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CIA Reject

Saara Dutton

Whenever The CIA makes embarrassing headlines, revealing bumbling spies or globe-spanning ineptitude, people speculate that it's staffed with idiots. Whenever I hear this, I nod my head in vague agreement, the way you would when someone points out the futility of the sneeze guard over a salad bar. But I secretly think, "Well, they did one thing right. They didn't hire me."

This wasn't a decision America's All-Powerful Spy Agency arrived at easily. The truth is, I had some initial success becoming a CIA operative in the Clandestine Service.

A few years ago, I was working in the satellites department at CNN. This was a tedious job that mostly involved talking to satellite truck operators and telling them to "rotate your pole". In all the time I worked in that department, I never ceased to find this funny. Of course, I also never got a promotion.

My job in satellites provided some downtime, most of it spent on the Internet. In between Googling high school classmates and reading abysmal forwarded emails I stumbled across the CIA website. What a goldmine. They have changed it since then, but at the time it offered up a rotating eye and menacing, siren-like sound effects that honked out: "WAAAAHNK! WAAAAHNK! WAAAAHNK! WAAAAHNK!"

Now, I had been hatching an escape from CNN for some time. I disliked being there so much that I spent much of my free time concocting health-related ruses. Once, I called in sick for a week with pneumonia and flew to the Bahamas. When I returned I didn't know if the joke was on me or my co-workers, who kept wiping the phones down with anti-bacterial spray. Another time I pretended to sprain my ankle to get out of work. My return to the workplace after this particular ploy should have cured me of my scheming. Taking pity on me since I don't drive, my boss kindly scheduled a car service to pick me up. If I were a better person, the guilt would have overwhelmed me. But instead I just sat back in the luxurious black leather seat, haphazardly wrapped my ankle in the ACE bandage I had just purchased and savored the sweet, sweet respite from Atlanta's MARTA subway system.

So, as I perused the CIA website, it occurred to me that becoming a CIA operative offered a one way ticket out of a life of counterfeit illnesses. Instead of my dull work-a-day existence, I could be sitting in a dark café in Bogotá, setting up a sting to catch Marxist-rebel-narco-terrorists. I could be in Red Square, wearing a fur hat, speaking perfect Russian and negotiating oil pipelines. I could be in Kazakhstan, fighting off insurgent caviar bandits. When caught in a bind, I'd kick 'em in the nuts, disarm 'em of their machetes and sneer one-liners like,

"How do you like me now, jackass?"

And then, before jumping over the wall into the Caspian Sea, I'd lecture them on Walt Whitman, Johnny Cash and Western-style big sky freedom.

I sent a resume off to Clandestine Services Training and was a little surprised

to receive a response five months later, by which time I'd moved across the country to San Diego for an opportunity at a Mexican run TV station. I didn't actually talk to a CIA recruiter at first. In what would become a running theme, I was in the bathroom and missed the call. It was a peculiar brand of synchronicity, and it happened at least four times. I'd be on the toilet and then return to the living room to find a message from the CIA. It was creepy, and prompted a moratorium on my Starbucks intake.

When we finally do make contact, the recruiter and I have a standard phone interview, similar to any phone interview (why does this job appeal to you, what wonderful weather you have in San Diego) except for the quizzing on foreign despots and nuclear capabilities of various Asian nations.

A few days later I receive a packet of information and forms in the mail. I am onto the next stage: preparing for the Clandestine Services Training information session and one on one interview. This is great, I think. It's as though I'd thrown a dart at a list of careers and it landed on this one.

Two weeks later, I find myself in Santa Ana, at the Embassy Suite's lush, Southern-California style atrium, surrounded by healthy looking people milling about in light cotton clothing. Well, all except the fifteen or so serious looking people wearing dark suits. Consequently there is little need for a sign to direct me to the correct conference room. I simply follow the people in dark suits with Foreign Affairs Magazine under their arms instead of US WEEKLY. Still, not wanting to appear over-anxious by being the first one to take my seat, I wait around until I see enough of them enter the room with a sign marked "CST" in small letters. When I finally make my entrance, I find that I am the only woman in the room. This doesn't bother me, even when a Hobbit-like man leans in with Frito- perfumed breath and whispers,

"You know, being a woman really improves your odds of being selected."

While I'm touched by his observation, I don't have to respond because just then the two CIA recruiters walk in. My status as the only woman in the room is revoked. I size them up and figure the female recruiter seems cool. But the male recruiter looks like he should be selling novelty license plates at a mall kiosk. He's sporting a local weatherman mustache, huge eyeglasses and a dumb grin. Where did they find this guy? Is this his cover? Good-natured dork? Harrison Ford never played it this way.

We are all instructed to write just our first names on the desk cards. Although I am reminded of Mrs. Erickson's third grade class and the heated fights over the Garfield stickers, people take this very seriously. One guy writes his last name by mistake and spends the next five minutes furtively blacking it out. He wipes his brow afterwards. Apparently, he is already feeling the pressure of living under an assumed name.

After we all place our desk cards in plain view, the male recruiter lives up to his mustache and starts yammering on about the excitement of CIA coed volleyball, and how you can meet some "really neat guys and gals." Furthermore, he informs us that all the wives shop at the commissary for beef to make burgers at the CIA barbeque. I shift in my seat.

Who IS this asshole?

Nobody applies to the CIA so they can gobble down Rice Krispy treats and drink Miller Highlife in Belarus.

Just then the female recruiter decides to hone in on me, and explain how wherever we are stationed, the CIA will helicopter us to medical facilities for any "female troubles" we may have. Now, although I'm the only other person in the room with the equipment that might cause "female troubles" I think we are all a little queasy at the prospect of a CIA sanctioned gynecologist.

When a collective silence ensues, the male recruiter switches gears to discuss more adrenaline pumping pursuits, like parachuting and target practice:

"I tell ya, we have a lot of fun out there. Takes some guts to jump outta that plane, though. And you know, shootin' on that range, it's just a real neat experience. An' of course, we also teach you special driving techniques for hazardous conditions. That's real fun too."

I am suddenly alarmed. Amazingly, I had never considered driving a car

during espionage missions in foreign lands. I had considered wearing a fat suit as a disguise, hiding in Eucalyptus trees, and dead dropping classified documents, but driving did not cross my mind. This is incredibly stupid, I know. And as I previously mentioned, I cannot drive. I cannot drive to the post office up the street. I cannot drive to work. I cannot drive to the 7/11 to get a bag of beef jerky. I cannot drive, period. So as he rambles on about neat CIA driving techniques, I'm thinking:

How could I overlook this? There was never a James Bond movie entitled

"On Her Majesties Secret Unicycle" or "Rickshaws are Forever" or "You Only Hitchhike Twice". Was it even possible to chase international criminals while taking public transportation? What if I don't have exact change? What if I do? I'd be hanging off the side of a double decker bus in London, brandishing my AK-47 and bellowing,

"Eat shit motherfucker!"

These thoughts have all but rendered me deaf to the recruiter's lame discourse, and I don't care. I wonder if I should even stay for my one on one interview scheduled for two hours from now. Is there any point? What am I doing here anyway? The session wraps up, and we all stream out. Directly outside there is some moron who starts screaming at the CIA recruiters because the sign marking the room for the information session wasn't marked clearly enough. Perhaps he wanted something in neon. They are willing to give him a second chance, but I would have given him the boot. The man couldn't find a sign—how could he find mad bombers in the bushes of Beirut?

Strangely enough, this incident gives me renewed hope. If this moron thinks he could be a spy, then I could too. Millions of people learn to drive every year. I could too.

My logic is good, but I still need more confidence than that. Waiting until the recruiters head into the elevators to begin interviews, I high tail it to the hotel bar and order a Chivas Regal on the rocks. I peek around, worrying that someone will report me to the CIA. Not since my 17-year-old beer bonging days on the beaches of Whidbey Island has the consumption of alcohol inspired such fear of government authorities.

I tip the bartender exceedingly well in case he is cahoots with the CIA. I'm still nervous, but by the fourth gulp the scotch just tastes so smooth and good that I don't care anymore. I order another one, again tipping so exceedingly well that when I've finished it, the bartender gives me a third on the house. Out of obligation, I down this too. I am now ready for my interview to become a spy in the Clandestine Service.

I pop about 12 breath mints and go up to the female recruiter's hotel room. She is seated at a table, reviewing my resume. It is a meager resume that was only recently pruned of a part time position at The Reject Shop, where I worked while I was attending Richmond College in London. Considering that The Reject Shop sold everything from wooden spoons to penis-shaped soap to plastic flowers to boob-shaped chocolates, and I was forced to wear a hat that read "One of Life's Rejects" and a matching shirt that read "Born to be a Reject" I felt it prudent.

I take a seat, and am glad I got the female recruiter instead of Barbeque Bob. Unlike him, she is really personable and interesting. We talk about current events, she compliments my suit, and quizzes me on CIA policy information that we were supposed to memorize. Even though I doubt much of the information is that sensitive, I have been instructed not to reveal its contents to anyone outside of The Agency. This feels vaguely thrilling. We get along really well, and I feel I've nailed the interview. Of course I could also be drunk.

Turns out she did like me, because a few days later, as I'm on the toilet, the CIA calls and says I will be sent tickets to fly out to DC for a three day interview process. A thick envelope soon arrives, with maps marking the locations of various CIA buildings, hotel recommendations and a selection of books to read about The Agency. They have managed to spell my name wrong on the airline tickets and all the paperwork.

I scan the book selection and choose to purchase "Inside the CIA" by Ronald Kessler. It's a surprisingly lively read. My favorite bit is the discussion of a CIA

plan to make Castro's beard fall out by pouring thallium salts into his shoes. They assumed that if his beard fell out, he'd lose public confidence. It sounds ludicrous, but then, the man has kept his beard all these years and managed to outlast nine U.S. presidents. Maybe Fidel is onto something.

I fly out to DC a couple months later and wind up staying at a cheap hotel quite far away from any of the CIA buildings. I choose this particular low-grade jewel in the "Inns of Virginia" crown because it is in Falls Church. I like the sound of Falls Church. It's evocative of a Merchant Ivory locale. I picture a stunning manor house inhabited by beautiful aristocrats dressed in white linen sipping champagne and making cruelly witty remarks.

Instead I get close proximity to the Sizzler Steak house and a lumpy bed. My disappointment could have been avoided if I had simply read the hotel description, in which the author could come up with nothing better than touting its "convenience to Route 7 (Leesburg Pike.)"

The night before my first day's interview session, I attempt to get a good night's sleep. It doesn't occur to me to schedule a taxi the night before. This is a huge mistake. The next morning I wind up calling the cab company three times and waiting over an hour.

When the dirty, dilapidated cab finally arrives, looking as though it came to my hotel by way of Calcutta, we are severely crunched for time, but the cabbie insists we can still make it. This may very well have been true, except he can't find the building. He can't even find the general vicinity. I suppose this is good news for the CIA, but not so much for the cab company. We wind up dead ending in a field somewhere. Admittedly, it is very attractive countryside, and a nice change of pace from my shitty hotel environs.

Now, it's bad enough pulling into the CIA parking lot in a beaten up cab. It is worse being 45 minutes late, red faced from calling your cabbie a "fucking useless bastard" after he'd called me a "fucking cheap bitch" for refusing to tip him. I run into the building. As I rush up to the reception desk, breathless and irritated at my predicament, I'm told I'm too late.

"You'll have to reschedule."

My face, still red, now drops. I consider my options. I could just nod and accept my fate gracefully, or I could do what I ultimately did. Cause a scene, make my case and indict my cabbie. This is a good decision, since he makes a phone call to see if I can make up what I missed. Turns out I can. I scramble over into the human resources offices, where the other candidates are all sitting around. Before I can pull myself together, a woman smelling faintly of stale Juicy Fruit gum walks over, calls my name and we head into her office. Just like the woman from my first interview, she compliments my suit. As the suit I am wearing is two sizes too big, scrounged from the sales rack at Macy's, and recently spit cleaned of an old mustard stain, I suspect this is just something they're instructed to tell candidates to put them at ease.

The interview consists of a few standard questions, and then some role playing. I am pleased that my childhood drama skills are coming in handy. Who knew my gender bending performance as Abraham Lincoln in the 5th grade school play would prove so useful in international espionage?

We get along well and she asks if I'd like to go to lunch with her. I am immediately riveted by the idea. This must be how CIA operatives are selected. It is the equivalent to the midnight tap on the dorm room door in the Skull and Bones fraternity. She's going to take me to a red velvet lined room patrolled by radioactive sharks. We will discuss volcanic boots, holographic gloves and telekinetic underpants.

She then tells me to wait in the green room until she "checks on something."

What could she be checking on? The status of my ticket on The Orient Express? My newly minted twelve passports with twelve different names and nationalities? A special collection of wigs for me, made from the silken hair of Eastern Block prostitutes? I go out to the green room and stand around. Something is glinting under a chair and I bend down to pick it up. It is a large green ring, like a class ring. It seems is far too large not to be planted there. A person would notice if a ring of this size had slipped off their finger. This is clearly a test of my observational skills. I proudly bring it up to the guy in the reception area.

"That's weird," he says distractedly, and goes back to his crossword. I wonder if he's trained to act nonplussed.

My interviewer comes back ten minutes later and I am no longer invited to lunch. Not sure if there is a connection to the green ring or not.

I sigh and purchase a bag of stale Oreos.

After lunch hour we view the training video. It's pretty entertaining. Everyone on the video is positively in rapture about the CST experience. They're all in fatigues, swinging from ropes, rolling in the mud and such. The women all seem a lot taller than me. As I am barely 5'2, I wonder if they'd have to custom make my fatigues. I spend the next few minutes mentally making notes for a children's book entitled "Clandestine Dwarf in Fatigues". Consequently I have no idea what the gist of the training video is about, and am pleased there is no pop quiz.

The rest of the day is spent writing some essays, and general administrative stuff. I have yet to taste any excitement. This is not what I had pictured at all. It's all so depressingly normal. There are no slick gadgets or toned bodies. People chew gum and crack horrible jokes. It is just like CNN, except the bad jokes have a slightly different tilt. Instead of some overly hairsprayed anchor asking the floor director for the "personal vanity plate" when she wants a mirror, here at the CIA they offer up such geopolitical knee slappers as:

"Oh you know Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan?" We just simplify things and call them all "The Stans!"

We finish up some paperwork and I head back to my dismal hotel, feeling a little depressed. I came here for mystery and the chance to enter a world of fascinating secrets, and instead found dull suits, dull jokes and dull architecture.

In an attempt to perk myself up, I walk to the Sizzler down the street. This is not the most effective way in which to perk oneself up. I order some type of Sizzlin' Combo, and dissolutely gnaw on the tough steak and rubbery shrimp. Even the cheap wine does not lift my spirits. I go back to the hotel and reserve a cab for the morning. Lying in my lumpy bed, watching a sit com, I conclude that I have been duped in two ways. One, applying to the CIA is not the thrill a minute experience I had expected and two, not Everybody actually Loves Raymond.

The CIA building I arrive at (on time) the second day is even less interesting than the first one. There is no scent of intrigue, only bacon. I follow the smell to the cafeteria. I figure I could use some breakfast. On the way there, I spy an employee corkboard. People have posted various notices such as:

Running Shoes for sale: Cheap.

CAT W/MISSING TAIL FOUND

It's Girl Scout Cookie Time! Order your Thin Mints,

Do-Si-Dos and Tagalongs NOW!

Problem with squirrels? We've got the Solution!

Half an hour later, we are led into a room to take our personality tests. They tell you there are no wrong or right answers—but everyone knows that's not true. One question that throws me for a loop asks something like,

My people tell me that I'm an excellent leader.

TRUE OR FALSE.

There are also a couple odd questions along the lines of whether you'd rather work as a flower arranger or as a racecar driver. The burly football player seated next to me nudges me and says,

"I guess that's to figure out who the gays in the group are."

That's it for the afternoon. I wait around for my cab, and the other candidates ask why I didn't rent a car. Out of concern of they'd think I was a nutjob, and

the knowledge that they'd be right, I lie and say I thought it would be easier this way. I'm not sure I have been too convincing on this issue, but for once my cab has good timing and whisks me back to my hotel of doom.

After realizing I have few other options, I make a second pilgrimage to the Sizzler. This is like signing up for another helping of humble pie. But even as I am sitting there, eating wilted iceberg lettuce, looking at fat men in stained Redskins sweatshirts, listening to Lionel Richie warbling about what a feelin' it is to be dancin' on the ceiling, I can't relinquish the dream that tomorrow the CIA could catapult me into a world of thrilling endeavors, hair-trigger decisions, political frisson, and heart pounding chases through the rain swept streets of Paris.

On the final day of my CIA interview sessions, we take endless math and cognitive skills tests. I imagine this is to determine our ability to translate ciphers. I am completely useless. It is a good thing they weren't relying on me to crack those German military codes in World War II. On one section I just give up after the third or fourth question and just start filling in bubbles at random. But at least I am not alone. The burly football player finishes and says,

"Well, I can kiss that section goodbye."

When we have all turned in our worksheets, we are instructed to write an essay.

The other essays I have written so far have been practical, task-related essays. But this one forces you to examine if your basic personality is right for a career in the Clandestine Service. I scribble out some clichés of what I think they'd like to hear, and then erase them. I scribble down some sarcastic, cynical observations about myself, and erase those too. I write and erase, write and erase. There is no easy way to approach this question.

I write about how being raised in a community of free-thinkers, odd balls, crazy hippies and devoted parents in the Pacific Northwest gave me license to be whomever I wanted, because they loved us enough to let us figure things out on our own. I write about raging political arguments with my father, when we started throwing food at each other. I write that I read the National Enquirer alongside The Economist. I write that I am a first generation American. I write that my mom taught me to respect this country but also respect our Finnish heritage, which is why she named me SAARA with three A's instead of SARA. I may have been teased about it, but I was always proud of that extra A, and it irked me when people dismissed the pronunciation as pure whimsy. In a sense, that extra A was my connection to the family my mother left behind when she came to America.

I erase all of this and start again.

I stop when I realize everything I've written reveals that I was raised to value my individuality. And it strikes me, on about the sixth or seventh attempt to write this essay, that I'm not cut out for this job. Admittedly, there should have been many red flags before now to tell me this but as I look at my dingy sheet of paper, it finally sinks in.

It isn't because I think the CIA is an inherently cruel and cold-blooded institution. It isn't because I don't think I could do the job, with or without a driver's license. No, it's just that I finally realized I couldn't surrender my identity. The very fact that I've been enthusing about my unique Finnish name when there is a whole wall of fallen CIA operatives with stars instead of names to mark their deaths just proves it.

Maybe I just needed to see the CIA employee corkboard, hear about CIA coed volleyball, and smell that crappy CIA cafeteria bacon to understand this. I thought I could live anonymously when I assumed the life I'd be leading would be so extraordinary. But with what I'd seen so far, I got the suspicion it wouldn't be.

Now, I'm not stupid enough to think that even with the stacks of confidentiality contracts we signed that the CIA would let the thousands of candidates that pass through each year in on their fascinating secrets. But it seemed like at every turn, they were trying to stress the normalcy of clandestine life, when the abnormality of it is usually why people find it so fascinating. And if they couldn't show us the secrets, they should have at least

let us believe that there were amazing secrets to be revealed later on. And if I couldn't have something amazing in return, then my identity was too high a price.

By the time I hand my essay in, I've written and erased so many times that the sheet of paper is nubby and thin.

I'm a little worn out by now, coated with pencil eraser dust, having analyzed myself too much. But I still have to see the CIA psychologist for further analysis. I am pretty much resigned to the fact that I'm not going to become a CIA operative at this point. Still, I find that the psychologist is a nice guy and I enjoy our conversation. I think does too, until he asks why I'm here and I mention the hilarious CIA website. I even do an imitation of the "WAAAAHNK! WAAAAHNK! WAAAAHNK!" sound effects.

He looks at me like I'm a particularly unfortunate product of incest and says,

"Huh. Yeah. Well, you must have impressed someone to get this far," and makes a note on my paperwork. I figure this is not a good sign. I suspect the person who recommended me to get this far will be reprimanded and I feel a little guilty.

My final stop is at the reimbursement office where I am paid in cash. Not being a high roller or a very industrious carnie, I do not think I have ever possessed this much cash in the palm of my hand.

I walk outside into the sunny parking lot and run into the burly football player, who gives me a lift to the airport. Unlike me, he's a competent driver and I suspect he'd grill very flavorful burgers at the barbeque in Iran, wearing a "Kiss The Cook" apron translated into Farsi. I also doubt he's ever faked pneumonia to get out of work. He's probably a very skilled CIA operative by now.

A month later I get my Xeroxed rejection letter. I'm proud to see that this time they've spelled my name correctly.

