

The Story of K

The ad said: “Great job for the right person. Unlimited potential. Great salary and benefits. Apply in person at the Twelfth Street Building, 1212 Twelfth Street, 12th floor. Interviews begin at 12:00. –The Society of the Twelve.”

K didn't know how he could fail to respond to that, even if he weren't unemployed.

The Twelfth Street Building was monochromatic and forgettable, its only entrance a large glass door with silver block letters proclaiming: “TWELFTH STREET BUILDING.” Several men and women were queued up outside when he arrived. He looked at his watch. It was 11:45. “Door's locked,” a skinny man with a thatch of errant hair explained.

“You here for the interview?” K asked.

The man nodded. At precisely noon a large, square man in a frock coat, top hat, and cravat (yes, K thought, it was undeniably a cravat) came down a long hallway at the other side of the glass door, unlocked and opened it, and stepped aside.

“Follow the signs,” he said, taking for granted, it appeared, that they were all there for the job interview.

They moved down the hallway to its end where a sign with large printed letters spelling “JOB” pointed to the left. They shuffled in unison to the left down another long hallway. K counted 23 of them besides himself. At the end of the second hallway, dimly lit by bleak florescent lighting that made everything look unhealthy, was another “JOB” sign pointing to the right. K couldn't remember how many long hallways they'd navigated when they came to the large glass door with “JOB” painted on it, opened it, and streamed into a dimly lit room furnished with heavy pieces of wooden furniture. K noted that there were no magazines on the tables or pictures on the walls and the hands on the clock on the wall were as immovable as

stone. After a few minutes a man emerged from a back room. His face was covered with boils and pustules.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“We were looking for the interview,” K said, trying not to stare at the man’s face.

“I know of no interview,” the man said. “I am Job. I have nothing to do with interviews. Interviews are the furthest thing from my mind.”

Job nervously touched his face.

They went back and followed the signs and once again found themselves at Job’s door. Some shook their heads, some cursed. Several of the most disgruntled members of the group left. K and 13 others remained. They went back to the man in the frock coat and asked him where the job interview was.

“Follow the signs,” he said.

“But,” they protested, “we’ve done that.”

The man shrugged. “We’re talking the Society of the Twelve here, you know, not some mail order, feel-good correspondence job.”

Several more of them left. K set out again with the eight that remained—four men and four women. This time, at the end of one of the halls, they saw a small man open a door, dart through an opening, and disappear. It was not a door they’d noticed before. It was not a glass door like the others they’d seen, but a solid door that was so exactly the color and texture of the wall that it was nearly invisible when closed, a door that, if you didn’t believe it was there, you might never find. K felt a strange exhilaration as he opened it and a proud superiority over those who had left. He looked down another long hallway but this one was not dim and depressing but

lit by equally spaced sconces emanating fierce light for as far as he could see. At the hallway's end he could just make out a sign. The sign said: "THIS IS THE WAY."

They set out down the new hallway until they finally reached a dead end and yet another glass door. As they stood there a man approached from the other side moving slowly that he appeared for the longest time to be making no progress toward them at all. When he finally got close enough they could see that he had a long gray beard and carried a clipboard. He opened the door and stood between it and them, looking intently at each of them, then at his clipboard. "You, you, you," he said, pointing to two men and a woman and motioning them through the door.

K and the other five stood there. "We have all come for the job interview," he said. "We have spent a great deal of time getting here."

"We have all spent a great deal of time getting here," said the gray-bearded man gruffly.

"But, surely, you're not telling us we can't interview for the job."

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"But whose decision is it?"

"Do you think I know? I just have the list of the chosen."

"But that makes no sense," K protested. The man laughed so loudly that the sound made K's ears hurt. "Listen, I want to speak to your supervisor."

"Nobody's spoken to him for years."

"But why were those people allowed through?"

Suddenly the gray-bearded man looked back at his clipboard.

"Say, I got this wrong. Those three that went through were the ones I was supposed to keep out."

“So we *can* go,” said K.

“Now, just a minute. Not so quick.”

“But you just said we were supposed to go.”

“I didn’t say that. I said they *weren’t* supposed to go.”

“So who *was* supposed to go?”

The gray-bearded man stared intently at his clipboard. “You,” he said, pointing at K.
“*You.*”

K darted through the door leaving the others wrangling with the gray-bearded man. He felt badly leaving them behind but there wasn’t anything he could do. Besides, there were three people in front of him. One of them might be hired before he even got to the interview.

He finally got to an elevator and remembered that the interview was to be conducted on the twelfth floor. As he stepped into the car he noticed that there were buttons for 20 floors. No, wait a minute, the last numbered floor was “20,” but there were nineteen floors. And the missing number was 12!

Frustrated, he got off on the eleventh floor. He found a floor directory and looked at it. There was no Society of the Twelve. As he pondered his dilemma, one of the three that the gray-bearded man had let through the door ahead of him came walking up the hall.

“Up there, up that hallway,” the man said to K, looking much more florid and disheveled than K remembered him, “in room 666. Whew!” He straightened his glasses, then took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

“Do you know where the job interview is?” K asked.

“To hell with the job interview,” he said as he wandered off. “Room 666. That’s what you want.”

I guess I know why he wasn't supposed to get through, K thought, as he got back on the elevator. He didn't know what to do other than try the thirteenth floor. And, if that wasn't right, all of the others he supposed. But, when the elevator opened, there, immediately across the hallway, was a large glass door with "THE SOCIETY OF THE TWELVE" painted on it. At last! He strode across the hall, opened the door, and entered.

He found himself in a large white room. The walls were white, the ceiling was white, the carpet was white. Chrome chairs were against the walls. There was a chrome table with a glass top in the middle of the room. There were pamphlets on the table that said "The Society of the Twelve" on them. There were pictures in chrome frames on the white walls. Each was a picture of a room with white walls and white ceiling and white carpet furnished with chrome chairs and chrome, glass-topped tables. When K looked closely at the pictures, he saw that there were pictures like that on the walls of the pictures too. There was absolute silence and a feeling of great peace in the room.

He went to the table and picked up one of the pamphlets. It described the Society of the Twelve as inspirational, philosophic, hermetic, philanthropic, provocative, mystical, and infused with intellectual rigor and uplifting introspection. It described it as essential to the stability, health, soundness of mind, and long-term mental acuity and vigor of any person not closed to its opportunities. It informed the curious of its archaic provenance and its current vitality and its glowing future. It spoke of the miracles it had performed, the injustices it had righted, the obstacles it had overcome. It lamented the plight of the poor benighted souls who had not been touched by its benevolence, witnessed its compassion, or breathed in the serene and beatific air of its emanations and utterances. In short, it was not at all clear what the Society of the Twelve was. The pamphlet did say, however, that the Society had been founded by a certain Jheronimus

K Jerome. K was much taken by the fact that the Founder had his middle name. An omen, surely.

Even as he thought this a man came through a door at the rear of the room. It was another of those doors that blended in so well with the wall that K had not even noticed it but now that he'd noticed it seemed inevitable. As the man approached he saw that he wore enormous glasses with tinted lenses and a suit of coarse fabric with wide lapels. He extended his hand.

"Jheronimus K Jerome," he said. "You must be K."

"Why, yes," said K, "however did you know?"

"If there's anything that I don't know, I don't know what it is." He smiled and the chrome furniture almost seemed to glow with his smile's warmth. "So what do you want to know about the job?"

"Pretty much everything. The ad was very brief. But it did promise great salary and benefits. And unlimited potential."

"Well, you know, some of that is metaphorical."

"So the job is with the Society of the Twelve?"

"Oh, no. The Society is closed. And really it is thirteen of us if you count me, the Founder and CEO. That's why we're on the thirteenth floor, see? And there's no twelfth floor. My little joke."

He laughed. It was an immensely reassuring laugh. It was his smile made into sound, into music for the soul.

"Who *is* the job with?" K asked.

"You'd be working for us. Not just on the Board of Directors."

“Doing what?”

“Whatever we inspire you to do.”

“What kind of products do you make?”

“We don’t make things. We make a difference.”

“I hope you don’t think it rude of me to ask, but what is the salary?”

“It isn’t rude, it’s irrelevant. If this job is right for you, your rewards will be largely non-material.”

“Where would I work?”

“Fourteenth floor. As you are promoted, you’ll move up. Most of our people retire on the twentieth floor. From there . . .”

He made an upward motion with his hand, inferring it was possible to rise even further in the organization. K wasn’t sure how that could be, especially after you retired, but he found Jheronimus K Jerome infinitely reassuring about things that seemed to make no sense. He felt that he could believe anything that this man said.

“So, we’ll expect you to start tomorrow.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a simple declarative statement, and K found himself nodding.

“Go down the hall to your right and ask for Peter Peterman. He’ll take care of all of your paperwork.”

Peter Peterman sat on the other side of a window in another white room sorting through enormous sheaves of paper.

“Fill these out and bring them back to me,” he said to K, pushing a thick stack of papers at him through the window.

The papers were complicated and endless. They wanted to know when he was born, where he was born, why he was born. They wanted to know who his parents were, who their parents were, and who their parents were. They wanted to know where he was from and where he was going. They wanted to know not only if he was the son of a father but also if he was the father of a son and whether he was the son of a son of a son. They wanted to know things he knew and things he didn't know, things he'd thought about and things he hadn't only never thought about, he hadn't even thought about not thinking about them. And, of course, they wanted to know why he wanted to join their organization. That was easy. "Great salary and benefits," he wrote. "And unlimited potential."

When he'd completed all of the paperwork, he took it to Peter Peterman. Peterman took it from him without comment and pushed another huge stack of paper back through the window at him.

"Fill these out and bring them back to me," he said.

"But—"

Peterman gave him a stern look.

K filled out the second stack of paper and the third. When Peterman thrust the fourth stack at him, he said, "Listen, this is ridiculous. How much more of this is there? I mean . . . I'm hungry."

Peterman's stern face relaxed into a smile.

"Now you're talking, my friend." He took all of the papers K had filled out and threw them into the trash. "You pass. Go on down the hall for your physical."

"I . . . I pass."

“Absolutely. With flying colors. Some have filled out papers for days before getting to the point you did. Splendid! Quite splendid!”

K left feeling rather confused but nonetheless relieved that he’d passed. He made his way to a glass door with the inscription “Darvon Flomax, M.D.” and entered. Flomax stood in his white coat in another white room amidst the colorless gleam of his furniture.

“Take off your clothes,” he said peremptorily.

K did so, slowly and self-consciously. Flomax walked around him slowly, passing his eyes over his naked body. K was extremely embarrassed. He was not in a closed room. He was standing there naked in front of the glass door that faced out on the long hallway outside. He looked nervously over his shoulder to see if anyone could see him. At first no one was there. Then one of the others whom the gray-bearded man had let through the door came up the hall, stopped to stare, and began to laugh. It was the other man, the one who’d not been to Room 666.

After several moments, Flomax said, “Put your clothes back on.”

K did so with alacrity but he had no sooner gotten them back on than Flomax told him to take them off again. K remembered Peter Peterman. “Now, listen,” he said, “this is ridiculous.”

Flomax glared.

“It is, is it? Who’s the doctor here?”

K sighed and took off his clothes. Now the woman the gray-bearded man had mistakenly let through the door was on the other side of the glass leering and pointing. She was slapping her thighs and laughing uproariously.

“Stand on your head,” Flomax barked.

K complied. Flomax took a small notebook from the pocket of his white coat and spoke aloud the words he was writing in it. “Patient dresses and undresses without visible pain but

suffers from obverse distension of the genitalia and redness about the ears as if from excessive blood flow. Conditions should be watched.” K lost his balance and fell over. “Patient also has problems with balance and equilibrium. Should also be watched.” He closed up the book and put it back into his pocket. “Put on your clothes,” he said. “Then go down the hall to Gilder van Shekel in Benefits.”

Well, at least, thought K, he would now find out something specific about what material things this job would bring him.

Gilder van Shekel greeted him effusively.

“Have a seat, have a seat,” he said, gesturing toward a chrome chair. “This shouldn’t take long at all. You’ve done all of your paperwork with Peter Peterman.”

“Well,” said K, “yes. But he threw it all out.”

“What! And you let him?”

“Why yes. He was quite enthused about it and congratulated me.”

“Of course he did. That’s his job. Yours is to do the paperwork.” Gilder van Shekel was shaking his head mournfully. “I don’t know, K, I just don’t know.”

“I’m sure I can do the paperwork again. It was only four big stacks.”

“Four stacks? That’s all. Oh, well, then Peterman didn’t throw that much out. That’s just the introductory material. You can go back and do that later. We’d best get underway with the paperwork here.”

“There’s paper work here?”

“Benefits paper work, you know, benefits paperwork.”

K sighed.

“Could you tell me about what my benefits will be first?”

“That would be pointless, wouldn’t it? There *are* no benefits until you’ve done the paperwork.”

Gilder van Shekel left the room to return carrying a towering stack of ring binders.

“I have to fill out all of that?” K wailed.

“Oh, no, no. These are just the instructions for filling out the forms. I will leave these here in case you have any questions. I’m going back to get the forms now.”

K lost track of how many forms he filled out. Nor did he know how much time it took because his watch had stopped and he’d not seen a clock since the one in Job’s office that had also stopped. Finally, after stack after stack of forms had been completed, Gilder van Shekel looked at the latest stack K had proffered and nodded.

“That’s it,” he said. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Now,” K said, “could I please know about the benefits?”

“Oh, we all want to know about *them*, don’t we? We’re always looking for them. But, you know, we don’t have time. You need to get on down the hall to have your identification card made.”

K went to a door that announced “I.D. Cards” and entered. He was tired, very tired. And hungry and thirsty. A small man approached him and took him to a back room where he directed him to a seat in front of a camera.

“Say cheese,” he said, and clicked a button. Why did the man have to say that? K’s mouth watered at the thought of cheese. Within moments the man took a picture from the camera, trimmed and laminated it, and handed it to him. “Wear it all times on the job,” he said.

K looked at the photograph.

“Who’s this a picture of?” he asked.

“You, of course. How could it be anyone else? You just saw me take your picture.”

“It’s not me,” K repeated.

“My goodness, you just sat there and had your picture taken and saw me take it out of the camera and make your ID.” The man took the picture from K and looked at it. “Why, it’s as good a likeness as I’ve ever seen. Look at those ears, that nose, those eyes.”

“It doesn’t look anything like me. I don’t have hair like that. And look at those teeth.”

“Yes, yes, I was going to call to your attention our dental plan.”

“Listen, take my picture again, okay?”

The small man shook his head as if he were humoring a delusional person.

“Okay, okay,” he said.

The second picture wasn’t him either.

“There must be something the matter with your camera,” K insisted.

“Listen, K, if you don’t stop this I will have to ask that your employment be reconsidered.”

“But I can’t wear this. It’s not me.”

“Just a minute,” said the small man. He left the room and returned with another man. He showed him the pictures. “Says they aren’t him,” he whispered to the other man, shaking his head sadly.

“Take a third picture,” said the other man. “If he says that’s not him either, send him to our attitude readjustment ward. As it is, he should go to counseling.”

The small man nodded.

K was sent forth with a third picture that wasn’t him either but he dared not complain further. As it was, he had to go to counseling. He went there and sat in the monochromatic

waiting room on his chrome chair and looked at the brochures on the wall. They said: “Dealing with Depression,” “Dealing with Substance Abuse,” “Dealing with Low Self-Esteem,” “Dealing with Narcissism,” “Dealing with Your Weight,” “Dealing with Addiction,” “Dealing with an Abusive Partner,” “Dealing with Apathy,” “Dealing with Irrational Enthusiasm,” “Dealing with Imagined Affronts,” “Dealing with Difficult People,” “Dealing with Manipulative People,” “Dealing with Chronic Disease,” “Dealing with Financial Difficulty,” “Dealing with Memory Loss,” “Dealing with Being Obsessive-Compulsive,” “Dealing with Coping,” and “Coping with Dealing.” After a while a man with sandy hair and a sandy beard dressed in sandy-colored clothes and wearing soft sandy-colored shoes with sandy-colored socks crept up on him and said in a quiet, inflectionless tone, “And so, K, are we having problems?”

“I don’t think so,” K said.

“You know, identity disorder isn’t all that rare. And we have been getting wonderful results from these.” He handed K a bottle of pink pills. “Take one after each meal and at bedtime. Don’t miss a single time or your symptoms could recur.”

“What symptoms?”

The sandy man smiled.

“When you have finished those come back and I’ll give you some more.”

“How long will I have to take them?”

“Oh, I don’t know. We’ll make that decision later. Why would you not want to take them, if they’re helping you? I mean medical science is just wonderful, isn’t it? We have a pill for everything. You may go now. Remember: one after every meal and at bedtime.”

K got up to leave. The references to meals made him remember that he was very hungry.

“Oh, and one more thing,” said the sandy man. “On your way out, whatever you do don’t get off on the eleventh floor. Did you get off there on the way up?”

“Why, yes.”

“Ah,” said the sandy man, nodding knowingly. “That explains everything.”

K left with the pink pills rattling in his pocket and got on the elevator and pushed the button for the first floor. The elevator, however, opened on the eleventh floor. Before he could close the doors he heard the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. It was the sound of a woman singing. It would, he thought, have been the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard even if it hadn’t been in such stark contrast to the almost complete silence he’d encountered everywhere on the thirteenth floor, silence except for the talk of Jheronimus K Jerome and Peter Peterman and Darvon Flomax and Gilder van Shekel and the small man and the sandy man.

In spite of himself, he got off the elevator and homed to the sound of the beautiful singing. It was coming from behind a door. The door was solid and wooden and bore the number 666. He opened the door and saw a young woman dancing and singing to the sound of a recording. She was in a red room with yellow chairs and golden draperies. There were luxuriant plants in copper pots and multi-colored birds in a golden pagoda cage and bright paintings on the walls. She wore a dress of a light silken fabric that clung to every curve of her body. She smiled as she swayed to the music.

“Oh, hi,” she said, “do you like to dance?” K was struck dumb by her beauty. “Come in, come in.”

There was the smell of food inside.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” she asked.

“However did you know?” K asked.

“Don’t be silly,” she laughed.

She made him eggs and bacon and toast with jam and, when he was still hungry, cooked him a steak and a potato and made him a salad and, when he was still hungry, gave him ice cream and apple pie and cheese cake and chocolate chip cookies. She gave him coffee and tea and milk to drink and, when he was still thirsty, gave him water and orange juice and, when he was still thirsty she went to the refrigerator and took out a beer and held it up and raised her eyebrows in inquiry and when he nodded she laughed the most beautiful laugh K had ever heard.

When he was finally finished, she patted his hand and said, “You never answered me about whether you like to dance.”

K wasn’t sure he had ever danced but he wanted to do whatever this woman wanted him to do so he said, yes, he liked to dance. And so they danced and danced and danced. They danced until he realized how very late it had become and that he had to go.

“Whatever for?” she said.

“Well, I start my job tomorrow.”

“Job?”

“I have to make a living.”

“What a curious phrase. None of us makes a living, do we? I mean we make a dying, don’t we? Sooner or later.”

“Well, I guess . . .”

“And in the meantime,” she insisted, laughing, “we should dance, dance, dance.”

She reached out for him and took his hand and they danced some more. They waltzed, they did the tango, the cha cha, the polka, the foxtrot. They did the fandango, the gavotte, the rumba, the madrilenò, the sequidilla. Before she had come into his life, K knew none of these

dances. But now, with this wonderful, beautiful woman, he did them all as effortlessly as if he'd been dancing his entire life. And, when it was all over, they curled up together and slept.

When he woke, K could not remember ever having slept more soundly. He reached over to where the woman still slept beside him and gently passed his fingers over her hair. He felt very, very happy. Then he remembered his job, and the Society of the Twelve, and making a living and he leapt out of the bed.

“What’s the matter?” the woman asked. “Where are you going?”

“Job. Work.”

“Oh, dear,” she said. “Must you do that frightful making a living thing?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Well, I mean, everyone does. You can’t just always dance?”

“Why not?”

“You just can’t.”

She frowned, then smiled.

“Kiss me, darling.”

The next morning he woke up again from a sound, restful sleep, and the morning after that. He lost track of how long he stayed with the woman. He was very, very happy. But, of course, he had to make a living.

When he finally reported for work on the fourteenth floor and presented his ID, he was turned away.

“That picture isn’t you,” he was told.

“But of course it is,” he insisted.

“No, no, no. That hair isn’t yours. And if you had teeth like that I’d be talking to you about our dental plan.”

“I must report for work.”

“No can do. Not with that ID.”

“Let me talk to Jheronimus K Jerome.”

“Nobody talks to him.”

“He’s on the thirteenth floor.”

“Listen, buster, you ever hear of a building with a thirteenth floor? Buildings just don’t have them. This one included. Too many superstitious people.”

“But I was on it.”

“Naw,” the man said, “this guy was probably on it.” He handed K back his ID. “Now beat it before I call security.”

K was in a daze. He couldn’t possibly have imagined Jheronimus K Jerome and Peter Peterman and Darvon Flomax and Gilder van Shekel and the small man and the sandy man. Could he? Then he remembered the pills the sandy man had given him. He hadn’t taken a single one of them! That was the problem. He took out the bottle, went to a water fountain, and swallowed one. Then, because he’d missed so many dosages, he took a second, and a third.

By the time he got down to the ground floor he felt like he was walking on air. He strutted down the hallway whistling the music he’d danced to with the beautiful woman. The man in the frock coat with the top hat and cravat was standing inside the door talking to Job. Job’s face was still covered with boils and pustules.

“Better see your dermatologist,” K laughed, playfully poking Job on the shoulder. Job gave him a sullen look.

Outside K saw the woman from Room 666. She was across the street walking with such grace and beauty that he felt a great longing for her. He wanted to dance, dance, dance. He stepped off the curb and called to her. K never saw the bus coming. It hit him and rolled him into the curb where he saw the large advertisement on its side as it drove away: “Great job for the right person. Unlimited potential. Great salary and benefits. Apply in person at the Twelfth Street Building, 1212 Twelfth Street, 12th floor. Interviews begin at 12:00. –The Society of the Twelve.” As the bus receded into the distance, K looked desperately for the beautiful woman but she was gone. He shifted his gaze up to stare into the limitless vault of sky.