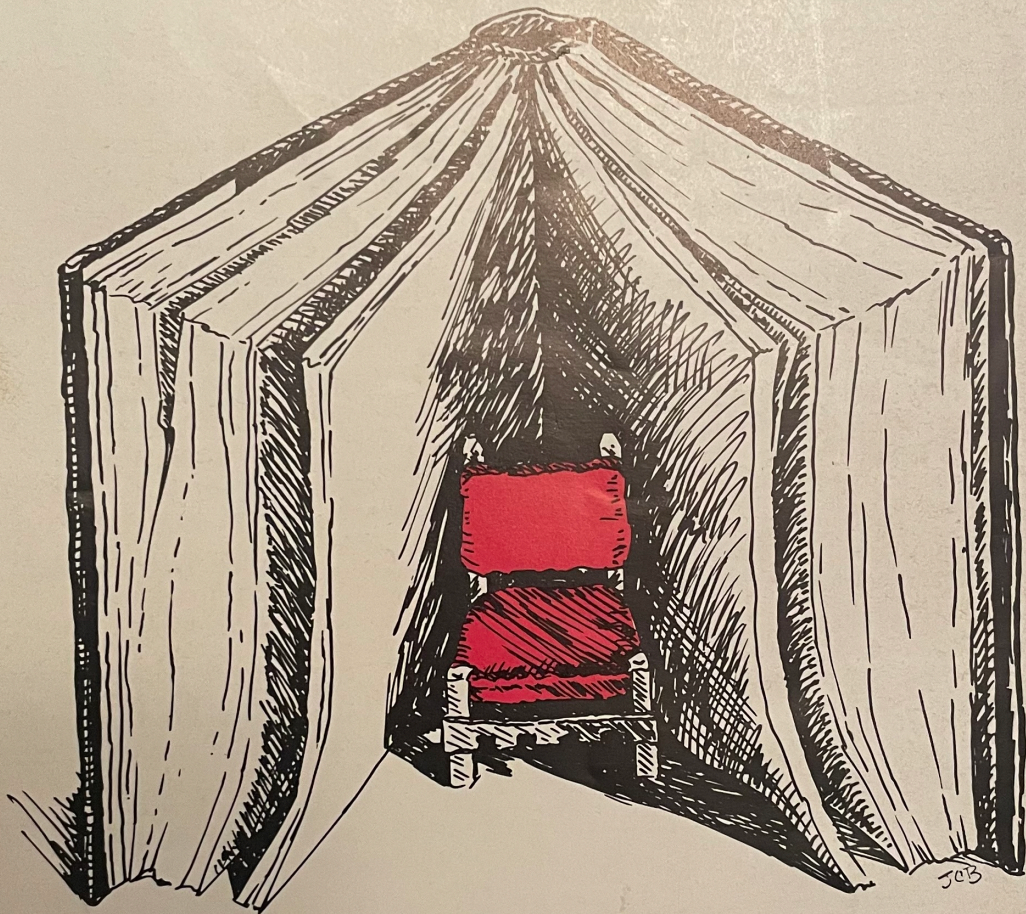


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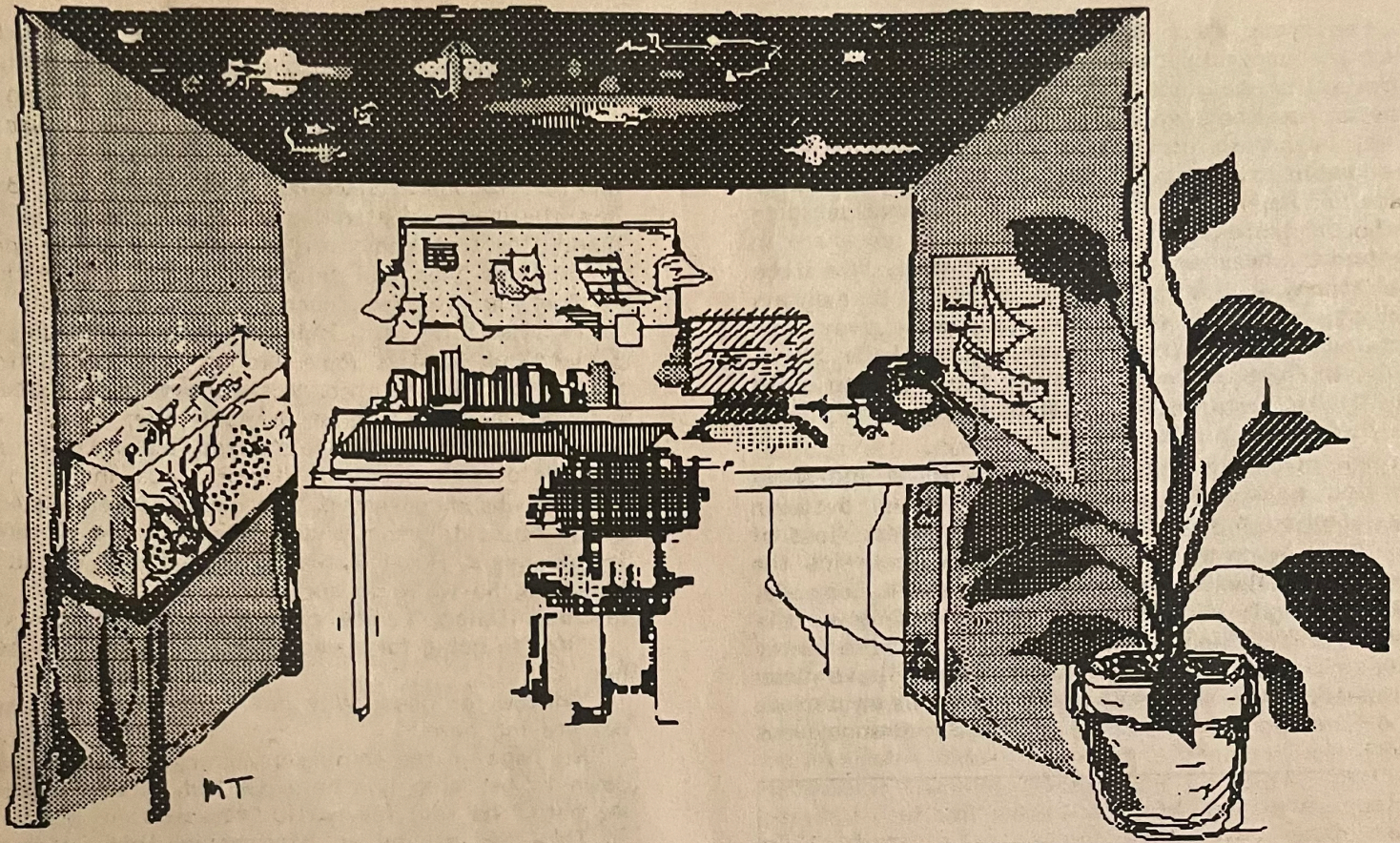
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Spring 1985

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C U B I C L E S

Tricia Tunstall

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 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.

Tricia Tunstall lives in New York City and has published fiction in the *Kenyon Review* and non-fiction in several business magazines. She is also a lyricist and has written works for musical theatre.

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 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 of stairs 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 archeological 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 café 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.

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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 her 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 even 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 no 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

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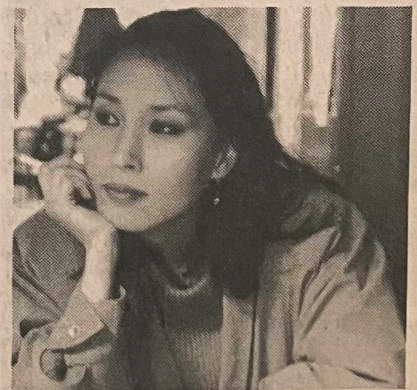
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**Kandinsky's
Sojourn**

Collected short stories

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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.

On the morning of Washington Irving's two-hundredth birthday, Lydia sat in her cubicle and made an effort to concentrate. She wrote memos advising of updates to certain accounting procedures, and she wondered what Jim had brought for lunch that day; and she wondered, as she had done many times before, whether Jim's wife ever noticed what large lunches he sometimes packed.

She knew very little about Jim's wife. Over the years she had listened politely when he recounted that Marcy had taken a course, dropped a course, looked for a job, started a garden; but she was in fact deeply uninterested in Marcy.

Lydia and Jim had never slept together. In the early days of their friendship Jim had wanted to rent a room where they could go at lunchtime, but she had refused. She could not sleep with him casually, she told him, and so she would not sleep with him at all. He was a married man. He never mentioned it again, and she had the feeling he approved.

After that they were more relaxed together, as though somewhere in the background the buzz of a pneumatic drill had subsided. They quickly became very close. Sometimes Lydia felt that she and Jim had found their way past sex into the comfortable unspoken intimacy of those who have long been lovers.

She went out with other men now and then, men outside of the corporation. For the past six months she had had a steady relationship with an eye doctor named Davis Neal, a pleasant man who played tennis and was an assiduous reader of magazines on current affairs. He was impressed by her ease with credit cards, her authority with cab drivers; and when he introduced her at parties he always mentioned her job at the corporation with pride. He had a hearty admiration for *Women In Business*.

She did not mind being so amiably misunderstood. Jim knew who she was.

And she did not feel jealous of Marcy because on the level that mattered most, Jim belonged to her. Marcy spent the days taking her courses and training her rosebushes. But Lydia's days were locked

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into Jim's. Every day, over and over, they connected --rapping on the wall between their cubicles, reaching for their telephones, sharing a napkin. Their common alienation drew them together more powerfully than a common affinity could ever have done. She was the accomplice of his discontent.

When it grew close to noon Lydia took off her shoes, sat down on the floor, hooked her toes under her desk, and did fifty sit-ups. Then she put on her shoes and coat and went to meet Jim. She waved as she passed Simon, the occupant of the cubicle on her other side, who was slumped at his desk staring idly at his papers as though watching TV. He waved back, briefly sunny, and called to her, as he did every day, "Enjoy!"

It was an early April day, and the air was full of white light and the smell of the river. Jim was already at the bench, unwrapping a spinach paté.

"I just passed Magnuson on the way out," he said. "Going for his daily box of Ring Dings, no doubt."

Jim hated Chucky Magnuson with an energy that baffled her. "Why should it bother you what he eats for lunch?" she asked him.

"Nixon ate ketchup on cottage cheese for lunch."

"And look what happened to him."

"And look what happened to the guys who worked for him," said Jim. He ate a sliver of paté on a cracker and stared at the water. "Happy birthday, W.I.," he said morosely.

She felt troubled by his mood. As a rule he swung between agitation and cheer; it was disturbing to see him simply gloomy.

"We should do something terrific to celebrate your fortieth," she said. "Enough with these posthumous birthdays. It's next Monday, right?"

"Nothing to celebrate," he said. "Forty. My God. When Washington Irving was forty. . ."

"What if I take you out for a drink after work on your birthday?" she asked him, a little surprised at her own suggestion. "Someplace real, with tables, you know, and chairs?"

"So you think I'm getting too old for the carefree riverbank picnic life, do you?" he said; but he looked pleased.

"Just a drink," she urged. "It wouldn't have to make you late getting home."

"Or make you late for some hot date with Neal Davis," he said. He got the name wrong every time.

"It's Davis Neal, and a hot date with him is a contradiction in terms," she told him. "Listen, I'll find some darling café. Little dish of peanuts, little cocktail napkins, the whole thing."

He smiled and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's a nice idea, Lydia," he said.

They finished the paté and crackers and a slab of cheese, and between them, slowly, they pulled apart the sections of an orange. Then they went back--one by one, as they always did. From the beginning they had maintained a remoteness in front of the others as scrupulously as if they were having a passionate affair. They came and went separately and they whispered on the telephone as though it were a string between their cubicles with a tin can at each end. In front of their colleagues they treated one another with vague, offhand courtesy.

The birthday drink, Lydia realized, should occur somewhere they were unlikely to be seen by their office mates. She spent her lunch hour on Tuesday surveying the neighborhood for an appropriate spot. On Wednesday at lunch Jim had recovered his good humor and was full of an article he had just read about a temple to Demeter somebody was excavating at Corfu. "Demeter--corn goddess," he told her. "She used to walk the fields plowing the earth with her bare toes, scantily clad in a couple of corn husks or something. Very sexy." Lydia, later that afternoon, was embarrassed to find herself distracted from her accounting procedures by the question of what she would wear for their drink.

On Thursday she took a half-day off, which she did with some frequency; the corporation was generous in its allotment of Personal Days, Vacation Days, and fractions thereof. These hours she liked to devote to insistently pleasurable pursuits. She would lie in a hot bath with string trios on the record player, or have lunch in a restaurant with a novel and a glass of wine, or take a taxi to a foreign film. When she filled out her time sheet at the end of a week it was a delight to record "PD" or "VD" (an abbreviation that seemed to disturb no one) in one of the little boxes. The time sheets gave her a

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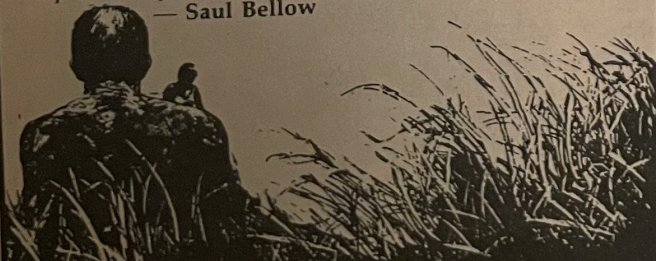
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comforting sense of order: that much for them, this much for me, she would think. As long as she and the corporation were competing for her life, it was good to have the score so carefully kept. With a time sheet you knew where you stood.

This Thursday afternoon she went shopping for a birthday present for Jim. It was a tricky business. She wanted the present to stand for the thread of secret animation they spun together through the bureaucratic wool of their working lives. That was how she thought of it. But it was a romantic thought, and she did not want to get a present so romantic as to upset the calm of their friendship. She roamed in and out of shops and in a happy moment came upon a miniature sailboat made of ivory. It was a delicate three-masted craft, its slender hull tipped slightly, its latticework sails curved as though full of wind. Lydia took it home and sat it briefly on her coffee table next to her favorite possession, a music box that played variations on "My Darling Clementine" in a baroque whisper.

Chucky Magnuson came around Friday morning in what he often called a support mode. He liked to drop by his people's cubicles at the end of a week to give them a feeling of appreciation. Lydia heard him first in Simon's cubicle.

"Do you believe it's Friday?" he called buoyantly. "I'm ready for it, how about you?"

Simon's response was unintelligible through the wall. He was a shy man; he had mastered the passing salutation, but direct questions tended to unnerve him. Chucky Magnuson, fortunately, knew the answers to his own questions. "Bet your ass you are," he said, taking leave of Simon. "Have yourself a wild one!" He appeared in Lydia's doorway and leaned against the doorjamb, suddenly and uncomfortably serious. Clearly he could not wish her a wild one, and yet he did not seem prepared to offer an alternative proposal. She saw he could find no recourse but to talk about work. "How's it going?" he inquired, teetering in her doorway like a tennis player trying to avoid a foot fault.

"Just fine," she said, wondering if one of the flimsy walls might someday collapse during a Friday visit. Chucky Magnuson was big, and leaning hard seemed to be his way of throwing his weight around. He sustained his position in the doorway and peered at the papers on her desk, asking a few supportive questions. Then he marched on to Jim's office.

"Jimbo! How's the crazy man these days?" she heard him say, obviously relieved to be back in the domain of mad and spontaneous males. She had never heard him use the nickname before. "God, I love this little nook of yours, I really do," he continued, and then his voice grew dim. He had stepped inside Jim's cubicle and closed the door.

Chucky Magnuson was not, as he would himself have said, a closed-door or lowered-voice kind of a guy. Lydia took off her shoes and padded over to stand beside the wall and listen. She could make no sense of the alternating barks and murmurs; but the moment Chucky Magnuson left Jim's cubicle her phone rang. "Meet me in the stairwell, could you?" said Jim curtly, and hung up.

He was sitting on the landing in the lotus position with his eyes closed, scowling, when she arrived. "He calls me Jimbo now," he said without opening his eyes. "Do you believe that? Jimbo. Rhymes with limbo."

"What did he say to you?" she asked him.

Jim did not move. "I'm an asset to the department, and we really ought to have lunch together sometime, he and I."

"You're getting a promotion," said Lydia. In spite of herself she felt a classic thrill of interest; in the bureaucracy, that was always the key, the charged word. The aggressive thrust of any upward move could arouse tremors of excitement throughout a whole department. "I'm sure that's what's going on. They're getting ready to promote you."

"Unlikely," said Jim, opening his eyes, and then as she started to argue, "and anyway, what would that do for me? So I get to be part of Chucky



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TRANSLATIONS



Magnuson's significant peer group. This is an honor?"

"I wonder," she said, "if a promotion would mean out of the department." She could not permit that thought very long and continued at once, "Of course they'll want to keep you here, and there are all kinds of places within the department that might be opening up."

Jim unfolded his legs and put his feet on a step, staring down into the stairwell. She resisted an impulse to take his head between her hands. "I don't want a bigger office," he said. "Too much trouble to put the Milky Way on the ceiling. And I don't even want a bigger job. I might forget to feed the fish." He was utterly grim.

"That guy's an idiot," she said. "Don't worry about what he calls you." She looked forward to giving him his birthday present. No matter what office he had, the little ship would sail among his memos and keep him company.

He was silent a moment. "Well," he said at last, "it's Friday, anyway. We might put the boat in the water this weekend if the weather holds."

Early Monday morning Lydia called Jim in his cubicle and sang "Happy Birthday" softly into the phone. "Five-fifteen tonight at the Riverview Lounge," she added at the end.

"Terrific," he said, his voice surging up behind the wall. "Listen, don't mention my birthday to anyone else around here, okay? I don't want to have to deal with any friendly Hallmark sentiments about being as young as you feel." Later she saw him in the hall, wearing a burgundy vest and black polka dot bow tie, whistling high melismatic flourishes against the Muzak piped throughout the corridors. Nimble, furtively, he touched her arm as he passed.

He was not free for lunch; and though he called her a number of times to whistle a bar of music he wanted her to identify or to read her the latest florid memorandum to hit his In Box, she did not see him again until she lined up behind him in the Xerox room late in the afternoon. "Till the Riverview Lounge," he murmured so that only she could hear. and moved to the Xerox machine.

The Riverview Lounge had little glass tables on bronze pedestals and a classical guitarist in a doublet and buckled shoes. They sat by the window in the falling light and drank champagne. Lydia felt momentarily unnerved to be sitting face to face with him, their knees touching visibly beneath the glass; it helped to look out the window at the river, which they had so often looked at together from their luncheon bench. She raised her glass to him. "To forty," she said.

"To forty," he agreed; and as they clinked glasses he reached across for her hand. His face was flushed. "And to you, for this delightful celebration. And to my surprise. I have a surprise today."

"Hold on--I'm the one with the surprise," she said, reaching in her bag. "It's your birthday, after all." She handed him the present and watched him pull off the wrapping.

"Oh, my God, Lydia," he said, lifting up the little boat, "this is perfect. This is just too perfect." He cupped it in his palm and gazed at it. "You won't believe it when I tell you. . ."

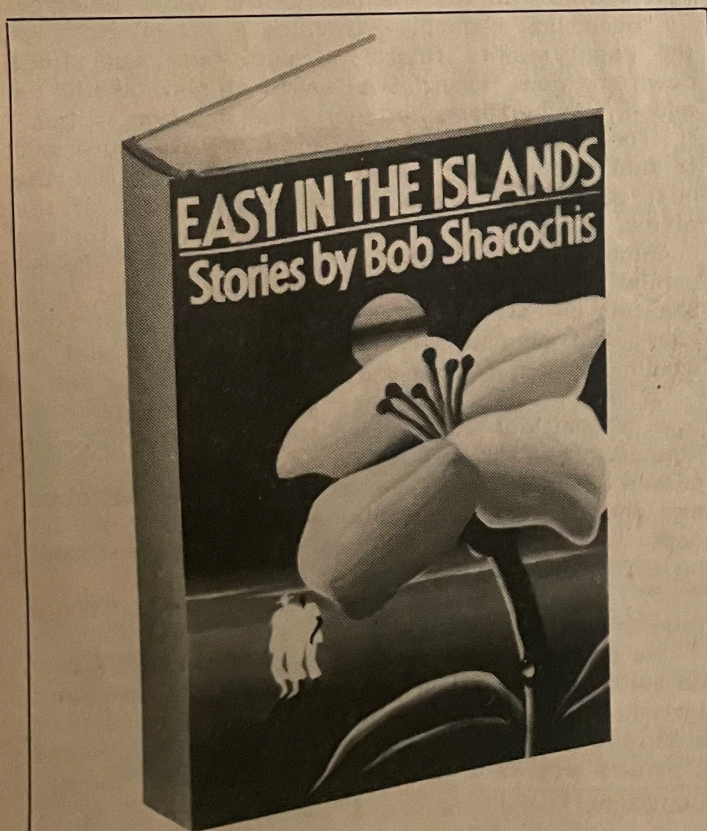
"Tell me what?" she said.

"My surprise," he said, raising his glass again. "I commemorated my fortieth birthday today in style," he went on. "I quit." He put down his champagne glass and smiled at her.

"What do you mean," she said, "quit?"

"Packed it in. Finished. Today at lunch I went to see Mr. Magnuson and informed him politely that the corporation will no longer enjoy my services. No explanations. No excuses. Nothing about how I am forty years old and my life is half gone, and unless I make my break now I will begin to die very quietly at my desk and every day hear a few more of my brain cells pop like seaweed pods under the pressure of what I haven't done. Nothing about how in another ten years or so they would have to embalm me and stuff me and prop me in my chair every morning, as they no doubt already do with a number of others, and spray some nice floral scent around to conceal the smell of rot. Nothing about any of that. Very smooth, very cool. Just--'I quit.'"

"You quit," repeated Lydia. Outside the window the river was turning pink and gray in the sunset.



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"I decided this weekend," he went on. "And once the decision was made, it was so simple--we realized there was no good reason why not. I think, you know, it was the thought of turning into 'Jimbo' that finally did it."

Lydia stared at him. "What about. . ." she began, and stopped. There was something urgent she needed to ask him, and she could not find it. "What about your house?" she said, which was certainly not it.

"We're putting it on the market today," he said. "It shouldn't be hard to unload. And Lydia, wait till you hear--we bought a boat. A twenty-two footer. We're getting it shipped right to Greece. We fly to Athens, meet the boat at Sounion, and we're set. It's three-masted--just like this." He cradled the little ornament in his fingers.

Her mind focused around a question. "Who is 'we'?" she asked, although of course she knew the answer.

"Just Marcy and me--I'm pretty sure we can handle it ourselves. Marcy's a hell of a sailor. And I'll bet I know the Aegean better than most of the Greeks." He tilted the boat to catch the pink light in its pearly surfaces. "It's so simple," he repeated wonderingly. "We just go."

"Uh-huh," said Lydia, "and you live on just what, exactly?" She was shocked at her own sarcasm. He was going to fulfill his dream, and all she could do was bully him about money.

"I've got a bit saved," he said, "and maybe some eminent archeologist will hire me sometime. I figure we could always get something started taking tourists around the islands. I could give painless lectures on Greek sculpture. Marcy could demonstrate sailor knots. People would love it. They would think we'd been doing it for years."

"Sounds great," she said. "A brand new career conning tourists."

He looked confused. "Lydia," he said, "aren't you glad for me?"

She lowered her eyes to the boat in his cupped hands and then took it from him and laid it gently back in its box, pulling the tissue paper around it. "Sure," she said. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

He gripped both her hands. "How can you ask that?" he said. "You know what I'm doing. You're the only one on earth who really understands."

Well, that was true. Her anger turned toward Marcy, who seemed to have cheated by becoming a hell of a sailor without her knowing. She lifted her glass formally. "Here's to forty," she said.

Within a week he was gone. He had given two weeks notice, but on Wednesday he was told by Chucky Magnuson to repaint his ceiling before he

left. Enraged, he packed his things into a carton that afternoon, maps and magazines and fountain pen, and mailed it to the Salvation Army. He called Lydia several times. "You want the rubber plant?" he asked her. "You want the twins?" He had always insisted the goldfish were twins, as though there were no other reason two goldfish would look alike. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll find them a nice situation." She did not want them at all.

He talked to no one else in the department about why he was leaving. The rumors began in friendly envy--he had gotten a good offer somewhere else, he was going to do free-lance consulting--but when he continued uncommunicative they turned malicious, and by the time he left people were saying he was unstable.

He met her in the stairwell to say good-bye. "I'll send you a postcard from every single island in the Aegean Sea," he told her ardently. And if he ever got a post office box where she could write him, he promised, he would let her know. The little ivory boat would travel with them everywhere. When he said that her eyes filled and she walked up a few steps, her back to him.

"Did you ever notice how they keep this banister polished?" she said, when she could turn around. He squinted up into the shadows of the upper landings.

"Somebody probably straddles a velvet cloth on the twenty-eighth floor," he said, "and just slides down and goes home." She looked at him. "Well," he added, "maybe that's not such a bad solution, either."

The night of the day he left Lydia was surprised to feel nothing but a kind of weary relief. But the next day, in the constant fluorescent noon of the office, she fell into the desolation reserved for the midnights of most abandoned lovers. The silence behind her cubicle wall was like a slap in the face. She felt betrayed, as though he had lied to her for years. But he had only done what he had said he would do. Had it been she who had betrayed him?

It was Friday, and they were already painting over his ceiling. She decided to leave early. Chucky Magnuson had not yet put in an appearance. As she passed Simon's cubicle she saw that the rubber plant and the fishtank were sitting on the floor by his desk. "I figured he might want me to have them," he explained, embarrassed.

"I think he would be glad," she told him. "You'll take good care of them."

He smiled, relieved, and gave her a wave. "Enjoy!" he said. On an impulse she walked to the stairwell instead of the elevators, and slowly, sliding her hand along the banister, she descended the eighteen flights of stairs and went to meet Davis Neal for dinner.

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