

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

At eight P.M. in the bleak heart of winter the bundled figure of a wretched man, perhaps the village bum, drags itself like a troll across the frozen campus of First Choice University in the town of Crewneck, Massachusetts. His hunch and bloodshot eyes of despair speak of sleepless nights, probably on doorstoops and benches. Like a hobo from the 1920s he shuffles and shambles. He makes a pitiful picture.

Yet a closer look under the lowered hat brim reveals an alarmingly young face for one on the fritz. The eyes are full of fatigue, yes, but a peek into his bag reveals no cardboard shoes, half-empty nips, salvaged mosquito netting, nor any of the other sad accessories of street living. Inside the bag, instead, is a laptop computer that will later give him access to a database of 25,000 applicants to First Choice University. This prematurely aged man is twenty-five years old, and he is neither drunk nor destitute (well, one out of two). At this late hour on this bitter night, he is just leaving work. His name is Henry Haggard, and he is an admissions officer in the middle of application-reading season.

Poor Henry is not looking forward to the rest of the evening. While many of his non-admissions friends in Crewneck are already out to dinner and frolic this Thursday night—the beginning of the weekend in all

college towns—he still has thirty applications to read by tomorrow. His lone hope for combining business with pleasure is to find others who can share in and sympathize with his drudgery. That leaves only the other members of the admissions staff, with whom he already spends twenty-four hours a day, it seems. But then he thinks of the newest admissions officer, a young woman just graduated from First Choice last spring . . .

Let's fast-forward to later that evening.

SCENE: The living room of Haggard's apartment, decorated with a week's worth of crumpled socks lying across the unmatched secondhand furniture like dead herring. Smashed tortilla chips mingled with rug lint form a crunchy veneer underfoot. In one corner, the television crackles with a basketball game. Henry is stretched out on the couch, propped half-awake with a few pillows on one end, shifting restlessly under his laptop. Now and then he rousts himself to type, trancelike, for a few minutes and subsides again into the pillows. He has spent most of his evenings this month—in fact the last four winters of his life—in this position. In his imagination tonight the inside of his refrigerator looms in Technicolor, the frosted green glass of the beer bottles beckoning to him like beautiful mermaids across an endless murky gulf of application forms.

On the other side of the room, sunk in a low-slung armchair, is Sarah Bleary—twenty-one, bright, vivacious, but already sprouting dark circles under the eyes in this, her first admissions season. Laptop on her knees, she stares numbly at the screen. The two of them push at the keys like drugged seals. Their eyes are glassy from long hours of close work.

BLEARY: You sure know how to show a girl a good time.

HAGGARD: Welcome to life in the fast lane.

BLEARY: Hey, here's an essay for you. *(He does not look up. She reads from the application.)* "I believe breadth of learning is the most important educational goal to have—"

HAGGARD *(Putting his hands over his ears)*: No more, I can't take it. Not while the Celtics are down ten points.

BLEARY *(Going on)*: "For me breadth has a double advantage: Firstly, it is to anyone's advantage to know about as much as they can, and secondly, there are more than one or two things in which I am interested. I am not saying that it is not good to concentrate studies in one area later on, or that I want to learn all there is to learn, but rather that my four college years will be my chance to take a wider range of courses than I ever could, and I intend to take this opportunity." No E. B. White, is he?

HAGGARD: The imagination of a hockey puck.

BLEARY: I've been reading ones like these all night. But the thing is, he's a decent kid—I want to like him.

HAGGARD: There's your first mistake.

BLEARY *(Intent on the application)*: He's got OK grades in a good courseload at a good school, he's on the tennis team and volunteers at the hospital, but just so gray on paper. He wouldn't stand out against a cement wall.

HAGGARD: Here's your write-up. *(Eyes closed, dictating)* "Respectable stats and the usual range of x-currics but bland bland bland. Teachers mention imagination and sense of humor not confirmed by essay. A numbers call at the end, but looks like WL at best."

BLEARY: How can you say that without even reading the file? Besides, you're wrong about the imagination and humor. They say he's earnest and hard-working.

HAGGARD: So change it to, "Implied drudgery is indeed confirmed by essay." I know that kid and thousands like him. Standard fare from private schools in Boston or New York or Chicago—

BLEARY: It's Dallas, actually.

HAGGARD: Same difference. Probably has New York parents.

BLEARY (*Confirming it in the file*): All right, smart guy—

HAGGARD: Or maybe he's from high-tax-bracket public schools in the middle-class 'burbs. Big difference, right? What's so likable?

BLEARY: A little cynical, aren't we?

HAGGARD: Just realistic. Wait'll you've been at it a couple of years. Or months. *The kids gotta come across on paper*, or else when they come up for committee decision you—and they—won't have a leg to stand on. I mean, I like to discover an NSTK as much as anyone—

BLEARY: NSTK?

HAGGARD: Neat Small Town Kid. But even they gotta come alive in the app. Haven't you noticed that most apps are the same as most others? These are teenagers, after all. I know they've really worked hard as assistant business manager of the newspaper and they're all individuals and "very unique" and all of that crap—at least, that's what they all say—but you wouldn't know it from their applications. And that's what counts. I've got no patience for the No-Pulse Brigade.

BLEARY (*Yawning*): What time is it?

HAGGARD (*Cheering up*): Beer time.

BLEARY (*Pats her laptop*): Duty still beckons.

HAGGARD: Duty doesn't have to be *total* agony.

BLEARY: Yeah, well. I've been on this same kid for half an hour and I can't remember a thing about him. I think I'll get some more coffee.

HAGGARD: Why don't you cut out the middle man and go straight to the No-Doz? There's not enough coffee in Brazil to keep you alert for forty files. Have a beer—might as well enjoy yourself.

BLEARY: Don't try to corrupt me—I'm on a strict caffeine and popcorn diet. Besides, I'll fall asleep.

HAGGARD: That never stopped anyone from reading files. Sure, you'll have the occasional nightmare that every kid is a pre-something-or-other whose essay begins, "Hello, I am a very unique person," but you'll get over it. Some of my best evaluations were written asleep. It's like the Ouija board. The pencil moves by itself. (*He struggles up from the couch and goes into the kitchen.*)

BLEARY: How do people do this job for ten or fifteen years?

HAGGARD (*From the kitchen*): Don't ask me.

BLEARY: Didn't I hear this was your last year?

HAGGARD: Yup. My hitch for Mother First Choice is over. (*Returning with coffeepot and two beer bottles*) Law school, here I come.

BLEARY: It's not over yet.

HAGGARD: True. (*He holds out a bottle.*) Brought one for you just in case. Sure you don't want some? (*She shakes her head. He pours from the coffeepot into her cup.*)

BLEARY: Maybe a sip of yours. (*He hands her the beer; she sips and gives it back.*) Mmmm.

HAGGARD (*Prone again*): I'll tell you how they do it. The big wheels don't read as many files, for one thing.

BLEARY: Assistant directors do.

HAGGARD (*Sitting up halfway*): Hey, I'm an assistant director. Assistant director means squat. You'll be assistant director too if you stay around two, three years and don't have any major screw-ups. I mean the directors and associate directors, the honchos. You think they read half the files you do? No way. Too much burnout.

BLEARY: What I can't believe is the amount of paperwork, all the computer junk. I guess I thought of it as mostly meeting kids and parents, choosing the class, that kind of thing. There're plenty of good parts, like all the expense-account travel—

HAGGARD: Join the admissions office and see Tulsa.

BLEARY (*Ignoring him*):—and the long vacation, and the people. It's a great job for someone just out of school. But there's a lot of diddly detail, too. I mean, we're talking petty bureaucracy here.

HAGGARD: You got it. Today was typical. I spent most of the morning emailing alumni and guidance counselors, doing my blog for the office, emailing a follow-up to a great kid I saw in Colorado, and reading precisely three files. In the afternoon I had to finish filling out my travel vouchers and writing the reports on my last trip, had a meeting with the Diversity Office on recruiting in the southwest, and then we had that full staff meeting at the end. Total file reading: six. Thirty-four to go—not counting the ones I had left over from yesterday and the day before that.

BLEARY: You're behind?

HAGGARD: You're kidding, right?

BLEARY: I thought I was the only one.

HAGGARD: Everybody is. I wouldn't worry about it too much. Everything is designed to get in the way of file reading.

BLEARY: Including bull sessions?

HAGGARD: Hey, even oxen get to take the yoke off once in a while. How far behind are you?

BLEARY: Far.

HAGGARD: How long does it take you to do a file?

BLEARY: I don't know, fifteen minutes or so, with writing it up and everything. I guess longer when I get tired.

HAGGARD: Well, there it is. Not bad, but you've gotta do five or six an hour to keep from drowning. Ten minutes and get outta there. And hell, even that doesn't do it. What you realize is that, to do the job right, there aren't enough hours. And that is why God invented winter weekends.

BLEARY: Ten minutes? How do you give it a good read?

HAGGARD: After a while, most of them won't even take five. The point is to get them done. Period. Sure you'll blow a couple; that's expected. But there are checks and balances along the way in the system. Even so, occasionally a kid falls through the cracks. Can't be helped. Things happen fast. They have to.

BLEARY: I *was* a little blown away by the speed of the early-action decisions in committee. I mean, boom boom boom, most kids took no more than two minutes.

HAGGARD (*Shakes his head*): Oh boy. Wait'll regular committee starts in February. Two minutes is an eternity. The December meetings are like stop-action slow motion compared to March. Last year we made four hundred forty-four decisions in *one day* between ten o'clock and four—and we broke for lunch for half an hour! Of course, those were New Jersey applicants, so it doesn't really count.

BLEARY (*laughing*): Careful, I'm from Teaneck.

HAGGARD: I knew there was something weird about you. But we see so many apps from there that we go to committee with them specially prepped for speed. We took—what?—ten percent overall last year; you know what the New Jersey percentage was?

BLEARY: Something like eight, no?

HAGGARD: Five. Five percent! Jersey alums went postal over that. But listen, that's true—about the lower ratio, I mean—in every area where we get a ton of apps.

BLEARY: It won't be much better this year if the kids I'm seeing are any indication. I don't know why, but the last few days have been full of essays on dying pets by the pom-pom crowd. And I've still got a bunch to go. Speaking of which . . .

HAGGARD: Yeah, yeah. (*They return to their screens, occasionally shaking their heads or laughing over an application. Sarah sips at her coffee, Henry quaffs the beer. He starts on the second bottle.*)

BLEARY: Listen to this one.

HAGGARD: I warn you, what you're about to do constitutes assault with a deadly weapon in some states.

BLEARY (*Reading from the essay*): "I, Bradley T. Borewell, am a happy, well-rounded student. Through hard work and much study I have been able to produce this result."

HAGGARD (*Sighting down the barrel of an imaginary rifle*): Bang. It was self-defense, Your Honor.

BLEARY (*Yawning and stretching*): I think today's exercise in sadomasochism is over.

HAGGARD: Going so soon?

BLEARY (*Getting up and looking at the kitchen clock*): It's almost midnight. There're still some left, but as you would say, what's tomorrow for, right? (*She goes to the closet for her coat and packs her laptop into its case.*)

HAGGARD: If it weren't so late that it will be early soon, I might ask what you're doing later. I might ask you anyway.

BLEARY: Very amusing, Henry.

HAGGARD: Admissions officers are people too, you know.

BLEARY: Doesn't feel like it. I feel like a file-reading marionette. Wind me up and I do forty a day.

HAGGARD: If you're lucky.

BLEARY: See you tomorrow. Thanks for the coffee. And the wild times. (*She moves toward the door. Still on the couch, he twists and stretches out his arms in mock panic.*)

HAGGARD: No no, don't leave me here alone with *them!* (*But she is gone. Henry slumps back and looks at his screen.*)

HAGGARD: Five more. But first . . .

(*He goes into the kitchen and returns with another beer. Settling on the couch, his eyes half-lidded, he gets back to his computer, and hits return to open up his next file, his thirty-eighth of the day—YOUR APPLICATION.*)

Fadeout, with the sound of snoring and the distant roar of the televised crowd.

WHAT IT MEANS

This is your audience. Study them well. Not exactly the Nobel Prize panel. There are other members of the committee, of course, each of them dif-

ferent, but Henry and Sarah are common types. There are actually two basic species of admissions officer—the Temps (*Miserabilis overworkus*) and the Lifers (*Cynica terminus*). The Temps are likely to be young, enthusiastic, and often recently graduated from the school they're working for. They're intelligent but not usually bookish, and hired largely for their sales appeal; the wholesome extrovert abounds among young admissions officers.

Temps are interested in using admissions work as an interesting time-killer until they enter graduate school or business or, now and then, college academics. Some end up in high schools as teachers and guidance counselors. Henry Haggard and Sarah Bleary are Temps.

Lifers, on the other hand, at the top level, are the big guns who set policy and run the show. Just below that is a class of itinerant admissions soldiers, Lifers all, who move from school to school, slowly climbing the ladder toward a directorship somewhere. Many of them began, in their salad days, as Temps, but got caught up in the business through inclination or inertia. Few prepare to be Lifers—it just happens. Some are hardcore bureaucrats, and some have fallen into a comfortable career from more precarious faculty jobs. (Tenured professorships—the only secure college teaching appointments—are difficult to get.) Admissions offers lots of benefits—reasonable job security, free tuition for family members, good vacations, and in most cases a lovely and lively place to live.

Lifers these days are usually personally dynamic, multitasking market-savvy “enrollment managers” who see the job as stewardship of the “brand.” They don't read as many files as Temps, though they do wield more weight in policy, and many are remarkably familiar with the details of the class.

(This seems as good a place as any to mention the obvious: Incompetence occurs as frequently in admissions offices as it does elsewhere, which is to say, with discouraging semiregularity. There's not much you can do about this, but it might soften the blow if you're rejected. “They

wouldn't know something good if it hit them in the face,” you can say. But, like umpires who may now and then blow a call, admissions offices are not known for changing their decisions.)

Both Temps and Lifers are great at parties. They are outgoing and charming, professional interviewers and minglers and smilers. Somewhere underneath it all, in most cases, is legitimate interest in education or in kids, but between the superficial smiles and the deeper sympathy grows a very stubborn layer of um, *experience*. (I'm trying not to say cynicism.) It blisters rapidly into callus, even in the newest recruits. These are your readers.

WHO DECIDES?

The Temps and the early Lifers do the bulk of the application reading. In fact, most admissions offices hire outside readers, from graduate students to deans' spouses, to pick up the slack. The more seniority you have, the fewer files you read. It's understandable. File reading is the drudge work, and directors want to look at the big picture. The irony is that the readers have less to say about policy but more about individual decisions—more therefore about your application, especially if you're in the Gray Area.

FIRST AND SECOND READING

Most files are read twice. Henry and Sarah are in stage one. Theirs are the first comments to darken your file. (They also rate you *numerically* as a student and as a person, usually on a scale from one to five or six.) Colleges handle first reading differently. At Brown, we always first-read applications at random; only later does the admissions officer covering your geographical area, the person who is going to present you to the committee—and essentially make the decision on you—read your application. At Columbia, on the other hand, files were first-read by the of

ficer in charge of your area and second-read randomly by faculty, grad students, and anyone else the admissions office can corral to help ease the load.

At some colleges, though, every file doesn't even get to the director. Applicants are screened by a few readers in a "regional committee." Admissions officers will tell you that only the obvious rejects don't make that first cut, but built into such a system is great pressure to trim the workload of the director's final committee and to *save time*. You can bet that almost everyone who's weeded out early belongs to Just Folks.

Some math: If a school has 30,000 applicants, even if the committee meets every single day between November 1 and April 1, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's—which of course it doesn't—the college is making 200 decisions a day, or 25 per hour. That's less than two minutes per file. But if, as is true, the committee meets about a hundred days, they're doing 300 a day, or almost 40 an hour if they push hard. That's why many colleges have more than one committee, which means the director may *never* see your application.

At all the colleges, it is the reading of the *area person* that counts most—the second reader in a process like Brown's, the first in one like Columbia's. The area officer looks at you in relation to other applicants from your school and your region. The area person literally "knows where you're coming from."

RIFFRAFF READERS

Faculty

You are not writing for a panel of professors. Although at smaller colleges a faculty member or two may be more involved in admissions—they may even be given time off to work in the office—decisions are made overwhelmingly by Temps and Lifers. Admissions officers wish it were not so, but faculty at schools like the Ivy colleges are not typically concerned

with the admissions operation, except to howl occasionally that the freshmen in their classes can't write English. The last thing professors want to do is read twenty files a day.

Hired Guns

Many colleges employ part-time readers to trim the application population. These may include anyone from graduate students to the dean's relatives by marriage. Hired-gun readings are often wild cards. They do not share the embattled admissions office psyche, and so they sometimes read the files more carefully (because they read only a few). They have quirkier tastes. But the subtleties of grades and schools are a code they only dimly understand; the hired gun therefore almost always leans heavily on the essay, a document everyone understands, and which speaks (you hope) plainly in your favor.

THE COMMITTEE MEETING

By the time your application gets to the "full" admissions committee—usually the director, the presenter, and one or two other officers (everybody else is busy reading files)—the decision is made. Very rarely does the committee overturn the presenter's recommendations, and such reversals often involve an applicant from one of the Lobby groups. In fact, in the case of an experienced Temp who has established credibility, the committee is likely to be just a rubber stamp.

SCENE: A richly appointed old room in the admissions building at First Choice, with dark wood paneling, a wood and marble fireplace, and recessed mahogany bookshelves. On the walls are original prints of First Choice as it looked in colonial times. In the center of the room, in high-backed chairs around a massive antique oval table polished to a high gloss, sit Henry Haggard, today's presenter; at his left, the director; and across from Haggard, Sarah Bleary—the "committee." The table is besieged

with coffee cups, water bottles, a pizza box, a few clementines, two bananas, a bag of vanilla-covered pretzels, two bowls of carrot sticks with dip, a half-eaten red velvet cake, some assorted boxes of cookies, and several soda cans. In front of each of the participants is an open laptop that shows a summary of each application—the SAT's, class rank or GPA, and various formulas made of that information, as well as the all-important ratings (1 to 6 at First Choice) already given each file by two admissions readers. The entire application, including the essay, is also available for view and discussion.

DIRECTOR: What've you got?

HAGGARD: Seven Admits, ninety-seven Rejects, ten Wait List. And a great YouTube for happy hour.

DIRECTOR: You're tough.

HAGGARD: We're talking about the Bronx, here.

DIRECTOR: OK. Shoot.

HAGGARD: Bronx Polytech first. Black girl with good numbers, no dad, oldest of four, all brothers, mom's a nurse, easy A. (*As he will do for every decision, the director types the proper code. He looks up.*) Another easy one, astro numbers but not a nerd, works part-time with the homeless, teachers ecstatic, two varsity sports—nothing special, but still—and a great essay about his best friend—

DIRECTOR: OK.

HAGGARD: Next one's not so easy, but a good one, I think. Some spark here.

DIRECTOR: Readers are high for a kid with those numbers.

HAGGARD: Super recs, grades are solid in a strong program, and check out the essay. "I do some of my best thinking in the bathroom," it starts. [See p. 141.]

DIRECTOR (*Glancing at it*): C'mon.

HAGGARD: Yup. But he plays it out really well—funny, thoughtful, really sharp. You don't see many like this. Here's the kid you want in your class.

DIRECTOR: If he doesn't spend all his time in the john. (*Director types the admit code.*) Who's next?

HAGGARD: Next one I wanted you to see before we hang him out to dry.

DIRECTOR: Wait list? Those stats are awfully good compared to the Bathroom Buddha.

HAGGARD: Pre-med and flat as a pancake personally. Unbelievably dumb essay, school just repeats the obvious about math-science ability, and teachers are polite. Has a two-page *résumé*.

DIRECTOR: God.

BLEARY: This the kid I read?

HAGGARD: Yup.

BLEARY: The essay's all about how working with microbes made him a better person. He's deadly.

HAGGARD: His dad's some kind of research doctor, that's how he got the lab job.

DIRECTOR: Why not an R? What's keeping him in? You're saying he doesn't offer us a thing.

HAGGARD: I'd be for an R but the school would go nuts. Because that's all we're—

DIRECTOR (*Scrolling down*): That's it at old Bronx Poly? Nineteen rejects?

HAGGARD: That's right.

DIRECTOR (*Entering the code*): I don't want to hear from them on this.

HAGGARD: I'll take care of it. They've got a pretty good idea what's coming. It was a weak class.

DIRECTOR: Next.

HAGGARD: Minuet High . . .

Get the idea? The director doesn't even have *time* to read the essay. He sees the beginning, perhaps, and skims the rest. The director wants to spend the minimum amount of time on a case, so the other admissions officers read the essay *for* him, in effect. The readers, and especially the area person, make the difference.

Let's look in some detail at the ways applicants unwittingly make all this speed possible.