

JUSTIN WALDRON

Chinese Drywall

Job Interview: 21

Miller grabs the man's hand. His grip is a bit harder, has more emotion to it.

The man's skin is loose, like wet putty.

"It looks as though I have everything I need here."

"Okay," says Miller.

"You have a degree in anthropology, correct?"

The man shuffles through a manila file. He scratches the tops of his hands when he looks up. He is visibly uncomfortable with Miller. He has that way about him.

"Yes."

"What is it about anthropology that led you to majoring in it?"

"It was a few years ago now, but back then it was because I wanted to know as much as I could about people. Now, I don't know."

"Okay." The man scratches again and tries to fix his glasses by moving his nose around. "I can imagine you would learn a great deal about human nature with that. It could be a benefit. I majored in business the whole way through. Got me here, so I guess I can say that it benefitted me."

Miller sits and nods his head. His hair falls slightly onto his face. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand and casually rubs it on his jeans. The interviewer doesn't notice.

"So what is it you do now?" the man asks.

"I rip out Chinese drywall mostly. The illegal stuff."

"And why do you rip it out? Is it defective?"

"I guess you could say that. I don't know the physics of it, you know, but it smells like shit. It's made with sulfur, and it leaks out, and the stench fills the house and rusts the pipes. People just abandon a house sometimes because of it. It causes foreclosures. The smell gets in their clothes, in their mouths. Little kids make their eyes red when they touch them with their fingers."

"Interesting. Why do you want to leave the job?"

At Work:

Miller jabs a crowbar into the brittle drywall and pulls it down like a zipper. The smell of shit is in the dust. He pulls off the loose chunks with his powder white hands and tosses them in the middle of the empty apartment. He and his fellow trasher heave the pieces onto the grass below from a little balcony. One piece nearly grazes a woman walking her dog. She looks up to the balcony and sees the men staring down at her unsympathetically. When they're done with the apartment, they sit on overturned

plastic paint buckets near the open sliding glass door and drink sulfur tinged beer. They don't notice the taste, any taste. As they're leaving, Miller sees a broken picture frame with a torn photo of a man with his arm around someone who is missing.

"Bring it to burn."

They can't leave anything behind. The rule is that everything found gets burned. No exceptions.

Job Interview: 25

The man on the other side of the desk is nearly invisible to Miller.

"I apologize, Mr. Miller. The back light here just burnt out, and we don't have an immediate replacement. Your résumé?"

Miller hands it over, his fingernails filled with irremovable white, the faint smell of feces on his body.

"Okay. So, what expectations do you have about working with us?"

There's some movement. Miller can just make out the man using his fingers like a comb on his thin hair. Miller shifts and thinks about the question. There's a silence that lasts nearly a minute.

"I guess I would say that my expectation is to work at a job where when it's done, I can go home and not think about it afterwards. Not have to have the job with me everywhere I go."

"What do you mean by that? Your job requires a great deal of work at home?"

"No, it requires no actual work at home, but I do count the constant washing. It requires a great deal of work to get the smell out. Five times in a row one night. Couldn't get it out."

"What is the smell?"

"Excrement, basically. The drywall turns to dust, and I breathe it in. It creates a barrier between my lungs and the air. I struggle to inhale after a long day's work. The air I exhale is soaked in the smell of it. After a certain amount of time, you see, the drywall develops a smell described by some who have to live with it as velvety sewage. I'm constantly covered by it, so I have to scrub my clothes by hand. I go through a lot of shirts." Miller laughs.

There's the sound of a chair squeaking, as if the man were leaning his weight back.

"Okay. Good. What was it like working for your previous supervisor, and how was your relationship with him or her?"

After Work Some Nights:

Some nights during the week, they light a fire behind the warehouse to burn anything found in the houses and apartments. There's a pit surrounded by a metal rim. It's filled with boxes and tables and broken bits of appliances, and some of it is puffing

over like a cupcake from its cup and onto the asphalt. One of his co-workers covers the outer layer of the items in gasoline, and Miller throws a burning rag on it. They stand as close to the fire as they can get without getting burned. They have to do it late at night so nobody sees. The owner saves money on dumping by doing this. Miller opens a can of beer and sits in a chair by the warehouse. He watches the other guys just standing there, and he stares. He normally slips out when nobody is paying attention, shortly after the pit begins to burn, and heads either home or to a bar. This night he stays for a couple more beers and watches until the stuff in the pit is half-consumed.

Job Interview: 29 — About Midway Through:

“Describe your typical work day and or week.”

“Okay. Well, I wake up at around five o’clock. I hate waking up so early, but I do it.”

“Have you ever been late?”

“No.”

The interviewer leans against the window and looks out at the other buildings in the downtown area. The window is not one that is made to open, but the trees are moving, so it appears as if it is nice outside.

“Continue then.” He lets out a slow breath, turns away from Miller, and looks back out the window.

“So, I don’t really have time to make breakfast. I normally eat a meal bar or something on the road. I drink coffee, too. I get to the warehouse, and I team up with one or more guys. We go out to houses and apartments and don’t talk to each other because we’re all so tired. We work in that filth until noon when we get a half hour off the clock to eat. By then, I’m covered from head to toe in that nasty smelling white dust, and I have to spit into a paper towel and wipe the area around my mouth clean. Everything tastes like it, that’s just the fact. It’s inescapable, and it’s one of the few things we guys really talk or joke about. Depending on the day, I’m done between five-thirty and seven-thirty, but that’s not on burn days. On a burn day I might be out until really late. I do that Monday through Friday.”

The man looks over at Miller, and his bearded face moves little. Then, only his eyes drop down, and he reads from a manila folder he’s holding down near his waist.

“Yes, how would you describe the pace at which you work, and are you satisfied with that pace?”

Morning at the Warehouse:

It’s not bad in the mornings. Sometimes the guys and Miller talk about what it would be like to just work in a warehouse all day and not have to tear out drywall and clean apartments. The overall consensus is that it would be much better to work in a warehouse. The echo of everyone’s voices turns into one homogenous hum. The thick

metal walls vibrate and exhale as if the warehouse were alive and breathing. The young woman at the desk in the waiting room shouts out to each person and lets them know who they're working with and what place they're going to. It gets quiet as the guys gradually flow outside.

Job Interview: 30 — Toward the End:

"What motivates you? What really gets you going?"

The man asking the question nibbles on a Coke can while making a slurping noise, although he might just be sucking on it. There's a thirty-second silence. The man fidgets around in a way that one could describe as nervously.

"I guess money and healthcare. That's the real meat of it, really."

"What would you say is the thing that you do best at work?"

"I rip out that drywall pretty well. I have a technique that gets the job done with less energy than it should. It's all about leverage. I jam the crowbar in from a certain angle, and the walls just disintegrate, kind of."

"Okay, what is the worst thing you have ever done while at work?"

Miller laughs. "Now that's not a fair question or even one that you could expect a real answer to."

The man straightens his shirt without really looking at Miller.

"It's a standard question that most candidates have little trouble answering."

"Okay. Well, when we strip an apartment or house or whatever, we have to strip it of all personal belongings as well. Not sure why really. Policy. I think it might be because that stuff just soaks in the smell of it and for insurance purposes and all that. We burn the items at night behind the warehouse. Everything has to be burned. No exceptions.

"One day me and the guy I was working with were finishing up, and we were going through the last dusty box that was in a corner of the garage. It was a pretty big box, and it was filled with pictures. Densely packed with bricks of pictures. Little statue things and souvenirs, too. The pictures looked like a family, and they ranged from baby pictures to adult pictures and everything. Old ones in black and white, thousands in color. A whole family's life was documented there. Who knows how or why it was left behind. Could mean they didn't want them, but it could easily mean they left in a hurry and forgot or couldn't bring them for some reason. Now, there were a lot of names and phone numbers written all over those pictures. We could've called one. Maybe taken a few minutes to find someone who they belonged to, maybe not. But we went ahead and threw the box and everything into the fire that night.

"Not sure if that's bad or just nothing, but it always stuck with me. That was early on. When I was new there. I'm used to it now."

Miller crosses his legs and stays quiet except for a slightly louder breathing sound.

“Okay, thank you. Do you consider yourself a team player? Do you work better by yourself or in groups?”

Driving After Work:

Mentioning the smell would be a waste of time, but it is there, and Miller doesn't really notice because the windows are down, and the air is crisp. It's at that point where air can become crisp and cool, but only at that point, so it's nearly perfect and not cold. He looks at the little houses he's driving by. He presses the radio button on, but then immediately presses it off. There aren't many people on the road. Miller pulls into a small restaurant's parking lot to sit and eat while he waits for it to get dark so he can join the guys and help them burn the week's trash.

Job Interview: 33

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Miller. First question: Where do you see yourself in five years?”