I had just stepped off the train at Boston's Back Bay, and was half-jogging along the concrete platform. I had missed my stop and would have to skip the coffee I had planned to have with my brother-in-law and catch the subway if I was to make my first interview at 8:30 a.m.

It had already been a long three days since I got behind the wheel of a rental car in Holland, Mich., and drove across the country to attend a job-placement fair sponsored by Carney, Sandoe & Associates, a consulting firm that recruits teachers and administrators for positions in private elementary and secondary schools. I was a refugee from the academic job market -- a Ph.D. in English whose temporary appointment had dried up at the college where my wife had landed a tenure-track job. Now I was on the alternative career bandwagon.

As I ran from the train to catch the subway, I was slowed down by a heavy bag of credentials and the slippery leather soles of a new pair of shoes. As I tried to turn a sharp corner into the station, I came to a sliding, pinwheeling stop, two inches in front of what must have been the largest man I have ever seen. There was a short moment of silence between us. He looked down at me, blinked once, then whispered, "Get out of my way little man."

In no shape for any kind of confrontation, I squeaked out, "OK," and stepped aside.

But the giant on the train platform had hit a nerve. I had never felt smaller, had in fact felt as if I'd been shrinking for months.

On my way to the job fair, I had had an interview in Philadelphia at a prestigious day school. It had not gone well. My teaching demonstration was awkward. I had misjudged the tone and pitch of my presentation and, as I have habitually done when nervous, talked too much, deadening discussion. I was also still smarting from my worst showing on the college job market. The calls I had anticipated did not come, and as my wife, Susan, interviewed for a tenure-track job in New Orleans, I stayed with my in-laws in Dallas, trying to play with our two sons while dying internally. At that time I had been contacted for only two interviews, both at high schools. Worse, neither were anywhere near colleges that had shown interest in Susan.

The job fair in Boston -- known as the "Forum" -- was just one of many regional job-placement conferences for private schools around the country. Such gatherings, much like the Modern Language Association conferences, are held in lush hotels whose lobbies serve as a base of operations for faculty recruitment. Forums run by Carney Sandoe are supported by that placement agency, and their agents orchestrate the event, directing their candidates through the process, dressed in bright-blue baseball caps and bow ties.

The National Association of Independent Schools runs an equivalent conference called "Link." Because Link was in San Francisco at this time and I could not attend conferences on both
coasts, I had chosen Boston, where I could at least save on accommodations by staying with my parents. Unlike most of the hopeful private high-school applicants fresh out of the best colleges in New England, I couldn't afford a night in hotels affiliated with the conference. So I opted to commute from the suburbs to the city, stacking up my interviews in two days.

Even at the time of my trip, I had only a few slots filled for the two days I would attend the Forum and was resigned to a spare schedule. Before going to bed the night before the conference, however, I checked my e-mail, and received a shock. Suddenly I had 14 scheduled interviews and a note from my placement agent saying to expect more the next morning.

Some of the names of the schools were familiar: Exeter, Lawrenceville, Taft -- schools where the best (and wealthiest) students and athletes in my hometown transferred when their parents lost faith in public education. But most of the schools were new to me, and they were geographically spread out across the United States. I was excited and terrified, realizing that there would be no way for me to prepare for each individual school.

Unlike the college job search, where applicants send materials directly to the schools that interest them, candidates in the private high-school market must submit a file to an agency. So while a few schools will contact the applicant ahead of time, many will wait until the morning of the conference. All of these factors contribute to a nerve-racking job search for applicants and interviewers alike.

In the end, though, the system is much to the benefit of a good candidate. As I was to discover, word of an attractive candidate who interviews well can get around quickly, resulting in many unanticipated interviews and position openings.

Fast-walking into the Sheraton, I gawked at the crowd of young men and women scurrying from room to room. Some were finding their interview tables, others checking coats and registering, many had already begun frantically scribbling notes and placing them in the boxes of the schools that they had targeted but were not on their interview schedules. To me, 10 years older and a good deal scruffier than anyone around, the other applicants appeared as if they had stepped out of some catalog. Was I ever that young, that good looking, I asked myself? I straightened my new tie in the mirror.

Mentally, I ran down the questions I thought I would be asked. Some were easy. "What kind of teacher are you?" "Do you have any coaching experience?" I knew that my Ph.D. and the summers I had spent coaching baseball would make me an attractive candidate. And I had eight years of good evaluations to speak for my teaching.
But the academic credentials that were drawing me interviews would also draw scrutiny. I knew that some schools would be suspicious that I was looking for a job in a private high school only because I could not find work at colleges, suspicious that this was a last resort. And no one wants to hire a castaway. Some would wonder if I could teach a 15-year-old, having taught nothing but college students for eight years.

There would also be questions about my family and my wife. The most prestigious schools were boarding schools, and they didn't want to hire anyone who couldn't commit to a 24-hour-a-day job; who would balk at the idea of dorm duty and after-school obligations; who would be fighting with his spouse over parental duties. Indeed, my brother-in-law had lost his job at one school for "spending too much time" with his children.

During the long drive, I had managed to practice a speech that almost convinced me that my motives were pure: I had always planned on teaching high school, but had gone blindly from graduate school to graduate school, unwilling to pass up offers of free education and scholarships. I had always planned to return to coaching but had realized over the years that the time commitments of higher education made that impossible. I felt I had more to offer. I wanted to teach motivated students in a setting where all my skills could be used. I was no specialist and had never wanted to be. And where college was the realm of specialized professionals teaching one or two kinds of courses over and over, it seemed that an English teacher in a private high school would have greater opportunities to grow and develop, to teach Shakespeare and creative writing, to know the students in the classroom and on the ball fields. As for Susan, she was supportive of my search and was looking to take time off from teaching so that she could pursue her writing.

All of the answers were true. And yet, I wasn't telling the entire story.

Although Susan was supportive, I couldn't imagine her or my children handling dorm life, couldn't imagine allowing Susan to give up her career for my sake -- even for a while. I knew that the only way I would take a job was if Susan could find one in the area. And though I had made the mental shift to teaching at the high-school level (and was feeling ridiculous about my earlier reservations) I was still somewhat damaged goods. Still smarting deeply with rejection.

As my interviews progressed, however, much of that feeling began to wash away. It became obvious that my Ph.D. and scholarly work were much more a benefit than I had anticipated. One interviewer mentioned how attractive it would be to have a professional writer and experienced college teacher on staff -- one who could speak to their advanced students about academic advancement and professionalism from the vantage point of experience. Another mentioned that if a school wanted its students to aspire to advanced degrees, it helped to have them taught by teachers who had achieved such distinction.
But overall, my degree and publications simply served to distinguish me from other candidates. As one interviewer put it, "You present us with a choice between potential and proven ability. We would prefer the latter." Even the doubters -- those who were worried if I would be happy laboring on my writing while burdened by the demands that boarding schools place on the time of a teacher and coach -- were extremely receptive to any response that would put them at ease.

I found that many interviewers had rather inaccurate conceptions regarding the amount of free time that was available to the average college professor, never mind the average adjunct, visiting, or "part-time" professor. I could honestly tell them that I wrote almost exclusively during vacations -- that I had never really had time to write during the academic year and probably wouldn't know what to do with it if I did have it.

In the end the interviews went better than I could have hoped, with each school representative nodding happily to my answers -- wanting, it seemed, to believe them as much as I did -- even if at times I felt a bit like an actor in a bad film, saying his lines with conviction and sincerity but not completely feeling them.

When one school asked about my children and then followed up with the question "So, is there a wife to take care of these children?" I felt myself wince and had to recompose myself before answering, "yes" while mentally checking that school off my list of job possibilities. During the course of the day I would discover that this was a common but by no means epidemic sentiment. Some schools, having looked up my information on the Web even went so far as to offer Susan a job out of hand -- a wonderful contrast to the college market, where having an academic spouse was considered a liability, not an asset.

Still, looking at the beautiful brochures with red-bricked and ivy campuses many colleges couldn't match, staring at the faces of all the wealthy, privileged students, I couldn't help but wonder how I would fit in. Growing up the son of a high-school guidance counselor in a wealthy town, I had developed an ability to tolerate the well off but not that attitude of entitlement that often accompanied their lifestyles. And though these potential colleagues seemed like wonderful, down-to-earth people, I was concerned. And I knew that this was a prejudice I would need to leave behind if I were to teach these students.

Still, it was thrilling to move from table to table, to be the one schools were vying for, for a change, trying whatever they could to set themselves apart. The tables were close enough that a representative would hear what I was saying and then track me down in the halls or between interviews, to give me a card or a phone number, or offer to take me for coffee or even dinner. And in many ways, these people and their world were undeniably attractive -- as were their enthusiasm for teaching and their obvious affection for their students and schools.
At the end of the second day of interviews I was exhausted and even more rumpled than usual. I found my brother-in-law, now the athletics director of a prestigious day school in Virginia, who had just finished interviewing prospective coaches.

As we sipped our diet cokes at the bar, he asked, "So, you think you can do this?"

Jeff was the one who had first suggested I try the private high-school market, saying: "You would be perfect. They would love you." But behind his enthusiasm lay his own concerns. There is no such thing as job security at a private school, no procedure for review, so when he was told that he was not being renewed, he simply had to uproot his young family and move on. Fortunately, he was able to find a school that did more than simply talk about promoting families. But his experience was a caution for both of us.

I let his question hang in the air a minute, and laughed: "I have no idea."

"I hear ya big guy," Jeff said, "I hear ya."

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