

One: The Perfect Fit

1999 was the wrong year to be out of work in San Francisco. The economy was blasting into orbit on the twin rockets of Internet technology and optimism; every idiot who could turn on a computer and print a business plan was becoming a millionaire. If these tech-astronauts hadn't already cashed out and parked the private jet in the hangar, they had millions worth of stock options that made them feel just as secure and smug. I went to booze-soaked website launch parties and listened to college drop-outs brag about how much money they had *lost* that day as they chased pharmaceutical grade ecstasy with Grey Goose vodka. The city had become similar to Washington, D.C. in that you couldn't talk to anyone for more than five seconds before they asked what you did for a living; more specifically, they wanted to know if a business plan handed to you had any chance of finding its way to venture capital. When I told people I was unemployed, you could see the lights go out. Standing alone at the bar with a bottle of Budweiser, I felt like the prospector digging for emeralds during the gold rush.

While I had fled to San Francisco to escape the fall-out from a particularly nasty break-up in Denver, my little brother Stevie and our roommate Chase had come for their share of the tech-action. San Francisco had been built by guys like them: 49'ers with picks and pans, hippies in the Haight during the 60's, wannabe tech millionaires in the late 90's. They showed up with the idea that success was as much a matter of osmosis as hard work.

The three of us couldn't even find a place to live.

After two months of fruitless searching for a rental amid the swarms of other new hopefuls, we came to the conclusion that the only way we were going to secure an apartment was if we made up jobs for ourselves—occupations that would set us apart from all the other prospective tenants willing to pay thousands of bucks a month for the privilege of residing in the tech boomtown. We decided that we'd all be employees of my brother's nascent company, Sharkattack.com. Stevie was president, I was VP and Chase was the CFO. Stevie, being the only guy with any actual interest in Sharkattack.com, had thin business cards printed up at Kinko's. We started wearing our interview suits to open houses we found on Craigslist, our ties loosened as if we'd just come from long negotiating sessions instead of four-dollar buffet-line turkey sandwiches. Chase would call Stevie's mobile on the sly, and when it began to ring my brother would hold up one finger and pretend to take a business call. I didn't have a cell, so I couldn't play along. The landlords saw right through our charade. I mean, who wore a *suit* to work anymore?

We finally found a place in the Richmond. The Richmond District was the last resort for renters. Closer to the Pacific Ocean than to the Transamerica Pyramid building, this forty-by-forty block of neighborhood on the foggy side of Golden Gate Park was inhabited mostly by non-English speaking Russians and Chinese. Every building was a drab-colored three-story affair with sun-faded newspapers and take-out fliers littering the stoops. The area was strictly residential, and nobody was having launch parties out that far. But after several weeks of searching and wearing out our welcomes on friends' couches, a landlord finally called to say he'd rent to us. Even after he cashed our \$5,000 deposit check, we still thought it was a joke. In our anxiousness to have an apartment, we hardly

noticed that, despite the monthly rent of \$3,000, to get to the third bedroom, we had to walk through all the others. It was a “railroad flat”, which nearly all the apartments out there were, with the kitchen, bathroom, and living areas all laid out in a straight line. On our first night as official S.F. residents we moved the backseat of Stevie’s SUV into the living room to serve as our temporary couch, and divvied up the rooms. Stevie needed the big one because he was going to be working his start-up from home and required space for his command center. Chase and I Rock-Paper-Scissor’d for the room with a closet, and I lost. But I graciously accepted defeat, thinking my brother was positioned to strike-it dot.com rich, and we’d soon be cooling our heels in a glassy downtown condo. I moved into the tiny cubicle in the back. At twenty-six years old, I didn’t even have a door to my bedroom.

Stevie took the first week after we moved in to set up his office. He had a Bezos desk (named after Amazon.com’s Jeff Bezos, whose first office was, according to start-up legend, an old door resting on two sawhorses in his garage) laden with his computer, Lee Iacocca’s autobiography, a telephone, and maps of the country thumb tacked to the wall. Thusly organized, he sat down and waited for the money to roll in. As far as I could tell, his days consisted of talking on the phone with his girlfriend, re-writing his business plan, and playing Atomic Cannon on his computer. According to Stevie’s numbers, Sharkattack.com had something like a \$430 million market cap. His idea was to sell interactive advertising space on the side of big rig trucks. While cruising on the interstate, a driver would spot the Sharkattack.com advert on the side of an 18-wheeler, call the 800-number listed, answer a quiz question, and somehow Stevie would get paid. I never really did understand how it

was all supposed to work, or even why he had to have “.com” on the end of the company name. Apparently all the investors Stevie had pitched didn’t get it either, and four months into the game Sharkattack.com hadn’t earned a dime.

A couple weeks in town had infected me with the same get-rich-quick fever that had everyone else in the Bay Area running a temperature. I could see the dot.com era flashing past me like a stolen Porsche with hundred dollar bills floating out of the sunroof. Before arriving in S.F., I’d been under the impression that the whole thing was a giant nerd revolution, and that in order to get in you had to have a computer science degree and pants three inches too short in the legs. The reality was that the great bubble was taking all comers—frat boys, farmers, and phrenologists alike. Put “.com” at the end of anything and you were on the road to riches. I had never thought of myself as particularly greedy, but I knew that if I didn’t make a jump for the loot while the money was still stupid, I might not get another easy chance to become a tycoon for a long time. I had complete faith in Stevie’s company, but I felt we ought to spread the family talent around. Besides, I was starting to go stir-crazy in that apartment of ours. I figured that if I could just get in on the ground floor of any of the thousands of Internet enterprises springing up around town, I would be financially set for life. So I called a temp agency.

I dressed in what I thought passed for business casual and caught the bus downtown with my brother’s briefcase in hand. There was nothing in the attaché besides my three paragraph resume and the *Cannonball Run* videotape I’d forgotten to return to Blockbuster before my appointment. I realized my outfit wasn’t right the moment I got off the bus at Market Street. I was wearing tan slacks and a tweed sport jacket that

might have passed muster in Denver, but in downtown San Fran it made me look like a door-to-door magazine salesman. Guys my age in \$2,000 Armani suits pushed through thick glass doors while chatting with lovely women in tight skirts. E-commerce millionaires in blue button-down shirts, chinos and black leather jackets made plans for lunch on their cell phones. Advertising hipsters in Fred Siegel jeans and artfully messy haircuts slipped into the backseats of sleek black Town Cars. Big Ideas seems to float in captions above their heads. I may as well have been squeezing an accordion with a dancing monkey.

The Perfect Fit's waiting room was decorated with fake plants, reproductions of classic paintings, and inspirational posters. Several bulletin boards displayed minimum-wage increase memos and company picnic snapshots. The chairs looked as though they'd been borrowed from a cheap shrink's waiting room. One other sorry unemployed person hunkered down in the far corner. This prospective temp was a woman about my age wearing a pantsuit almost as outré as my sport jacket. She balanced a clipboard on her lap while chewing the end of a pen. I stepped up to the reception desk. The last time I'd felt like such a loser in a waiting room was back in college when I'd gone to Student Health thinking I had the clap. But this was worse, because at least copping to VD indicated you were getting laid. Another big problem with being unemployed in 1999 was that all the women who weren't Internet millionaires themselves had become accustomed to \$300 champagne dinners at Le Colonial and riding in BMW M3s. Anything less and they weren't going to put out, so my offers of Applebee's and bus fare certainly weren't cutting it.

"Good morning!" the receptionist called out in a startlingly

chipper voice. I guess you've got to be upbeat when faced with a bunch of depressed, out-of-work fucko-s like me coming through the door. Just like at Student Health, there was a bowl of lollipops on the front desk.

The receptionist handed me a sheaf of forms and advised me to take a seat. I brushed aside a partially-deflated bouquet of helium balloons, and picked a chair as far away from the other applicant as possible—desperation needs its space. By the time I'd completed the packet I had taken off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves. I handed the clipboard back to the receptionist and flipped through a *Red Herring* magazine with a cover story about an eighteen-year-old tech wizard. In the accompanying photo the punk was behind the wheel of his orange Ferrari, grinning like he'd just figured out how to jerk off. His contribution to humanity was an online method of (illegally) "sharing" episodes of *Air Wolf* and *Dr. Who*. I was halfway through the article when a cherubic woman of about thirty-five stepped into the waiting room and mispronounced my name. This was Clarissa. She led me back to her office. Clarissa scanned my documents, occasionally marking something in the margin with a pencil bearing a Smurf eraser.

"What kind of work are you looking for?" she asked finally.

"I want to do something interesting," I explained.

"Interesting?"

"You know, like do you have any jobs chasing hookers out of yacht clubs or blowing up garbage cans? Maybe something that calls for riding a scooter around an office all day and

getting a lot of stock options?” Clarissa cocked her head and stared at me for two seconds before she figured out I had made a funny and laughed. I was sweating and hoped like hell that my deodorant would last through the interview.

“I’ll be straight with you,” she said. “I’ve got plenty of temp jobs, but I don’t think any of them qualify as ‘interesting.’” She used her chubby fingers to make quote marks in the air.

“Perhaps I misstated my position,” I said. “I want—need to have—a job. Seriously, I just need to get my foot in the door somewhere. I figure I can work my way up from there.”

Clarissa said she understood, but the bottom line was that she didn’t want to put me in an opening where I was going to get bored after one day and quit.

“I get new postings in every morning,” she assured me. “I’m going to keep my eyes peeled for something—how shall we say?—*unusual*. Like I said, I could start you filing at a law firm tomorrow but you’d hate it. So trust me here. I’m sure I’ll have something for you by EOW.”

I raised my hand. “Eee-oh-double-u?”

Clarissa raised an eyebrow, “End of week. Trust me here, I’ll find something for you. It may not involve hookers or yacht clubs or being a batboy for the Giants, but it won’t be filing or data entry. I promise you that. So go home and enjoy the afternoon. Okay?”

I reached across the desk to shake Clarissa’s hand.

“Honestly,” she said, “I wish we had more open-minded candidates like you. It’s so much more fun!”

I walked out of her cubicle and grabbed a lollipop off the receptionist’s desk. I was no longer unemployed. I was a candidate.

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Clarissa called the next afternoon. I got the message after returning to the house from Sam the Sandwich Man’s, where I’d picked up hot pastramis for Stevie and myself. The sandwiches cost \$2.50 apiece. Top Ramen with a can of cooked chicken was on the menu for dinner. Stevie had taken three bites out of his sandwich before he remembered to give me Clarissa’s message. I put down my pastrami and dialed The Perfect Fit.

“Oh,” Clarissa said, her voice heavy with regret, “I just gave it to somebody else.”

“Gave what?” I asked.

“The job. I just got off the phone with the other candidate.”

I asked for clarification. She told me that she had found a prime gig at a leather goods warehouse, no filing or data entry involved. Apparently in the ten minutes it had taken for me to hit the sandwich shop and come home, some other go-getter had snagged what I envisioned to be a cushy, teamster-type job. I glared at Stevie. If not for him I’d be getting ready to drive a forklift and get discounts on motorcycle jackets. Clarissa assured me she’d come up with something else, but I was feeling crushed about the leather gig. It wasn’t a start-up and there

was no mention of stock options, but it sounded pretty sweet for starters. I contemplated having Stevie hold all my calls for the rest of the afternoon so I could walk to the Blarney Stone and drink Irish Car Bombs until I passed out.

Clarissa called back when I was almost out the front door.

“Okay,” she said, “this definitely counts as unique.” The job required running a few errands for a wealthy matron, who was holed up in a mansion in Pacific Heights. There was a 10 a.m. reporting time with a 6 p.m. quitting time.

“And they’ll provide lunch.” I could tell she was reading the posting off a sheet on her desk. “Mrs. Phelan specified that she wanted someone intelligent that she could have a conversation with and that they be...” Clarissa trailed off. “Hmm...”

“Mrs. Felon?” I asked.

“Mrs. *Feel-an*,” Clarissa said, getting back on track.

“Do I have to screw her?” I asked.

“What?”

“It sounds like a gigolo thing.”

Clarissa laughed. “Thirteen bucks an hour and it’ll be a one or two day assignment. By the time you’re finished with that I’m sure I’ll have something good for you. What do you think? Sounds great, right?”

I was in no position to argue.

Two: The Temp Gig

Pacific Heights is San Francisco's premier neighborhood, a ridge of red brick mansions commanding an unobstructed view of Golden Gate Bridge and the bay. The lawns were perfectly groomed squares that looked as though they had been vacuumed instead of mowed. But as I walked the clean sidewalk looking for the address, I realized that the true value of this exclusive neighborhood was the abundance of parking spots. Only after a few months in San Francisco could I make that connection; every other neighborhood had you circling in three-block radiuses five or six times before you found a place for your car. If you scored a spot near your apartment, you came up with lots of reasons to leave it parked. Even the posted parking signs in the Pac heights were snooty, boasting a three hour limit as opposed to the lowly two hours every other neighborhood in the city was granted.

I checked street numbers until I found myself standing in front of the house. Unlike its imposing neighbors, which were tall and columned, it was an elegant Cape Cod, complete with white-washed window shutters, and was covered with ivy. The house had an eight-foot wall in front, which separated the entrance and lawn from the street. It looked as if it really belonged along the beach in Malibu, not parked up high in the San Francisco fog. It certainly didn't appear grandiose enough to warrant a house manager, whose name I had on my scrap of paper. I reached to ring the doorbell when I saw a small brass plaque with the inscription *Please Take All Deliveries to Side*

Door. I went ahead and punched the bell. A voice came over the intercom a couple of seconds later.

“Hello?”

“This is Tony.” I paused before adding, “From the temp agency.”

“Okay.”

A buzzer sounded and the door clicked open. I walked through to a small courtyard and took a neatly manicured walkway up to the front door. It was wide open. Standing in the foyer with her back to me was a young woman in pink stretch pants, a short black leather jacket, and expensive-looking pink mules. Blonde hair fell to just below her shoulders, and a violet g-string peeked over the waist of her pants. The woman was talking to herself as two movers in white coveralls tried to keep their balance and grip on a walnut chest of drawers.

“We could put it right over there,” the woman mused.

“Pictures, a couple vases. Flowers. That’s not a problem.”

The movers were popping sweat as the woman tapped her toe on a dark Persian carpet and continued to scout potential locations for the heavy chest. Beyond the front door, I could see a wide, curving staircase led upstairs. Off to my right was an elegant dining room table set for ten. The antiqued living room to my left was filled with several chairs that didn’t look as if they’d ever been sat in. Downtempo samba music wafted out of unseen speakers. One of the movers noticed me standing in the open doorway and the woman pirouetted. Her

bright smile faded ten watts. She'd obviously been expecting someone else.

"I'm from the temp agency," I explained. "Are you..." I looked down at the piece of paper in my hand, "... Linda?"

"She's downstairs," the woman said. "Go through the kitchen."

I wiped my feet on the doormat. The movers shuffled to the side to let me pass. I walked down a short hallway and came upon half a dozen people standing around the kitchen's marble-topped cooking island, eating. Forks paused halfway to mouths at my sudden appearance.

"I'm looking for Linda," I said.

A forty-ish woman wearing a velvety tracksuit and a blue blazer asked if I was from the Perfect Fit.

I confirmed that I was.

"Right," she said. "Come with me." She picked up her plate, which was heaped with cucumber salad, and went through a doorway off the kitchen. I followed.

We descended a flight of stairs to a gleaming laundry room and pantry, which was about the same size as my entire apartment. We turned off the pantry and into a spacious office. The white shag carpet was so deep that I could feel it dragging on my shoes. Without further conversation, the woman, who I assumed must have been Linda, handed me a typed list that took up two pages. She retrieved an envelope from a heavy blonde wood desk drawer that slid out on silent castors. I looked inside the envelope. There were three hundred-dollar bills.

I gave her a questioning look.

“I need you to take care of this list by the end of the day,” Linda said, glancing back at her plate. “You know the city pretty well?”

I lied and said that I did. She walked me back through the laundry room, down a corridor lined with cabinets which matched the blonde desk, and out to a separate entrance. She opened the door for me. I paused for a moment to see if she was going to give me any further clue as to what was expected of me.

All she said was, “Hurry.”

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