



Do you hear that ticking? No, you wouldn't, I suppose. It's sort of an internal thing, like my biological clock, only I hit the permanent snooze button on *that* thing a long time ago. I'm referring instead to the sound of the seconds vanishing on my tenure clock. It started up when Patrick Henry University in Albemarle, Virginia, hired me to teach political science six years ago. What happens at the end of six years is that the senior members in my department vote on whether they think I show great promise as a scholar. If the answer is yes, I win a lifetime membership, all expenses paid, as a university professor. If the answer is no, I receive my walking papers with a one-year deadline for clearing out.

I should know very soon whether I walk or dance. My department is meeting now to make its decision.

My name is Damocles.

No, that's not true—it's Lydia Martin. Speaking as a political scientist, I'd describe myself as white, single, thirty-three, and with a history of voting as an independent. I have no religious convictions to speak of, although in times of great duress I've been known to reconsider my options.

Like now.

I haven't always been worried. In fact, up until just about a year ago, I'd have told you I fell into the shoo-in category. But that was before the Great Sea Change.

I remember the day exactly, a dreary Thursday in mid-November. On that particular afternoon I was studying my little desk calendar, contemplating a weekend of skiing over Thanksgiving break. I was thinking something low-budget, like one of those resorts in West Virginia. I'd have to take a chance on the weather, but it was West Virginia or nothing. Unlike most of my students, I couldn't afford a trip to Stowe or Banff where there was sure to be snow, real or otherwise. In one of my classes a few days earlier, I had overheard someone saying he wasn't going anywhere for the break. I perked up, thinking at last I had found an undergraduate whose standard of living was not higher than my own. That was until I heard him add that he would, however, be spending Christmas vacation with his family in the French Alps.

That's nice, his friend answered.

I sighed and put down my calendar. Someday, I told myself, you, too, will be staking out a spot in the lift line at Mont Blanc. Someday, when you've made it—when you're a whale.

Just then there was a knock on my door.

"Lydia? Are you in there? It's me, Pam."

I got up to open the door. "Come on in," I said. "Have a seat."

I wasn't surprised to see her. Pam usually stopped by at least once a week to talk. She and I were the only two women out of a total of thirty-five faculty members in the political science department. Pam automatically assumed that we therefore had a special bond. I didn't necessarily feel it. After all, she had just been hired and was going through the usual first-year drowning ritual. Her area was Western European politics and mine was American government—so there was little overlap of interest there. But, by my calculation, there was also no threat. Pam was harmless, you could see that in the way she always offered to help. Every time I passed her office, there was a line of students waiting to talk to her. Already she had approached the chairman about coordinating courses with other departments and bringing in guest speakers. He barely managed to contain his glee as he handed over the first few administrative tasks. Here was another sucker in the hatching.

As for looks, Pam was pretty in a nonobvious way. She had medium brown hair of medium length and was neither tall nor short, fat nor thin. She wore suits of jackets and matching skirts, those uniforms of professional women everywhere. I wore them, too, but managed to avoid the coordinated scarves and pins Pam favored. Plus, I was taller and leaner, and could get away with more stylish cuts and lengths. I kept my auburn hair trendily short, my face makeup-free, and cultivated the air of someone who would know the best Thai restaurant in town, if there were any. But Pam had something I didn't have—a warmth of expression in her medium brown eyes that practically screamed I AM A CARING PERSON at you.

If I had those eyes, I thought, I'd wear dark glasses.

At that moment, however, she looked unusually frazzled.

"Have you heard the news?" she asked, breathless.

"No," I said. "What news?"

She gave a quick glance outside and then closed the door.

"You had better sit," she said, and I did. She pulled a chair up to my desk.

"What is it?" I asked. "Did somebody die?"

She nodded. "Sort of. Word has just gone out. Walter Kravitz went down."

"Walter? Walter went down?"

"Yes. Can you believe it? He didn't even make it out of the department."

I sat back, stunned. No, I couldn't believe it. Walter Kravitz had been denied tenure, and denied at the lowest level of review. He had not even had the opportunity to be swatted down by the dreaded dean's committee, which could and often did overturn a department's favorable recommendation.

"But . . . but why? He had a book, and at least three articles." Even as I spoke, my eyes scanned the bookcase against the wall and picked out the white dust jacket almost immediately: *When Tyrants Speak: The Manipulation of Language Within Totalitarian Regimes*. It had come out last April, a few weeks before the publication of my own book, and we had exchanged copies as a way of congratulating each other. At the time I remembered thinking how alike we were, two confident minnows knocking on the gates of cetacean paradise.

"I know. But get this. They said one book wasn't enough, not any more."

They. *They*, of course, were the whales, the tenured members in the department, all of associate or full professor rank. The older whales, the ones above the sixty-year mark, had come up in the profession in a different era with different standards. Thirty years ago, just *having* a Ph.D. had been sufficient to see you through the tenure door in some places, Patrick Henry University included. But in the intervening years competition for teaching positions everywhere had grown by leaps and bounds, so naturally qualification standards had shot up, too. And now, Pam was telling me, a new level had been set: One book is no longer enough.

"How can they do this?" I asked.

"It's completely unfair," she said. "Walter's book is good, or at least I heard it got decent reviews. And he's published a bunch of articles. Sure, maybe he isn't working on something right this second, but come on! His wife just had another baby, after all. That makes three kids, right? Now he has to find another job by next year. Do you know how tough it is these days to get a political theory position? What in the world is he going to do?"

But right at that moment I wasn't thinking about Walter. I was thinking about me. What was *I* going to do? What was going to happen to *me*?

I'd only published one book, too. It was called *Bringing in the Green: Profit as Incentive in the Environmentalist Movement*. It showed how amidst the environmental zealots there are a good number of savvy businesspeople. Specifically I did a study of the folks who years ago helped write the tax breaks and incentives for windmills and solar energy panels, and then subsequently went into the alternative fuel business themselves. They ended up turning sunbeams into a cash crop, and reaped a hefty profit.

The book got good reviews. The *American Political Science Review* called it the best book on interest-group politics to be published that year. The *Journal of Politics* said it was a "must read" for organizational theorists. Even *The Wall Street Journal* included it in one of its book review roundups, saying, "*Bringing in the Green* shows that some environmentalists *do* live in glass houses."

My mail picked up. I received an invitation to present a paper at the yearly American Political Science Association conven-

tion. A think tank in Washington, D.C., asked me to participate in one of their panel discussions. (A televised broadcast of the session aired at 2 A.M. on C-Span. I taped it and sent a copy to my parents.) After a few months, I even got a royalty check. All in all, to my mind it was beginning to look distinctly like whale mail.

Except of course for the letters from those readers who hated the book. And there were quite a few. They thought *Bringing in the Green* was an attack on the noblest cause in the world, and that I was an oily tool of Imperialist Petroleum, Inc. I responded to everyone, telling them I never meant to insult the environmental movement. What I really wanted to say was, Read a book, any book, on organizations and you'll find that even in the most ideologically righteous groups there lurks the dreaded profit motive. It can take different forms, such as a desire for personal perks, power, and—yes—money. But it is always there, in someone somewhere within the fold. Count on it.

To paraphrase one of my heroes, James Madison, if men were angels, we wouldn't need Earth Day. At least the entrepreneurs in my study really *did* clean up while they cleaned up. Surely, I thought, that must count for something.

Looking back, at the time I must have radiated an invisible sensory field of tenurability. Some of my colleagues, the ones junior to myself, began asking me to read snippets of their works-in-progress and sought my advice on which publishers they should contact. For the first time I felt the gentle nips and tugs of minnow lips on my own minnow tail.

I have to admit, I liked it. I dispensed my opinion freely and in a variety of postures—leaning jauntily against the door frame of my office or with one hand cradling a glass of wine at a dinner party. The more I spoke, the more acutely I detected signs of nascent spout formation. So this is it, I thought. Transmogrification is under way.

Or so I believed until Pam walked in and delivered her little bombshell.

"This is terrible, just terrible," I said.

"Isn't it?" Pam sighed and shook her head. "I guess the vote was taken yesterday and that's when Walter found out. I knocked on his office door a little while ago to tell him how sorry I am but he wasn't in. I don't want to call his home—I don't really know his

wife and it must be hard enough on her right now without having to talk to strangers about this. You know her, don't you?"

"Shelly? Yes, of course."

"Well, if you call, please say I'm thinking of them and that if there's anything I can do, anything at all, they only have to ask."

"Okay. Sure," I said.

She got up. "Well, I have to go prepare for class, so I'll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing before I barged in. Seems as if you're always working. I guess you won't have much to worry about when *your* turn comes next fall. Talk about someone who's got a million irons in the fire. . . . See you."

"See you," I said, and answered her farewell wave with a weak fluttering of my own fingers. As soon as the door closed I sat forward, head in my hands.

"Damn!" I said. A million irons in the fire! All I had going at the moment were a few spinoff articles from the book, hardly the stuff of impressive new research. What was I going to do?

I squinted back at the cardboard calendar. November. I had nine months to write a book, or at least something that someone could possibly say could be a book at some future time.

Nine months.

Just like having a baby, I thought. Easy. No problem. I can do this.

Before my eyes, my skiing weekend took flight. It was clear I'd be spending the Thanksgiving break in the library. Gone was West Virginia, wiped clean off the map. But it was a small sacrifice to make in the scheme of things—so long as I got to keep Mont Blanc.