants and check their backgrounds before sending them out to companies for interviews. There just isn't enough time available and too many recruiters take the path of least resistance.

For that reason alone, companies need to develop clear understandings with their recruiters. Understandings that hinge upon companies exhaustively vetting recruiters, and recruiters exhaustively vetting job candidates. Face-to-face contact abets the process.

PHONY PHONING

Sam Nesbitt, former barber and wordsmith extraordinaire, kept chattering away until I felt the start of a headache. According to him the only reason the North Atlanta office of Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz was still in business was...you guessed it, Sam himself.

I had to admit he wasn't far off the mark. His sales had sustained the office during the time Rupert Randolph Robertson was stumbling around, missing his quotas, and raising concerns that perhaps Robertson wouldn't cut it as a recruiter.

"Sam, may I interrupt?"

Sam raised an eyebrow as if questioning my right to do so.

"Charley wants you to show me how to mine companies for leads. He says you're an absolute master at it."

Charley hadn't said that, but a few choice words can often get somebody on your side. And words cost nothing, as any recruiter can tell you.

Sam positively glowed; you could have electrified a house from the energy he radiated. "Well, that's nice of Charley to—"

"Do you mind sharing some of your secrets with me?" Ask that question to any recruiter, then sit back and listen as the floodgates open and the bullshit pours forth. In the same way that the easiest mark for a salesperson is another salesperson, the easiest mark for a recruiter (bullshitter) is another recruiter (bullshitter). Each positively glows in the reflection of the other's line of gab.

Sure as hell, it worked with Sam. "Well, sure, I'd be happy to." The grin on his face almost split his head in two. "Hmm, how can I start?" He reflected for a moment, and then snapped his fingers. "Let's begin this way. Say you have the resume of a damn fine job applicant in the software industry, an applications engineer, but you don't know where to market the guy. You need the names of decision-makers in his business. For this example, assume you've talked to the job candidate and he wants to remain local, doesn't want to move. What you do is find the names of local software companies in the Atlanta area, using one of our databases, even the phone book. Next you make a few calls."

"Bernice told me the usual lists are so overused that it's virtually impossible to reach anyone with the authority to issue a job order."

Sam shook his head in wonderment as if he was instructing a dumb pupil. "I'm not talking about the usual telemarketing type of call. What I do is something different."

"I don't get it."

"I'll show you." Sam flipped through the yellow pages of an Atlanta phone book and zeroed in on a software company. "Pick up the extension. Don't be surprised when I use a fake name to identify myself."

I picked up the extension and Sam dialed the number.

"Breckinpell Industries. How may I help you?"

"Miss, my name is Larry Jones. I'm a disabled person, and somebody in your company helped me at Wal-Mart the other day, lifted me into my wheelchair after I fell out. I don't remember his

name but he told me he's some sort of software manager at your company. Is there any way you could help identify him? I want to send him a thank you note."

The receptionist's voice changed immediately from matter-of-fact, all business, to cheerful, almost lilting. "Sir, I'd be happy to but I don't know which department he works in, and this is a pretty big company. Can you give me any further information about him?"

"I recall him saying something like he was in applications engineering. Something like that."

"That's helpful. One moment, please."

During the ensuing silence, Sam made gave me a thumbs up and grinned.

"Sir, we have three engineering sections, but none of them are called applications engineering. I've got the directory in front of me right now. Can you tell me what this person looked like?"

"You know Miss . . .?"

"Please call me Anita."

Sam allowed a slight whine to creep into his voice. "Anita, I was so confused and disoriented at the time I forgot what the gentleman looked like."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Jones. I hope you're okay now."

"Well, it's been difficult, but with the help of kind people such as that wonderful gentleman and yourself...Look, Anita, I have an idea. Why don't you give me the names of the three managers of the engineering sections you mentioned, along with their telephone numbers. I'll call them personally to find out which one helped me."

"I'd be happy to." Anita rattled off the three names. Sam—thanked her and ended the phone call.

"Slick, eh?" Sam asked, beaming at me like the proud papa of a newborn baby.

"Do you use that disabled line often?"

"Damned tootin'. As soon as you mention that magic word *disabled* everybody drops what they're doing and tries to help you. Did you notice that not once did Anita take other calls while she had me on the line?"

"You did seem to get her attention. But doesn't this approach ever come back and, if you'll excuse the expression, bite you in the ass? I mean, what if Anita finds out the call is phony? She may talk to the three managers whose names she gave you and find out you're a recruiter pulling a fast one."

Sam made a dismissive gesture with his hands. "I've used that line or others like it maybe one hundred times. Got caught once. Just once. That small a percentage is worth the risk to get good leads. Incidentally, the managers whose names Anita gave me may also be in the market some day themselves. Three more names for my Rolodex. Another plus."

I had to agree about his conclusion of the risk-reward ratio, assuming Sam was telling the truth about being caught only once. But one thing I had already learned about recruiters who lie was their tendency to lie to themselves as much as they lied to others. Sam may have believed the risk of getting caught was slight, but I had my doubts.

"Want to listen to another call?" Sam asked.

"The same line?"

"No, something totally different. This one's a beauty."

"Fire away."

"Okay." He flipped opened *The Book of Lists*⁵ randomly selected a local company, and dialed the telephone number while I listened in on the extension.

"Porter, Morrison and Swan. How may I help you?"

Sam placed his hand over the speaker and whispered to me, "Large law firm downtown." To the switchboard operator he said, "I'm trying to reach the mailroom supervisor for your firm. I don't know the name of that person."

"What is this about, sir? We're not allowed to divulge employees' names."

"I received a FedEx package of expensive software by mistake that should have gone to your firm. Some kind of mix-up. I need to know who to send it to."

"I can give you our address, sir."

Sam's voice turned frosty. "The package contains an entire business suite of the highest priced software on the market. I don't think it's appropriate to send it out without first addressing it to a specific responsible individual in your mailroom."

The receptionist thought it over. "I guess it won't hurt to give you the name of ...why the mailroom, sir?"

"Isn't that obvious? The mailroom supervisor is in the best position to determine who the software goes to." Sam was deliberately intimidating the receptionist, gambling that she'd be afraid of getting chewed out by her boss if she failed to comply with Sam's request.

The gambit worked. After a pause, the receptionist said, "The name of our mailroom supervisor is Mariah Shantz."

"Would you put me through to her, please?"

Sounds of connections, then a woman's rushed voice, "Mailroom."

"Is this Mariah Shantz?"

"Speaking."

"Ms. Shantz, my name is Randy Wilbertson, marketing director for Distributor's Guild of America. Every month we pick a businessperson at random and award him or her a complimentary suite of business software or some other expensive product. There's no obligation for anything on your part, no fees of any sort, no shipping and handling charges. And nothing to sign or commit to. We're a distributor and this is strictly a promotion our firm offers to advertise the availability of products we carry. We'll be shipping out the free software to you sometime next week. Congratulations on being selected."

"What company did you say you're from?"

"Distributor's Guild of America. We're an affiliate distributor of Microsoft products, among others."

I knew this was all made up nonsense, of course.

"You say no obligation of any sort to receive the software suite?" She sounded suspicious. "No strings?"

"Believe me when I tell you, it's free and it's an expensive business suite of software. Most computer stores would charge you \$500 for the very same package. You pay nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nor do you need to do anything."

"No funny tricks where I wind up paying for something I didn't ask for?"

"No funny tricks. No fees of any sort. Period."

Voice a little less cautious now. "Well, I suppose it's okay—provided there's no money exchanged and I don't have to sign anything."

"Believe me, Ms. Shantz, there's no catch and it's better than okay. In fact, you're lucky you were selected. You'll use this software for years to come."

"This is unusual. I'm not the type that ever wins anything."

I couldn't help but chuckle to myself, thinking, and you're not going to now.

"I've got your address. I'll make sure our shipping department gets right on it."

"Where can I reach you, Mr. Waters?"

"I'll include my business card in the shipment."

"Well, then, what can I say other than thank you so much?"

"My pleasure, Ms. Shantz...And, by the way, if you're interested in select fellow employees being included for future consideration of receiving free software, why don't you send me a copy of your company phone directory?"

Voice suspicious again. "I'm not at all sure about that."

"You're against other employees in your company getting something valuable for nothing?"

Pause, then, "I'm not against that at all."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Look, if I give away a directory and my boss finds out about it...well, I just don't know."

"Guaranteed nobody will *ever* find out. I realize all of this is hard to accept but it's true. Why don't you give other employees the same chance of winning the free software? I promise we won't contact them to sell them anything. Anything at all."

"I don't know. I guess I don't want to take the chance of having our lawyers exposed to all kinds of sales calls."

"Look, Ms. Shantz, you'll have my business card. I'll give you my telephone number right now to demonstrate my sincerity."

Voice still hesitant. "I'm really not sure."

"Tell you what, Ms. Shantz, I'll throw in two tickets to the Bolshoi Ballet at the Fox Theatre. Just to convince you of my sincerity."

That did the trick; I heard it in her voice.

"Do you also promise not to share our directory with anybody else?"

Sam, sounding indignant. "I one hundred percent guarantee it. You have my solemn word as a professional and a businessman."

"Okay then, I'll send it out today. Let me have an address."

Sam gave her an address of a company in Charlotte, North Carolina, called Distributor's Guild of America and that was that.

"Wow," I said. "I never thought she'd send you an internal phone directory."

"Know what sealed it?"

"The tickets to the Bolshoi Ballet at the Fox Theatre. Hell, I'd go for that myself."

"Well, you're not going. There are no tickets. But that's not what I'm talking about."

"Okay, I bite. What are you talking about?"

Sam threw his feet up on his desk and leaned back. "What turned the trick was the woman's greed. The free tickets. Greed gets to them all the time."

"You amaze me, Sam."

"Sometimes I amaze myself."

"Tell you what I don't understand," I said. "I don't get this address in Charlotte."

Sam chuckled. "It's a mail drop."

"What in the world is a mail drop?"

"Nothing more than a collection of mail boxes, run by a small businessperson, where mail is received, then forwarded to another address."

"Oh, I get it. You don't want Mariah Shantz to know who you are and where you work. So she sends the directory to the Charlotte address under the name Distributor's Guild of America, but what she doesn't know is that she's really sending the directory to a mail drop."

"You got it. Anything that's addressed to Distributor's Guild of America—or other phony company names I use—automatically gets forwarded to me in Atlanta. And the mail drop owner is obligated not to reveal my true identity, just in case Mariah calls."

"Then Distributor's Guild of America is strictly phony."

"As phony as a politician. And with a fancy name that makes you think of some high flying corporation. Makes it more believable. Mariah Shantz would have been reluctant to send her phone directory to a post office box."

"One thing I don't get. You offered to give her your telephone number. Suppose she took you up on it?"

Sam chuckled. "That was a bit of a risk, but I had to offer it to convince her I was the real thing. Had she insisted, I would have made up a telephone number with a Charlotte exchange."

"And if she had telephoned that number before sending out the directory?"

A sly grin slid across Sam's face. "Then I would have been shit out of luck. But she didn't, did she?"

"So now you'll soon have the telephone directory for one of the largest law firms in Atlanta."

"I usually don't handle job searches for lawyers, but the next time I do, I'll have one hell of a rich resource of names at my disposal. And just to prove my generosity, I'll just add that directory to our reference library." The smarmy grin plastered across Sam's face revealed his self-satisfaction.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to use the resumes that come flowing into this office by the thousands? Or run an ad in the papers or over the Internet?”

“That’s exactly the problem. We receive shitloads of resumes and ninety-nine percent of them are worthless. They’re from losers, job hoppers, failures. The kind of job applicants that companies don’t find attractive. You get flooded with the goddamn things. If you waste too much time sifting through that dross, you’ll never fill a job order and you’ll be looking for a new job yourself in six months.”

I stood and stretched. Sam, still full of himself, said, “There are other ways to get good names.”

“What are they?”

“There’s one simple method that few think about. Just casually stroll into any good restaurant or hotel, act like you belong. Chances are you’ll find some kind of bowl filled with business cards at the cashier’s in the restaurant or the front desk of the hotel. You know the kind: giveaways and drawings by hotels and other firms, like cell phone companies use to promote their businesses. When nobody’s looking, just scoop out the cards and you’ve got yourself some fresh leads. The fancier the hotel or restaurant the better the leads. Go to the local Motel Eight, you’re probably not going to find the kind of high level executives you’re trying to reach. But if you pilfer cards from a bowl at the Ritz Carlton, that’s another story. Which, incidentally, I do about once a month. Get my drift?”

“I sure do.” It told me something about Sam, as well as other recruiters who stoop to this level of deception to find leads. Effective? Sure, but over the long run how many executives will continue to do business with Sam when they glom onto his tricks? I chuckled to myself; probably more than I imagined.

Sam said, “Here’s another idea most recruiters haven’t thought about. There are companies advertised on the Net that will show you cyber tricks for mining leads on corporate websites.”

“Explain that, please.”

“The programming techniques these cyber companies use uncover hidden employee information online. All they need to do is access company websites, and using their so-called x-ray techniques, they can open company computer files and find the names of employees. I don’t know anything about it myself, but I told Dan Blair, our regional manager, of a company in Vermont that does exactly that and he’s going to look into it.”

“None of us could do that by ourselves. We don’t know anything about writing programming code.”

“True, but Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz has employees at corporate headquarters who are programming experts and they’ll know what to do.”

“My head’s spinning. Mind if we call it a day?”

Sam threw a face splitting grin at me. “The master tired you out, did he?”

“You’ve given me a lot to think about. Thanks for the help.” I walked toward the entrance to his cubicle, then turned back to face him. “One more thing, Sam. Isn’t something like that phone call to the lawyer’s firm illegal?”

Another grin split Sam’s face. “I don’t have the faintest idea.”

Elaine's Diary

What else can I say but wow? As arrogant as Sam was, he was on target for the way a lot of recruiters operate. The object lesson is clear. If you're manager of a company that uses a receptionist or other persons acting as a focal point of incoming calls, instruct them NEVER to release the names of employees under any circumstances. Tell them to direct all inquiries to somebody from Human Resources or some other *managerial* source where the person screening the call is savvy and knows enough to separate a con job from a genuine call. This simple kind of anticipatory precaution will prevent your company directory from finding its way into the wrong hands.

It's also a good idea to use the phone company's caller ID service so, in the event that a recruiter or other salesperson attempts to trick you into revealing names or other confidential company information, you're in a position to identify the party, or at least the recruiting agency. Have your lawyer send that recruiting company's president a letter informing him of the con game and threaten legal action. That's the best way to curtail phony phoning.

Incidentally, there is a way that recruiters circumvent Caller ID. They punch in *67 before dialing the area code and phone number. That prevents the party being called from identifying the calling party's telephone number. This little trick doesn't work on 700, 800, or 900 phone calls, such as 800, 888, or 911.

The only authorized way to trace blocked telephone numbers is to immediately dial *57 after you receive a phone call from a party who has blocked access to his number. This places the number of the caller in a telephone company data bank, but it's available only to local law enforcement agencies, and only upon written request from the called party. In terms of tracing deceptive recruiter telephone calls, that's too cumbersome a procedure. One of the intended purposes of using *57 to unblock calls is to prosecute stalkers, not uncover shady recruiters.

Finally, make it clear to all employees that anybody, other than a manager in charge, who divulges company information such as employees' names or hands out confidential company documents such as phone directories will be fired. This measure alone will stop all but the most foolhardy. But remember, there are always other fools to take the place of fools you've fired. So remain vigilant.

SLINGING SHIT AT A SCREEN, PART DEUX

I had filled my first job order exactly ten working days after joining Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, and then my second three days later. The following month I sold and filled three job orders. A record for a new recruiter in the Northlake branch office and the second best novice recruiter record for the company nationwide.

Charley was ecstatic. Since he was the one who had hired me it would be to his credit if I succeeded. Sam Nesbitt, currently the office's top producer, eyed me as if sizing up an opponent. He was ambitious to move ahead and didn't want anybody standing in his way. I'm sure he thought I might offer him competition as the branch's highest producer, and he wasn't happy about it.

Bernice pretended to be delighted for me, but her eyes gave her away. They flashed envy and, wonder of all wonders, a touch of fear. No longer was Elaine untested. I had cut my teeth and was getting ready to sharpen them. My success, and perhaps my intensity, frightened Bernice, drove her to caution. I had that effect on a lot of people, particularly on those who at first underestimated me.

With my first check I was able to rent a small apartment five minutes from work, furnish it with some cheap furniture from a local supermarket furniture store, and begin eating three meals a day. I replaced the brakes and tires on the Honda Civic. What a delight to have enough money for the basic necessities.

Three days after filling my fifth job order, Charley called a meeting. Bernice, Sam, Janey, and I showed up in our tiny conference room, really a cubicle with a metal table and eight chairs. The room was so small and crowded that Janey, our gal Friday, a heavysset buxom lady, had trouble squeezing into a seat between the table and cubicle wall.

"Where's Charley?" I asked after sitting down.

"He's got one of the company big shots in his office," Sam replied. "Should be here in a minute."

"The question isn't where's Charley?" Bernice said with a snide expression. "The question is where's Rupert?"

I glanced around. "Where is Rupert?"

Bernice ran a finger across her throat and made a slitting noise. Everybody suddenly got busy shuffling papers or writing notes on pads in front of them.

Charley marched into the conference room, an unusual event in itself. Charley was more the type to stroll, not march. I examined his face for any telltale strain and noticed a certain tension around the edges of his mouth. He was trailed moments later by a tall, well-groomed man in his middle thirties, dressed to kill in a midnight blue suit, pale blue shirt, and maroon tie, a three-corner white linen handkerchief tucked neatly into his breast pocket. His eyes were as sharp as the creases in his pants; they scanned the room and took in everything and missed nothing. His entire bearing fairly screamed no nonsense. I immediately sat up straight and folded my hands in front of me on the table.

Charley sat down on a chair at one end of the table and said, "Dan, I don't believe you've met our newest recruiter. This is Elaine Priestly, Elaine, Dan Blair. He's the Southern regional manager for our company."

Dan and I exchanged polite hellos while his eyes quickly roamed my body. I hid my discomfort; part of the game every woman must learn to play if she is to succeed in business.

"Congratulations on your fast start, Elaine," Dan said, all business now. "Two months, five job orders filled. Keep up the good work."

"Thank you." I was careful not to smile, to match his serious demeanor with my own.

"Now, for the rest of you," Dan said and the room froze. He stood at the opposite end of the table from Charley. "Look around and you'll notice one person missing...Rupert Randolph Robertson." He let his words float above the assembled group for a moment before proceeding. "To be blunt about it, Robertson was a failure at recruiting. A man obviously in the wrong profession. He brought in one goddamned job order the entire time he was with us. That kind of performance is intolerable." He reached down and pounded the table for emphasis. Everybody jumped, including me.

"What really annoys me is how long it took before we booted him out. Robertson worked for us two months, if you can call what he accomplished work. I can't. He should have been fired after thirty days." Blair paused and looked directly at Charley who seemed to shrink into his chair. "If we had reacted quickly, by now his replacement would be on board working through the learning curve. That type of slackness drives me nuts."

Charley said, "But, Dan, we—"

Dan held up a hand like a traffic cop halting oncoming cars. Charley immediately shut up.

"Does anybody here," Dan asked, "want to guess some of the things Robertson was doing wrong?" It was really a rhetorical question. Everybody remained silent and attentive. For a moment Bernice looked as though she was going to speak until Charley silenced her with a furious stare.

Dan walked to a chalkboard behind him and picked up a piece of yellow chalk. "Number one, and most important, the guy's perspective was all screwed up." He scribbled the word "perspective" on the chalkboard.

"Robertson tried hard to see both sides, his and the client company's, with the result that he forgot the reason we had hired him in the first place. He spent so much time worried about meeting the client's every need that he neglected meeting his own needs. That of making a sale...let me repeat that...*making a sale*. The reason we're all here today and Robertson isn't.

"His failure in perspective led to one sale in two months time." Dan's face turned pink then ruby then crimson as he talked, his cheek muscles worked furiously between sentences. He paused for a moment and his fierce gaze swept the room from one person to the next. Everybody found notes to stare at, a wall to examine, or a shoe that was suddenly the most fascinating object in the world.

"Now listen up and listen good. You want to be a recruiter for Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz, you got to have a single-minded perspective, that of making money. Lots and lots of money. Whether you recognize it or not, it's a war you're engaged in, a war of you versus the client. Either the client wins or you do. If he wins, he's taking money out of your pocket and food out of the mouth of your kids. The son of a bitch is robbing you, picking your pockets clean. And, worse, if you let the recruiter at a competing agency beat you to the punch by getting the job order

and filling the vacancy, you're a patsy, a pushover. You don't even deserve to be playing in the game."

The room was dead silent, I found myself holding my breath, afraid to breathe deeply and be noticed, maybe singled out with a blistering comment. A quick surreptitious glance around the room told me that everyone else felt the same way.

"Robertson allowed his so-called sense of fair play to interfere with his judgment. Well, fuck fair play. Your job is at stake. In this business good guys don't finish last, they get booted to the curb." He stopped for a moment, then yelled, "Does everybody understand that?"

Every head in the room bobbed up and down in unison. Every face revealed fright.

Dan took a few deep breaths. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get carried away. It's just that I hate having a loser work for us." The color of his face slowly returned to normal. He turned to the chalkboard and wrote the word "schmooze."

"Another thing about Robertson, he didn't know how to schmooze clients. Guy was all facts and figures when he talked to his human resources contacts⁶. Contrary to what most of you believe about human resources people they're really human." Dan grinned and everybody dutifully chuckled. "They respond to small talk. How's the wife, the kids, what do you think of this hot weather, that kind of bullshit."

I didn't think Dan Blair was the type who enjoyed or made much small talk himself. My guess is he would have been mechanical about it and prone to talk business first, last, and in between. Assuming he had been a top recruiter—and I had to believe that, because in this cutthroat business only the best make it to the top—it meant Mr. Dan Blair was either bullshitting us or himself. Either way, I planned to continue following my instincts and doing it my way.

I was beginning to realize that in the headhunting game the traditional practice of doing business didn't lend itself to relationship building. Most recruiting business embodied the spirit of in and out. Get the job order, fill the job order, move on to another company, start the process all over again. To me that was self-defeating, but I surely recognized that it was the way many recruiting agencies conducted their businesses.

Well, I might be a young 'un, as my daddy called me, but that didn't mean I couldn't think for myself. Following the traditional recruiting path may work for some but not for others, depending on the recruiter's temperament and personality. I figured I had two advantages over the other recruiters in the room. First, I was a sincere person and came across that way. From my admittedly limited experience I had already discerned that both clients and job applicants prefer dealing with a sincere recruiter than a glib one (although, to be honest, I could bullshit with the best of them. But I was learning to restrain myself, instinctively fearing I'd come across as superficial.) Second, I was a woman, and an attractive one. Regardless of how unfair that advantage may be, in my limited experience, it was true that male clients responded more positively to female recruiters, and I intended to make the most of it. Which called for face-to-face meetings. Consequently, I had quietly discarded most of the quick hit, in-and-out mentality Charley and Bernice and the others had taught me in favor of building relationships.

“Next, Robertson didn’t send out enough resumes. That’s just about as basic as you can get in this business.” Dan wrote “Broadcast resumes” on the chalkboard.

I tentatively raised my hand, which brought an immediate frown of disapproval from Charley and frightened looks from the other recruiters in the room.

Dan nodded in my direction. I asked, “What does broadcast resumes mean?”

“Just what it says. We find a sellable candidate, particularly one who is just getting back into the job market, preferably somebody who hasn’t yet given his resume to other recruiting agencies, then run his resume off and send it out to every company and contact that might be possibly interested.”

“That could be dozens of companies.”

“Sure. So what?”

“Nothing, just asking a question.” Better to shut up now before I get Dan and Charley mad at me.

“You’re new, Elaine. What you have to understand is the more people that see the applicant’s resume, the better your chances of making a quick sale. And quick sales are important in our business because sooner rather than later the same job candidate will hand out his resume to other recruiters. Speed is of the essence.”

Charley said, “Dan, that’s what I been telling Elaine in our coaching sessions.”

Broadcasting resumes. Regardless of the “coaching” session, we always seemed to get back to the basic recruiting credo of slinging shit at a screen. Didn’t Blair and the others realize that the tactic pissed off both clients and job applicants? Clients, because they’re flooded with job applications and not receptive to receiving resumes without requesting them. Job applicants, because you never knew when an indiscriminately broadcast resume might wind up in the hands of the resume owner’s employer. Mergers are commonplace in today’s marketplace; dozens of companies with different names operate under the same corporate umbrella. A broadcast resume could land on the human resources desk of a company affiliated with the job applicant’s employer. From there it would almost assuredly find its way back to the human resources manager of the resume owner’s employer. Don’t shrug off the possibility. It’s happened so many times before it’s sickening.

And, incidentally, it’s been the genesis of many a justifiable lawsuit against recruiting agencies.

Then why do so many recruiters risk it? Finally it came to me: yes, of course, Dan and many other recruiting managers recognized the risks associated with mass mailing resumes; they’re not stupid. But they continued their shit slinging routine because it worked short-term for them, and most recruiters only saw and understood the short term. The in-and-out philosophy at work: a quick sale justifies any means available. Long term is a phrase consisting of two words that means absolutely nothing to a recruiter foraging desperately for job orders today. The phrase may as well be in a foreign language for all the good it does.

“Okay,” Dan said, “let’s talk numbers.”

The recruiters emitted a collective but muted groan.

Dan faced Elaine. “As way of explanation for Elaine, our newest recruiter, you may not be aware that we have a phone device that tracks the number of calls made by each recruiter daily. We also obviously record the number of job orders received and the number of jobs actually filled by recruiter.

“For this office during the past month all of you together, including Charley who spends about half his time on the phone, half his time on administrative duties—you collectively made sixteen thousand calls, which is about two thousand under where you should be. And it shows in job orders. Last month this office landed thirty job orders and filled eight. We would have had a banner month but Robertson fell flat on his ass.” Dan stopped and ground his teeth. His jaw muscles rippled in response.

Charley cleared his throat. The noise reverberated throughout the silenced room.

Dan said, “I’ve been exceptionally lenient until now. But from now on, it’s a different story. As the saying goes, no more Mr. Nice Guy. Here it is, so listen up, folks: miss your two sales per month quota and you’re hitting the street. There will be no second chances. One month, under two closes, you’re out. Does everybody hear me loud and clear?”

A chorus of stunned faces and muted yeses greeted Dan’s question. He stared at every one of us in turn, Charley included, then pivoted around and left the conference room.

Fifteen minutes later, while I was in my cubicle on the phone, Charley and Dan Blair walked into the crowded space, and Charley perched on the edge of my desk.

“Got a few minutes to talk?” Charley asked.

“Sure,” I said, and put the phone back on the hook.

Dan slid onto the only other chair in my cubicle. He laced his fingers behind his head and gazed at the false acoustical ceiling. “It’s been a long day.” He looked down and winked at me; not a lascivious wink, more of a friendly wink that buddies occasionally flash at each other. My guess is Dan was attempting to get me to relax, because the moment he and Charley had entered my office I tensed up and he saw it. Dan was one of the company’s big bosses and I was just the new kid on the block, so I guess he felt a little arm patting was in order.

“Got to admit,” Dan said, “I’m really impressed by what you’ve accomplished in the short time you’ve been here.” He kept his voice low so the other recruiters couldn’t hear our conversation, and signaled Charley and me to do so, too.

“Thank you.”

“My gut tells me you’ve got a future with this company. Believe it?”

“I’d like to.”

He grunted. “You really do, if you keep your eyes on the ball.”

“What specifically do you mean, Mr. Blair?”

“Call me Dan.”

“Okay...Dan.” It was hard for me to spit out, just as it was difficult for me to call any older man by anything other than his last name. Particularly one of the big bosses.

“What I mean is, just keep doing what you’ve been doing. Looks like it works.”

I decided to level with him. “What I’m doing may not be exactly what other recruiters are doing. Charley knows that.” I glanced at him and nodded.

A tiny smile crept along the edges of Dan’s lips. “I’ve got the feeling you’re going to be teaching other recruiters to do things *your* way in the not too distant future...provided, of course, you continue your success and bring in more business. Are you with me?” He stared at me hard.

My heart was starting to flutter; I felt its pulse in my throat. "I think I understand." I didn't, but I thought something big was in the air.

"That day might come sooner than you think."

"I'm excited by the possibility."

"Good, you should be. But that's between us three sitting here."

I ran a make-believe zipper across my mouth. "I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"She never shoots her mouth off, Dan," Charley said. "I can vouch for that."

"An important trait too many recruiters lack."

"Thank you for your confidence in me. Both of you. How can I help...specifically?"

Dan waved my thanks aside. "Charley and I both feel we need to improve the performance of the office. We intend to formally train every new recruiter, probably re-train those on board. From what we've seen so far, you might be that person. Is that specific enough?" He grinned at me.

"I get it. But I don't know if I'm—"

"If you want to get ahead in this business you got to have balls of steel and the confidence that goes with them."

"I'm young. That might be a disadvantage."

"In this racket what counts is results. You can be twenty or seventy, fat or thin, good looking or ugly. Doesn't make any difference. As long as you can produce. We ride with winners. So far, you've shown Charley and me a great deal of maturity for somebody so young. We'll take the chance. After all, we do have a backstop."

"What's that?"

"If you fail, there's always somebody else waiting in the wings. Always. Don't forget that, Elaine."

Elaine's Diary

Whew! How was that for a session? When I look back on it, I'm lucky I didn't faint or do something equally stupid that would have exposed my inner doubts. Big stuff for a novice, particularly one fresh from the hills.

Anyway, I learned a lot from Dan that day as I would in succeeding months and years as I followed him up the ladder at Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz. On that first exposure to Dan's wisdom I picked up that recruiting agency managers often view the recruiter-client relationship as adversarial. Recruiters are the good guys, companies the bad guys. It's a war to the finish. If the good guys win they get job orders and fill them. If the bad guys win they fill job vacancies from within their companies, or worse, hand out job orders to competing recruiting agencies (more bad guys).

These recruiting "warriors" give themselves away by attitudes so aggressive and perverse they often cross the line from confident to rude, from conviction to assertion, from belief to certitude. They're easy to spot: fast talking, won't take no for an answer, don't listen well, hear only what they want to hear and nothing more, unresponsive to anybody else's needs other than their own; as subtle as enraged water buffaloes.

Sure, Dan was a little bit this way. But he tempered it with clients and, as I was to learn, related extraordinarily well to top executives whose focus, like Dan's, was on results, not bullshit.

Nevertheless, both hiring company executives and job applicants would do well to avoid such recruiters. Their first and only goal is to use you. Guaranteed you will get the short end of the stick unless you learn to rein them in.

It's good to keep in mind that true long term partnerships between recruiters and clients, in the sense of frequent sit-downs, are the exception. The predominating recruiter philosophy of quantity (adherence to the numbers) over quality (personal relationships) does not lend itself to lasting associations. Much recruiting business embodies the essence of in and out. Get the job order, fill the job order, move on to another client, start the process all over again. Keep the phone buzzing. A phone on the hook is a wasted moment, a potential sale lost.

Which brings up the shop-worn and irresponsible practice of broadcasting resumes. Even in this era of rampant lawsuits many recruiters still shoot out resumes to all corners of the job market, with or without the permission of job applicants. This is because it's difficult, if not impossible, for many recruiters to think of job applicants as anything more than cannon fodder, a sub-human resource whose only purpose is to put money in the pockets of recruiters.

But even when a recruiter talks you into broadcasting your resume—and she can be very persuasive—remember that shit travels at twice the speed of sound. May I suggest that you, as a job candidate, resist the temptation? Your name will quickly make the rounds of the human resource crowd (within an industry or community they all know one another) and you'll be regarded as desperate, your reputation tarnished, often beyond repair.

But if you're a job applicant whose resume is being circulated without your permission and you lose your job, then sue the bastards. Go after, not only the recruiter, but also the recruiting agency the recruiter works for. Both bear responsibility and the agency will have deeper pockets than the sole recruiter to reimburse you for their dishonesty and greed.

A JOB APPLICANT TELLS ALL ABOUT RECRUITERS

Three weeks later I started my training gig for the Northlake office. According to Dan and Charley the plan was to start locally, then expand the service to other Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz offices in the Atlanta area. Provided, of course, I was able to handle the job. A big *if* in the minds of my fellow employees.

The biggest obstacle to success on this new assignment was my age. How many thirty- and forty-year olds would feel comfortable learning recruiting techniques from a brand spanking new recruiter of the just-turned-legal age vintage of twenty-one, albeit it a pretty savvy person—if I do say so for myself?

Charley had some doubts; Dan had none. And I was growing more confident every day. Maybe that was the difference between Charley and me now that I was beginning to feel comfortable on the job. I was willing and eager to try new approaches. As was Dan. Charley didn't subscribe to my personal relationship recruiting approach and feared anything new that might cut into his override⁷.

In preparation for the training assignment I decided to speak with a few job applicants to uncover weak spots in our recruiting pitch and the service we rendered.

I swept the Internet using the Google search engine to find job applicants who had been burned by recruiters. There were several websites devoted to such complaints, many more than I had imagined. It opened my eyes to the extent of the problem. I made a few select phone calls.

My first interview was with a thirty-seven-year-old sales manager, a man who had lost his job when the dot.com company he worked for went belly-up. He was on the street for six months before finding another comparable position. I'll call him Mr. Blue. My thought was that a sales manager would have some extra insight into the recruiting process since he had some real life insights into what it took to make a sale.

We began our discussion one Saturday morning in a coffee shop with Mr. Blue summarizing his experience:

"Let me say up front that the comments I'll be making about recruiters don't necessarily pertain to you. I don't know anything about you other than what you've told me. So I'll make the assumption you're an ethical person and what you're about to hear is about recruiters who aren't. Those shall remain nameless. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"The most important thing I found out when dealing with recruiters is to remember they don't represent job applicants, although they profess to. Neither do they truly represent companies hiring them to find job applicants, although they receive their commissions from sales of warm bodies made to those companies. Furthermore, most of the recruiters I've worked with in the past felt they didn't have any deep-seated loyalty to the recruiting companies they work for. In the final analysis, they stand alone like the lone gunmen of the American West a hundred years ago."

"Survival of the fittest type of thing?"

"Exactly," Mr. Blue said. "Recruiters stand or fall by their own performance. They have nobody or nothing to lean on. Same way for those Old West gunmen."

"Maybe we're getting off track here. I didn't mean for this discussion to become philosophical."

"It's not philosophical as much as striking at the essence of recruiting."

"Please explain that."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but recruiters live by the sword and die by the sword. They either perform or they're fired. Just as we've been talking."

"You can say that about any job."

"True, but in the case of recruiters, mama and the kids don't eat until daddy recruiter sells bodies."

"No doubt about it. Everything most recruiters earn is based on commissions for filling jobs."

"There's something so...desperate about the act of recruiting. It goes beyond making money. As if should they fail to make the latest sales, they're going to be condemned to hell. Does that make sense?"

"You're getting a little deep for me."

"It goes beyond money, seems to drive to the core of what recruiters are made of."

"What are they made of?"

Mr. Blue leaned back in the booth and thought it over. "I can't think of a better occupation to illustrate where it's every man for himself, and the hell with the other guy. If I'm going to eat tonight I'll need to snatch the food right out of the other guy's mouth and rip his throat so he can't compete against me."

"That's pretty harsh."

Mr. Blue shrugged. "I'm telling you what I think."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"I don't mean to be bitter. Look at it this way: recruiters finagle human resource managers into giving them job orders, then finagle job applicants into thinking the job openings they're trying to fill are the golden opportunities of a lifetime."

"Isn't that really what good salesmanship is about, convincing others?"

"Yes, of course, as long as it doesn't cross the line into flat-out lies." His tone turned bitter. "And nobody is better at crossing the line than recruiters. In my entire career, they're the most accomplished group I've found at lying."

"Give me some specific examples."

"Let's start with the Internet. They post jobs that don't exist."

"Why would they do that?" As if I didn't know.

Mr. Blue's lips curled down at the corners. "Because they want to increase their database of resumes. The reason I know is that I sent in posted resumes to jobs listed on Internet job boards, then followed-up with telephone calls the next day to the recruiters who ran the ads. Every one of them told me the jobs they posted had been filled." Mr. Blue stopped to take a sip of coffee. "Now you and I know jobs don't fill that quickly. So the only conclusion I can come up with is that those jobs never existed to begin with."

I knew that was true, but I didn't let Mr. Blue know I agreed with him. "What other experiences have you had with recruiters?"

"Here's a doozy that shows how some recruiters operate. One time I was close to receiving a job offer from a local Internet services company, was in fact going back for my third interview. The recruiter, acting as a go-between, asked me what my bottom line was for money, the least I would accept. He hastened to add that

he was a master at negotiating and he'd get me the most money possible. I foolishly believed him. He asked me to wait outside his office while he got on the phone and bargained on my behalf with the Internet services company.

"I sat down in a chair outside his office and one of the secretaries told me I'd be more comfortable waiting in a private office. She led me to an office adjacent to my recruiter. The offices were connected by one of those hollow metal doors that sound travels through. I overheard the recruiter talking to the human resources guy at the Internet services company, letting him know the least salary I'd be willing to take—the information I had revealed to the recruiter in confidence. Not a goddamn word about negotiating.

"I was so furious I jumped up from my chair and slammed the door open leading to his office. You should have seen the look on the jerk's face. He was scared out of his wits. I was madder than hell and it showed. I walked right up to him, pressed down on the hook, and disconnected the conversation, then marched out of the office, so damned steamed I couldn't see straight.

"Anyway I took over negotiating with the company, but the damage had already been done. The HR (human resources) guy was upset that the recruiter and I couldn't get together on money and I guess they considered that a poor reflection of my managerial abilities.

"Bottom line is I never got the offer. Which taught me never to leave negotiating an offer to a recruiter. Bastards don't really care."

I played devil's advocate. "Doesn't it make sense for a recruiter to bargain in good faith? After all, the more money offered a job candidate the higher the recruiter's commissions."

"Yes and no. Let's say I receive an offer for \$75,000 from a company and the recruiting agency's commission is twenty percent, or \$15,000. Now, assuming the recruiter makes a third of that, his commission amounts to \$5000.

"Now, further assume that he negotiates an additional five thousand in salary for me. That brings me to \$80,000. That extra five thousand's a lot of money for me, but in terms of extra commission, not as meaningful for the recruiter. Again, the agency gets twenty percent, or \$16,000. The recruiter gets a third of that or \$5333. So for a lot of extra effort he receives a measly \$333. Fact is, he's not going to go out of his way to do that because—"

"Because he needs to spend his time making more money, which means moving on to the next job order."

"Damned tootin'. But it's something more than that. The recruiter is scared to death that he might alienate the executive making the offer for the hiring company. In that context it's the difference between \$5000 and nothing. Why risk losing the entire commission for another \$333?"

"So the additional money simply isn't worth it."

"Exactly. Bottom line is, how many recruiters you know ever got job candidates higher salaries than they were asking for?"

"Wow, that was some story. You've made your point. Got any others?"

Mr. Blue smiled at me. "I'm just warming up."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

Mr. Blue chuckled. "Don't be. As I told you up front, never trust a recruiter to look out after your interests. Every job applicant has to do that for himself or herself. In any respect, here's another story to add to your collection. It illustrates my point about never depending on a recruiter. Sixteen years ago, when I was a

kid fresh from business school, I interviewed for a position as salesman with a company in San Jose, California that made computer hard drives. I was living in Philadelphia at the time, made two trips to the Coast, and received the offer during my second interview. It was a Friday and I told the HR lady I'd get back to her Monday morning with my decision.

"It was in the days before cell phones had become popular so I was out of contact until I stepped foot in my apartment around midnight. I ran through the messages on my answering machine. There were eight of them, all from the recruiter who had hooked me up with the San Jose company, asking me to call back the very minute I came home, regardless of the time. Just as I finished the messages the phone rang. It was the recruiter. Here's the conversation as I remember it. I've disguised the names of the real companies."

RECRUITER: (voice full of good cheer) Congratulations, I understand you got the offer from PinkStar Games.

MR. BLUE: I did.

RECRUITER: When do you start work?

MR. BLUE: Hold on, you're jumping ahead of yourself. I told them I'd think their offer over carefully during the weekend and get back to them on Monday morning.

RECRUITER: (sounding incredulous) What's there to think about? It's a great offer, exactly what you're looking for.

MR. BLUE: I have to weigh the PinkStar offer against another offer I had from a company in Dallas.

RECRUITER: (sounding hurt) I didn't know about that company.

MR. BLUE: It came through another recruiter. I didn't think it was any of your concern.

RECRUITER: (voice sharp now) Who's the recruiter?

MR. BLUE: Swindle and Sneeks out of Chicago.

RECRUITER: Lousy company. Stay away from them.

MR. BLUE: Why?

RECRUITER: You can't trust what they say.

MR. BLUE: They seem pretty straightforward so far.

RECRUITER: What's the name of the company they sent you to?

MR. BLUE: Brown Plains Software.

RECRUITER: I heard of that outfit. They have a terrible reputation in the industry.

MR. BLUE: How so?

RECRUITER: Oh, a bunch of things: high turnover, low morale, lousy pay.

MR. BLUE: Where'd you hear that?

RECRUITER: (sounding evasive) Oh, around.

MR. BLUE: That doesn't sound anything close to what I found out about them. Actually, from my research and the people I interviewed with, I received the exact opposite impression.

RECRUITER: (quickly changing subject) Look, I got to tell you, the offer you received from PinkStar is just about as good as you're

going to get anywhere. It's far and above the salary bracket for the job.

MR. BLUE: The offer I received from Brown Plains Software was about twenty percent higher.

RECRUITER: (a stormy silence) What I'm talking about is your future prospects. PinkStar Games has you pegged for bigger and better things.

MR. BLUE: So does Brown Plains Software.

RECRUITER: (voice turning hard) Let me lay it on the line for you. I talked with the PinkStar HR lady after you left for the airport. She tells me you've got some heavy competition for the job. You're the better candidate but if you don't grab this job, she's got two other professionals she can fill the job with. Two highly qualified candidates. My suggestion to you is to call the HR lady at her home in the morning and accept the job before she changes her mind about you.

MR. BLUE: She agreed to hold the job offer open until I get back to her Monday morning.

RECRUITER: They all say that, but it's been my experience they get skittish and change their minds. See, she's on the spot. Has to have that job filled pronto, and my impression was that she's nervous as hell since you didn't accept the job offer when it was offered.

MR. BLUE: That may be your interpretation, but for now I'm going to take her word for it.

RECRUITER: Tell you what, let's walk through the offers, side by side. Maybe I can help you make a decision.

MR. BLUE: Thanks but no thanks. This is something I've got to do myself.

RECRUITER: I've got a lot of insights into making these kind of important decision. I've counseled literally thousands of job candidates like yourself.

MR. BLUE: I'm sure you have, but I'm going to make this analysis myself.

RECRUITER: Promise me you won't make a final decision until you've talked with me.

MR. BLUE: I won't make that promise.

RECRUITER: (voice revealing near panic) This is about your future. I'm trying to give you some expert advice.

MR. BLUE: Look, it's late and I'm tired.

RECRUITER: Suppose I go back and have them sweeten the offer?

MR. BLUE: Goodnight.

RECRUITER: But—

MR. BLUE: (hangs up phone)

"That's the kind of crap I've had to go through with damn near every recruiter I've dealt with."

"I suppose you can expect it. There's a lot of money on the line for the recruiter. He'll do whatever he can to persuade you to take an offer from his client company."

Mr. Blue's eyebrows raised. "Even when it's not to my benefit?"

"The more honest ones won't cross that line, but they'll walk right up to it."

"How do you mean?"

"In the example you mentioned, a real professional would never tell you that the Dallas company was lousy if it wasn't. Sounds from the way you described it, he knew absolutely nothing about Brown Plains Software, but tried to convince you otherwise."

"That was exactly my take. He tried to reach me several times that weekend but I made myself unavailable. The phone stopped ringing when I called PinkStar Games Monday morning and declined the offer. Needless to say, I never heard from that recruiter again. Apparently once you turn down an offer, you're on that recruiter's shit list."

"That's not an untypical reaction...they're afraid of a repeat performance and time to a recruiter is a precious commodity. Any other examples?"

"I once took an interview that didn't last too long, about an hour as I recall, and the company told me they'd get back to me. I was too young to realize those words were the kiss of death. I was out of the running and didn't know it. So I called the recruiter's agency and was told by the receptionist the recruiter was out for the day. I knew that was a lie because the recruiter had told me before the interview she'd be available all day. No matter how many times I tried to reach her, she never called back. Three weeks later I received a letter from the interviewing company informing me they had selected somebody else. But I never heard from that recruiter again. Apparently, once you've been turned down for an offer, the recruiter turns her back to you."

"Unfortunately, that scenario's not at all that unusual."

"One final story, if I might. I've been saving the best for last."

I leaned forward. "You've got my attention."

Mr. Blue sighed. "Before I interviewed with the San Jose and Dallas companies I interviewed with a recruiter in Montreal for the position of salesman for a company manufacturing electronic monitoring systems used mostly in subway systems across the world."

"I flew up to Montreal and the recruiter, let's call him Morton, met me at the airport. He was a kindly looking older guy with white hair, a lined face, and a warm smile that made me feel welcome. Kind of like Walter Cronkite."

"Morton gave me a firm handshake and led me to his car in the parking lot. He asked me if I had eaten any dinner on the plane, and when I told him no, he said with a chuckle that I was in for a treat."

"He took me to downtown Montreal where we had dinner at a five star French restaurant. Over martinis we exchanged war stories, you know, just like two businesspeople relaxing and getting to know each other."

"Perhaps I shouldn't have taken the first martini, but the damned guy was so accommodating I felt immediately at ease. So, two martinis later we ate our dinner of Dover sole and chased it down with an expensive white wine."

"About this time when I was really flying high, Morton's tone turned gradually more serious and he began questioning me. Why did I want to change jobs? Why

wasn't there a future for me at the company I was working for? Those kind of penetrating open-ended questions that reveal the substance of a person.

"Of course, I had prepared myself for the interview by asking myself the same questions, but the booze was clouding my judgment. I stumbled over the answers so much it seemed as if they were made up. As the meal progressed, his questions became more direct and penetrating, his tone sharper. Diners from nearby tables glanced at us in annoyance.

"Finally, over coffee he mounted his final assault. His face twisted into a snarl, his questions became downright nasty, insulting. 'I don't believe you cut costs fifteen percent; sounds phony to me. If you're so damned good, why are you leaving your company? Why are they letting you leave?' Those kind of questions.

"The booze got the better of me. I slapped my hand on the table and told him to shut the hell up. My face was flushed and I know my eyes were spitting bullets.

"Then, he did a funny thing. He sat back in his chair and smiled, said something like 'Just kidding. Go on, relax and enjoy your coffee.'

"It struck me, much too late, that all of this had been an act designed to see if I would lose my cool under pressure. And it was. Of course, by then it was too late.

"The following morning he explained that he had designed this 'stress test' himself to weed out those who couldn't handle themselves under pressure. He told me that the salesperson for this job would be required to work with some pretty rough and tumble hard-drinking transit authority types and would be required to keep his cool under all conditions."

Mr. Blue paused and turned to me. "How do you like those apples?"

"That's terrible and I'd imagine not at all a good predictor of how you'd handle yourself. Obviously, knowing in advance the type of customers you'd be dealing with would give you ample opportunity to prepare for any circumstances."

"Well, you asked for the kinds of experiences I've had with recruiters, and I can tell you that was my worst moment. Made me hate the bastards."

"I can understand why."

Elaine's Diary

Mr. Blue stated it perfectly: the most important thing I found out when dealing with recruiters is to remember they don't represent job applicants or employers. They only represent themselves.

How true. Recruiters are paid agents of companies seeking to fill job vacancies. They're paid by companies to place warm bodies into open jobs. Job applicants are the products of the recruiters' efforts, but it's important to remember that recruiters do not work for or represent job applicants. People seeking employment through the services of recruiters need to keep this in mind and make their own decisions about which opportunities are right for them. Never rely on recruiters to make important career decisions.

As an add-on to that principle, job applicants need to do their own negotiating. In some rare instances it pays to use recruiters to help jack up the package, but job applicants must retain control. Placing compensation negotiations in the hands of recruiters is foolhardy as Mr. Blue so convincingly demonstrated.

Another recruiting truism from Mr. Blue: recruiters want nothing to do with job applicants who can't or won't earn them commissions. So if you're a job applicant who has turned down a job that a recruiter fought to get, don't expect to hear from him again.

Likewise, if the recruiter sent you on an interview and you failed to get the job, don't be surprised if you don't hear from that recruiter again, or if you do and you're turned down at a second company, that's all she wrote. Rightly or wrongly, he'll seldom waste time on somebody he perceives as a loser. We call this the Law of Two Strikes. Maybe the first turndown on an interview had nothing to do with you, the job candidate. Strike one. But to be turned down a second time, strike two, you're out!

A COMPANY EXECUTIVE LAYS IT ON THE LINE ABOUT RECRUITERS

My training assignment was off to a fast start. I qualified the other recruiters in the Northlake office in my recruiting routines. (Bernice was furious; you could see it in her flashing eyes and rippling jaw muscles. After all, a short time before, she was teaching me recruiting basics.) I soon expanded my efforts to the other Atlanta branches of Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz. The marvel of it was that not one single recruiter offered resistance to my suggestions. Of course, they were under no obligation to accept my suggestions, but if their performances faltered, and upon investigation branch managers found that they hadn't followed my training outline, well, to put it bluntly, it was their asses on the line.

I was nobody's fool. I understood that without Dan Blair's support the other branch managers in Atlanta would have kicked me out of their offices faster than a snake swallowing an egg. Such was the nature of this business that each branch and every recruiter in it operated under the illusion that they were independent entities.

And, to some extent, they were. In recruiting it's every man (woman) for himself (herself). It's one of the few occupations where individual practitioners do not rely on others to do their jobs, where each recruiter operates as if alone on an island. Indeed, the isolationist aspect of recruiting appeals to the type of people who stay in the business any length of time. Call them loners, self-sufficient businesspeople, whatever. Recruiters spend most of their time on the phone and seldom come in direct contact with job applicants and hiring executives. People who need the constant presence and reassurance of fellow workers surrounding them do not do well as recruiters.

Of course, the shield of independence halts abruptly when their number of placements falls under budget. That's when they feel the weight of the organization. They're given probably one chance to improve performance, and that's about it. The next corrective step is at the unemployment office.

In any respect, I had a lot of initial success as a trainer and the results showed up as increased billings for the individual branches.

Ever willing to expand my understanding of the business, I decided to interview a human relations vice president of a prominent Atlanta company in the news and entertainment business, to inquire about her experiences with recruiters over the years. She was kind enough to grant me access. Let's call her Ms. Green. We had lunch and she opened up to me over coffee. The lady held nothing back, and what I discovered were several eye-openers. What you'll read below is the transcript of my interview with her:

ELAINE⁸: I've got the mic turned on now. Let's start with who you are and a little about your background. For purposes of this interview I'll be calling you Ms. Green and we won't mention actual company or recruiter names. Anonymity rules.

MS. GREEN: I'm vice president of a company in Atlanta in the news and entertainment business, and widely known in my industry both here in the USA and abroad. I've been in the business of human resources for twenty years now with three different companies, and I've had exposure to all aspects of the HR job. For

many years I worked either as a company recruiting specialist or manager of that function where I learned what to expect from outside recruiters and how to deal with them. I'm also president of the Georgia branch of a major HR association.

ELAINE: Good, that establishes your credentials.

MS. GREEN: Where would you like to start?

ELAINE: A good place would be your general impression of the recruiting profession, and then move from there to specifics.

MS. GREEN: (thinking) Okay, in summary I consider recruiters a necessary evil. I need them to assist in our hiring function but, as a rule, don't like them nor respect them. (smiling) Present company excepted, of course.

ELAINE: Pretend I'm a reporter, not a recruiter, if that'll help.

MS. GREEN: (more smiles) It will. I appreciate your objectivity.

ELAINE: You were about to tell me why you neither like nor respect recruiters.

MS. GREEN: That's a generalization, of course. There are some recruiters whom I admire. A few whom I consider friends.

ELAINE: I gather those are the exceptions.

MS. GREEN: They are, indeed. What I find objectionable about the lot—and I'm generalizing here—is that as a group they have the ethics of snake oil salesmen. You can't take their word for damned near anything and you always have to be on the lookout for a fast one being slipped past you. It takes a lot of extra time and effort on my part, and the part of our HR people dealing with such recruiters, trying to keep the company from being screwed.

ELAINE: Examples, please.

MS. GREEN: One of my pet peeves is the lack of rigid screening before recruiters submit job candidates. I remember one case in particular. You could say this one's seared in my memory, a real nightmare.

ELAINE: Tell me about it.

MS. GREEN: Several years ago, at the start of my career, I worked for a small manufacturing company in New Jersey as recruiting manager. We were looking for a director of purchasing to replace the one who was retiring. We had just implemented a complex inventory control and purchasing system and needed somebody with similar experience. The consensus was that nobody in the company was capable of assuming those managerial duties so I was asked to look outside. I used a recruiter in Chicago to find the right candidate, and he quickly identified several candidates with the relevant experience, one of them from a manufacturing company in Arkansas. We interviewed the candidate several times and asked the recruiter to thoroughly vet him because we wanted to give him an offer. The recruiter said he did and came back with nothing but high marks for the man. We extended an offer to the Arkansas candidate and he accepted it. He started work shortly thereafter and everything went well for the first three months with one exception. The new purchasing director had a wife and two kids

who were supposed to have moved from Arkansas to New Jersey shortly after his starting work. When he kept on putting off that event I began getting suspicious. Working in human resources does that; you see so much shit that your senses for smelling it become acute. To make a long story short, the purchasing director disappeared after working four months. Nobody knew where he went, including the recruiter. We hired a private investigator and soon discovered the purchasing director was standing trial in Arkansas for accepting kickbacks at his last company.

ELAINE: How did he get through the recruiter's screen?

MS. GREEN: (snorting) It's obvious, isn't it? The recruiter never checked with his last employer, or if he did, he never told us about the fraud. I wanted to initiate a lawsuit against the recruiter but my boss, the president of the company and a real softie didn't want the notoriety. One thing that taught me was never, repeat never, rely on a recruiter to check an applicant's background. And I must admit, I was just as much at fault as the recruiter for not checking. Needless to say, I haven't made that same mistake again.

ELAINE: I agree. HR needs to double-check an applicant's record. It's incumbent upon them since they have the most to suffer if their selection goes wrong.

MS. GREEN: Tell me about it. My lapse in judgment earned me a black eye. Not a knockout punch, but I sure as hell didn't look too good after that in my boss' eyes. That incident alone soured me to recruiters. But there have been other incidents. Many of them.

ELAINE: Any more examples?

MS. GREEN: (grinning) Pull up a chair, honey.... While working in HR for my second company we extended an offer to one candidate who claimed he had a master's degree, but as we discovered after we had hired him, he had completed his course work but had never submitted his thesis and received the degree. When we confronted the recruiter with this tidbit of information, he shrugged off the concern, told us that the candidate was the best person for the job, and that we were finding fault over a technicality. We fired both the new hire and the recruiter.

ELAINE: (shaking her head sadly) That's the kind of story that makes pariahs out of recruiters.

MS. GREEN: Along the same line, I've had recruiters—and this happens all too frequently—submit job candidates who don't meet all of our required specifications. Not desired characteristics, mind you, required. One such recruiter submitted a so-called accountant for the position of cost accounting manager when the guy was nothing more than a glorified bookkeeper with hardly any real understanding of cost accounting at all. We picked that up within the first five minutes of interviewing him. Question is, why didn't the recruiter let us know the candidate never had any real accounting experience?

ELAINE: Unfortunately, I have to agree with you. Too many of the recruiters I know are lax in that regard. It has something to do with their intense focus on making commissions, I suppose.

MS. GREEN: All of us have to eat. But we don't have to cheat.

ELAINE: Well put...and it rhymes.

MS. GREEN: (laughing) Perhaps that should become the motto of all recruiters: we all have to eat, but we don't have to cheat. I like that one a lot. I think I'll get some signs made with that slogan and hang it on the walls of our interviewing offices.

ELAINE: I'll tuck that slogan away in my memory banks.

MS. GREEN: Another thing that bugs the hell out of me about recruiters is how some of them encourage job applicants to stretch the truth about their backgrounds. Just last month one of the interviewers working in my department told me about a job candidate she was interviewing for the position of compensation specialist. The applicant, a young lady was bright, focused, personable. She had exactly the right credentials and experience and seemed perfect for the job. But when we checked her employment record and compared it to her resume we found an immediate problem. She claimed to have worked four more months at her first job out of school than her employment record showed. When she was confronted with this she readily admitted her culpability. Apparently she took a job and immediately discovered it wasn't the right one for her. And was honest enough to include it in her background. When a recruiter saw the four-month job listed on her resume he blew off her honesty, told the woman the short job would look so terrible that she would be immediately out of the running for any position. Without saying so in so many words, his attitude suggested that she bury the job by extending her employment date with her first employer. She stupidly followed that tacit advice and as a result did not receive an offer from us although under any other circumstances we would have hired the woman. As for that recruiter, we wrote a letter to his boss about the incident.

ELAINE: What happened?

MS. GREEN: (shaking her head disgustedly) Just as you've probably gathered. Nothing.

ELAINE: He wasn't fired?

MS. GREEN: Oh, the recruiting agency manager wrote us back saying that the recruiter had been disciplined. But my guess is nothing happened, particularly if that recruiter was a high earner, and I suspect he was.

ELAINE: (nodding her head) That happens too often. Recruiting managers value above all else a recruiter who can produce. Many will invent all kinds of reasons to excuse unethical behavior.

MS. GREEN: I guess what really gets to me more than anything else are the lies recruiters tell you to get your business, and then twist themselves inside out to sell sub-par job applicants to you. It's as if they're operating in a jungle and anything goes.

ELAINE: I think you put your finger on something important. For many recruiters there are no standards to adhere to. Too often their bosses wink at deceptive recruiting practices, permitting them, even implicitly encouraging them, as long as their recruiters continue to get and fill job orders. And since there are no federal or state regulations, and recruiters don't have to be licensed, they're operating in a free environment that allows behavior that wouldn't be tolerated in other parts of the business community.

MS. GREEN: That's a mouthful, but I happen to agree with you. Although I hasten to add that not all recruiters engage in deceptive practices.

ELAINE: Agreed. Most don't.

MS. GREEN: Another thing that pisses me off about recruiters is how they scheme to get through gatekeepers⁹. I've had a couple of recruiters tell me in confidence that they routinely receive training in methods to get through gatekeepers, and those methods are based on deception. For example, telling secretaries that they're friends of the executives they're calling, when they're not. That sort of thing.

ELAINE: That's common in most businesses. Doesn't make any difference what you're selling—intangible services such as recruiting or tangible products. It's called telemarketing to sell something or make appointments.

MS. GREEN: I suppose, although the deceptive aspect of it irritates me. It speaks to the do-anything attitude to land a job order.

ELAINE: How about retained recruiters? Have you found their performance any better than contingency recruiters¹⁰?

MS. GREEN: Generally, yes. What I like most about them is we can rely on the confidentiality of their efforts. With contingency recruiters, you never know who is aware of the search since they tend to send resumes out everywhere.

ELAINE: Isn't that at least partially true because human relations people may ask more than one recruiting firm to help them locate job candidates?

MS. GREEN: That's true if you haven't been burned. But I have. I, for one, and I know there are many other human resource professionals like me, rely upon a relatively small handful of recruiting firms to conduct their searches, and we largely hand out assignments to one recruiting firm at a time, firms who have specific industry knowledge and whom we trust to find us good and reliable candidates.

ELAINE: I've been advocating that approach since I came into the business.

MS. GREEN: We also tend to specialize. For example, if we're looking for behind-the-scenes production people—in the entertainment business they're called line producers—we hand out assignments to two recruiting firms who know that market and are familiar with the demands of the jobs.

ELAINE: That's a smart way to operate. It assures a consistent quality of job candidates.

MS. GREEN: It's helped my company, that's for sure.

ELAINE: I'm going to ask you to switch hats for a moment and describe ways that client companies make it difficult for recruiters to do their jobs.

MS. GREEN: Hmmm, that's a refreshing perspective. Let's see.... Okay, here's one, and I've seen it all too frequently. I think HR professionals tend to seek Mr. or Ms. Perfect when we're filling jobs. We ask recruiters to find us the absolutely best person possible for an opening and give that recruiter a list of impossible-to-fill qualifications. We want somebody bright, focused, educated, alert, aggressive, contemplative, a team player, quick on her feet, considerate of others, warm, tough. The list goes on—all for twenty-five grand a year.

ELAINE: (chuckling) Many of those qualifications being entirely opposite and unlikely to reside in the same person.

MS. GREEN: Not only unlikely, try impossible. By the time we get through we've described a superwoman. Somebody who doesn't exist. If she did, she'd likely be queen of the world by now and all of us would be working for her.

ELAINE: I know exactly what you mean. A list of contradictory characteristics really puts the recruiter on the spot. If you'll excuse the expression, she doesn't know whether to shit or go blind.

MS. GREEN: (laughing) A similar problem occurs when we try to find job candidates who fit the profile of our chief executive.

ELAINE: A big mistake. What a company wants is employees with different skill sets.

MS. GREEN: Change that "wants" to "needs." We must have differing viewpoints to succeed. Not to mention employees whose interests and abilities lie in areas not allied with the top guy.

ELAINE: Anything else?

MS. GREEN: Isn't that enough?

Elaine's Diary

It's hard to believe, but recruiting is one of the few service professions that deals extensively with the public and has no minimum professional standards, no licensing requirements, no educational requirements, no universal code of behavior, no standard procedures, no common "bible." Which opens the door to inconsistent behavior if not outright deceptive practices. In such an environment, recruiting managers are apt to be more forgiving when subordinate recruiters continue to get and fill job orders anyway they can. That's tantamount to operating in a free environment that allows, even encourages, devious behavior not tolerated in other parts of the business community.

Therefore, a hiring company owes it to itself to rigorously check the background and qualifications of its job applicants before making offers, and *never* rely on recruiters alone to perform this most crucial task. After all, what's more important to the success of a company than its employees?

The natural tendency of recruiters is to sell job candidates, not find fault with them. So who's to blame if they overlook what to them might be considered some minor faults, but in the eyes of the hiring company would easily be classified detrimental?

Therefore, hiring companies need to err on the side of safety and check every important criterion about a job applicant before making an offer. Even when recruiters "verify" background information, such as education, job titles, employment dates, compensation, and achievements.

In my opinion, it's advisable for companies to rely upon a relatively small handful of recruiting firms to conduct their searches. It also makes sense to use recruiters who specialize. Some recruiters, for example, handle sales searches, others financial searches. Some specialize in high tech searches, others in service businesses. Each has developed the contacts within his area of specialization to locate the best candidates. That makes a lot of sense, since recruiters cannot be all things to all people (although they would have you believe differently).

Nothing defeats a company's purpose of hiring the best possible candidates more than broadcasting job openings to a variety of recruiters. Not only do companies lose control of the quality of job applicants that cross their thresholds, they also send a signal to the recruiting community that whoever gets in first with whatever candidate it has available will get the job order. That arrangement is almost guaranteed to produce an inferior stream of job candidates as recruiters hustle to beat their competition and get somebody—anybody—in for an interview. Everybody loses, particularly the hiring company.

Conversely, hiring companies should be careful not to make the recruiter's job so difficult that it's impossible to fill position openings. That occurs when hiring managers seek "perfect" job candidates, those who don't exist now and never will. Everybody has faults. Practicality should be the governing rule in the selection process.

A PRE-EMPLOYMENT CHECKER TALKS ABOUT CROOKED JOB CANDIDATES AND RECRUITERS

Getting pointed insights from both Mr. Blue and Ms. Green covered the spectrum of those people recruiters most frequently deal with. But how about those now ubiquitous pre-employment checkers, the firms that verify work backgrounds, academic histories, and credit standings of job applicants?

True, these investigators work mainly for companies conducting searches by checking job candidates' resumes and employment applications. Was it possible these practitioners might have some insight into how recruiters either abet the process of verification or steer job candidates in the direction of stretching the truth? Let's face it; we've all heard horror stories of cheaters, and those of us in the recruiting business get our noses rubbed it often enough, even when only guilty by association.

To uncover the extent of it, I contacted one of the HR executives I'd worked with and she put me in contact with one of the largest pre-employment checking firms in the Southeast, a company that had investigated the backgrounds of literally thousands of job applicants.

For purposes of this discussion, we'll call the pre-employment checker I talked with Mr. Verity.

ELAINE: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me. As I understand it, you have some insights into the recruiting process.

MR. VERITY: Please understand that any insights I offer deal with problems that crop up during my investigation of a job applicant's background and credentials.

ELAINE: Would you expand on that?

MR. VERITY: When employment dates or academic credentials of job applicants don't check out, company interviewers sometimes lay the blame on the recruiter's doorstep.

ELAINE: How so?

MR. VERITY: Many job applicants who get caught lying on their resumes or on application forms claim recruiters advised them to lie, and even went so far as to tell them how to do it.

ELAINE: Does that happen often?

MR. VERITY: A simple answer to your question is, I don't know. I suspect quite often, but I can't prove that with statistics. For purposes of discussion, let's assume it's a reasonably small percentage, say ten percent. And further assume a million jobs are filled in any given year—a number I don't consider excessive—that ten percent amounts to one hundred thousand resume liars. A staggering number. And, frankly, I believe that number is actually much higher.

ELAINE: In absolute numbers, it is staggering.

MR. VERITY: The problem is when a job applicant develops a fraudulent resume or lies on an employment application, then blames the recruiter for steering him in that direction, who knows if it's true? My personal experience leads me to believe that recruiters foolish enough to advise job candidates to lie don't put it in writing,

and they're smart enough to cover their tracks. To have what the politicians call plausible deniability.

ELAINE: Can you describe how recruiters abet resume liars?

MR. VERITY: There are dozens of dirty tricks liars use to enhance their resumes. Let's say a company needs a specialized engineer and those type of engineers are hard to find. The job may demand strict academic requirements, something not at all unusual in a technical profession. For example, a company wants a design engineer with a degree. Now, assume the recruiter has found an exceptionally qualified candidate, but the candidate doesn't have a degree. Making sure he's not overheard, the recruiter shows the engineer how to fake a degree.

ELAINE: Oh, you mean like getting a fake degree from a diploma mill?

MR. VERITY: (smiling) Nothing so crass. It's hard to get away with that blatant approach anymore. Not that it isn't tried. I uncover that kind of sham all the time.

ELAINE: (nodding) I imagine it's more commonplace than most people imagine. Particularly given that 100,000 figure.

MR. VERITY: It is commonplace and it's how I make my living, exposing such frauds.... Getting back to the engineer without a degree, the recruiter might advise him to research colleges and universities that have closed their doors. All the job candidate has to do is conduct a search on the Internet to find failed academic institutions. Or, if he's lazy, he can ask his local librarian to point him in the direction of sources that identify such institutions. He won't have to search far to find a defunct college he can claim awarded him a degree. And few company recruiters are going to go to the trouble of hunting down former college employees to verify the job candidate's diploma. In essence, the job candidate and recruiter have crossed the line from stretching the truth to outright fraud.

ELAINE: Is the process always that simple?

MR. VERITY: You'd be surprised. Of course, it takes some planning. Once the job candidate's found a defunct college, he needs to make sure to mention during a subsequent job interview that the college he graduated from is no longer in business. Chances are the interviewer will accept that information at face value, and if she doesn't, even the most cursory check will support the job candidate's claim that the college once existed but no longer does. At this stage many, if not most, HR interviewers will shrug their shoulders and abandon the verification process. Mission accomplished.

ELAINE: Do these fakers always get away with it?

MR. VERITY: Not if we do some checking. If I were a company HR interviewer and a job candidate told me his degree was from a defunct institution that's a red flag. I'd become automatically suspicious. Not that the candidate is necessarily telling a lie, but it

pays to check. It takes me about three or four hours of hard digging to uncover the truth in most cases.

ELAINE: What are some other typical scams?

MR. VERITY: (eyes rolling toward ceiling) There are so many we could go on like this for hours. For example, here's another cagey scheme. I caught one job applicant faking an undergraduate degree, and our HR client told me the clever way the devious job applicant had forged the college transcripts.

ELAINE: What did he do specifically?

MR. VERITY: Posing as an HR manager, the job candidate called the college where he wanted his phony degree to come from and asked to be sent a copy of the college's alumni newsletter. With that in hand he read every article until he found the name of one of its graduates about the same age as him. He called the college again claiming to be that graduate and asked for a copy of his transcript and had it sent to a mail drop. Once he received it, using tiny strips of paper, he covered the name of the person printed on the transcript along with his address and social security number and all his courses and grades. Then he copied the now blank transcript. The devious fellow had in his possession a realistic looking college transcript. Next, he typed in the blanks: his name, address, and social security number. Then he downloaded a copy of the college's degree courses online. From the catalog, he typed in the degree courses he wanted to display and, of course, didn't forget to give himself high grades. Finally, he ran a copy of the completed transcript.

ELAINE: A master confidence man at work.

MR. VERITY: As the saying goes, you ain't seen nothing yet. This guy was smart enough to realize that he needed the college's embossed seal on the transcript to give it an air of authenticity. Know how he accomplished that?

ELAINE: I'm almost afraid to ask.

MR. VERITY: (shaking his head in wonderment) According to what the job candidate eventually confessed to the police, he placed a Kennedy half-dollar coin face down on a flat surface, then laid the transcript on top of the coin. Using a hard surface such as the bottom of a spoon, he pressed down on the transcript along the outside edge of the coin until a raised image showed on the transcript. He rubbed enough on the middle of the coin to leave a blurred image on the transcript as if the college's embossing lever hadn't pressed down firmly enough, knowing that too strong an impression would reveal the seal was made by a coin.

ELAINE: I'm left breathless by this person's ingenuity.

MR. VERITY: This clever fellow told the HR manager that to save her the trouble of sending for his college record he had brought it with him to the interview.

ELAINE: How considerate of him.

MR. VERITY: He was betting that she wouldn't call the college because she had his transcript right in front of her. And she didn't. Instead she let us do it and that's when we exposed him.

ELAINE: What role did the recruiter play in this specific case?

MR. VERITY: The job candidate claimed his recruiter steered him to the Internet web site that contained instructions on how to cheat on a resume.

ELAINE: If it's true that the recruiter was involved, he should have been fired or prosecuted by the law. Was he?

MR. VERITY: The recruiter claimed he had nothing to do with the job candidate's cheating ways. Since there was no proof indicating otherwise, nothing was done. It came down to a matter of whose word you believed.

ELAINE: How prevalent is this type of cheating?

MR. VERITY: The real bad stuff, like faking college degrees and work experience? I've heard different numbers, ranging from ten to twenty percent. The other stuff, like stretching the truth about accomplishments, probably much higher, maybe as high as sixty percent. I can tell you this: since firms such as ours that check backgrounds and credentials have grown, the incidence of cheaters has declined.

ELAINE: That's a healthy trend.

MR. VERITY: True, but clever job applicants and those who aid and abet them, such as dishonest recruiters, are always finding new ways to beat the game. I suppose they always will.

ELAINE: It does seem so. Hopefully, there aren't many recruiters foolish enough to play this dangerous game.

Elaine's Diary

This is a scam that really and truly pisses me off. How can recruiters be so stupid as to help cheaters get their foot in the door? It almost always comes back and bites them in the ass. And sullies the reputation of their agencies and the other recruiters working there. They also risk lawsuits, criminal proceedings, certainly damage to their reputations. Which translates to loss of income for everybody involved.

What strikes me about this sordid business is the extent to which crooked job candidates go to wiggle their way into gainful employment. Some of the most ingenious methods, like using the Kennedy half-dollar coin to forge an embossed seal, stagger the imagination. Makes me wonder what we're coming to.

Here's the bottom line: when a job applicant cheats on his resume, hiring companies and their recruiting firms have the obligation to determine if the recruiter played any role in the fraud. If the recruiter did, he needs to be forced to face the consequences. Anything less only encourages him to repeat his performance.

The temptation to take the easy path attracts some recruiters, particularly when there's nobody looking over their shoulders. The kind of unbridled work environment most recruiters work in encourages deception. And every instance of recruiter malfeasance resonates throughout the entire industry, damaging the reputation of all recruiters, good and bad alike.

A MAJOR SURPRISE

I should explain that Dan and Charley expected me to continue selling warm bodies, and that the training assignment was unpaid additional work. So yours truly embarked on a marathon sixteen-hour-a-day work schedule that was enough to break the back of most recruiters. I devoted the first half of each day to obtaining job orders, the second half of the day on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to training. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, along with evenings and weekends, I interviewed job candidates.

As I'm sure you can tell by now, I was ambitious, focused, and appreciative to have been singled out for this extra duty; I put my heart and soul into the training assignment. My social life stank. I managed every now and then to grab a late evening cup of coffee at a Wendy's, but that was the extent of it.

This hectic schedule went on for a matter of weeks until Dan Blair unexpectedly called me at home early one Sunday evening. The tone of his voice was urgent; he wanted to see me right away. We arranged to meet secretly that same night at a small restaurant, the Café Roma, not far from my apartment.

The café, late in the evening, was one of those near-pitch-black places devoted to couples, with booths tucked in the back of the building, far away from prying eyes. We sat in of those booths.

"Sorry to take you away from home," Dan said as soon as we had seated ourselves and ordered a couple of spritzers. He looked around. "This place is perfect for a quiet conversation."

I smiled. The booth was so dark I had trouble discerning Dan's facial expressions; always a disadvantage when you're conversing with the big boss. "Got to admit, I'm curious."

"This conversation can't go any further than between you and me. Understand?"

"I do. You know I can keep my mouth shut."

Dan nodded. I had to squint to see it. He noticed and asked the waitress to bring over a table candle. She did and he lit it. "There, that's a little better."

"I'm all ears, Dan."

"You're more than that, Elaine. That brain of yours is always engaged in third gear. Don't think I haven't noticed. You don't miss much, do you?"

"How do you mean, Dan?"

He leaned forward and said in a clipped voice, "You and I will get on better if you don't try and bullshit me."

He had caught me by surprise; I didn't move. After a moment of silence I said, "Okay, cross my heart."

"Now that we got that out of the way.... You've done one hell of a job on the training assignment." He stopped and chuckled. "Got all the troops talking. A twenty-year-old-woman—"

"Twenty-one."

"I stand corrected. A twenty-one-year-old woman instructing some of those old dogs we have in how to recruit. I can just picture their faces." He guffawed, then glanced around to make sure nobody was watching him. "I don't have to tell you whatever you've done, and however you've done it, you're getting results. Billings are up in all of the Atlanta offices."

“Dan, I may be young, but I’m not naive. A lot of the increase is due to your telling the branch managers to follow my methods or else.”

“Nobody could ever accuse you of being naive, certainly not me. But I didn’t bring you here to discuss training. I’ve got something else in mind for you now. A fresh assignment.”

I sat back in the booth and held my breath.

“Charley’s getting to the stage where he wants to take an easier role, get out of the pressure cooker. We’ve had a few talks and I’ve decided to bring Charley aboard my personal staff to act as sort of an administrative assistant. He’s agreed to make the move.”

Knowing Charley I didn’t believe he would be happy about the new assignment, but what choice could he have had? I guessed that if he hadn’t accepted the administrative role, his other option would have been to file for unemployment.

“Elaine, I’m offering you the job. Think you can handle it?”

Despite the unusual late night appointment in an out of the way place, and despite Dan’s hinting at the subject before making the offer, I was caught unprepared and stunned. Branch manager at twenty-one! It was hard to believe.

“How will the others take it? Particularly Sam and Bernice?”

Dan shrugged. “They’ve got one choice. Either accept it or not. If they don’t and they give you trouble...well, the answer to that is quite obvious, isn’t it?”

“Sure.” I said that more confidently than I felt. Dan was examining me with one eyebrow raised as if to ask if supervising difficult people was beyond my ability, so I added, “I know how to handle that kind of problem, Dan...and any others that might come my way.”

He visibly relaxed then and told me what my new salary would be along with overrides and performance bonuses. I saw stars as if a boxer had landed one directly on my chin. I was so excited I thought I would burst. Somehow I managed to curb my wild enthusiasm and keep in character for an executive. Me, a branch manager! Fancy that.

***DIRTY TRICKS RECRUITERS PLAY
ON OTHER RECRUITERS***

I still had a week or two before I completed my training assignment so I decided to take another stab at unearthing raw opinions about recruiters, such as I had done with job applicant Mr. Blue, company executive Ms. Green, and employment checker Mr. Verity.

This time I wanted to find out what recruiters thought of other recruiters.

With Dan's permission I rented a banquet-sized room at a local Marriott and brought together all the new recruiters of the Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz Atlanta branches for a roundtable discussion. For purposes of concealing their identities, I arbitrarily assigned them different names that appropriately described their outstanding characteristics. I call them Mr. Anxious, Ms. Naive, Mr. Cynic, and Ms. Careful. We met on a Wednesday afternoon and I immediately hastened to assure the gathered recruiters that whatever they told me would remain confidential.

ELAINE: First let me assure you that nobody in Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz will ever hear anything that is said here today in confidence. You have my guarantee.

MS. CAREFUL: Just to make sure, let's not anybody call one another by name.

ELAINE: Good idea. We'll go with that.

MS. CAREFUL: Not that we doubt you, but how can we be sure this conversation will stay in this room?

MR. CYNIC: Yeah, recruiters aren't exactly known for their closed mouths. They carry tales from company to company.

MR. ANXIOUS: I know what you mean. They're worse gossips than purchasing agents.

MS. CAREFUL: Change that "they" to "we." Let us not forget, every one of us in this room is a recruiter.

MS. NAIVE: I was told when I became a recruiter that I had better keep my mouth shut when a job applicant or company executive talks to me in confidence.

MR. CYNIC: (snorting) And you believed it? Seems like every recruiter I know, other than you, doesn't.

ELAINE: You can either take my word or check with the managers who know me. Dan Blair for one or Charley Morgan, my boss at Northlake. (At the mention of Dan Blair's name, the group quieted.) Look, I've built my reputation in this company on a bedrock of integrity. Integrity with companies and recruiters, and anybody else I've dealt with.

MR. ANXIOUS: (eyes darting around) Why don't we get off this subject? (turning to Elaine) What else should we talk about?

ELAINE: I'm not really sure. Why don't you say anything that's on your mind regarding other recruiters.

MR. CYNIC: I don't like them. (Ms. Naive giggles nervously).

ELAINE: Why not?

MR. CYNIC: It's like working among a pack of hungry wolves. You never know who's going to tear your throat out to steal a job order.

ELAINE: You've had that happen to you already?

MR. CYNIC: (snorting) You haven't?

ELAINE: For purposes of objectivity I won't voice an opinion or enter into the discussion in any substantive way.

MR. CYNIC: Chicken, eh?

MS. CAREFUL: (turning to Mr. Cynic) Why don't you leave her alone? She's only doing her job.

MR. CYNIC: Okay, okay. Get off my back.

MS. NAIVE: I've got a subject we all know something about. Society meetings.

MR. ANXIOUS: You mean those monthly meetings we're told to go to where recruiters from all over town gather to talk about subjects common to them?

MR. CYNIC: You sound like something out of an advertising brochure. Yeah, that's what she means. You know, where nobody wants to really tell you anything for fear of giving away secrets to the competition.

MS. CAREFUL: My boss told me to keep my mouth shut and ears open at those meetings, learn what I can, but never give away anything.

MS. NAIVE: (giggling) Wow, it's like we had the same boss. Mine told me if I shoot my mouth off there, he'd fire me.

MR. CYNIC: That drives home my point about recruiters being a pack of wolves. Listen, I'm older than the rest of you, our hostess included, and I worked in a couple of other industries before trying my hand at recruiting. As part of my work I attended dinner meetings of two other association groups, one in industrial engineering, the other in quality control. I can tell you the recruiters group is unlike any of the others I mentioned.

ELAINE: How so?

MR. CYNIC: In other associations, members go out of their way to share information. In the recruiters' society we attend, members go out of their way to hide information. That's the primary difference.

MS. NAIVE: You know, you're right. The meetings I've attended have all been like that. Everybody's friendly on the surface but I sensed the jealousy and contempt not far underneath and it shocked me.

MR. CYNIC: (snapping his fingers) You put your hands right on it, kiddo. That's why you never feel quite comfortable at those gatherings. Like everybody's sizing you up, asking themselves the same question—Is this new recruiter going to rob me of a commission? Is he going to take the bread out of my children's mouths?

MS. CAREFUL: Look, this is the profession we work in. Why knock it?

MR. ANXIOUS: I can give you another example about recruiters. One stole a job candidate from me.

ELAINE: Tell us about it.

MR. ANXIOUS: It was my second job order, this one with a Memphis company making guitars. I had busted my hump to get it. You've all been there. Work your ass off getting the job order, then filling it with somebody hard to find that the company's willing to hire. Anyhow, I wasn't able to convince the guitar company to make it an exclusive. They did give me this, however: they opened it up to only one other recruiter, a company in Nashville...I don't have to tell you that finding job applicants with guitar manufacturing experience is like finding the proverbial needle in the haystack. But I was lucky enough to finally locate a really fine job candidate and mentioned the guy's name to the HR person I was dealing with at the guitar company. Well, she accidentally let the guy's name slip in a conversation with the Nashville recruiter. Before you know it the Nashville guy had the job applicant up for an interview. The guitar company gave him an offer and he accepted. The only question remaining was who was going to get the fee.... We went around and around with the guitar company and the Nashville recruiter, finally settled it by splitting the fee; half to the Nashville company, half to Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz. Which cut my commission in half. And we'll never get another job order from the guitar company again. Too much haggling.

ELAINE: Wow, that's quite a story. But I have to admit that stealing job candidates is not an unusual occurrence in this business.

MS. CAREFUL: I have a story to rival that. My former best friend in college, who now runs a recruiting firm in the Bay area, was in a life-and-death struggle with a competing recruiting firm for the business of one of the Bay area's top financial institutions. The competition really got vicious when the competing firm poisoned the well by mailing scam letters to the client company.

ELAINE: What kind of letters?

MS. CAREFUL: Letters sent out under the supposed signature of my lady friend recruiter to every manager in the client company stating that any client company manager giving the recruiting firm business would be entitled to a ten percent finder's fee. That kind of enticement is flat-out illegal. But my lady friend never sent out those letters. It could only have come from the competing recruiting firm. Not that she was ever able to prove it, of course. Regardless of her protests to the client company, it left a bad taste in their mouths, and both recruiting firms were banned from doing business with the client company.

ELAINE: Whew, that was really a dirty trick.

MR. CYNIC: My guess is that the recruiting profession is at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to ethics and morality.

ELAINE: It can be the poster child for the underbelly of capitalism. At least for those recruiters who have no standards of behavior.

MR. CYNIC: Let's not kid ourselves. All of us here have fought with other recruiters for job orders and the better job applicants. We've all done some underhanded things like stealing job candidates. Hell, there are damn few good enough job candidates to go around as it is. I'd venture to say none of us is lily pure. After all, we're all cut from the same cloth.

MS NAIVE: (scolding) That's an awful way to look at our profession.

MS. CAREFUL: I've learned to expect problems with other recruiters, both inside and outside our agency. That way I'll never be disappointed.

MR. CYNIC: Now you're talking. You've put your finger on it. We may be in the same profession, and working for the same company, but in the last analysis, each of us is an island.

Elaine's Diary

Regardless of whether you're a job applicant or a company hiring executive, remember that recruiters carry tales from company to company, from applicant to applicant, from recruiter to recruiter. They're often worse gossips than purchasing agents. So, if you have something you want kept confidential, take steps to keep that information from falling into the hands of recruiters, or anybody else in a position to spread tales.

The sole exception to this rule of recruiter babble occurs when recruiters hide information that might allow other recruiters to "steal" job leads or discover hot job applicants. Thus, the universally accepted but unwritten recruiting rule of keeping mum among competing recruiters. This difference is especially noticeable in recruiting association gatherings where, unlike most industry groups, members seemingly go out of their way to hide information from one another. The atmosphere at such meetings rivals CIA gatherings.

In fact, there are those who will argue that the recruiting industry is one of the most unethical going. The problem is a lack of self-imposed standards or mandated state licensing requirements. Recruiters operate in an unregulated environment that allows, even encourages, behavior not tolerated in other professions.

It is not probable, given the diverse nature of the recruiting industry that recruiting societies will be able to impose nationwide uniform codes of conduct. Therefore it falls to the states or federal government to impose realistic licensing requirements along with a legal arm to enforce those standards, thereby assuring a minimum level of acceptable behavior.

ELAINE SAYS GOODBYE AND GOOD LUCK

Well, that's it: the dirty rotten recruiter tricks I learned during my early period at Lahrs, Phibbers, and Cheetz. And quite a bag of tricks, isn't it?

I hope you've learned enough to keep from ever becoming a recruiter's victim, whether you're a job applicant seeking gainful work, or a company executive seeking to hire the best-qualified job candidates for your open positions.

As for me, four years after I was promoted to branch manager, Dan Blair, my boss, moved up to chief operating officer for the company in The Big Apple and took me with him as his special assistant. Five years after that, the guy Dan had promoted to take his place as Southern regional manager left to take the helm of a smaller recruiting company in Dallas. That left a vacancy. Dan moved me into that slot and I remained in it five years until Dan was promoted to chief executive officer. Guess who became the first woman chief operating officer of Lahrs, Phibbers & Cheetz? Yours truly. And I held that position for another five years until a heart attack struck Dan down. Within three days after his death the board promoted me to chief executive officer, where I remain today. Right on top of the heap.

No, to answer your unspoken question, I never married. Never felt it necessary or desirable. Neither did I want to have any children, especially after my teenage miscarriage. I simply never felt any biological urge for motherhood after that. Sure I have occasional boyfriends, but it never gets beyond the wham, bam, thank you, ma'am stage. My life is my job and I love it.

Well, that's about it. If you ever get to The Big Apple and want me to regale you with dirty rotten recruiting tricks I learned at the top, give me a call.

ENDNOTES

¹ My middle name Delanna is really a contraction of the Spanish word del, meaning *of*, and the name Anna. Which, for a hill girl is somewhat exotic since redneck names don't go in for all that fancy Spanish name shit. Makes me wonder if somewhere along the line mama didn't meet up with one of those hot Mexican dudes.

² Job order: recruiting industry vernacular for getting paid (often outrageous) fees to fill company positions.

³ Running a desk: the recruiter is responsible for obtaining job orders from companies and filling them with job candidates.

⁴ Cold calling: phoning unknown company hiring authorities to get job orders. Normally every recruiter is expected to develop his own job orders (see endnote #2 for a definition of job orders).

⁵ *The Book of Lists*: as mentioned previously, a listing of Atlanta companies and their contact information, published by the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*.

⁶ Human resources contacts: the organizational members most recruiters work with, particularly in larger companies where human resources has the assigned responsibility of locating suitable job candidates for open positions.

⁷ Override: the commissions recruiting managers receive for job orders filled by their subordinate recruiters.

⁸ Gosh, you haven't forgotten my name already, have you?

⁹ Gatekeepers: receptionists, personal secretaries. In general, employees assigned to keep recruiters, salesmen, consultants, stockbrokers, and others from bothering their bosses.

¹⁰ Contingency recruiters: retained recruiters generally are used by client companies on an exclusive basis to find upper level jobs where confidentiality is a must. Contingency recruiters usually find job applicants for lower level jobs. The quality of the latter searches varies wildly, although even retained recruiters are vulnerable to the same pressures that contingency recruiters face: producing results. At one time the primary difference between the two was that retained recruiters would be paid for the search, whether or not they filled positions. But that definition was misleading to begin with, since how long do you think companies will pay out hefty sums of money without getting results?

END