

ONE

The person who interviewed her had no face. Under other circumstances—if the job market hadn't been so bleak for so long, if the summer hadn't been so glum and muggy—this might have discouraged Josephine from stepping through the door of that office in the first place. But as things were, her initial thought was: *Oh, perfect, the interviewer's appearance probably deterred other applicants!*

The illusion of facelessness was, of course, almost immediately explicable: The interviewer's skin bore the same grayish tint as the wall behind, the eyes were obscured by a pair of highly reflective

glasses, the fluorescence flattened the features assembled above the genderless gray suit.

Still, the impression lingered.

Josephine placed her résumé on the oversize metal desk and smoothed the skirt of her humble but tidy brown suit. The interviewer held a bottle of Wite-Out, with which he (or she?) gestured her toward a plastic chair.

The lips, dry and faintly wry, parted to release the worst breath Josephine had ever smelled as the interviewer inquired as to whether she had seen anything unusual en route to the interview.

The most unusual thing she had seen en route to the interview was the building in which she now found herself. Exiting the subway station, turning the corner, approaching the appointed address, she was surprised to come upon a vast, windowless concrete structure stretching endlessly down the block in what was otherwise a modest residential neighborhood. The concrete wall was punctuated at regular intervals by thick metal doors. The side of the building bore an enormous yet faded “A” and “Z,” superimposed over each other so that it was impossible to know which letter ought to be read first. A narrow strip of half-dead grass separated the building from the sidewalk. As per her instructions, she located the door labeled “Z”; in fact, it was the first doorway she encountered, which she decided to claim as a positive omen. The elevator was slow. The concrete hallways droned with an anxious, unidentifiable sound.

“No,” Josephine lied.

“You’re married,” The Person with Bad Breath asked, or stated, as though this was a corollary to the first question.

“Yes,” she said, surprised by the flare of joy in her voice; five years in, it still felt like a novelty to be his wife. A few months ago, days after they’d moved to this unfamiliar city, as she was

unpacking boxes in the newly rented apartment, she'd thought: *Has evolution really managed to culminate in this? This spoon, this cup, this plate; us, here.*

"His name," The Person with Bad Breath continued. Such a parched voice; Josephine's throat ached in sympathy.

"Joseph," she replied.

"Full name."

"Joseph David Jones." It occurred to her that The Person with Bad Breath had neglected to offer up a name or a title.

"Employed."

"Yes, an administrative job not far from here." Josephine chose not to mention that he'd only gotten the job a month ago; that it had followed his own weary interminable period of unemployment; that they'd fled the hinterland in hope of finding jobs just such as these; that they'd fled in hope of hope. "Just one subway stop away, actually," she elaborated when her comment was met with silence.

"Does it bother you that your husband has such a commonplace name?"

Josephine couldn't tell whether this was an interview question, a conversational question, a rhetorical question, or a joke. But she had been unemployed for far too long to bristle at it, or at anything else The Person with Bad Breath might come up with. And indeed: She had sometimes felt that the name Joseph David Jones was not sufficient to represent him, his moods and his kindnesses.

"I kept my maiden name," she dodged.

"Newbury, Josephine Anne," The Person with Bad Breath said, without glancing at the résumé.

She awaited the timeworn quip about their shared name. Joseph/ine.

“You wish to procreate?” The Person with Bad Breath said.

Again, she didn’t know if the tone was idle or mocking, kindly or dismissive. Surely it wasn’t legal to ask such a thing in an interview—but, as the familiar raw longing pulsed inside her, she nodded and then crossed her fingers at her sides, as was her habit whenever this sore subject came up nowadays.

“How is your vision?” The Person with Bad Breath said.

“Twenty-twenty.” She hoped there would be no further probing; her vision hadn’t been tested in eight years, and distant objects had recently begun to blur and shimmer.

Before Josephine could decide whether or not she ought to ask her interviewer’s name, The Person with Bad Breath abruptly stood. Josephine fumbled to follow, out of the office and down the long hallway. Once again, she noticed the sound: a sound like many cockroaches crawling behind the closed doors, interwoven occasionally with brief mechanical moans. As they walked, The Person with Bad Breath consumed three mints dispensed from a small tin drawn from an inner pocket. The bad breath became less offensive to Josephine when she saw that an attempt was being made to remedy it.

The Person with Bad Breath stopped at one of the doors and pulled out a thick clot of keys. The door opened into a small pinkish box of a room, its walls aged with tack holes and old tape. Five steps and Josephine could touch the opposite side. A metal desk and an outdated computer buzzed in the ill light of an overhead fluorescent. Beside the computer, stacks of gray files.

“Open the top file,” The Person with Bad Breath instructed, directing her to the chair behind the desk.

She opened the file to a sheet of paper covered in dense typewritten text:

The file contained four equally dizzying pages after the first. As Josephine tried to focus on them, a headache took root behind her eyes.

The Person with Bad Breath pressed a colorless hand down onto the pages.

“Only the topmost section of the top sheet concerns you, Ms. Newbury. You never need look below the line containing the name and the date.”

Her headache retreated slightly.

The Person with Bad Breath tapped the computer’s mouse. The screen came to life: a dim and frozen spreadsheet behind a pop-up box demanding a clearance password.

“Capital H—Capital S—Eight—Nine—Eight—Zero—Five—Two—Four—Two—Three—Eight—One,” The Person with Bad Breath recited, as Josephine’s fingers located the requested characters on the keyboard.

The password pop-up box returned a red ERROR message.

“HS89805242381,” The Person with Bad Breath repeated impatiently.

This time her fingers were accurate, and the spreadsheet brightened before her eyes.

“Welcome to the Database,” The Person with Bad Breath said. Josephine could hear the capital “D.” “You have clearance only to complete your task.”

At that, Josephine smiled—hired, or so she assumed, and dying to tell him.

“My task?” she inquired, biting down her fool’s grin.

“Locate the entry in the Database via the search function,” The Person with Bad Breath commanded. “Use the HS number on the form.”

She obeyed, carefully inputting each of the digits. The cursor leapt to the correct row. There it was: IRONS/RENA/MARIE, followed

by a series of boxes all filled in with an intricate combination of letters and numbers. Only the box at the far right remained empty.

“Cross-check the number and name in the Database against the number and name on the form. The form is always correct; occasionally the Database lags behind.”

The Person with Bad Breath paused, and Josephine nodded her acknowledgment. She felt extra-young, like a child going to school for the first time.

“Then input the date at the top of the form in the far right-hand column of the Database.”

It made her nervous to have someone watch so intently as she performed such a simple, stupid task, typing 09072013.

But then she noticed that this was tomorrow’s date. She weighed the benefit of catching an error against the rudeness of pointing it out, and mustered all her boldness.

“Shouldn’t it be *today’s* date?” she said.

“Place the file in Outgoing,” The Person with Bad Breath ordered, pointing at the metal file holder on the desk.

Josephine was ashamed by the visible shakiness in her wrist as she pressed the file into place. The Person with Bad Breath took a step back and, presumably, eyed her, though it was hard to tell with those reflective glasses.

“Next file,” The Person with Bad Breath said.

Josephine reached for the next file and opened it. JEAL/PALOMA/CHACO. She searched for the HS number; cross-checked (all correct); input the date on the form (09062013); placed the file in Outgoing.

“Flawless execution,” The Person with Bad Breath commended.

Josephine felt a rush of tenderness toward her new boss.

“Perhaps you will find this work tedious,” The Person with Bad Breath said. “It is also highly confidential. Not to be discussed

with anyone at all. Including *him*.” The “him” added suggestively, almost aggressively.

Josephine nodded. She would have nodded to anything.

“Good skin, good eyes,” The Person with Bad Breath muttered, or maybe Josephine misheard, but, eager to please, she continued to nod. “HS89805242381, got it?”

“Yes,” Josephine lied.

Hourly rate \$XX.XX (not so very much, but so very much more than nothing), benefits, tax paperwork, the stuff of life, direct deposit in case of a change of address, sign here, 9:00 a.m. Monday, and off she went, employed, regurgitated by the concrete compound out into the receding day.