

Lydia's cubicle was next to Jim's. The walls were so thin that when he called her on the telephone, the sound of his voice through the partition was a muffled counterpoint to their conversation across the wires.

He called her several times a day. She thought his fingers must find the four numbers of her interoffice extension as a pianist's hand finds the notes of a major chord. She called him too, but not as often.

This morning he called her before her arms were out of her coat sleeves. "Happy Monday," said the voice in her receiver and the voice behind the wall. "Any suggestions as to how to make it through another one?"

She was reminded of herself as a child, anxious in bed without fatigue, asking her mother, "What can I think about?" She put down her container of coffee and stared at the wall between them. "Today is Washington Irving's two-hundredth birthday," she said. "It's in the paper. Washington Irving was a clerk in an imports firm. Just imagine his Mondays."

"We should have lunch today, to celebrate Washington Irving's birthday," said Jim. "I'll wait for you at noon."

In the preceding month or so Jim and Lydia had lunch to celebrate the birthdays of Chopin, Ted Williams, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Like most of the other employees of the corporation, they took lunch hour seriously. They worked in the accounting department, where the workload was not often heavy; besides, their boss, Chucky Magnuson, was a jovial man who felt betrayed when his subordinates worked too hard. "Managers are people too," he would say aggressively, looking for argument. A company man for twenty-five years, he had risen slowly through various backwaters of the corporate bureaucracy and was now lodged firmly, like an air bubble under a lily pad, at director level. "Everybody's got to give themselves time to relax and be a person," he said often.

He had started to say "themselves" instead of "himself" when Lydia had been promoted into the department three years before. Right away she had sensed his fear of being seen as a chauvinist and knew it gave her a decisive advantage, which she had promptly begun to exercise by taking

frequent twenty-minute breaks away from her desk. She assumed that Chucky Magnuson would never say a word to her about it; and she was right.

She spent these breaks trying to rouse herself from the vague depression into which she sank after working for any length of time in her cubicle. She was an assistant project manager, and she reviewed sheets of statistics and read over memos full of bureaucratic terminology: "process," "update," "input." She was irritated by the grammatical passivity of these words -- they popped up anywhere in sentences, here as a noun, there as verb. When she had stared at them until they seemed to be magnets pulling her eyelids down, she would walk away from her cubicle. She wandered through the halls of unfamiliar floors or went down to the lobby to stare at the Art Deco murals. Most often she took a book to the stairwell and read.

She loved the stairwell. It was warm and dimly lit and utterly deserted, since all travel between floors took place in the corporation's vast fleet of elevators; even so, the wooden banisters beside the stairs were always polished to a high sheen. Someone, late at night probably, walked up and down the twenty-eight flights and rubbed a luster into the railing that no one, it should have been assumed, would ever see. Lydia found this mysterious and touching and came to accept it as an anonymous gift. It had been in the stairwell that she and Jim had had their first conversation. One morning during her fourth week in the department, as she sat on a step with her legs stretched out and a textbook of Italian grammar in her lap, the landing door had burst open and Jim had come charging up the stairs. He vaulted gracefully over her ankles and paused at the middle landing to turn and stare at her.

"Did the principal send you here?" he asked.

She was frightened and got to her feet.

"Ah-hah," he said reaching down and taking her book. "That doesn't look like an accounting binder to me." He flipped through the pages and looked up quickly. "You," he told her solemnly, "are an astonishing woman. Italian! You're studying Italian! *Bellissima lingua!*"

This was encouraging. "I'm going to Venice, actually," she said. "I really want to get to Venice before it disappears. But I won't go until I

can speak the language. So we're in sort of a race -- me over here learning Italian, Venice over there sinking."

"You're going for a vacation, you mean?" he asked her.

"Maybe for good. Why not?" she said. "I'm sure not staying here."

His hand on the shining banister, he walked back down to her step and held out her book. "You and me both," he said fervently. "You and me both."

They had stayed an hour in the stairwell that morning, and he had told her of his plan to quit his job someday and sail a schooner around the Aegean Sea. He would stop off at various islands, he explained, and go on archaeological digs, where they always needed volunteers. It would be a while before he could carry out this plan, since he and his wife did not have much money saved. But if the economy held and the raises kept coming, sooner or later he could do it. He told her about the four hundred windmills on some Greek island, and she told him about the dozen caf, bands in St. Mark's Square; and they agreed to meet for lunch.

They met for lunch almost every day for the next three years. They shunned restaurants; Jim was in the habit of bringing his own lunches, and he began to pack enough for Lydia as well. He brought breasts of smoked chicken and wedges of Brie, radishes and gherkins and espresso in a thermos. Sometimes Lydia would bring the meal, staying up late the night before to make miniature quiches or deviled eggs. They would walk down to the river and sit on a bench, eating with their gloves on in the winter.

Lydia discovered that Jim, like her, had until now kept his profound dislike of the corporation a secret. They had both resisted joining in the office rituals of smug, vociferous complaint for fear of trivializing their own acute antipathy. Now, with each other, they could speak of their boredom with the mutual understanding that it mattered. Lydia could rage at the idiocies of memo language. Jim could draw fierce historical analogies between the modern office and the Victorian factory. They took one another seriously.

Almost every day they met and talked of what they might do if they quit the corporation. Lydia's dream of going to live in Venice paled after a while; she abandoned Italian for French and got the idea of becoming a chef.

As she told Jim, she had always had a flair for spices; and they were accepting women now in the great Paris institutes. Later still, insecure about the language problem, she had thought of giving herself a crash course in the major composers and becoming a classical disc jockey for some small radio station. She had always had a pleasant speaking voice and a flair for music.

She had always, in fact, had a flair for many things. She had graduated from college with a lode of enthusiasms and no particular distinction. She wished earnestly to do well by the rest of her life; but the question of what she might "be" remained distressingly opaque. While she waited for one of her flairs to blaze up and illuminate some grand, ascending career path, she had taken a job with the corporation.

She was still waiting -- for a timely opportunity, an unexpected chance, a sudden clarity of ambition. It seemed to them that when the time and the means to leave the corporation came along, she would know.

For Jim it was more complicated: he had a wife to support and a mortgage -- taken in a moment of temporary insanity, he said -- to pay off. Jim would be forty in a week.

But when he talked about navigating the Suda Bay and landing at Crete to dig for the hairpins and pocketknives of ancient Greeks, he did not seem to be forty. He read sailing magazines and boat catalogs with the obsessive energy of a teenager. On summer weekends whenever he could, he crewed on the sailing yacht of a wealthy friend and learned as much as he could. But there was nowhere on earth for sailing, he told her, like the Aegean Sea.

"You've never seen it," she said impressed by his certainty.

"I know it as well as if I had," he said. "It's the perfect body of water, the perfect scale for human beings. It goes on and on, and you could sail it all your life and never know it entirely; but not matter where you went there would be islands on the horizon to comfort you. Thousands of islands! They were inventing regional theater on those islands when the rest of the western world was still asleep! And the wine, and the olives, and the dolphins leaping . . ."

Jim knew everything about the court of the Minoans, about the

Peloponnesian Wars. He was inept at the small talk that upholstered the social life of the office; he tended to talk too long and too vigorously about trade wind patterns. He was a tall, loose-limbed man with wandering hair and an unconscious habit of whistling. When he walked through doorways he invariably dipped his head -- although it was never necessary; the corporation had accounted for the possibility of tall people when it planned the height of its doors.

His cubicle had earned something of a reputation in the department. The constellations of the night sky were painted on the ceiling, and ornate maps of classical antiquity covered the walls; there was a fishtank in the corner where two goldfish swam beneath the pendulous leaves of a giant rubber plant. In the middle of the cubicle, at a desk piled high with back issues of *National Geographic*, Jim wrote brisk, competent memos on accounting procedures with an ebony fountain pen. Jim's specialty was systems design. It had been rumored recently that he might be up for a promotion.

Lydia's cubicle, in contrast, looked uninhabited when she was not in it. She never hung a wall calendar or left an umbrella on her coatrack. She camped at her desk as though she were there just for the day, keeping all her things -- date book, hand lotion, aspirin -- with her in a large handbag wherever she went.