

YL short story competition

The interview

I wish I hadn't said that. Just when I thought the torture was ending and I had scraped through with my life and dignity, a few choice words had me begging for a swift, merciful end. It had begun only moments ago . . .



I stood at the threshold, hand braced on the doorknob. The overwhelming realisation hit me that my fate was about to be decided in that room. Would I be a failure or a success? My heart pounded through my chest and somehow made its way to my throat. I couldn't swallow, I couldn't even breathe. My lips chapped dry while the moisture went to my slick palms. I ran my free hand through my hair, forgetting I had spent half an hour carefully making sure it looked unkempt in just the right way. Brad Pitt style.

The jitters that had started at my feet were making their way up my body. My knees began knocking together almost rhythmically like a pair of bongos. I wasn't sure if I had the coordination any more to open the door.

I took a slow deep breath to steady myself. Wasn't I a grown-up? Hadn't I practised and trained for years to build up to this moment? Hadn't I got through pimples, shaving and shaving with pimples (relatively) unscathed? I could do this!

So in I went.

There they were – the Panel. A middle-aged man rose and strode forward, buttoning his jacket to hide his paunch. This was clearly the jacket's only purpose for being and, despite a valiant effort, it was failing miserably. The man's glasses slid down his nose as he scrutinised me up and down. Then he held out his hand.

The Handshake. A deluge of interview preparation "advice" flooded through my head. Be firm but don't squeeze too hard. One shake meant let's get down to business. Two was a little friendlier. More than that and you're the food the lions want to play with before going for the jugular.

He shook my hand, then kept shaking and practically led me into a chair. Oh God! I swallowed the tennis ball lump in my throat and adjusted my collar (trying to hide my jugular, I guess).

The moment I sat down, the next test made my body freeze ramrod straight. The Posture! To cross my legs or uncross them? To hold my hands together or on the sides? Luckily my momentary paralysis had left both my feet on the floor, slightly apart. My hands were on the armrests, gripping them for support. I remember this stance means "open and confident".

He offers me a drink and I practically lunge for the glass of water, hoping it will calm my nerves. I take deep breaths but remember too late that it's not physically possible to breathe and drink at the same time. I go into a (mostly) silent coughing fit and the tears have welled up in my eyes before I can make it stop. I clear my throat so I wouldn't sound like a bleating lamb when I finally spoke.

Then the Questions began. The lady asked me first.

"So, tell us your background," she says.

I hate this question. Why do they insist on asking this? Where is one expected to start? At uni? At birth?

winner

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She understands my momentary hesitation and clarifies, "What made you want to be a lawyer?"

Honestly, I thought I would become Tom Cruise and hammer Jack Nicholson into submission while Demi Moore watched on in awe. Instead, I was rudely thrust into a world of paper-shuffling and myopia. Suddenly, I'm fighting the urge to yell to the Panel, "You can't handle the truth!". I give them the same answer I've given before to the same question.

Then another popular question: where do you see yourself in [insert some random number] years time? What do they expect you to say? Truthfully, I will have a better job because a career these days is done in three-year intervals. I will have travelled the world on the amount I've saved by still living at home. And I will have over five hundred friends online but will have only met about half of them. Instead, I give her another generic answer.

Then silence. Awkward silence. They have perfected the art of the poker face over the years and, secretly, I think they get a kick out of torturing us poor unfortunate souls. My hands are still shaking like autumn leaves and the jitters have returned in my toes.

I think the man notices my discomfort and gives me a look that clearly says he remembers being in my position and sympathises with me. It makes him seem a little more human and a little less carnivorous.

He asks me how my exams are going and I finally begin to relax. I only need to pass my client interview practical tomorrow to get through the semester and everyone knows it's a soft subject.

"The exam is pretty predictable," I tell him. "There's no point going to the tutes because the examiner just cycles through the same scenarios each year and we just spit out last year's answers."

The smile on the man's face is encouraging, so I decide to continue, "And the funniest part is that we call the examiner Eli the Elephant because he doesn't even remember or realise what we're doing."

The man is obviously amused, rolling around a little as he laughs. I smile for the first time, proud of myself at how well this was going. Not many people could say they managed to entertain the Panel.

A gorgeous girl in a tantalisingly short sundress steps into the room. "Hi. How is everything going?" she asks in her musical voice.

The man and woman smile at their daughter. "Good, sweetheart." says he. "Thanks for finally introducing us to your new boyfriend."

The girl's bright smile falters a little in confusion. "Actually, I thought you two had met before. I mean, Daddy does the tutes and exams for the client interview subject, so you were bound to have run into each other."

My heart stops. I think I'm clinically dead. All my bones have evaporated and the rest of me has turned into organic slush, slowly oozing towards the ground.

As the man looks over at me, I can now see the flash of steel fangs in that smile. The hairs on his neck stand up as if electrified and before my eyes, the elephant has morphed into the blood-thirsty lion.

Oh yes, I really wish I hadn't said that.

SHINASA WASIMI is a lawyer with Corrs Chambers Westgarth.