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THE STYLE MAGAZINE

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FIRST SUNDAY EVERY MONTH

SPY HUNTERS

You can't apply for the job,
you don't even know you're a candidate.
Then the brown envelope arrives;
inside there's an invitation to an
interview. Congratulations.
Someone, somewhere, wants you to be a spy

In a Regency house just off the Mall, a man wearing an MCC tie sits behind an enormous mahogany desk. On the other side of the desk is a navy-suited strawberry blonde. Suffice to say her name is Camilla.

The man questions her about her hobbies, and Camilla answers easily enough. Then he suddenly slips in a question about Middle Eastern politics. His manner remains relaxed but emotionless, but Camilla is unnerved, sensing a menacing undercurrent.

'He was being very nice, but it soon became clear that everything was designed to intimidate - from the grand room to the size of the desk to the sudden switches in the conversation.'

Camilla is being interviewed for a job, but this is a curious interview as she hasn't applied for the job, nor has she been told what it is. 'It's a curious feeling to be summoned to an interview when you haven't applied for anything,' she says. 'You feel vulnerable, because the implication is that they know a great deal about you, without your having told them.'

The job title is never mentioned. Even if she were successful, she would not be told what the job was until she joined. They talk about Camilla's cultural interests, her academic background (a good second from Oxford), and about topical events. Then the interviewer intimates that Camilla may have to make herself alluring to men in order to 'get on' in the job. Such are the possible requirements if you aspire to the ranks of Britain's secret servants. It transpires that Camilla was being interviewed to become a spy for MI6.

MI6 - 'the firm' to its employees - posts its secret agents abroad, while MI5 - 'the office' - concerns itself with domestic surveillance and counter-espionage. It is rumoured that MI5 recruits about 15 candidates a year, taking those with less good academic qualifications, while MI6 offers a more tempting salary package and tends to recruit bright Oxbridge graduates.

The interview is usually broached in one of two ways. Either a potential candidate is approached with no prior intimation, by post, or lured via the university careers officers or academics.

Camilla was approached the way most are. She received what potential recruits commonly dub 'the brown envelope', a mysterious letter on Ministry of Defence paper which simply informs the recipient that he or she 'might be interested in working for us'. The recipient is requested to turn up at a designated time at one of two hideaways. Strictest confidentiality is demanded. He or she is asked never to talk about the circumstances of the interview, and at the interview the Official Secrets Act has to be signed.

Quentin, a boy with Adonis-like looks who studied Classics at Cambridge, received his brown envelope. His uncle works for the Services, and Quentin was headboy at his Catholic school, but he hardly seems classic spy material, as he is free-spirited and indiscreet.

'At the interview you are asked *never* to speak of what has happened - and if you join you can never tell anyone what you do. Not even your wife. I think I would go mad,' says Quentin. Later he blabbed the details of the interview to all his friends. Most do.

Sandy, a Russian graduate from Durham University, was, on the other hand, approached by the university careers advisor. Several of the universities have resident 'talent' spotters who screen potential recruits and steer them towards a double life. In Sandy's case they were successful. She joined MI5.

'The careers woman asked me whether I would be "interested in doing research work for a department that is not normally advertised. I can't tell you what the work is".'

Candidates who accept the invitation to the interview - most do out of curiosity - will find themselves either in MI6's recruitment HQ in Carlton Gardens, or in Gower Street or Curzon Street where recruitment takes place for MI5. Carlton Gardens is the only glamorous HQ. MI5's HQ in Curzon Street is a dull neo-Georgian place, while the other hideaways - in Gower Street and MI6's HQ in Westminster Bridge Road - are impersonal glass and concrete blocks with government-issue net curtains.

Camilla felt decidedly uneasy there. 'I kept thinking "What sort of person do they think I am, that I could be a spy?" I expect the fact that I worked in the Foreign Office during my "year off" and that my father works there, had something to do with it. Yet I am the least likely person to be a spy, being clumsy and outspoken. It was considered a huge joke among my friends, who thought I would be the perfect double bluff.'

Quentin, the Cambridge graduate, didn't know what they were after. 'It was very eerie. They seemed to know a lot about me - about the fact that I had just returned from South Africa and really precise details about university scrapes.'

The mystery is unravelled by Sandy, from first-hand experience. 'The intake is broader than the old days, when one simply "knew a chap" or was a personal friend of the founder, Kell. You used to be much older when you joined - you had to go off and do something first.'

'Now they are so short of suitable candidates because spying seems less glamorous, so they get

REPORT BY CAROLINE PHILLIPS

you to join straight from university. In my intake, there were quite a few people from red-brick universities, but the overall tone is still right wing. The people I know who were approached at Durham were all middle class and public school. And they were all bright.

'What they are looking for is someone from a stable background, someone who is conservative, and probably Conservative, but they don't like people who are politically active, left or right.'

But what are the characters who sign up *really* like? 'Oddballs and social misfits,' says Sandy, without a hint of self-irony, after a year of working there. 'The people I was working with had obscure degrees - they were lacklustre pedants who wouldn't fit in anywhere else and couldn't earn a living in competitive circumstances. They were inadequate, failed people who compensated for their own shortcomings by working for the Secret Service.'

Apparently they are the sort of people who feel superior because of their access to secret information. They can look without being seen themselves, and they feel better than everyone else because they act as judge on them. They would

'I am the least likely person to be a spy, being clumsy and outspoken. My friends thought I'd be the perfect double bluff'

not feel quite so special if they were simply eavesdropping on friends' conversations or sneaking a look at their private mail.

Members of the Civil Service Commission oversee candidates while they tackle IQ tests on words, numbers and diagrams and write reports. On another day, applicants pretend to be members of various committees. They give speeches on various topics, and there are question-and-discussion groups.

This is followed by a meeting with a psychologist. 'Nothing very searching went on,' says Sandy. 'He asked me lots of questions about my childhood. His job is to check that you are stable and that you won't suddenly fly off the handle and turn into a traitor. But his questions were pretty banal.'

Finally Sandy was confronted by a committee of ten people from MI5 who questioned her to ensure that they really wanted her.

Meanwhile personal vetting (PV) ascertains whether the potential spy has any skeletons in the cupboard - if he is bankrupt, uses drugs, has had brushes with the law: if he is a member of undesirable organisations or has any offbeat sexual predilections likely to make him a blackmail victim. 'They asked me whether I had a girlfriend,' grins Quentin. 'I didn't at the time, so they asked me whether I had any girls who were friends! It was pathetic.'

The PV squad visited various friends of Sandy's. 'One friend showed me a photocopy of the incredibly lengthy form she had to fill in about me. One of the questions she was asked was whether I was promiscuous. She told the man that I wasn't at all: that I had only had two boyfriends in the preceding six months. "Hmmm," he replied, "promiscuous".'

It took a year from the day Sandy was first approached to the day she joined. The first four months on the job were taken up with training - a stint round the various departments, learning the system, how to deal with the inevitable mound of paperwork and how to identify suspects. Then she was given a popular posting concerned with uncovering KGB agents and political extremists in Britain.

'It sounds thrilling, and sometimes it was,' she says. 'On a typical day, you would be going through transcripts of phone-tapped material. Occasionally you would pick something up. But the real subversives are intelligent enough not to talk on the phone.'

'Most of the time the Russians are talking to their wives about the grocery bill or the videos they are buying. They are obsessed with videos and talk about them the whole time. You are more likely to become obsessed with the work >

< and start finding hidden layers of meaning. Is "video" a code for a dead letter box?

'Sometimes you have surveillance on someone because you think he is suspicious. Then he *does* something suspicious. He might have acted obviously by driving near a nuclear site. Or he may have joined an evening class, another telltale sign, because a lot of them recruit by enrolling for classes where they pick up students.'

But Sandy began to question the morality of her work – listening to people's private conversations, snooping in their mail and ruining the careers of fellow citizens when she found out something about them. She found the job stressful, and that affected her outside life. Trained to be suspicious and assume the worst motive in any action, she found she even started to doubt whether her flatmate was *really* just going out to buy some milk, as she said she was.

The fact that she was given no help with her cover story – none of them are – did not help either. She would go to a party and avoid asking anyone what they did for a living, the first question one normally asks, for fear that she would be asked the same.

Above all, she found life as a spy dull. This was precisely what Quentin sensed from his interview. 'The abiding impression I took away from the interview was that the work would be unbelievably boring and dreary,' he says. 'You wouldn't be living the cloak and dagger life, blowing up bridges and driving a car with an ejector seat. Instead, you would be posted to some foreign embassy, masquerading as the Under Secretary for Information, or whatever. Eighty per cent of your time would be spent on tedious and routine diplomatic work.'

But wouldn't the work be dangerous?

'I asked them whether they condoned the use of weapons,' replies Quentin, 'and they said: "We try not to use them,

but, of course, you will be sent off on a small-arms training course." Yet I didn't sense that the work would be dangerous or exciting. I felt they were trying to manipulate me into joining through the *idea* of glamour and, more than anything else, secrecy – a romantic image that is unwarranted.'

Quentin's hunch was borne out by Sandy's experience. 'Most of the time you are simply going through files – work that is so dreary that you would never do it if it weren't secret,' she says. 'There is no test of efficiency: we only know when we *haven't* been successful and a spy is found whom we haven't known about. You could quite easily fill your days achieving nothing more than shifting material uselessly into different files. And if you find something out, you can't necessarily use it, because you can't reveal your sources.'

Sandy found the system not only dull and inefficient, but also stifling. 'There was no room for initiative, no space for independent thought at

all, which is an added frustration for all the bright recruits.' She left after a year.

She still feels marked by that year, and it affects her promotion prospects. You can't put spying on your CV and when people find out what she did, they still mistrust her. 'I think the suspect that I still work there and may be secretly reporting on them.'

None of the three regrets not working for the Secret Services. Quentin left his interview agreeing to go on the 'pending' file. This means that, at some stage in his life when he is perhaps travelling a lot, he may be contacted to work as an amateur spy: unpaid and reporting back on the state of the Philippine police uniform or the Nigerian bus service.

Meanwhile, he is hitting the heights in advertising, while Camilla, who never heard another word, says she is better off in the 'real' world penning heady novels about murder, lust and intrigue. And as for Sandy? Well, that would be telling.

YOU

'The people I was working with were lacklustre pedants who compensated for their own shortcomings by working for the Secret Services'

