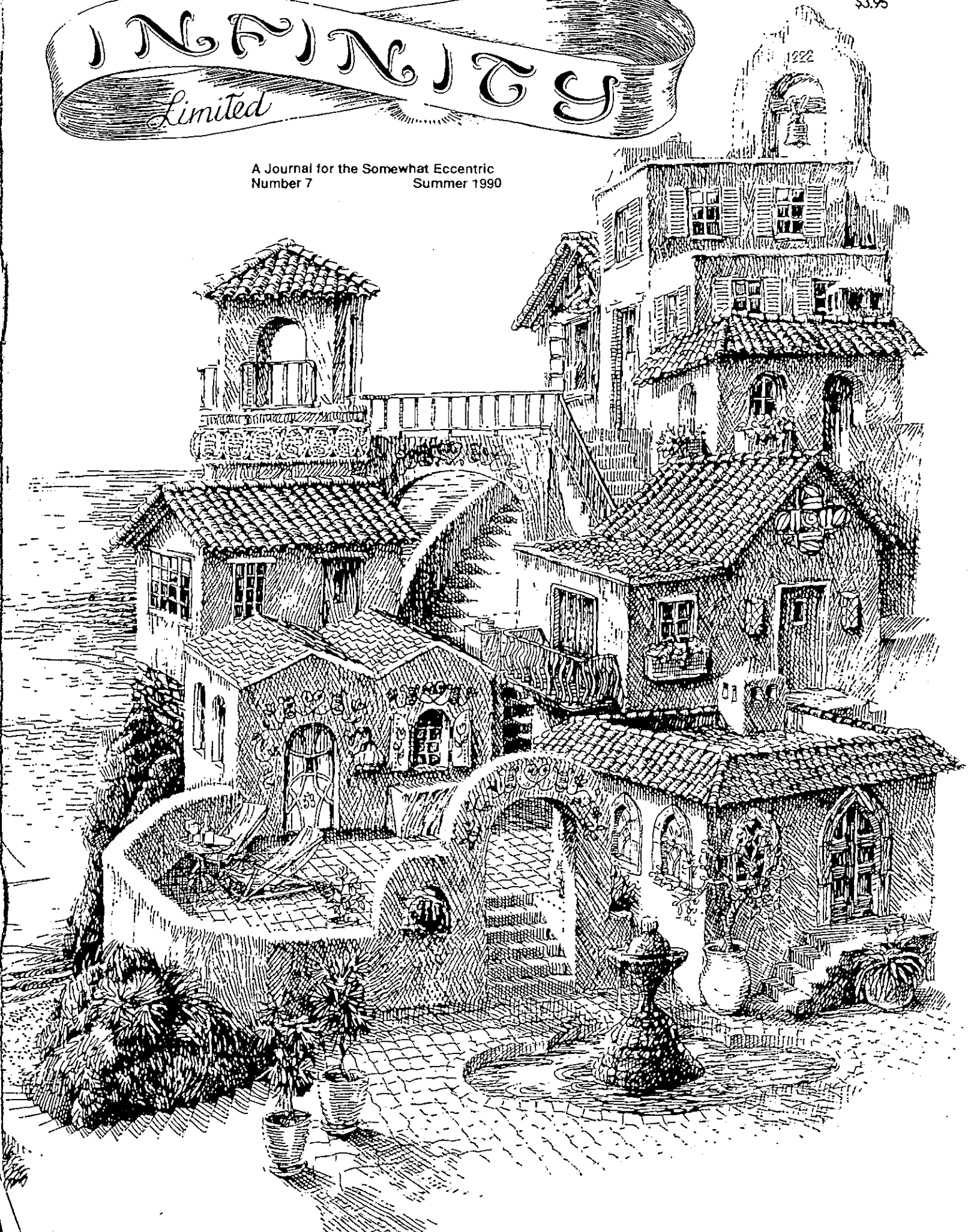


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We'll Get Back to You

by
Peter Bates

"James Walker," said the secretary.

Jim didn't respond. He was in the waiting room reading the brochure entitled *With Computrol You Take Control*, printed in kelly green with orange letters and a black border—the colors of a forest fire. "Excuse me? James Walker?" His head popped up. "She's ready to see you now, three doors down on the left. If you have any trouble finding her, just let me know."

He got up, glancing at the Art Deco mirror in back of the plant display. His three-piece suit was wrinkled and his eyes were so wide and snappy he looked like he'd been drinking coffee non-stop for days.

He found the room. "Hello," he said, shaking her hand, "you must be Marsha O'Brien." For a thin woman, she had an unexpectedly strong grip, the same handshake that vocational counselors taught him to use. She wore a small gold cross around her neck; her hair was short. A constant blinker, she was probably wearing contact lenses.

"Call me Marcie. I haven't heard the name Marsha, well, since *my* last job interview." She smiled without showing her teeth and he copied her. "And before that, high school. So, James or Jim?"

"Jim's fine," he said, sitting straight in his chair.

"I like nicknames. Why be formal all the time, right? Mr. This, Ms. That. If more of us relaxed, let our hair down at work, there'd be fewer problems. I'm sure of it! Right?"

"Right! I agree completely." They chatted briefly. A dog barked outside her window and she looked out and said, "My gosh, that sounds just like my Shar Pei, Worrywart. But of course, it couldn't be him, I never let him out! Well, tell me all about Jim Walker."

What could he tell Marcie about himself? He never liked talking about himself, especially since his two years at BTS Software had been so insignificant. When they laid him off, he had no idea how his wife Norelle would react. Would she cry, get angry, shrug it off, or maybe make a joke out of it? She did none of these things; instead, she scanned the paper for openings and, when they fell through, grilled all her friends and colleagues for leads. They had few to give, but that didn't stop her; she thought up other schemes, like buying three how-to-get-a-job books in one day. He was amazed at her energy, even thankful for it. It diverted her from the anxiety scaling his back like psoriasis.

He looked at Marcie's red fingernails, smiled, and told her about the software packages he'd tested and how he'd solved those two problems that had stumped his peers. Then he waited.

"I want to say that we're *very* impressed with your resume, especially since you've worked with technology similar to ours for *ten years*. Add to that your managing the Scylla Project . . ."

"Well, as I mentioned to you over the phone, we've

decided to forego the standard interviewing process. I'm sure human resources won't be too offended. And if they are, they'll just have to answer to me!" She smiled. "You'd be working on my team, you'll report directly to me. Let me tell you a little bit more about Computrol Systems."

"Excuse me. It was two years," he said. "As far as managing goes . . ."

"Beg pardon?" she said.

"I've only worked in this field for two years."

She took out the resume that Bartwell Recruiting had sent her and flipped to the second page. "Two years? It says here ten years."

"No, I . . ."

"A typo perhaps."

She pointed to the part that stated "1975-1985." He scanned the paragraph that claimed he'd managed the Scylla Project at his previous company, a bold fabrication. He'd never even seen a memo about the Scylla Project; few did, it was too hush-hush.

The headhunter had lied twice. He knew they sometimes fibbed, but he never thought this one would. She seemed so pleasant, naive even. She'd even boasted about her Beatles collection.

He read the whole resume to buy time. "Ah, I think I see what happened," he said. "Ms. Peterson must have misinterpreted what I told her."

"Peters," she said. "Carol Peters. I think." She looked in her Rolodex. "Yup, Carol J. Peters."

"You see," he said, "I have been working for ten years. When I mentioned that over the phone to Carol, she must have thought I said I'd been working in your *particular* field for ten years. That's not correct. I've only been two years in this technology . . ."

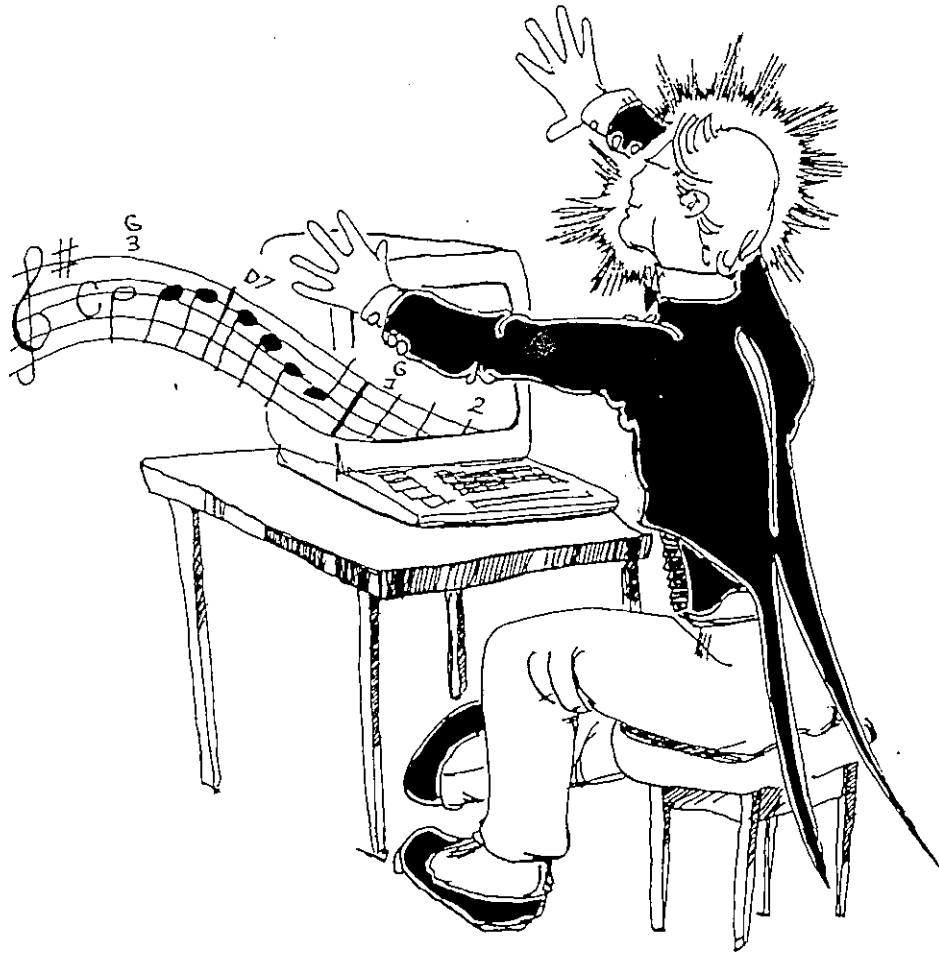
"I see. Well, things *can* get confused. These agencies juggle so many people around, no wonder some of them fall through the cracks." She cleared her throat and said, "Well, Jim, you also started to say something about the Scylla Project. Your involvement as manager . . ."

"Yes," he sighed. "I'm afraid that too needs qualification. My management began when I took over for the man in charge," he lied. "He was out on medical leave, so I held the fort for a good solid week—no, month! Seemed like a week. That was enough time to get my feet wet."

"Listen, you don't have to tell me that. I've seen a lot happen in a month. And not happen too. Two weeks ago, I was promised a new paperclip dispenser and do you think they've replaced it yet? Not on your life. Excuse me, please." She wrote something on a yellow stick-up pad.

"So tell me more about Computrol," said Jim.

"First, let me say we're a little concerned you might not have enough technical and managerial expertise for us. We're looking for someone who can supervise a full



load, oversee some of the younger employees, and still come up, fresh as a daisy, asking for more. Is that, uh, you think you could handle that?"

"Oh, no question. Yes."

He tried to maintain eye contact. He knew it was important, but always had trouble at first meetings. Whenever the stakes were highest, he got distracted, especially with women. As much as he tried not to, he stared at the blobs of Marcie's mascara.

"Jim, would you mind if I gave you a little test? I'd like to ask you a few questions that gauge how well you understand our operational environment. They're kind of general, without right or wrong answers, so relax. Okay?" She moved her hands together and apart, as if molding a lump of air. Her red fingernails flickered like garter snake tongues.

"No, certainly not. Fire away." His mouth got dry.

"Good. Don't you find tests a real challenge? Question number one: Which is more important in the life cycle of a product, timeliness or accuracy?"

"Timeliness or accuracy?" he repeated. "Timeliness or accuracy of what?"

"I'm sorry I can't be more specific; that's part of the test. It's whatever you perceive it to be. So don't be afraid to use your imagination. Think of it as a fun thing."

He needed a glass of water, but didn't think he should ask for it, so he replied, "It all depends, doesn't it?" He felt as if he were dangling his legs over an alligator pit. How long did she expect him to think between questions? Was this supposed to be an easy question or a hard one? His

throat tightened. He looked down at her and noticed she'd checked the "undecided" box—a bad sign. Nobody wants a wimp.

"The answer to your question: accuracy." He looked for a sign that he'd erred and when he saw her left eyebrow twitch, he coughed. "What do you think?"

"Don't ask me, I'm just a neutral examiner. I'm not supposed to know *anything*. So which is more important? Timeliness or accuracy?"

"Accuracy," he boomed in a confident voice. Perhaps there really was a single right answer. So if he got the first one right and the second one wrong, did that mean he got a fifty? Not good. He peeked down the page, feeling his neck stiffen.

"Question number two: Which is more important, being on top orrrr . . ." She drew out the word like a quiz show host and looked at him. Why? Some kind of interviewing trick? She continued: ". . . maintaining a strong market position?"

That was it. A trick question. Jim wasn't surprised, they lurked everywhere. Teachers mined tests with them, managers tripped employees with them, lovers pulled them on lovers. He remembered the first trick question he'd been asked: "Who are the five presidents on Mount Rushmore?" His heart beat faster.

"I say go with a strong market position, because you're advancing, but not too fast. There's still room for growth." He paused, but she gave no reaction, not a quiver -- she just wrote his answer down. Had he responded too impulsively? The thought sank in his stomach like a cold stone. He hated

what came next.

We'll get back to you. He knew what *that* meant: more interviews. He wondered how long he could keep up this level of smiley chit-chat. He'd gotten used to it by now, but had it done any good? He was an ex-librarian, a burned-out social worker, a would-be doctor, and a defrocked altarboy. Back in college, the Young Democrats had asked him to leave, and when he was single, girlfriends were always telling him they needed space.

"Is that . . ." he said, "uh, is that Computrol's direction?" His eyes were stinging, but why? The lights? The air conditioning?

"Oh, I can't tell you that. Classified information! My boss would *shoot* me!" She smiled, while he imagined her standing blindfolded in front of the company firing squad, dressed in her beige suit, smoking a Virginia Slims. "Besides, there are no real yes or no answers, remember? By the way, take your time with these. We're in no hurry," she said, leaning back. She folded her arms and glanced at her Casio.

Was this her last question coming up, or were there five more? Ten more? How would he handle ten more? While she marked down his reply, Jim thought of the crackerjack problem solver he'd seen recently. A VP—on local news—squelched rumors of a takeover with one of his own: His company was going to take over them. A cartoon he had designed flashed on the screen, an eagle taking a smaller bird ("Uno Who") under its wing. Now this man had solved a problem, a nice meaty problem cut from the bone of daily life. How would he answer Marcie's questions?

"Number three . . ."

Somebody knocked and Marcie got up and cracked the door. She smiled and said she was in an interview, but the voice—sounded like a man—told her to check her electronic mail. She said "later," the voice mumbled back, and she nodded. She returned to her desk, excused herself, and typed a few strokes. After staring at the screen, she got up and left without a word.

Jim sat in his chair for a few seconds, not sure what to do. Maybe he should get up and peek at the test. Why not? What could he lose? If he were fast, he could find question number three; lucky, perhaps even the answer. The door was almost closed. She'd rushed out so quickly she wouldn't remember closing it, so he did.

He found the question in two seconds—"What is your idea of the ideal company?"—and scrambled through the folder for the answer. He found it at the back of the folder under "Standard Response Profiles," but just when he started reading it the computer beeped.

He glanced at the screen, which displayed the message "You have mail," and closed the folder. Even though the "you" didn't refer to him, he drew closer to the keyboard. But wouldn't it be like opening one of her letters? Nobody would know the difference. The argument *was* seductive, but he didn't think he had enough time; besides, he still had to paw through the test folder. He started to get up, but didn't make it to a full stand. He sat back down again and played with the keys. After tapping up a few blind alleys, he brought up the mail.

Msg from kcory: Not surprising, is it?

Interesting. Probably somebody's response to the previous message. He typed faster, trying different combina-

tions to display whatever might have sent Marcie scurrying out. When he found it, he read it. Twice.

There once was a man named I. M. Timorous who never left his house. He always stayed indoors, thinking that if he went outside, he'd get hit by a car or a tree would fall on his head. Then one day a radio talk show called him and asked him how many clouds there were in the sky. A simple enough question, but Mr. Timorous didn't know. He quickly got up and took a look outside. When he came back in, he picked up the phone and said, "Not a one. Completely clear."

"Mr. Timorous," said the announcer, "you are absolutely right! You have just won five thousand dollars!"

From that day on, Mr. Timorous got out into the world and exercised his initiative. It has certainly paid off. Today, he now has a well-paying job at Computrol, leader among the information technologies.

What a curious little story, he thought, as he resumed his seat. The doorknob turned and Marcie entered with a large—but not really fat—man. He wore a blue-striped suit and a tie that looked like it was cut from a floral swatch of fine upholstery.

"Well, congratulations!" said Marcie.

"Not bad," said the man, holding an old-fashioned racing stopwatch. "Three minutes and thirty-seven seconds! Not bad at all."

"Mr. Bartolo, this is Jim Walker. Mr. Bartolo is the head of Human Services."

Jim stood up and smiled quizzically. "Why, uh, why are you congratulating me?"

"You passed the test!" said Mr. Bartolo. He took out a pack of spearmint gum and peeled a slice. "And with flying colors, too. Piece of gum?"

"No thanks. I passed? I really didn't think I was doing that well."

"Not doing that well?" Bartolo turned to Marcie and flashed a rubbery grimace—a smirk mixed with a hasty wink, poorly executed, but earnest. "Come on now! You cracked our electronic mail system in three minutes. Why, it took me a lot longer than that my first day."

"Three hours was more like it," said Marcie, grinning like her team had just won the big game.

"Well, we all have our little problems with technology now and then. I guess I should speak for myself. Our new hire certainly doesn't seem to." He smiled and chewed his gum with his mouth open, sloshing it against his cheeks.

New hire, thought Jim. They're actually hiring me on the spot. Suddenly he thought of all the restaurants he and Norelle hadn't been to yet. Repairs, he could repair the bathroom.

"Well sir, next thing I want to do is take you to my office, start putting the paperwork through. Then we'll give you your introductory packet, a quick tour of the facilities, and sign you up for orientation classes. I assume the rate we advertised is commensurate with your requirements?" Jim nodded. "Good. Now one thing we both want to ask you. When you were poking around our mail system, did you see any way we might be able to improve security? You know, a tweak here and there to make it a little harder to get into?" ∞