

The Interview

He is woken up at 3 in the morning by his cell phone ring.

“Hello?” he answers groggily.

“Is this Mr. Gordon Hawthorne, senior editor at Penguin?” He can’t recognize the baritone voice.

“Yes. Is this an emergency? It’s the middle of the night.”

“I apologize about the lateness, but we would like to interview you for a very lucrative position, and it’s quite time-sensitive. Are you free today at 9AM?”

He sits slouched over in his bed. He turns on the lamp on his night stand as he’s trying to wake himself up in order to be as professional as possible, but he’s addled with a mixture of confusion and sleep.

“Who’s we? Which company?”

“Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to divulge that information over the phone. It’s classified. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I can have someone pick you up at your apartment, 152 Apartment 3E Ludlow Street, at 8:15AM. Does that work for you?”

Who the fuck is this? he thinks, and how the hell does he know where I live?

“Mr. Hawthorne, I understand this is a very confusing phone call, and you must have a lot of questions. All I can tell you is that this is a government-related position. All other details about the project cannot be discussed over the phone. The rest will be revealed during the interview.”

He rubs his hand over his face in a vain attempt to wake himself up fully. “Do I even have a choice?”

The voice on the phone lets out a deep belly laugh. “Of course, but you’ll want to choose to come. Be ready at 8:15AM. Also, don’t bring anything—no cell phone, watch, nothing.”

Click.

He stares at the phone as if it’s a Magic 8-Ball, waiting to reveal the answer to the mysterious question, “What the hell just happened?” As he sits in consternation, a cold hand touches his back. He turns and sees the woman he picked up last night from The Blind Tiger bar. Truthfully, after all the drinks they had, he forgot exactly what she looks like, but he’s pleased now—chestnut hair shoulder-length, green saucer eyes, and even a bit of baby fat on her cheeks, almost cherub-like. The rest of her is hiding under the covers, and under normal circumstances it would be a mystery he’d solve.

“Sorry about that. Listen, something’s come up, so I’m afraid you’re going to have to go home. I’ll get you an Uber.”

“Is everything all right, Greg?”

“It’s Gordon...and I really have to take care of something.” *She doesn’t remember my name?* he thinks. *I’m never talking to this woman again. Then again, I did forget what she looked like, so I guess we’re even.* He orders the Uber as he walks to his desk to grab one of his business cards to give to her.

He’s a good interviewer, always has been. Internship at Penguin, job offer, youngest senior editor in the company’s history, and working with literary talents like Nick Hornby, David Benioff, J.M. Coetzee, and others, before he turned 30, all because he’s *that* good at selling himself. *It doesn’t hurt that I’m no slouch at my job either,* he reminds himself, and a smile emerges.

But none of that prepares him for this. *How the hell do you prepare for an interview when you don't know the job or company?*

Under normal circumstances, he would research the company in order to tailor which skills and experiences in his jobs relate best to the job description, and to prepare questions to ask to demonstrate his knowledge of the market. He'd practice his possible STAR Method responses. But he can't do any of that.

“Fuck.”

He's wearing his khaki suit, one that makes him look profession but still stand out from the typical black business suit. He has his driver's license, a credit card, and cash in his shoe, just in case. A black Ford Escalade with tinted windows and government license plates pulls up right in front of him. Out of the car steps a bulldog of a man, dressed in a no-frills black-suit/white-shirt-and-black-tie combo. “Get in,” the driver says, opening the door with such haste that it looks like he's trying to rip it off. Gordon doesn't even have time to buckle his seatbelt before the car starts moving.

The car stops in front of a dilapidated warehouse near Pier 39 in New York. Windows covered in filth, graffiti with epithets, and even a crumbling façade all adorn the building.

The inside tells another tale. As soon as he enters the building, he's blinded by pristine white—chairs, receptionist desk, coffee table, marble floor. He laughs at the juxtaposition. *Typical government clandestine building. Might as well put a sign out front that says, “Definitely Not a Shitty Rundown Building Being Used as a Government Office.”* This is another one of his tactics, staying calm by using humor to ease his tension. The people that don't perform well

under pressure are the ones that think that there *is* pressure. It helps him a little right now, but he can still feel his hand shaking.

“Mr. Gordon Hawthorne?” the receptionist, an attractive woman in her early thirties, asks. Her navy-blue business suit, in stark contrast with everything else, readjusts his eyes.

“Make yourself comfortable while you wait.”

She extends her right arm toward the coffee table and chair. She gives a breezy smile, so he figures she’s probably new. Her makeup is a bit too perfect, so she’s single. Her gestures are deliberate, and her posture is impeccable, which could mean a Southern girl, someone who’s had etiquette ingrained into her. She has a very small beauty mark on her right cheek. It’s the closest thing to a blemish that the room has.

Reluctantly, he walks over to the chair and sits. *How can I escape if shit hits the fan?* he wonders. *The driver is standing by the entrance, so no mad dash out there, and the only other door in the room is behind the receptionist. Who knows who’s inside there?*

Why the hell did I agree to this? a question running incessantly through his mind the minute the phone call ended. *A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but curiosity killed the...*

A door opens. Out walks a woman, a little on the heavy side. The first thing he sees is a wedding ring. He bets that she has a child, maybe even two. Despite the makeup, her face is worn. She has bags under her eyes. *Yeah, at least two kids.*

She stares at him with a look of repugnance the whole time she walks by. *Why? What the hell did I ever do to you, lady?* His head tilts slightly to the left and his eyes squint as he debates whether or not he ever met her. He can’t think of any occasion. *So why the scowl?*

“We’re ready for you, Mr. Hawthorne. Please go inside.”

Her left arm out to usher him into the other room, the receptionist remains silent. It's the hardest his heart has ever beaten. He needs to do something to calm his nerves...

"As long as you're coming in with me," he says and flashes a smile. He hopes that she can't see his lips quiver slightly. She smiles back briefly, a bit as if she's broken character, then returns to her blank face. He's nervous, yet his body acts with all the confidence in the world as his legs move him through the door.

The white room doesn't faze him. The rough voice that says, "Come in," does. It's the voice from the phone call. Gordon takes several steps before he can get a better look at who spoke. A bald, gaunt, man sits behind a black desk.

"Did you find the place OK?" The man smiles again, evidently pleased with the joke.

"Piece of cake," he sits down in the chair in front of the desk. He knows that his chair is lower to the ground than the one behind the desk—an old psychology trick in order to subconsciously tip the power balance in favor of the person behind the desk—yet sitting he's a bit taller than the man.

"Good," the man replies, and his smile appears as wide as his face. "Sorry about disturbing you in the middle of the night. It's a rather urgent matter."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"In due time, Mr. Hawthorne. 'Patience is a key virtue.'"

"So is trust."

"Well put." The man gives an approving nod then writes in a legal pad. "Shall we begin the interview?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Trust me, this is a tremendous opportunity. You *want* to do well."

Gordon lets out a small sigh, one that's inaudible in order not to be viewed as confusion on his part by the man, the interviewer. He has his tricks, but this man is in complete control.

"Yes."

"Good." A perfunctory smile slithers across the man's face, this time without any trace of humanity. "I'm Mr. Washington. I've been charged by the government to assemble, how shall I put it, a team, and you are one of the possible candidates."

"You know, you could have even mentioned a salary as a way to make this not so needlessly vague."

"Trust me, salary *won't* be an issue for the people we choose."

Mr. Washington picks up Gordon's printed resume. "Is this up to date? Two years as a senior editor at Penguin; graduate magna cum laude from Rutgers University for your Bachelor's, Master's at NYU. Currently you're working on an anthology of short stories about aging in men." Mr. Washington lets out a grunt that's supposed to be a laugh.

"Yes, this is all correct, Mr. Washington."

"Don't care to ask how we got it?"

"You're the government. I'd be more curious if you *couldn't* get my most recent resume."

"Not naïve—that's a good sign." There goes the scribbling. Behind Mr. Washington is an inspirational poster, the only source of multiple colors in an object in the office. Gordon laughs slightly at the poster.

"What's so funny, Mr. Hawthorne?"

"The poster behind you—'Success is all about the journey, not the destination.' It feels out of place in this room."

“What do you think of the message?”

“I believe that there are plenty of opportunities for everyone, so there’s no need for quotes like that. If you want something and work for it, it shouldn’t be a journey. I’m sure that’s why you’re behind your desk, Mr. Washington.”

“Thank you. As flattered as I am, time is sensitive, Mr. Hawthorne, so let’s avoid the pleasantries.”

“If that’s the case, why don’t we get right down to it?” Another technique he frequently uses—role reversal to make the interviewer feel as if they’re not in control.

“You drive a hard bargain,” Mr. Washington says, unctuousness dripping from every syllable. “Fine. The world is ending.”

He offers no reaction. At first. “You’re serious?”

Mr. Washington repays the favor and remains stoic. Only the low hum of the air conditioner in the room is heard.

“How?”

“Does it matter? When all is said and done, literally, will it mean anything that it was war, famine, whatever caused it? Will that comfort *you*?”

“I...suppose not.”

“Like I said, time is sensitive!” Mr. Washington chortles. Gordon cannot understand how Mr. Washington’s behavior belies the gravity of the situation.

“Why am I *here* though? Surely it can’t be just to find out that...”

“Oh, right. Sorry. Yes. Have you heard of Kepler-186f?”

“The exoplanet that is 490 light years away? I read a story about it. Earth’s Twin, correct?” Mr. Washington writes, again. “I know there was some debate on whether or not life could exist on it, because of the density...”

“It can.”

Gordon waits for more information, but Mr. Washington taps the pen calmly against the desk. Mr. Washington is expecting him to say something, but what exactly? *Great?* Then it hits him. “You’ve been chosen to go.”

“Bingo.” Mr. Washington puts the pen to use again, and the sound of furious scribbling rings in Gordon’s ears. “You are quite perceptive, Mr. Hawthorne. That is definitely a quality that is admired.”

“But wait, if...the *job?*”

“Keep going, Mr. Hawthorne. Believe me, it’s helping your application immensely!” Mr. Washington appears as if he’s dancing in his chair with enthusiasm, yet it causes his voice to go even lower, and it resonates throughout the room.

“You’re interviewing candidates...to join you?”

“Yes! Isn’t that great? You deduced all of that on your own. That’s impressive. Great cognitive skills. No wonder you’ve had so much success.”

What does that matter now? All of the years of making sure that he did his best, even better than his best, all added up to what? This. But what is this? “I don’t understand though.” He’s on unfamiliar terrain because he doesn’t know what to do next.

“Now we both know you’re being modest, Mr. Hawthorne.”

Gordon has a quizzical expression, which causes Mr. Washington to change demeanor, almost downtrodden.

“We are choosing the best candidate in *every* field to join us to continue our way of life. One accountant, one professor, and so on. Do you understand now?”

Gordon’s brow is no longer furrowed. His stomach becomes very tight. His face blanches. The reality of what is happening is starting to fully hit him, and the room starts to become even brighter.

“Do you need a glass of water, Mr. Hawthorne? I know this is a lot to take in.”

And then he remembers: *at least two kids*. His mouth becomes dry. He has the urge to stand, but his legs won’t cooperate—they feel soggy. Mr. Washington walks across the room, and a few seconds later returns with a glass of water. It’s placed in front of him, but his arms are like his legs. He just looks at Mr. Washington.

“What about the woman...she was in here before me...does she have a family?”

“A husband and three children, the third just born a few months ago.”

He’s going to be sick. He can almost taste the bile.

“No longer sewing her wild oats like you, huh, Mr. Hawthorne?”

Though Mr. Washington’s tone is jovial, to him it sounds like a sneer, as if rubbing salt in the wound of his singledom. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can continue.” His legs still won’t listen to him tell them to work.

“I understand that this is a lot to digest. We can take a break if you’d like.”

“No. I don’t think I can proceed period, not when I know that—“

“Ah. I see. *Morals*.” Mr. Washington has a bemused look. “Does it comfort you to know that she didn’t hesitate, not even for a second, about the position? It didn’t bother her, not one bit, when she found out that there were other candidates. We have one man from Ukraine, an orphan, who laced up his bootstraps and worked his way up. That didn’t affect her in the

slightest. In fact, between you and me, I think it actually lit a spark in her. After she learned this, she was more aggressive, determined in her interview. Hell, to be perfectly honest, she didn't look like she gave a damn about whether or not her family came with her—she just wanted to live!”

He reaches across the desk for the glass of water. The glass is heavy for his arm to lift. The liquid refreshes his parched lips. *All of the other interviews, the stakes were nothing compared to this. Forget being scared. It didn't bother that woman. Let's show him why you're the best.*

“Do you feel better now, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Yes. I'd like to continue, if that's OK.”

“I knew you had that fighter's spirit—it's why I chose you.” Mr. Washington nods proudly. “Would you like me to go over some of the details of what life will be like?”

He finds it odd to hear the perks of working for a company in this manner. *401k, medical, all meaningless. The only benefit that matters for this job is the ability to continue to wake up every day.*

“There will be close to two million people that will live in our new society. Again, those selected will be hand-chosen by myself, as well as other individuals like me, all over the world. For the first time in human history, we will truly have a borderless society. Ironic, isn't it? People always claimed that imaginary boundaries would lead people to destroy each other, and here we are, about to have the first society that blends seamlessly *all* cultures because the world will be destroyed! Truly incredible what humans can achieve when we're determined.”

Mr. Washington rises from his desk and begins to pace back and forth, like a general galvanizing his troops. His shoes hitting the floor have a cadence, which syncs up with his speech.

“We will begin transporting the ones selected next week. It will take quite some time for us to actually reach the destination, but you will be in a sleep state, so it will feel like a simple dream. When you wake up, you’re alive and on your new home planet!”

At this moment, Mr. Washington stops exactly next to the inspirational poster. In Gordon’s eyes, the colors all merge together, indistinguishable from one another.

“The truth of the matter is, NASA discovered this planet about two decades ago. In secret, we’ve been building the infrastructure ever since, just in case. It’s always good to have a back-up plan, right? There will be about a year or two transition where we will continue to solidify our way of life while we continue to finalize everything—roads, houses, and so on. But rest assured, it will be quick. Us humans, we’re adaptable. We’ll acclimate to the new climate. We’ll figure out how to farm on our new world. In a sense, we’ll be like the Pilgrims.

“Now I know you’re not married. And that’s OK. There’ll be single people too. In a weird way, it’ll really make your selection process *a lot* easier. You won’t have all these needless qualms about a potential mate since your options won’t seem unlimited.

“You know, perception is the most important aspect. If you look at it in one sense, this whole event can be seen as a good thing. I know that sounds crude, but consider epidemics that are facing society today—famine from overpopulation, disease, poverty, crime. All of them are wiped out in one fell swoop!”

Mr. Washington’s hand sweeps across his body, though the gesture doesn’t seem natural to Gordon.

“Anyway, my point is, if you were married, your family may not be able to join our society,” Mr. Washington sits back down in his chair, which squeaks.

His body doesn’t feel soggy anymore. He stands up. He no longer feels queasy, but something else. “You have a problem with this?”

“With saving humanity? No, I don’t see any issue there!” Mr. Washington leans back in the chair. Gordon stands up.

“But by *choosing* who lives, you also are picking who dies. Don’t you see that? Can’t you see how it’s unfair to arbitrarily and subjectively say that one person is more deserving than another to live? Who gave you that right in the first place?”

“Where is this coming from? I thought you believed that if you want something, you should work for it. Don’t you feel that *I* have worked for the right to live? What about you? Haven’t you spent your life trying to be the best? Doesn’t that make you ideal to continue the human race’s existence?”

“I also believe that there are *plenty* of opportunities for everybody. But this? You’re killing people by not choosing them!”

“Mr. Hawthorne,” Mr. Washington leans forward in his chair and puts his hands on his desk, and begins, “it is unfortunate to hear you speak this way. I’m offering humanity a chance to survive, and you accuse me of murder.” Mr. Washington rises from the chair, and Gordon sees how small this man truly is. “Don’t you see that for the sake of the masses, some have to suffer? If you truly believe in an egalitarian society, which it sounds like you do considering what you’re *preaching*, this is the way to achieve it! We’ll begin anew and everyone will be equal. It can and will be perfect.”

“You’re talking about more than six billion people dying. How is that perfect?”

“Mr. Hawthorne, some people are not worth saving!” The sound of Mr. Washington’s fist reverberates in the room even louder than his voice did. “I find it interesting to see you feigning to wrestle with this moral quandary, one that you’re creating inexplicably. It’s OK to acknowledge that some people are better than others.”

After all, isn’t that what my accomplishments prove? My acts of modesty in the face of my achievements have always been my way of downplaying it--I deserve every success because I’m better than everyone else.

“Mr. Washington,” he says, and clears his throat, which has suddenly dried up again, “whether or not your sentiment is true doesn’t matter. In good conscience, I cannot continue this process. Thank you for your time.”

Mr. Washington climbs back in the chair. *What the hell is this guy going to do now? This is the government! They can make me disappear so...wait. So what? The world is ending.*

As he walks away, the image of being taken out is a blistering reminder of the future no longer available to him, to six billion people.

“Prudence. That’s the woman’s name.”

As he closes the door, he whispers her name. Truthfully, he’s unsure of the reason behind his decision. *Is it really wrong to choose one person over another? Or am I afraid that I might not nail the most important interview of my life?* Either way, he accepts his fate. He ends the interview.