

THE
COMMON

ISSUE NO. 06

\$12 US



Helen Hooper

MEETINGS

KIRSTEN ENTERED THIS PARTICULAR STARBUCKS right after her interview at The Wilderness Foundation across the street. It had not gone well. She'd exited into the midmorning glare and crossed the street in the direction the traffic light permitted—she had to go one way or another—and continued through the glass revolving door to the counter, where she ordered a grande hot chocolate, yes on the whipped cream. Set down her bag, claimed a table. Two mothers worked their strollers around the table to her left like lawnmowers around a mailbox. A man dialing his cell phone took the table to her right.

—Hey. It's me. Anything?

In his early to mid-forties, perhaps fifteen years older than Kirsten. Something faintly nautical about him, about his jaw and his commanding manner.

—Great. Super. OK. Listen, got a meeting, should be no more than an hour or so.

168 | Meetings. This world of meetings, of being needed somewhere. Law school was supposed to take her there. Quite possible she was the only one in her class still looking for a job. She'd collected a file of letters stating that there were many qualified applicants (though the letters never quite said that she was one of them) and wishing her the best of luck in her career. The Wilderness Foundation interview was the last one on her calendar. Law school had been a lot harder than expected, and her lousy grades mattered more than they ought to. She'd been *awarded*—as she liked to word it in cover letters—the JD. Not nothing; not enough.

The man at the next table picked up his phone and dialed, then pressed it to his ear with a flat palm.

—Listen. I can't take the kids Saturday. What? Because of a conflict is why. Uh huh. Well, I think I mailed it Tuesday. Fine. Yep. I heard you.

He stabbed the phone with his thumb and put it down. Picked up three pink packets, stacked them up, held them by a corner, shook them once, then ripped the stack open and poured the white powder into his coffee. He fit the lid back on, swirled, sipped. Kirsten sipped her hot chocolate. The blue laptop screen in front of her displayed icons and toolbars. The computer glowed with functionality. What was it she was going to do?

Write that thank-you letter promptly! The lady in the law school placement office highlighted the advice on the job-hunting tip sheet, as if Kirsten didn't already know it. The people in the Wilderness Foundation interview had slid their business cards down to the end of the gray Formica table, where she'd sat and collected them. Nina, the boss, paused as she lifted reading glasses that dangled from an oversized red chain around her neck, looked down the table and said, "Mornin', gang." *Be alert for clues to corporate culture!* Mirthful? Possibly?

—Here's where we stand in the process.

She'd been the first one to slide a card, prompting everyone else to do the same. Nina Reznak, Assistant General Counsel for Administration, The Wilderness Foundation, *saving the wildest places on earth.*

—These are the tier-one interviews; this is the tier-one search committee. The tier-two search committee, which will meet with three to five finalists, will be a different, smaller, team.

As she said this, she flipped through Kirsten's résumé, licking her thumb, turning the pages, unimpressed. There was no mirth. Nothing.

The lady in the placement office, while she'd marked passages in the handout with her pink highlighter, had said it was all about networking.

—You know, building and nurturing professional connections. Especially in this economy.

Wasn't that was she was doing? Wasn't that the placement office lady's job, especially at this tuition?

She capped her marker and handed Kirsten "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Law School Grads" to get her out of the office.

The man at the next table wore a nice blazer, real camelhair. Under that, a maroon V-neck over a white shirt. It covered a little softness in the middle. Dark, wavy hair swept back diagonally from a receding hairline across his boxy head. An overgrown version of the Brooks Brothers collegian whose mother might have photographed him twenty years ago, coming off so much better than his cousins at Thanksgiving.

He glanced toward the door, swatted a few crumbs with his napkin. Waiting. He picked up his phone again, typed with his thumb, and extended his arm

to read what it said. Kirsten could see glowing lines of messages skittering up the screen. Email. He dialed again, holding the phone to his ear, then tilted it away, punching another number, then back to his ear. Voice mail. She heard one of the messages still playing, a voice oblivious to its tininess, the way her own messages must sound, as he pressed a button to end it. Why get into it now? Fingertips drummed the table. Eyeing the door, sipping his coffee, hunched over it. The door, the watch, the door again, and then he picked up the phone and dialed.

—Me again. Burt there?

Sipped.

—Oh, right. When he gets in, you let him know I'm out. How 'bout Shan. Great.

Sipping, glancing at the door.

—Hey, bud. How's it going. Listen. I got this computer thing; maybe you could help. When I go into Outlook, it, like, freezes, then. . . .

He rose slightly and waved to a woman who just came in.

—Hey, let me get back to you on that, Shan.

As the woman approached, he stood, smiled, and pointed to the phone with the hand that wasn't holding it, nodded his head a little as if he and the woman were agreeing on something private.

—Appreciate it. We'll talk about it when I get in. No problem.

Punched off the call, begged her pardon, shook her hand. She asked if he was waiting long, hoped not.

—I had calls. That's what these places are good for.

He boomed this, something like a laugh layered under his words, his hand going to her elbow. It was easy for Kirsten to watch all this as the two of them navigated the space between the tables. Easy to see his precise, false smile while the woman got her coffee at the counter and he adjusted the chairs and meticulously squared away the little plastic frame holding an ad for pumpkin lattes. Making the table his territory, something he thoroughly possessed now, his vessel, the rented yacht to which the woman was a visiting dignitary.

Kirsten peeled the lid from her cup, licked the whipped cream off the underside. He might as well have called the weather, that last call of his. Just a prop for the picture he wanted this woman to see: a go-to guy managing it all with grace, clearing a space on his schedule for this little chat. It was important to make time, reach out, stay in touch. Living your values, broadening your base,

—You've been tapping away there. They got free Wi-Fi now?

—Yeah.

—Surfing the Net, social networking. You kids!

—I'm an attorney.

Too harsh.

—Looking for a job.

He leaned forward into the space between the tables, elbows on his knees. She could see just how far his hairline had receded, the cookie crumbs in the wool of his vest.

—Any luck?

—Looking for the right fit.

—Gotcha. Good deal.

He was back to the falsely cheerful voice he'd used when the woman had first arrived.

—Let me tell you something. You look like a bright young person, so I'll tell you something straight up. Ready?

—Sure.

Talking to her had perked him up.

—You never stop looking for a job. Never.

—Never?

He pushed off, his chair scraping loudly, and dusted off the crumbs. Dignity.

—Never, kid.

Who was he playing? That guy, that old movie. We'll always have Paris. We'll never have Paris. Let him have this.

—Never.

—Never.

—Gotcha.

He reached and rapped her table lightly with his knuckles. Genuinely cheerful now. Because of her, because of what she said.

He finished off his coffee, lifted the lid, and placed the wadded cookie paper in it. He fished the torn pink packets and the woman's business card out of his pocket, crumpled them together, added them to the cup, and replaced the lid. Tidy. Sidling past, he gave Kirsten a tiny salute.

sharpening your sword. Not just sitting, meekly sipping your warm creamy grande through the nipple of your disposable cup. He sat sideways to the table, one leg crossed jauntily over the other, elbows tucked, appreciating the scene, coffee cup held in the wrist-dipping style of an old-time movie star dangling a Gauloise, the picture of wry, masterly reflection. Kirsten fit the lid back on her cup and clicked "New Document" on the computer.

Dear _____. It would be a merge document, a letter to each member of the interview team. She knew how to do this from her internship with Congressman Lozano during college. But the sentences and paragraphs came hard. She appreciated efficiencies, formats, templates, prototypes. There was no need to build perfectly common things from scratch every single time.

How to start?

I am writing to thank you for meeting with me—taking the time to meet with me—today with regard to—regarding the position of attorney for grants and contracts. I enjoyed meeting with you—meeting you—and the rest of the tier-one search committee—the members of the committee. That was two meetings; fix in next draft. I wanted—in the past, but not now?—want to let you know—but it sounded more dignified in the past tense—wanted to let you know that my interest in the job—position—has increased even more due to discussing it with you—no—has grown, has expanded, is keener than ever. Synonyms in Word: augmented, amplified, enlarged, bigger, improved—has been amplified, has been greatly amplified, as a result of our discussion this morning.

Every sentence in that paragraph began with "I."

Fuck.

She wished she could say something that meant something. She wished she could use words in some real way, to do something, to move something—an idea, a feather, anything—from one box to another box, but this felt more like crocheting a doily: complicated, intricate, pinched, purely ornamental.

The woman returned with her coffee. Straight-spined, she moved with smooth purpose, putting her trench coat and elegant brown leather briefcase on one chair and sitting in another, her back to Kirsten. Reddish hair, shot with grey, cut in a neat shag. She was older, say five, ten years older than him. The khaki belt of her coat slipped out and lay limp along the floor. Was Kirsten supposed to tell her? (Pardon me? Your belt, the belt of your coat, is on the floor?) Um, no.

The man started.

—Since we spoke at the symposium in Chicago, I've been looking forward to sitting down with you. I hope this isn't a bad time.

This was it. This was networking.

—No, this is fine.

—Great. So. Listen. I'm not going to waste your time here.

Clasping his hands together definitively, in a kind of athletic prayer, he continued.

—You know SCG?

—Sure.

—So I can be candid with you. With a change in leadership, the challenge is sustaining the paradigm shift for the long term. You knock down that framework, build a new one, new checks and balances, new expectations.

The woman sipped her coffee, listening. The man continued.

—So last year, the thing with Marvin.

He leaned in with a shake of his head and a wave of his hand, dismissing some invisible wisp of ugliness.

—I feel awful about what the press did with it. I personally called Marvin and told him that. But I was asked to step in and I did it and did it happily. And now the board has at long last done their job and come to a decision. That's their prerogative. Their job. I realize that. I have no problem with that.

He planted his elbows and put his fist in his palm.

—I'm not shy about saying it straight up. Maybe it's just the kind of guy I am. Do I dot every *i* and cross every *t*? Maybe, maybe not. Is everyone happy? That I can't control.

This morning, Kirsten had taken a Xanax for the interview. Otherwise she'd have risked what happened yesterday at the Patent Office interview, when she became so anxious she couldn't speak. That is, the words she needed, the right words, wouldn't come, or come in time. They got stuck somewhere inside, leaving a gap she had to fill with junk. You have anxiety disorder, the doctor said, writing on a pad. This has one refill. My brain is a whajacallit, a concentration camp for words, she told her friend Dolores. Maybe they'll get out, maybe they won't. It's random. That's not even funny, but I feel bad for you, Dolores replied. Had she said the wrong thing?

Fear made things worse. Are you OK? The kind, kind Patent Officer HR man had asked. Can we get you a drink of water? Let's get you a drink of water,

he'd said, as if on behalf of the agency, of the department, of the United States government policy on compassion.

Last night, drinking mint juleps and smoking, Kirsten told Dolores about the kind man, the water, his saying we all get flustered from time to time.

*“My brain is a whajacallit,
a concentration camp for words,
she told her friend Dolores.”*

—It's a bitch being such a fucking nutjob, Kirsten said, trying not to whine. Dolores probably had it tough, too. For one thing, she weighed about twice as much as Kirsten.

They'd been good friends since second year, when Dolores transferred in from night school, and when they'd graduated, close together near the bottom of the class, Kirsten bought Dolores a silver julep cup, something that Dolores had coveted ever since she saw one at a sorority that she had not been invited to join down at The University of Alabama. Dolores went to law school to be able to live that way, she once joked, to get ahold of the silver cup of the law and drink its sugared whiskey. She tapped the ash off her cigarette and expertly plucked at her tunic where it snagged in the fold between her bosom and her midriff, smoothing it over her bulk. She took another drag, squinting, and then exhaled a long horn of smoke.

—Anytime you'd rather be fat, you let me know.

The job at The Wilderness Foundation was Kirsten's last choice, the fallback of fallbacks. A living, sitting in a windowless cubicle reviewing contracts at a nonprofit salary.

—We're a cause-driven institution, said Nina Reznik, removing and releasing her glasses. They hung from the red chain, wobbling.

Do your research before the interview was highlighted in pink on the tip sheet. Why, why why why had she gotten wasted with Dolores last night instead of memorizing their fucking website? Between her hangover and the Xanax, she felt—how to put it?—vague.

—Most of our employees could make more elsewhere, but they're here because they believe in the cause.

The ornithologist, sunglasses bulging in the pocket of his tattersall shirt, went next.

—Some consider this a stock question, but I like to ask it anyway. It's the kind of question we should all have the answer to. Where do you see yourself in five, ten, fifteen years? What's your objective, your goal, your what we call here—he made air quotes—"desired future condition"?

Rehearse your answers to questions you can anticipate, e.g. questions about your background and career goals.

—My goal, my objective, is to make a substantive contribution, utilizing my specialized suite of legal skills for

Fine-tune your answer per the organization's mission.

—to the saving of the species. I've always loved animals.

And don't be afraid to use a little (tasteful) humor.

—Don't laugh, but when I was a kid I had this huge set, collection, of stuffed animals like giraffes, bears, elephants, and this enormous—

Kirsten turned up her hands and reached out her arms, as if supporting something long and floppy.

—a reptile, snake, a huge stuffed snake I kept under the covers with me at night.

But don't overdo it @!!!

The ornithologist looked down at the table, pretending he didn't want his smirk noticed. Other tier-one team members hardened their expressions at neutral but stole looks to the left and right, except for one woman who had smiled and nodded throughout the interview, pleased with her own Girl-Scoutish practice to give kindness to people who needed it.

—Sounds just like my kid!

Kirsten's rejection letter from The McNabb Group, her first choice, came the day before yesterday. A lobbying firm: wouldn't she be a natural, given her Congressional internship? She'd pictured herself sitting at a desk, wearing better clothes, perhaps a mustard-colored cashmere sweater set and a vintage bracelet, collecting information about bills and laws for appreciative clients. The McNabb Group paid people well for downloading information into PowerPoint templates, no problem. But she hadn't even been called in to interview. *We appreciate your interest. There were many highly qualified applicants. We wish you the best of luck as you pursue employment in your field.* Kirsten showed Dolores the letter last night.

—BullSHIT.

Dolores was a good friend. She knew when to crank up the outrage.

—I don't believe these douche bags.

Dolores's job in the Department of Agriculture's bureaucratic dungeon of a legal department started next Monday, and Dolores had no illusions about how it was going to be. But she'd figure it out. Morbid obesity was like a magic cloak of invisibility. People unwittingly revealed themselves, their weak spots and secrets, right in front of you. Dolores leaned across the coffee table, handing the letter back.

—Tell these jerks they can take this and ram it up their ass.

A small girl, dressed completely in pink and carrying a thickly frosted cupcake, walked slowly toward the back. The girl—three, four—inspected the cupcake and picked off a sprinkle and put it in her mouth, leaving a divot in the frosting. A man wearing a baseball cap, paying at the counter, called over to her.

—Wait till we sit down, babe.

The woman still listened to the man, Kirsten saw, but also watched the girl as she approached.

—goes without saying a robust process to ground-truth—

The woman noticed then the belt of her coat lying on the floor, in the girl's path. She yanked it away, turning back to the man, interrupting him to say something. He answered quickly.

—Yes, it's amazing, you are absolutely correct. And you put it so well, so succinctly, so absolutely spot-on. I need to have a little bitty sign scrolling those very words across my computer screen. *Transparency, communication.*

He threw open his hands.

—Communication!

He placed one fist quietly back in the other palm.

—*Transparent* communication.

The woman forced a small laugh.

—What about Mel Parker? she asked.

The man leaned forward, lifting his coffee.

—So, he was, at some point, on our steering committee. Of course Mel's an old hippie at heart, and I say that with genuine affection, a good guy, but nothing he could or would do for me. You know Tom McCrelly?

—Sure.

—Solid guy.

—He certainly is.

They sipped their drinks.

—What about ILR? the woman asked.

Networking, in progress. Like mobsters in their perfect world, made men suavely seeking small favors. A black market for names.

—For them I have a lot of respect. I sat down with them last year, and my belief is they're going to take another look.

He bent forward, both elbows on the table, tilting in.

—I don't know why I tell you this. Maybe because you're aware of the context. And to tell the truth, it has honestly been terrific. But, you know, I loved Brazil. I'd love to get back down there.

The woman nodded politely, leaning back slightly and glancing away, across the café, across Kirsten and across the mothers at the next table, their babies asleep in the strollers, and all the other people with their laptops and phones, toward the opposite wall, where the pink girl stood on a long padded bench next to the man in the baseball cap. He patted the bench, trying to get the girl to sit down.

At the next table, the man went on as if the woman was still paying attention to him.

—you know, at some juncture.

Kirsten saw on the woman's placid, tolerant face that she was tired of the man, had already decided not to give him whatever it was he wanted. The meeting was a courtesy, a burden of her position. She sought in the cupcake girl a moment of relief.

He went on.

—Of course, my kids and their mom are up here.

The woman turned back to him.

—Do you have any kids?

—Nope.

And on, mustering earnestness, what a great ride it had been, what fun he was having in the immediate. Had to respect his effort: no need to look desperate. Kirsten drank the last of her hot chocolate, the cold, syrupy dregs. She ought to save the letter. *Thx wildernessfdtn*. Second paragraph.

As you go forward with—or, in?—the selection process please let me know if there are any questions I can answer. What did that mean, really? As you go forward in the selection process I am available to answer any questions you may have. Well, not any question. She wouldn't answer every question they might have about her. Or couldn't.

Dolores planned to pay off her student loans through her USDA job, which qualified her for the law school's extended payment plan. How long would it take? Kirsten asked. Hard to say, what with the government pay scale, merit steps, cost-of-living hikes. A good while. Doing hard time.

—And you?

Kirsten didn't have much of a plan.

—Working on it.

But how? How was that even possible?

—Well, doll, you just think about that tamarrah, Dolores said, turning on her Alabama accent.

The man raised his voice a bit as a wave of new customers arrived. The staff called out orders, worked the coffee grinders and steamers.

—Exactly, no, you are absolutely right. And I'm meeting with the committee on just that, maybe not in those words, but, agreed, there are absolutely immediate no-regrets measures.

As he talked he tapped the business card the woman had handed him. First on one long side, then a quarter turn, a couple of taps on a short side, quarter turn, tap tap. Something about the way he handled the card suggested that he might soon be using it to clean his fingernails. The woman reached for her coat.

Paragraph: *Again, thanks for your time. Thank you for your time, the time you took to meet with me, for meeting with me.*

The man in the baseball cap dragged the girl in pink past; Kirsten and the man and the woman all watched. The girl's dress was streaked with chocolate milk, her face and the hair that hung in it filthy with crumbs and blobs of icing and sprinkles. The man dropped the ruined cupcake into the trash.

—No! Not fair! I want it! Mine!

He picked her up, and they rotated out the door. Kirsten could see them through the plate-glass window. The man squatted beside the girl, talking to her, smoothing her hair out of her face, patiently listening listening listening.

The letter was pretty bad. Arguably worse even than the interview. Though that was blessedly hard to recall, specifically, thanks to the Xanax. But the letter got the gist of what she ought to say, didn't it? It's all just bullshit anyway, innocent bullshit, most of what people said to each other. Words were just the warm dung of longing and manners. Language a kind of mixed organic matter that you heaped in the garden, hoping things would push up through it.

The meeting ended in a pulse of adrenaline, the man robustly reaffirming that what she said was right, absolutely right. He slipped her card into his pocket, the same pocket where he'd earlier deposited the crumpled saccharine packets.

They pushed back from the table, the chairs scraping against the wooden floor like a bow drawn across an enormous stringed instrument. The woman cinched the belt on her coat and offered her hand.

—Good to see you again. Hope this was helpful.

He bowed his head slightly, suggesting something formal or Japanese, and shook her hand.

—It was, and I thank you.

—Headed out?

The man said he had to make a call first.

—Okay!

The woman made her way out of the Starbucks, toward the sunshine, newly light on her feet, it was easy to see, tossing her cup in the trashcan, sailing out the revolving door. That was that. The man idly punched his phone on, then went to the counter. Returned with a refilled cup of coffee, an enormous chocolate chip cookie, three more pink saccharine packets. He dumped the powder into his coffee and swirled. Checked the phone again, scanned and ignored messages. Rapidly consumed the cookie in large, joyless bites, like a dog hunched over his bowl. Lifted the sheet of wax paper that had held the cookie, licked off the smears of chocolate.

Kirsten had saved and closed the letter by now, but she stared at her computer screen to keep from looking directly at him.

He wadded the licked paper into a tight ball. Slipped the phone back into his jacket pocket and glanced around dully. Another meeting had not gone well. Kirsten lifted her empty cup and made eye contact with the man. He lifted his coffee in return greeting. Toasting whatever it was they shared.