

Call and Response
February 12th, 1985

She hates this place. She hates the tedium of her work as one of the anonymous, interchangeable cogs in the secretarial pool. She hates the grinding sexism segregating her from the men on the trading floor, making twenty times her salary. Or more. She even hates the office building—with its modern exterior design resembling an outsized ice cube tray and interior décor that is just as cold. But the salary and benefits at the downtown investment bank are far more than she can make elsewhere, so she stays.

She arrives at the trading floor to meet with Mr. Sorenson. For most of her tenure, she's worked in the Henhouse on the 42nd floor. Its bland monotony, with the constant, rhythmic clacking of typewriters and word processors, is no match for the testosterone-filled thrum and pulse of the trading floor. But up on 44, it's like seeing technicolor for the first time: the traders' white shirtsleeves and bright ties meld in a swirl of activity, contrasting with the stark green and black computer screens, desks piled high with red cans of Bazzini nuts, blue and white Greek diner coffee cups, pink boxes of donuts, and stacks of green bar reports bound in red, blue, and green covers—all highlighted in brilliant relief against the gray, wintry glare from the banks of windows covering three sides of the large space.

For a moment, the trading floor is quiet like she'd expect on a Tuesday morning. Then the market goes up a few ticks, and the traders jump from behind their Quotrons, shouting as they speed-dial their best clients.

From where she stands, she can hear Graham schmoozing someone on the phone, telling him to hit the bid. His clipped, British accent conveys credibility and smarts to investors, though his colleagues are not so easily impressed.

Down the aisle, she spies The Outfield on his way to the men's room, *New York Post* tucked under his arm. Known for his strikingly lush flattop (“as well-manicured as the greens at Shea Stadium”), The Outfield incites a daily frenzy of betting among the troops with his long morning dumps. Lomax, bouncing one of the many rubber-band balls he's made to expel his excess energy, says put me down for 10:18. Horowitz jumps in at 10:17. Junior traders place their bets, excited to be included. Old Crusty checks the last time slot and sets his wager for 10:33, undercutting Roper (The Groper) by two minutes. The old man does this every single day. She notices the traders' collective eye-roll when The Outfield emerges at 10:32, and Old Crusty sweeps the pool once again. He collects the \$32 winnings, mostly in crumpled singles, squares them up with quick hands, and slides the small stack into his billfold.

She turns her attention back to Graham, who's now barking at Pencil to buy the dip. Pennington Renwick, IV, aka Pencil Dick, must make hay on the floundering yen to make his quota. The schoolboy nicknames alternately embarrass and delight her, even though she would never utter them out loud, certainly not to anyone's face.

Across the way, Tombo calls out for a shine. He orders Not-So-Big-Ben to finish up and send the shoeshine guy to his desk, quick-quick. Not-So-Big cuts his shine short and dukes Shoey ten bucks. Shoey grabs his wooden carryall, stained from decades of polishing, and makes his way to Tombo at the dreaded muni bond desk. The bond guys are notoriously bad tippers, but what can you do, Shoey mutters to himself.

She squeezes by Shoey, giving him a brief nod, as she walks toward Old Crusty—Mr. Sorenson—right on time for their meeting. Other company secretaries might be wracked with nerves to approach a managing director out on the trading floor. Not her. These men don't scare her. She's encountered worse.

Sorenson greets her, raking his eyes up and down over her in a full-body scan. She ignores this yet hopes his poker face signals approval. He tells her he doesn't typically hire Hens straight from the pool but has heard good things about her. He throws out questions in rapid fire.

“You bright? You fast? Know what equities are? Can you handle these boys? They're a bit rambunctious, but they mean well.”

She answers in sequence.

Yes, she's bright enough for the job.

She can type 90 words a minute, if that's what he means by fast.

Of course, she knows what equities are; she's worked here for six years.

And she never lets the men interfere with her work.

She is satisfied that he seems satisfied with her answers.

“Good, good, good. So, you're not here on the prowl? I don't need another husband hunter on our desk like the last Tits McGee. She didn't last a month.”

She makes no comment. Old Crusty continues.

“The pay is \$365 a week, with a 2-week bonus at Christmas. More if we hit our numbers. You in?”

She says she's in.

“Right. I'll let personnel know you'll start on Monday. One more thing—you want to succeed in this department, you'll need to up your game. We are triple-long on short skirts, high heels, and an extra button undone. Go shopping.”

She is not visibly offended by this. She thanks him and extends her hand for a shake.

Later, she considers the details of her new job on the train ride home. The New Jersey Transit car is packed, overheated, and smells of dirty, wet wool. But no matter. She is content,

proud of herself for finally moving up. She flips to the list at the back of her red leatherette journal, the list of how she'd spend a raise if she ever got one. This promotion will surely bring relief to her monthly financial triage. Jotting down some notes, she covers the page with her left hand to ensure her seatmates can't see what she's writing. She is private that way.

The commute goes by faster than usual tonight. The train pulls into the station before she has finished updating the list. She exits the car, minds the gap, and follows the crowd, clomping down a flight of slick, iron steps, heading out to Walnut Street and into the ugly winter weather. She dodges the freezing shards of rain while sorting through her mental spending calculations on the walk home.

The multi-family, yellow Victorian where she lives has settled out of plumb. On wet days like today, the front door sticks and needs a hip-check to open. The foyer is warm, and the air is heavy with the smell of beef stew coming from apartment 1A. She checks her mail slot, then tiptoes up the narrow staircase to avoid any chitchat with her neighbors. Her cat's paw darts in and out from the crack under the door while she fumbles with the locks. The cat greets her, threading in and out between her ankles, purring, spreading love where otherwise there is none. She busies herself with dinner preparations, telling the cat about her day, and the next one, and the next one.

Then it is Friday, shopping day.

After work, with \$80 in her wallet from the automated teller machine, she goes to Bolton's down the street from her office, then onto Dress Barn. *Wouldn't it be a dream to have enough in the bank to shop at Macy's?* she wonders. But for now, the discount stores will have to suffice. She hopes to find something to add sex appeal to her serviceable wardrobe of long skirt

suits and bow blouses. She tries outfit after outfit, sometimes admiring, but often criticizing, the mirrored versions of herself, ghostly under the blue fluorescent lights of the dressing room.

A gnawing feeling in her stomach forces her to realize she is sunk with dread at the thought of standing out in a crowd, standing out at the office, like some zoo animal on display. She could never be what she is not. She settles on something she thinks is pretty enough, leaves the pile of rejects behind, and pays the clerk at the counter.

The subway gets her to Penn Station with minutes to spare for the commute home. Friday night trains are notoriously boisterous. Groups of people with beers wrapped in brown paper bags laugh and joke and toast the end of the workweek. It gives her an idea. With a portion of the money left over from shopping, she stops at the liquor store to buy some Lancer's rosé wine in the red clay bottle. Around the corner, she ducks into the mini-mart for a Sara Lee pound cake and, as a special treat, a bright bouquet of mums and daisies. At home, she toasts the end of her days as a Hen with a glass of wine and some cake, and settles back to watch *Miami Vice* with the cat curled in her lap.

On Monday morning, she reports early to the equities desk in her old navy blue suit, beige poly blouse, and a bright, new \$10.99 floral scarf knotted squarely around her neck. She hangs her coat on the hook and places two pens, two pencils, and two fresh pads along with her purse in the cubicle drawer. She turns on the word processor, ready to start the day.

Through the window by her desk, she spies the Statue of Liberty, the coppery green beacon waving hello. She smiles to herself, feeling welcomed by the Great Lady when Mr. Sorenson walks past.

"Good morning, Jean," he says and heads straight to his office.

I have arrived, she thinks and gets up to follow him with her steno pad and pen.