

Electric

In the Job Centre one of the neon strip lights was just about to go. It came on and then flickered off, came on and then flickered off. One of the lady caseworkers had telephoned the maintenance department; she had heard that flashing lights like that could cause epilepsy. It was a health and safety thing.

The sleek computer terminals whined gently under the light and silent Job Seekers looked at their screens. They were rat boys with chequered caps or vacant foreigners kicking up their heels; occasionally one of the job centre workers might get up and deliver some papers to another desk. Away from the reception room at the back were interview rooms and planning offices where the caseworkers could leer down at the jobless and make remarks about effort and hard work.

In one of the blue chairs, Ibrahim sat wide-eyed as the man in front of him tapped across a keyboard. The man was in his

thirties, overweight and a little sweaty. His tie nipped at his throat.

"What jobs are you interested in Mr Ibrahim?" He said.

"Electric," he said,

"I'm sorry?"

"I want to work with electric."

"Would you like me to get a translator?" The caseworker was a little nervous. He didn't like it when he didn't understand. He wanted to help.

"No," said Ibrahim, "I want to work with electric, lights and switches and wires."

The fat man looked at him more and a thin line of sweat had gathered just under his nose, his eyes looked vacant and that tie pinched a little more. His eyebrows rose as he understood.

"Oh, an electrician. Oh yes I see." He began tapping into the computer and then spoke rapidly.

"Could you just outline your qualifications and experience Mr Ibrahim?" The thin man on the blue chair picked through the words he heard and homed in on experience, a word he knew.

"Seven years electric in Khartoum, Sudan."

"And your qualifications?"

"Sorry"

"Qualifications?" The case worker sounded out each syllable, and then spoke more, "papers, evidence of past exams, formal or informal information concerning your skills and abilities as

accredited by a college or university?" Ibrahim eyed him calmly and rummaged through the words looking for some that he understood. He closed in on college and university.

"No college or university." The fat man leaned back on his chair and looked at his client. He was tall with curly black hair and glasses, his teeth were not straight and his clothes hung off him like he was a scarecrow.

"How did you learn to be an electrician?"

"My brother teach me, three years."

"Do you have any papers to say you are an electrician?" Ibrahim shook his head.

"My brother teach me."

"So you don't have any qualifications to say you are an electrician?"

"No."

"You'll have to go to the college if you want to be an electrician."

"How long it take?"

"I don't know, you need to go to the college"

"How much it cost?"

"I don't know, you'll have to see the people in the college." The fat man shifted himself on his seat, "What hours would you be available for work?"

"Everytime." The caseworker typed into the computer and hit the print button. Out of the machine in the corner a green form rolled out and curled round.

"Please sign this Mr Ibrahim. Thank you. In the next few days you'll get a letter through your door confirming that you are now in receipt of Job Seekers allowance. You need to keep this with you," and he handed over the now filled in UB40. "You'll need to come into the Job Centre every two weeks to sign, every Thursday at eleven. In the meantime, please feel free to use the resources here, you can look through our vacancies on the computers." He stood up and Ibrahim did the same, "Goodbye," and the thin man wandered out into the reception area.

"Thank you."

The lady caseworker put the phone down from the maintenance men and looked at the flickering light. It was the second time she had called. She felt glad she had seen it and reported it, and in a way, hoped that someone would have a sudden bout of epilepsy underneath it. Then she could use her first aid skills and the maintenance department would be in a whole heap of trouble. She traced the outline of a flower on her note pad and coloured in every other petal.

On the noticeboard there were cards with jobs on them. Ibrahim looked them up and down and squinted. There were words he did not know, Joiner and Lab technician and Barman and Surveyor.

There were numbers too, '£5 per hour' and '20K a year.' He looked them up and down for something that might be good for him.

Back in Khartoum, above dusty streets in the big new hotel his brother and he had fitted lights and air conditioning. They wired the fans and the sockets. When the day was done they drove home along the wide, hot streets with gangs of kids playing outside in colourful shorts. That was a long time ago.

The man next to him took a card from the noticeboard and walked up to the lady caseworker behind a computer. She typed in a code and then started talking. Ibrahim kept looking and right on the bottom row he saw the word 'Electrician'. He picked it up and read the word in his head. Electric-an.

The lady caseworker was nice. She typed the details on the computer and turned the monitor round so that Ibrahim could see the screen.

"You need a GNVQ level 2 and three years experience for this job," she said. "Do you have any qualifications?" There was that word again. She was nice and did not look sweaty like the other man. On her notepad she had drawn a flower and coloured every other petal.

"I good electric," he said, "I know wire and cable and plug and live wire," he counted them out on his fingers, "and screwdriver and fuse box...." She nodded her head as he spoke.

"But you need a qualification to do the job. In England you need to know about how to do things safely, health and safety is very

important here," she briefly thought about the strip light, "You need to go to college."

"How long will it take?"

"I don't know, you'll have to ask them." She smiled.

Ibrahim put the card back on the noticeboard and looked at the Job Centre. He saw the computers in the corner and the rat boys with their checked caps and young Kurdish men in jeans and clean trainers. Ibrahim gently took a soft blue chair from behind a computer desk and dragged it to the centre of the room. He positioned it under the flickering strip light and clambered onto it. With his thin long fingers he found the starter motor and gave it a little turn. The light flickered once more and showed a constant powerful beam. He got down.

"Excuse me, what are you doing?" said the lady caseworker.

"I told you. I am electric," he replied.

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