

## THE INTERVIEW

SHE WAS TIRED of the interviews. She already had had twenty at law school and two flybacks, and so far no one had made her a summer job offer. Tonight, on her second flyback, she'd taken a bus from Washington National to Baltimore and checked into the hotel at 10:30 with her interview at Reavis & Ferris set for 11 a.m. So what could she do tonight? She had \$20, her return ticket to Madison, and a VISA card with \$285 charged on a \$300 credit limit. She could go downstairs and sit in the bar.

She laughed at the face she saw in the mirror. Why not? Susan, you don't have to be that self-punishing, why not just go down and sit in the bar and have a drink? If a man approaches you, you can either tell him that you're a therapist or a nun, certainly not a second year law student. She touched her lashes with mascara and rubbed in a shade of lavender eye shadow. Someone had once told her that she had seeds of sunlight in her eyes. Who had said that? Was it Paul? No, Paul never said anything about her eyes. No one had ever told her that, she just dreamed that someone had told her that. She squinted her eyes and rubbed in the lavender shadow. She liked setting herself up this way. All right, if not a nun tonight, at least Anna Karenina.

She decided to have a drink at a table in the dining room. The room was old and classic, waiters in formal dress, starched white tablecloths, sparkling glassware, and crystal chandeliers. She ordered a glass of white wine and looked around. She'd phoned her roommate before she left the room, and Tracy told her there'd been a call from Bartholomew & Gross in Indianapolis. That could mean she'd finally had an offer. She sipped the wine. Would Anna Karenina accept a summer job in Indianapolis? Of course she would.

A man was staring at her, a man with a beard, sitting alone. She glanced at him for a moment. He was nice-looking. She'd been thinking about Tax this morning. Why did Professor Marcus always wear the same pair of thick-soled shoes? They looked like orthopedic shoes. Marcus had eyes like a jellyfish, bulging and filled with sadness. She'd been called on and she hadn't been prepared. "Miss Eliofson?" "Pass," she'd said. "Mr. Brownstein?" "Pass." "Miss Allen?" "Pass." "Miss Oberweis?" "Pass." "All right," Marcus had said, "four passes. It doesn't seem that there's a high level of preparation. Who has the case?" Someone's hand shot up. How could she be prepared if she was always running off to the interview room? She had tried to brief a few cases last night in the library, but there were so many undergraduates talking and laughing that she'd left and gone over to Paul's, but she couldn't find him. Why hadn't he waited for her? It seemed that he was never there anymore for her when she needed him. She wanted to be with him last

night, and he hadn't even left a message for her, just his scabrous cat staring at her with its flat amber eyes.

The man was looking over at her again and now he was standing. Who was Anna Karenina's lover? Count Vronsky? Did Count Vronsky, have a brown heard?

Suddenly the man walked to her table.

She didn't say anything and instead nodded her head.

"What does that mean," he asked, "yes or no?"

"Yes, sit down. I'm not waiting for anyone."

"My name is Steven Wainwright."

"My name is Anna."

"May I ask your last name?"

"Yes. Karen."

"Would you like some champagne, Anna Karen?"

An hour later they were both very drunk on champagne, and were standing in the Baltimore Aquarium staring at a fish. Steven was an SEC lawyer from New Orleans and he insisted on showing her the lawyer fish at the Baltimore Aquarium.

"Is that really a lawyer fish?" she said, watching the huge black fish with the bulging eyes in the glass case. It looked like Professor Marcus. "Where's his briefcase?"

"How can you be certain it's a he?"

"Okay, where's *her* briefcase?" She puffed out her cheeks and imitated the fish.

The lawyer fish was huge. It looked prehistoric with a black body and fat gray mottled underbelly. It blinked at Susan and languidly moved one huge fin.

"Why do they call it the lawyer fish?" She looked at him.

"Because it looks like a lawyer. Can't you see it's wearing glasses and has a vest with a key chain?"

She pointed to the plaque, "Lawyer Americanus," and burped. She was giddy and dizzy from the champagne. "What will you give me if I dive into its tank?"

"A hundred dollars."

"All right, let's see it."

Steven took out his wallet and removed a crinkled \$100 bill. "I always save this for a contingency."

She took off her jacket and handed it to him, and climbed up the ladder at the side of the tank. "How do I know he won't bite me?" she called down to Steven, looking over the rim at the fish. "It's full of slime! I can't do it! Do you think it eats people?"

"No, it's perfectly harmless. Why don't you give him the hundred-dollar bill and see if he eats it?"

She looked down again at the lawyer fish. She *could* do it. She could just step out of her skirt and blouse and slowly lower herself down into the tank. How would she get out, though? She saw a ledge of stairs leading into the tank which must be used for feeding. Was she drunk enough to do this? She stepped out of her skirt and tossed it at Steven. She unbuttoned her blouse and fluttered it down to him, and suddenly she was in the water, lowering herself down into the tank. The water was almost tepid. She felt like she had fallen into consommé. Holding her nose, she fell to the bottom and stood searching for the lawyer fish. It was too murky and she couldn't see the fish. Then she saw the huge shadow in the corner of the tank. She stared at it. Should she touch it? She could always say she had touched a lawyer fish. It seemed to sense that she was in the tank, but it made no motion toward her. She reached out and touched its side. She was beginning to run out of breath. She watched the slowly undulating fin. The two hooded eyes peered at her. She had to have some air, so she kicked through the murky water over to the ladder and thrust herself up the slippery rungs and gasped for air.

"I should never have done that," she said, gasping to Steven. "I can't believe I really did that. Did I actually do that?"

Back at the hotel they had a drink at the bar before they said goodnight. She bought the drinks with Steven's \$100 bill and except for her stringy wet hair, no one would have known she had been to the bottom of the tank to visit the lawyer fish.

They exchanged addresses and phone numbers on cocktail napkins and he led her into a side room near the elevator and kissed her goodnight. He had soft lips, and she liked kissing him, and when the elevator doors closed, he looked at her sadly because they knew they would never see each other again.

"What is the one thing in the world you want, Anna?" he had asked her.

"I want a dog. I want a dog to love me. Men are too deceitful. When I was in high school, I had a tiny dog named Jacques and I used to keep him in in my desk drawer and do my homework over him."

The last thing he said to her was, "A woman who can go into the tank with the lawyer fish doesn't belong in the corporate army."

In the room she took a shower and washed the dirt off and shampooed her hair. She wrapped herself in the big white terrycloth robe the hotel provided and dumped all the plastic bottles of shampoo and body lotion in her purse; then she called Paul in Madison. No answer. Maybe he was with someone. No, he was probably out for a beer with his roommate. Steven's lips had been soft, and she liked his eyes. What did he mean by the corporate army? Why had she gone into the

tank with that ugly fish? Would she dream of it? No, she wouldn't allow herself to dream about it.

In the morning she dressed in her gray suit, and after she put on her makeup and brushed her hair, she called her roommate. She wore a white silk blouse with a lace collar and a golden sun-god costume jewelry pin with tiny red-jeweled eyes. She tried it first on her lapel and then at her throat. She pinned it at her throat.

It was 9 in Baltimore, too early to call the firm in Indianapolis. Her interview was at 11. She had breakfast in the coffee shop off the lobby, and then took a walk and looked at some of the shop windows. In the window reflection she looked like any other eastern yuppie with her lace collar and sun-god pin. She'd put last night and the gray fish out of her mind.

When she returned to the room she thought of calling Paul again. He could have tried to reach her last night and not have left a message. Before she called him she made sure by ringing the desk.

"What is your room number?"

"623."

"You are Susan Eliofson?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, no messages."

She hesitated for a moment and dialed Paul's number in Madison.

"Hello?" he answered in a sleepy voice.

"It's me."

"How's it going?"

"Okay. I tried to call you last night."

"I stayed late at the library and went out with some friends for a beer."

She attempted to sound casual. "Who were you with?"

"Oh, Michael and some of his weird friends. What did you do?"

"I just ate dinner and went to bed. I was really tired." She was quiet for a moment.

"Susan, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"What time will you be back? I could meet you at the airport and drive you."

"I thought your car was broken."

"It was, but I fixed it last night."

"No, don't pick me up. I'll just take the bus."

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow in class."

"You really sound weird, Paul."

"I'm just tired, Susan. I'm going back to bed. I'll miss Tax, but I don't care. See you."

She put the receiver down and went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Susan, you're not freaked out, she said, touching her eyes on the mirror. Don't let him upset you. She unwrapped the plastic cover from the glass and sipped some cold water. She put on lip gloss and went back to the bed, sat down and called Bartholomew & Gross in Indianapolis.

"Mr. Krakauer, please."

"May I say who's calling?"

"Yes, Susan Eliofson from Madison." There was a pause and she looked at her watch. She still had almost an hour before the Baltimore interview.

"Krakauer."

"Hello, Mr. Krakauer. This is Susan Eliofson from the University of Wisconsin Law School returning your call."

"Oh yes, Susan. I guess I got your roommate. Susan, I'm sorry to bring you bad news. We're not going to make an offer."

"Oh."

"I'm awfully sorry. You really had good interviews with several of the partners, but we're cutting back on our hiring for the summer."

"I understand."

"I think you'll find that situation all over. I know several of the firms in Indianapolis are cutting back."

"Thank you, anyway."

"Again, I'm sorry. It was nice meeting you. I wish you luck. We've mailed a check for your expenses to you in Madison."

"Okay. Thanks a lot."

"Goodbye, Susan."

She took a cab to Reavis & Ferris and arrived 20 minutes early. The reception room was large and furnished in blond paneling with oil paintings of several men that she presumed were partners of the firm. There were two receptionists with practiced smiles and wearing silk blouses almost similar to hers. They offered her coffee or tea. They also gave her a notebook with a roster and photographs of all the partners and associates of Reavis & Ferris.

She began to leaf through the notebook. There were 125 lawyers, and only four women lawyers. No blacks, no Asians, no Latin names. Only one woman had made partner. She looked at her face. Elizabeth Moncrief. She was attractive. Gray-haired. Hobbies: "Traveling." Education: "University of South Carolina, B.A., Columbia, LL.D." Marital status: "Single." She flipped the pages to another woman. Patti Monahan. Johns Hopkins, B.A., University of Virginia, LL.D. She looked about 24. Hobbies: "Bartending; ski bumming."

A young woman with hair frizzed in a wild perm came into the reception room and greeted her with a big smile and handshake. "Hi, I'm Missy Crandall. I work with John Raymond. I'm a legal assistant."

Susan stood, holding the firm roster. "John asked that you come back to his office. I'll take you there. How do you like our yearbook?"

"It's very nice."

"It's just awful. One of the partners saw this in New York and came back and insisted we all pose, so we spent two months posing in shifts and writing our bios." She took the book from Susan and opened it to her photograph. "That's me, Missy Crandall—paralegal—real estate. Hobbies: men, and group therapy. Isn't that terrific? It's a good way to meet people as neurotic as yourself."

Susan smiled. They walked by several offices and each time the lawyer looked up at them without expression.

Missy opened the door to John Raymond's office and told Susan to sit down, he'd be with her in a moment. "Would you like another cup of tea?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, maybe a soft drink? John's a Pepsi freak."

"No, nothing, thank you."

"I'll meet you in the reception area."

"Do you like it here, Missy?"

"Oh, it's okay. I'm getting married, and we're moving to California, so I don't really think about the office. The money's good, and there are some nice people. We're always under tons of pressure, though."

John Raymond came into the office. He was a dark, sharp-faced, small man, about 35, in short sleeves and red suspenders. "Hi, you're Susan?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." The phone rang. "Excuse me," he said.

Susan felt something on her neck. She put her hand under her hair and she could feel something crawling along her neck, something slimy. She pulled it away from her neck and looked at it. It looked like a black beetle, then she recognized what it was. It was a leech, and two droplets of her blood were clinging to it. My God! She had showered and shampooed and she was covered with leeches! She quickly thrust her hand back around her neck and through her hair, but she didn't find another one. She took a piece of Kleenex, put the leech into it, and shoved it into her coat pocket.

"You'll crater that deal," Raymond was saying into the phone. He tapped on the mouthpiece with his pencil, "If you do that, Mitch, you'll

crater the deal.” He lit a cigarette. “I’ll soldier for you, but I won’t be a litter-bearer.”

He looked at Susan, and she could feel her hand trembling. Suddenly he offered her a cigarette. She refused it.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m tracking you, Mitch. I said I’m tracking you. Okay, call me back with the numbers.” He hung up. “So,” he said to her without looking at her. He held his pencil over her resumé. “Why do you want to become a lawyer?”

They all ask that question first. She thought about the leech in the piece of Kleenex. She could hand it to him and leave. “I want to be a lawyer because I think it will be interesting and challenging.”

“What will be interesting and challenging?” He was watching her hand.

“Being a lawyer.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m presuming.”

“Do you find law school interesting and challenging?”

“Not particularly. Occasionally I do.”

“What courses are you interested in?”

“I like Corporations, I enjoy Contracts, Civil Procedure. I like Antitrust.” She was giving him the answers she knew she should give, and now she was sitting on her right hand. She had the sensation that the leech had gotten out of the piece of Kleenex and was crawling up out of her pocket. She looked down at her pocket.

The phone rang again, and she saw a tremor on the left side of his face. “Susan, I think that’s enough. It’s really a bad time for me. I’m trying to do a deal and be in Washington by 1:30. So why don’t you go back out to reception and see Missy? She’ll take you down the line.” He stuck his hand out.

“Okay,” he said into the phone, “Okay, Mitch, I’m still tracking you.” He lit another cigarette and blew some smoke toward the ceiling, swiveling in his chair so his back was to Susan. “Bottom line, net net. You call out the numbers.”

She went back to the reception room where Missy was waiting for her. “Well, how did it go?”

“I don’t know. Is there a washroom here?”

“Sure, I’ll get the key for you.”

In the washroom she brushed her hair furiously. She checked her collar and pulled her blouse open and then sprayed her neck with cologne. She did her lips again, but her mouth seemed to leer at her in the mirror, red like the droplets of blood on the leech. She rubbed all her lipstick off and washed her face so she had no makeup at all. She did look like a young nun.

She thought of flushing the leech down the toilet, but instead she carefully uncoiled the Kleenex. The leech was dormant, like a slug clinging to the underside of a lily pad. She prodded it once with her finger and it moved. She rinsed the Kleenex with water and closed it around the leech and carefully put it back into her pocket. For some reason she wanted to keep it alive.

Peter Lindauer was immaculately dressed in a gray flannel pinstripe suit. His shoes were perfectly shined, and his hair was scissored in neatly cut layers. He picked up her resumé and blew on his glasses. She looked at his degree on the wall. He was a graduate of Harvard Law. *Cambridgiensis. Cambridgiensis* was a gerund. She wondered if Lindauer knew it was a gerund.

"What is your GPA now, Susan?"

"I think it's 2.5 or maybe 2.6."

He blew on his glasses again and held them up. "I didn't know we were flying back 2.5s. We never used to fly back under 3.0."

"I guess I just hit it off with your interviewer."

"I really didn't know we were interviewing under 3.0."

She was thinking of the white light in the waiting room at school. How many times had she sat in the room in Madison waiting for the light to signal that the previous student was through? Twenty times? Twenty-five times staring at the light? Then impatiently, almost always, a male voice. "Susan—Miss Eliofson—ah, yes, Susan. Please come in and sit down." As soon as she sat, the second or third question. "What's your GPA, Susan?" There was a tree that she would watch out the window when they asked the question, a small bare-branched tree. Still, she had two flybacks, even with her 2.5. One of the women with a 3.5 had twenty flybacks. She was the Queen of the Flybacks, and Susan wasn't even a princess.

Lindauer clicked his silver ballpoint pen. "What was your LSAT?"

"Twenty-five."

"About mid-level."

"Yes, mid-level."

"Well," he said, "I see you like underwater photography. Scuba diving."

"Yes. I'm interested in diving."

"Where have you been diving?"

"Oh, the Caribbean, the Florida Keys. Last night I visited the Baltimore Aquarium."

"You've seen our aquarium?"

"Yes. Do you know they have a lawyer fish there?"

"No, I didn't know."



“They do.” She wondered if he would ask her what the lawyer fish’s GPA was, but he didn’t.

“Why do you want to be a lawyer, Susan?”

“I guess I want to feel like I’m participating in the system. I can probably do some good. Also, I’d like to make some money.” She crossed her legs.

“If you could buy any kind of a car, Susan, what kind of car would you buy?” He stared at her, expressionless.

“Probably a Porsche. A black Porsche.”

“Do you know what your SAT score was?”

“My SAT? That must have been five years ago.”

“Don’t you remember?”

“No, I really don’t remember.”

The phone rang. He turned away from her. “Yes? Oh, hello, Richard. No, I’ve been trying to confirm our luncheon. Yes. Yes, at the dining room in the Belvedere. No, I can talk. I’ve just got someone here applying for a job. We’re really through.” He turned and his glasses flashed at her. “Susan, I’m sure we’ll be in touch. Missy will be waiting for you in the reception room.” He turned away from her. “Richard, I also want to talk to you about those hearings on the twenty-fifth. I think our approach is a little foolish . . .”

She stood up. The sun was coming through the window in a circle of white light, like the light in Madison in the interview waiting room. She would never be the Queen of the Flybacks. Cambridgiensis. Our paternal school. Of course it was a gerund. What difference did it all make. She was so tired of the system. She just wanted to scream at him.

She reached into her pocket. His back was still turned. She unfolded the Kleenex and reached out to him and gently put the leech on the collar of his immaculate gray pinstripe suit. The leech immediately began to undulate toward his neck, crawling toward the golden hairs at the back of his neck. The golden pollen. The white lily.

“Excuse me,” she said, “Peter.”

He turned back toward her impatiently.

“Thank you,” she said.

