

THE IDEAL CANDIDATE

The Characters

MR. MOOSHEGIAN – male, middle management, middle aged

KATE SMOLENSKY – female, not yet 25

ASSORTED VOICES

The Setting

An office. A door leads to a nondescript hallway.

There are two straight back chairs, a desk with a drawer and nothing more.

The walls are bare.

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ACT I

MR. MOOSHEGIAN sits at the desk. He wears a plain suit, tie and highly polished shoes. A few papers, a pencil and a full water glass are organized neatly before him. His hands are clasped atop the stack of papers. He stares straight ahead, waiting.

As he waits, there is no sound and he does not move.

He clears his throat.

Time passes.

Softly, a knock at the door. MR. MOOSHEGIAN doesn't seem to notice. He continues to stare forward, unmoving.

Another knock, a little louder. Still no reaction from MR. MOOSHEGIAN.

After a moment, the door opens slowly. Just a crack.

WOMAN'S VOICE: Hello? (no response) Mr. Mooshegian?

The door opens a bit more and the face of KATE SMOLENSKY appears. It's a lovely face. The eyeglasses are stylish but not too, and her hair is a conservative cut, but not severe.

She spots MR. MOOSHEGIAN.

KATE: Oh! I'm sorry. Mr. Mooshegian?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Miss Smolensky?

KATE (*edging in a bit more*): Yes. The woman out front said I should just come on back. (*pause*) I knocked. Twice.

She waits.

KATE: Should I ... would you like me to ... come in?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Does it seem appropriate that you should be interviewed for employment while standing behind a door?

KATE: No, sir. Of course not.

KATE laughs a bit, nervously, then enters the office.

She wears a simple dress that fits well, flattering her body, and carries a briefbag that is a little too large for her petite frame. It is the only thing about Kate Smolensky that is not absolutely perfect.

KATE is unsure if she should wait to be offered the only available chair.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Henry Ford.

KATE: I'm sorry?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Henry Ford. Do you know who Henry Ford was?

KATE: The founder of Ford Motor Company. Innovator of the assembly line?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Henry Ford once said that you could repossess all of his factories and burn all of his warehouses to the ground, but as long as you left him his people, he could rebuild everything that had been lost. Ford recognized that employing productive people and knowing how to find them were his most important management tools. Do you agree with that?

KATE: Yes, sir. Yes, I do.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: You do what?

KATE: I agree that a company — any company — is no better than the people who run it. Make it run.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: And?

KATE: Finding productive people is critical to success.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: And?

KATE: It's often very difficult to find these people.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: And?

KATE: And ... he, Ford, could lose everything else, but if he had his people he could rebuild.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Lose everything how?

KATE: By having his factories repossessed.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: And?

KATE (*hesitating slightly*): I believe you said his warehouses could be burned to the ground.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: And that strikes you as just punishment for being perceived as anti-Semitic? (*standing*) Will you be standing throughout the entire interview?

KATE: No, sir. I mean, I don't need to. (*with concern*) About Henry Ford and the ques—

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: –I do not need to sit if you would prefer to stand.

KATE: I'm sorry. (*gesturing to the chair*) Should I sit here?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN (*sitting in his chair*): Would you rather sit on the floor?

KATE (*sitting in her chair*): No, sir. This chair is fine.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: I could sit on the floor *with* you, I suppose.

KATE: That's not necessary. This is quite comfortable. I never intended for it to seem that because Henry Ford was or wasn't anti–

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: –So you prefer that chair?

KATE: To the floor? Do I prefer this chair to ... the floor, or ...

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: You do not know?

A moment, as the question hangs in the air.

KATE (*deliberately*): Mr. Mooshegian. I'm perfectly fine sitting in this chair. I didn't sit in it earlier because it hadn't yet been offered to me. No, I am not accustomed to job interviews where I remain standing or sitting on the floor. On the subject of Mr. Henry Ford, I agree with you that his philosophy on the importance of industrious workers — which you will find me to be — is a philosophy to be admired. I was unaware of the anti-Semitic charges against him. If they are true, I find his views reprehensible and repulsive and ripe for condemnation. (*takes a breath*) I apologize for speaking my mind in this way and please forgive me if I am being rude or disrespectful. But I want this job very much and I fear we've gotten off on the wrong foot. (*pause*) Which is entirely my doing, I'm sure.

A long moment.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Excuse me.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN stands and exits the office, closing the door behind him. KATE watches him go.

After a long wait, KATE opens her briefbag and removes a small tin. Even more carefully, KATE applies pressure to the corners of the tin until it opens with a small metallic “pop.”

KATE gingerly reaches inside the tin with a thumb and forefinger, and removes a single white mint which she places on her tongue. The mint disappears inside her mouth.

KATE closes the tin, replaces it in her briefbag, then sets the bag on the floor beside her chair.

The door opens and MR. MOOSHEGIAN enters. He eyes KATE suspiciously as he sits once again in his chair. He reviews the papers before him.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Miss Smolensky.

KATE: Yes, sir?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Your first name is Kate.

KATE: Yes, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: An abbreviation for Kathryn.

KATE: No, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Are you telling me Kate is not an abbreviation of Kathryn?

KATE: No, sir, it is. But not in my case. In my case it is an abbreviation of Katiana.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Katiana.

KATE: Yes, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Katiana Smolensky.

KATE: Yes, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN begins writing. This takes longer than we would expect.

Finally ...

MR. MOOSHEGIAN (*without looking up from his papers*): Do your friends call you Kat?

KATE: No, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: May I call you Kat?

KATE: Umm ... if I come to work here, I suppose that would be all right.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Katey?

KATE: No, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: You would prefer Kat?

KATE: I'd *prefer* Kate. Or Miss Smolensky. But if this workplace is one in which the informality of nicknames is encouraged and embraced, yes, I'd prefer Kat.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Are you sucking a small marble?

KATE: No, sir. I'm sorry. It's a mint. I'll swallow it.

With sudden panic, MR. MOOSHEGIAN leaps to his feet.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: *NO!*

KATE, violently startled, lurches and then gags.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Did you swallow it?

KATE (*feeling with her tongue*): No.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN quickly advances toward KATE. He removes from his pocket a pristine and crisply folded white handkerchief.

He holds it out to KATE, slightly beneath and in front of her chin.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Here. Please.

KATE looks at him oddly, then spits the mint into the handkerchief, which MR. MOOSHEGIAN gently folds in half and replaces in his pocket.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Thank you.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN returns to his chair at the desk. He looks down at his papers.

Silence.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: I should explain.

KATE: It's not necessary.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: My son, Anastas, when he was six years old. He choked to death. On a gumball.

KATE (*sincerely*): I'm so sorry.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: It was very hard. It happened in the next room as my wife and I were making love. She was fellating me. We heard nothing.

KATE: No wonder you—

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: —So when you said you were going to swallow—

KATE: —Of course I understand—

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: —I just reacted. I am sorry.

KATE: Please don't apologize.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN reviews the papers.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Peppermint?

KATE: I'm sorry?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: The mint. Was it peppermint?

KATE: Uh, no.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Spearmint?

KATE: Wintergreen.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Ah! Wintergreen. Same as the gumball.

KATE: A wintergreen gumball?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN (*wistfully*): Yes.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN'S attention appears to drift. A long pause.

KATE: Shall we discuss my CV?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Hmm?

KATE: Is there anything you'd like to ask me that relates to the position being considered?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: It *all* relates to the position, Miss Smolensky. Whether you choose to sit or stand, the delicacy with which you expel a breath mint, your views on a great patriot like Mr. Henry Ford ... it all relates to your appropriateness for the position of Senior Assistant Customer Service Junior Management Representative. You see that, yes?

KATE: Yes. Certainly. And I do hope I have made myself clear on any controversy surrounding Henry Ford. (*pause*) Did you just refer to him as a patriot?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: It is always interesting, I have discovered, when I finally meet a candidate after the initial phone interview.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN (*Cont.*): It is human nature, I suppose, that one forms a mental picture of the person on the other end. As I did of you.

He waits for a response. KATE smiles.

KATE: Mr. Mooshegian, when we spoke on the phone you mentioned that the position calls for—

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: —Did you?

KATE: Did I what?

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Form a mental picture of me. Based on my voice.

KATE: I don't believe so.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Really? No image at all?

KATE: No, sir. Nothing specific.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: In general, then.

KATE: Perhaps.

KATE makes a decision, then speaks matter of factly.

KATE: When speaking to a stranger on the telephone, I believe that most people conjure up in their minds an image of someone familiar. And it's nothing we do consciously, but rather it stems from our innate desire to attach a voice to a face. In my current position, I spend a great deal of my day on the telephone addressing customer questions and concerns. I would like to believe that my voice brings to mind someone pleasant ... a favorite niece, a cherished sorority sister, a fondly remembered kindergarten teacher. (*pause*) I am convinced that for most of the people I speak with each day, whether or not I'm able to solve their particular problem is secondary. What they really want — what they yearn for — is just to have someone listen. And care. Listen and care. Or do a damn good job at pretending.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Is that what you are good at, Miss Smolensky? Pretending?

KATE: No, sir, most of the time I honestly *do* care. But some days, I must admit, are harder than others to be genuine. Although I doubt that any of my customers would ever know the difference. That's the real talent of it, isn't it ... to be seen as a person who always delivers one hundred percent. Because no one truly does. (*pause*) I realize that I am speaking rather frankly here, Mr. Mooshegian. And that by doing so, I am taking a certain ... gamble. But you strike me as the type of corporate management professional who appreciates candor. And I'm sure that most every candidate who has sat in this chair has claimed that they will deliver one hundred and ten percent ... a hundred and *twenty* percent of the time. I respect you, this company and the job enough to be honest with you.

Silence.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: Nothing at all? The stern high school principal with a heart of gold? Your father's lovably quixotic business partner? The corner grocer who playfully chases away the loitering neighborhood children? (*raising the back of his hand as if to strike*) "Why, I oughta ..." (*laughs*) Any of those?

KATE (*to put this to rest*): The first one.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: The stern principal with a heart of gold?

KATE: Yes.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN (*pleased with the image*): Thank you. So you will not be giving one hundred and ten percent if I bring you on?

KATE: One hundred and ten percent isn't even possible, sir.

MR. MOOSHEGIAN: That is too bad. You led me to believe differently in the phone interview.

KATE: I don't remember ever—