

Affairs of the Head

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CHAPTER 1

North Hertfordshire, early 1990s.

End of June, chilly, unseasonal. Remnants of a recent shower drip from trees above a narrow and neglected lay-by. An elderly bus approaches, draws on to the pitted surface to allow its sole passenger to dismount, then grumbles away up the hill towards Luton. The girl, or young woman, watches it splash through puddles, then pulls her raincoat in close and moves without hurry towards a gap in the untidy beech hedge beside the road. She hesitates at a cattle grid then spots with relief a rusty gate, joined to an iron fence emerging from the hedge on either side. The whole entrance seems uncared for, but the gate opens readily enough. She passes through and begins her way along the curving, tree-lined drive.

How old might she be? Thin and tall, she walks strongly. Her plain face looks late teens but her straight blonde hair seems younger, essaying a length precisely between fashionably long and appealingly short. Yet she walked past a notice at the gate *Interviews this way*, so perhaps is just above school leaving age, seeking her first employment.

The drive is muddy and potholed, but she is constrained to it by banks of stinging nettles spilling from the feet of the trees on to the verge. Ahead of her, glimpsed between the trunks, scowls a Victorian mansion of the hideous variety sometimes described as a pile.

The grid behind the young woman clatters and she steps gingerly on to the grass to allow a vehicle to pass; from her expression, tights are no protection against nettles. The car's passenger, clearly a rival for the job, has contrived an aura of sophistication by sitting in the rear seat, as though chauffeur-driven. The car itself, a recent model, joins half a dozen more on the gravelled area in front of the house, crushing a few stray dandelions in its efforts to park neatly.

The nettle victim hunts for a dock leaf but soon gives up; perhaps in these circumstances pain is better than a yellow-green stain on her tights. She walks on, discomfort added to simple nervousness, to reach the front of the house.

Here is a flight of stone steps, clearly conceived for a much bigger residence. Some hastily scribbled instructions dangle from a pillar, with an arrow to a waiting room via an excessively ornate porch and entrance lobby. Established inside already are four young women and two men. Avoiding their curious glances, the new

candidate sits down quietly in the darkest corner and scratches her itching calves. The door opens again and with a dramatic swing of her short cloak, the occupant of the car just parked presents herself.

"Samantha!" she proclaims loudly.

"Good Lord! Annabelle! Did you get that First?" from one of the candidates already seated.

"No, only a Two-one. I ploughed my Opto-electronics. How about you?"

"Two-two, I'm afraid... The rest of us might as well go home now". Samantha laughs edgily.

The others shift in their seats. An owlish young man raises an ironic eyebrow at a good-looking character who has been quietly chatting up two of the young women. Annabelle continues the conversation as she sits down:

"I can't say the salary looks much, even living in the wilds of Hertfordshire."

She turns to the owlish candidate.

"And what qualifications are you bringing to this top-class job in such a magnificent building?"

"Oh, just an HND. My practical work'll be useful, I expect."

"And you?" Annabelle swings round unexpectedly to the young woman hiding in the corner, still rubbing her shins.

"Er - I haven't any qualifications". Conversation stops abruptly. "Well - I - it said they weren't necessary, so -"; Annabelle's laugh peals through further explanation.

"You don't believe that, do you? They just want as many as possible applying, to make the job look important!"

The target of this onslaught blushes and drops her eyes; she no longer rubs her legs. The others look uncomfortable, apart from Samantha who is nervously giggling into her sleeve. Silence follows for several minutes. Occasionally one of the candidates takes a furtive glance into the dark corner. Abruptly its occupant puts her handbag on her shoulder, picks up her coat and stands up as though determined to leave. But a door opens and a tall, untidy-looking man in his early forties peeps out. "Miss Muffatt?" he inquires of the young woman already moving forward; he opens the door wider to invite her through.

In total confusion, she drops her handbag while retaining her coat. She hesitates, returns her coat to her chair and picks up her handbag. Then looks around at the assembled company and whisks away her coat along with her handbag, as though from thieves.

"Miss Muffatt, is it?" calls a voice from behind. "I hope he hasn't got any spiders!" Miss Muffatt blushes again and hurries through the door.

* * * * *

Her whole future depended on this meeting. Fully conscious of its importance, she stopped and stood, just inside the door.

"Come in, please, Miss Muffatt. It's Jayne, isn't it? I'm Dr Andrews. Bill Andrews." The speaker waved towards a chair and seated himself heavily behind a well-used but still impressive leather-topped desk. Jayne Muffatt sat down quietly and observed him. He had a long face, elegant even, with a professorial receding hairline. He had clearly made some effort to clear his desk for the interviews: a small yet chaotic heap of papers was just in view on the floor near his chair.

"Now, you're wondering why I called you for interview, especially with all these unemployed graduates about. Yes?"

Jayne nodded and coughed before speaking: "It said in the paper that qualifications weren't necessary. But the others out there have all got degrees and suchlike. I'm surprised you wanted to see me at all."

Dr Andrews rocked his chair back to an unnerving angle and rested his elbows on its arms. He then carefully placed the backs of his fingers together, tips pointing downwards under his chin, and looked closely at Jayne. He had no notes in front of him, not even her application form.

"You attended St Theresa's School, Isle of Ulva, until this time last year, then Arlestead till now?" Jayne nodded.

"Bit of a culture shock - secluded girls' private school to our local state academy. Accident or design?"

"My parents always wanted me to go to a private school, but couldn't afford it. Then I had an aunt who inherited some money. And she paid for me. She insisted on St Theresa's."

"What was so special?"

"They taught all arts after the first year and only a tiny bit of maths. My aunt thought science caused all the world's problems."

Dr Andrews raised an eyebrow. "How did they get away with that? They'd have had inspectors, wouldn't they?"

"I don't know. One of the girls started publishing novels when she was only 14 and another's making a name for herself as an artist. So the school's got a good reputation. The head's very forceful and some of the parents have a lot of influence. It's only a small school and very remote. I think the inspectors have too many other jobs to bother." She paused.

"So you then spent your last year with Tom, Dick and Harry at Arlestead."

"Yes. My aunt died and all her money went to her second husband. Mother couldn't afford for me to stay there even for just one more year. So I came back. To the local school here..."

There was another pause; for Jayne these were painful memories. Dr Andrews said nothing until she forced a wan smile. Then he asked quietly:

"And you've passed no GCSEs at all?"

"No, I was totally unprepared. At St Theresa's, they thought girls didn't need exam results. If they were good enough, they'd succeed anyway."

"Like the novelist and the artist".

"I suppose so. The teachers taught us just what they felt like teaching that day."

"And was it enjoyable?"

"Sometimes, if you had one of the good teachers."

"A bit like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*?"

Jayne shrugged.

"I suppose so. I haven't read it. But none of them knew anything about science. I don't think they'd have been there if they had."

Jayne spoke calmly, as if on autopilot, her mind fixed on a distant horizon, afraid to look down and see the turmoil of emotions inside. If Dr Andrews realized this he gave no sign, but continued, though even more quietly:

"So how did you get on at our local place?"

"I couldn't do anything. They gave me books to read to fill in all the gaps in my knowledge, but I didn't know how to organize my learning or write exam answers. And they didn't have time to help me individually. I took English and Latin last Autumn but even failed in those. Basically, I don't know anything in any organized

way. I missed the Summer exams because I was ill, but I don't think I would have passed anyway."

Dr Andrews frowned and shook his head at the clinical way this had come out. But Jayne was used to this reaction. She knew that some saw her lack of achievement as failure, but to her it was simply how things had turned out. Her interviewer pulled some papers forward and glanced at them.

"So in effect you've repeated your 5th year. Ah, that explains why you're 17, not 16 like most school leavers."

He looked up brightly.

"And what can you do?"

"Discuss. And think, I suppose. And sometimes I get answers right by guesswork. I don't know why." There was a sudden lift to her voice; here at last was something she could be proud of. But she did not expect the next question:

"How heavy is the earth's atmosphere?"

"What? I mean, I beg your pardon?"

"How much air is there in the world? How many kilograms?"

"I don't know." The release of tension came out almost like rudeness, but Dr Andrews said simply:

"Of course you don't. Guess. Tell me what you're thinking."

Silence for nearly a minute. Jayne struggled, then realized she must relax and let her mind free-wheel.

"Isn't air pressure 15 pounds per square inch? I think I remember seeing it in an old book."

"Yes, that's about 7 kilograms weight."

"I don't know how big a square inch is, though." Dr Andrews rocked his chair forward, sketched one on a scrap of paper and Jayne peered at it.

"So if you knew how many of those squares would cover the earth, each one has - what did you say? - 7 kilograms of air above it. So would that work? I'm not sure I could do the sums though."

Dr Andrews studied the young woman intently.

"If I asked any of that rabble out there" - he waved in the direction of his waiting room - "they would go into all sorts of extravagant tales about adiabatic lapse rates and integrating from sea level to the ionosphere and probably still get it wrong, if they got an answer at all. Would you like this job?"

Jayne gasped. "Er - yes, please."

"Right", said Dr Andrews, standing up so precipitately his chair fell back with a crash. He marched to the door and peered through.

"I have made my appointment", he boomed. "I will not need to see anybody else. Wait there and I'll send Mr Summers along with some expense forms. Thank you for coming."

There was a united gasp, then a babble of shocked and angry noises. "You can't do that!" "It's disgraceful!" "What about equal opportunities?"

Annabelle's voice razored through: "What *has* she promised him? Don't go much on his taste."

Dr Andrews shut the door, mercifully heavy and well soundproofed. He turned back to Jayne, smiled and waited. She spoke very quietly, unsure whether she really ought to say this to a future boss.

"Shouldn't you interview the others first? I mean, they're all better than me really, and know far more science."

Dr Andrews picked up his chair and sat down again.

"I'd already decided to appoint you before you came. I only invited the others in case you were unsatisfactory."

That was no help at all; Jayne was still bewildered. Dr Andrews spoke gently.

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything. In time. Now, how much do you know about Dice Electronics?"

"Nothing. Should I?"

Dr Andrews laughed.

"Well, that's a nice change! Most refreshing. Usually people turn up and tell me more about the place than I know myself. So I'll have to tell you instead. Don't feel guilty, by the way. Most of the stuff I've put out there is so out of date it wouldn't have helped anyway."

He launched into a rapid summary of how the firm consisted of himself and Jack Summers and how the work was getting too much for them both, so Jack was having to pack up electronic units instead of keeping the nettles down on the drive. Jayne scratched her leg in sympathy.

"I'll start you off with some of the mundane jobs - stocktaking, packing up equipment and so on, then you can get involved in testing the structures we make. And perhaps even programming them..."; Jayne's rising panic was clear to her new boss.

"Oh yes, I know you don't know anything. I'll teach you. Don't worry."

"But wouldn't it be easier if you employed someone who at least knew a bit? Then you wouldn't need to do so much teaching."

"I agree. But in the electronics industry we've got a big problem. Now, pretend you were designing something but you were a bit behind someone else. You happen to know that an engineer in the other firm knows a lot about what they're doing and is being paid £30,000 a year. What do you do?"

Silence. Jayne suddenly realised she was expected to answer.

"Oh, offer him £40,000 and pick his brains?" she asked quickly.

Dr Andrews laughed.

"But that's immoral," she exclaimed.

Dr Andrews laughed again, this time with an edge. "Perhaps, but it happens. It's called head-hunting. So I want someone who's bright, but with very little background knowledge. Then my work is safer. That's why you'd be ideal. See?"

Jayne nodded, though unsure how far this was a compliment.

"So I will teach you all you need. No further study, no reading around and so on. I don't want you to become useful to another firm. OK?"

Jayne became thoughtful.

"So no-one will head-hunt me?"

Dr Andrews smiled and nodded. Jayne continued to think, and her thoughts emerged before she could stop them.

"So you can keep my salary low because no-one's going to offer me more? Oh, I'm sorry!"

Dr Andrews laughed. "I think you are a very intelligent young woman. You get straight to the point. But don't worry, you won't starve! When can you start - next Monday?"

Jayne nodded, happier again.

"Now, you live just up the road, don't you? So you can come on the bus or even cycle in good weather, perhaps?" More nods.

"If the weather's bad I might be able to give you a lift in sometimes. I come through Hartlehoe Green."

"Oh", said Jayne, "I thought you lived here."

"It seems like that sometimes, but I do have a home. I see it as often as I can," laughed Dr Andrews. "I'm looking forward to Monday. I think we shall get on well."

He opened the door for his new recruit. She moved out through the overblown portico and down the drive in a state of total disbelief. She didn't even mind that she'd missed a recent bus and there wouldn't be another for two hours. She strode off towards Hartlehoe Green.

After a few minutes, a car drew up. She ignored it, until a quick glance showed its driver to be the owlish young man. She didn't mind walking, but was looking forward to telling her mother the news, so she accepted the lift. He seemed harmless enough.

"Congratulations!" said her companion as they moved off.

"Thanks. I'm sorry you had such a wasted journey. What will you do now?"

"Oh, I've got another couple of interviews lined up. One I'm very confident about, so don't feel guilty."

They drove in silence along Haley Bottom. Jayne watched the fields and woods climb gently up on either side with the motion of the car. All was green after the recent glut of rain.

They reached the end of her road. "You can drop me here. Thanks." Her mother would not take kindly to her arrival via a young man she'd only just met.

"Best of luck," he said. "I'm glad you got the job and not one of those oh-yas." He laughed and waved as he drove off towards the motorway.

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