

Three-page sample from:

**MIRROR, MIRROR...**  
**LESSONS FROM A STRANGELY DISQUIETING INTERVIEW**

**By Corinna Fales ©**

I had interviewed killers, heroin addicts, nuns, dialysis patients, murder-trial jurors, and black and white school parents in Newark—to name just a few. All were excellent interviews, and many were lengthy and deeply personal. So what went wrong with Miss James? Now that I have finally figured it out, I will tell you, painful though it was, because it gave me insights worth passing on.

Interviewing Miss James was by far the most straightforward assignment I'd ever had. I was simply to conduct a relatively brief needs-assessment for a Meals-on-Wheels program in New York City to learn how the agency's clients felt about the meals they were receiving. Miss James was one of the "frail elderly" customers I was assigned to, and the entire interview was supposed to take no more than forty-five minutes. It should have been a cakewalk.

The setting was Miss James' one-bedroom, ninth-floor apartment in a nice new high-rise building on the Upper East Side of Manhattan—quiet, considerable view of the city, courtyard in front of the building, bushes, birds, a fountain—glorious spring day.

In this setting, Miss James and I were both participants and observers. And, although the requisite information for the interview questionnaire was finally produced and recorded in abundance, our interaction was disturbing and unhappy—for both of us, I believe.

My relationship with Miss James began on an appointed Sunday in March, when I was scheduled to interview her. She and I were both disappointed, however, because she spent hours waiting for me in her apartment while I looked for her in vain. It turned out that the social worker who arranged the interview had given me the wrong address, and there was simply no way to find Miss James. Furthermore (as it also turned out), this social worker had scheduled the interview at a time that was inconvenient for Miss James, and had insisted upon that time despite Miss James' protest. Then the interview did not take place at the badly scheduled time due to the social worker's error in address. So Miss James was, to begin with—and very understandably—“put out” and annoyed.

On the Monday morning following this original appointment, I called Meals-on-Wheels and was told that Miss James had already called. I was given her phone number, and called her immediately to explain, apologize, and re-schedule. I was struck by her voice and manner of self-expression. She sounded very genteel, dignified, educated, and Southern, though she rambled on quite a bit longer than I wished (about twenty minutes or so). We re-scheduled and all seemed fine—except that I then got sick and had to cancel our new appointment.

I called her the day before to let her know and to apologize, and said I would call again when I was better. I told her I hoped I'd be able to make it the following Thursday (five days later), but that I would have to call her to confirm. On Wednesday, I called to say I was still not well and would not be able to make it on Thursday; we re-arranged for Saturday.

During this conversation—which was again lengthy, chatty, and repetitious—she told me that her birthday was that Friday; she asked where I lived; she talked about the spring weather and tulips, which were just coming up (I said I'd try to bring some of mine for her birthday); she gave me her remedy for stomach bugs (eating yogurt and drinking acidophilus milk); she

described the benefits of listening to a certain nutritionist on the radio; she told me family stories; and so forth. Each of our telephone conversations was lengthy, friendly, and repetitious, and each time I was irritated by her success in keeping me on the phone for fifteen to twenty minutes. We established a very good rapport after all these calls, however, and a mutual curiosity about the person on the other end of the line.

Finally, the appointed day arrived. I did not feel well but dared not cancel. In fact, my guilt by then over the delays and re-arrangements was such that I felt I must appear no matter what. I also surmised that it would be a lengthy interview, and as my throat was still very sore, I scheduled only Miss James that day and looked forward to our meeting with interest and some trepidation.

I arrived at her building five minutes early—afraid I was going to be late—collected myself and took quick notes in the courtyard, and rang her bell at exactly 10:01. She called out, “Who is it?” When I said my name, she yelled out, “You’re an hour early!” and, momentarily, opened the door.

I was confused, checked her appointment time on my list, and saw to my astonishment that she was correct. I was very embarrassed, apologized, told her I would be happy to go away and return at 11:00 o’clock, and apologized again. I was also aware that we had seemed mutually surprised to see each other: there was a slight “startle” reaction on both our parts. (Furthermore, I was aware that I had *never* before made a mistake in the time of an appointment during all my years as an interviewer, and wondered what was going on.)

Miss James told me that she was just having her coffee, that it did not matter, and that I ought to come in. I repeated my offer to return but she insisted that I come in then. So I did.