



## The Job Interview That Went Up in Flames

**Sometimes job interviews go well; other times they can blow up in your face.**

By Daniel Baitch

It was early Spring, 1982. I was fresh meat for a hiring manager, with a shiny new Bachelor's degree and a resume typed on the best typewriter I could get my hands on – an IBM Selectric. The address the recruiter had given me matched the number on the little yellow house. I was confused; I was expecting an office building.

I re-read the job ad I'd torn out from the Baltimore Sun: *"Looking for young, ambitious entrepreneurs: Market a new safety device on your own time. Unlimited income potential."* I was wearing my grey pinstripe suit; my black wingtip shoes were militarily polished. With a leather binder under my arm, I walked up the cracked front steps and rang the bell.

A short, grumpy-looking old man opened the door, wearing slippers and a bathrobe over grey pajamas. He didn't say anything -- just looked at me, squinting from the light. With his scraggly white hair, dark circles under his eyes, stubby beard and blank expression, he looked like he'd just been woken from a coma.

*"Sorry to bother you...I was told to go to this address for an interview. Am I at the right place?"* I asked. He motioned for me to come in. I opened the screen door and followed him down a creaky stairway to a dark, damp, moldy garage; it was full of old tools, paint cans and rusty auto parts. Beneath a bare light bulb was a wooden stool, on which sat a big old carpet bag – the kind that traveling salesmen used to carry. It looked like he was setting up a magic show.

With a gravelly voice, the old man grunted *"I'm onna phone."* He pointed toward a dusty back seat that had been removed from of an old car. I hesitated for a moment and looked at him. *"Sit!"* he ordered. He turned his back to me, grunting quietly into the phone. I swiped off the car seat, sat down and waited.

After a few minutes he hung up the phone and moved some junk away from the stool, ignoring me. I cleared my throat. He seemed totally aloof; I wondered whether he was

completely there. Meanwhile, I figured, I was probably late for a job interview somewhere. But before I could ask him if I could use the phone, he walked over to a shelf full of bottles and jars. He picked up a tin of barbeque lighter fluid and a shiny red spray can. Placing the spray can under his arm, he reached into his bathrobe pocket and took out a box of kitchen matches.

I thought, *"This can't be good."*

He stepped up to the stool and began pouring lighter fluid onto the bag. That was the point that any reasonable person would have sprinted up the stairs and ran out of the house. But in a stroke of poor judgment, I didn't move. I figured he was setting up some kind of trick. I had to see this play out.

I didn't think he'd do it, but he did. He struck a match, and tossed it. With a *"WOOF!"*, the carpet bag burst into flames, not quite reaching the light bulb. As I frantically looked around for something to put it out with, the old man stepped back, reached for the red can under his arm, and sprayed a thin stream of liquid at the flaming bag. Whatever he had sprayed choked out the fire, immediately, completely! *"WOW!"* I heard myself say. I had just watched an old guy in a bathrobe blow up his luggage!

He looked at me, and in that gravelly voice, said, *"Think ya can sell it? I bought two hunerd boxes a deze. I'll sell it to ya twelve bucks a can."*

I was honestly so impressed that, for a moment, I actually thought of saying yes. A product that amazing? I could sell that...whatever it is... to hospitals, schools, churches, hotels, stores, gas stations... My mind was racing from the thrill of not having burned to death. But my better sense returned. *"No, I.....don't think so,"* I said. He just looked at me, flabbergasted. *"Why not?"* he grunted.

I thought of how awkward it would be to ignite a suitcase on some hospital purchasing manager's desk. Without the vivid demonstration, the *"Woof!"* and the angry flames; without eliciting a sudden fear of death, followed by a dramatic rescue by some oxygen-sucking chemical, the little red can just wasn't very impressive. So I shook the dust off my pants and hopped up the stairs. He just stood there in the smoke, holding the can as if I were turning down the opportunity of a lifetime.

I learned a few important life lessons that morning: First, if an old guy in a bathrobe takes out a box of matches, grab it from him (the matches, not the bathrobe). Second, don't sit on an old car seat in a good suit. And third, don't be taken by ads for job opportunities that sound too good to be true. They'll probably just waste your time. You might even get burned.

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