

The Interview

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The house in Bedford Square was so grey that it seemed to drink the morning light, and Clara Hale, standing on the pavement with her folder pressed against her coat, wondered whether she had mistaken the address. She had rehearsed this day for three weeks. She had read every report the Foundation had published, memorised the names of its trustees, and polished her answers until they shone like the brass plate beside the door. What she had not rehearsed was silence, and it was silence that met her when the door swung open.

A secretary with ink on her cuffs led her up four floors and left her before a tall door. The room beyond was lined with books, and an old man in a velvet jacket sat behind a desk worn by a hundred years of elbows. No sooner had Clara taken the chair opposite him than he asked, without looking up, whether she believed that a person could be good at her work and bad in her soul. The question was so abrupt that she laughed, and the laugh came out wrong in the hush. Thus the strangest hour of her life commenced.

He did not ask about her degree, or mention the salary or the duties in the advertisement. Not only did he ignore the folder she had brought, he never once glanced at the references she had fought to gather. Instead he asked about her earliest aspiration, what she had wanted to become at ten, and why she had stopped wanting it. Crucially, she noticed, he wrote nothing down.

Having waited until her answers grew careless, he opened a drawer and took out a single sheet of paper, which she recognised, with a small drop of the stomach, as her application essay. He read the first sentence aloud, a compelling sentence she had rewritten eleven times. It spoke of her grandmother, who had kept a bookshop in Leeds and taught her that truth was the only currency that never lost its value. "Arguably the finest opening sentence we received," the old man said. "Did you believe it when you wrote it?"

Clara asserted that she had believed every word, and her voice came out steady. What she did not say was that the degree listed so proudly beneath her name did not exist. She had abandoned her studies in her final year, when her mother fell ill, and never gone back. If she had not invented that first class result, she would not be sitting in this room now; she understood that with bleak clarity. The lie had opened the door. It had yielded her this morning, and nothing more.

The old man folded the essay and slid it into the drawer. It was not anger that she saw in his face but something subtler and worse, a quiet, profound disappointment, as though she had confirmed a theory he had hoped was false. There was no ambiguity in his next question, and no kindness, though his voice stayed soft. He asked, looking at her fully for the first time, whether she would like to tell him anything about the University of Edinburgh. Grasping the arms of her chair, she

understood that this was not an interview at all, and perhaps never had been.

"You know," she said at last. It was not a question. "I know," he said. "The university answered my letter last Tuesday. I have spent a week wondering what you would do if you were given every chance to keep your secret." Little did it help her now, the weeks of preparation, the polished answers. "Not only have you wasted my morning, Miss Hale, you have wasted something of your own, though I do not think you can yet name it."

Something in her chest, some tight mechanism wound years before, came loose. If she were the woman her grandmother had raised, she would have told the truth at the beginning; but the beginning was gone, and she was nonetheless the woman sitting here now. "I never finished the degree," she said. "My mother was dying, and I chose her, and afterwards I was ashamed of what the choosing had cost me. The shame made the lie, and I will not defend it." She heard the words as though someone else were speaking, someone with more dignity than she had ever managed, and her conscience, so long a dull ache, went suddenly still.

Only then did the old man smile. The founder, he said, embarking on old age, had left instructions sealed for forty years: the archivist must be someone who could be trusted with uncomfortable truths, for the archive held the private papers of people who had known what it is to strive and to fail, who had endured betrayal and kept their integrity, and who deserved a guardian with a conscience. Candidates with gleaming degrees had come through that door for months, all false in some small way. What the Foundation could not advertise was the only qualification that mattered. When Clara walked out into the square, the rain had stopped, and the wet stones shone as though the city itself had been washed and begun again.