

JANINE

INDISPENSABLE

At her new job, Janine makes the coffee. It's not technically her responsibility, but she does it. And she doesn't use the freeze-dried grounds from the giant can, instead she brings beans from home, good beans, bought from Intelligentsia with her own money, and she grinds them at work with the grinder that she herself donated to the breakroom. She does these things so that people will notice her. Every morning she visits the offices of her supervisors and asks Can I get you a coffee? After the first week she memorized who takes cream and sugar and who likes it black. *Here you go*, she says. *Two sugars, just how you like it*. They drink and say *Mmm. Damn this is good. You're a saint. You're going to spoil me*.

Oh, it's my pleasure, she says.

Sometimes she brings in a box of Krispy Kremes to work, even though she doesn't eat them herself. It is all part of a campaign to make herself seem indispensable. This is new. Back when she was at the Woolcot Group she did her work, did it competently, turned it in on time, but she did little to directly ingratiate herself with her co-workers, or her supervisors. She privately thought of them as *drones*, and her distance from them served as a measure of her humanity. The less of herself she gave over to them, the more human she remained. Then she was laid off.

This time she will take no chances.

She sits down at her station, checks her work e-mail, deletes a reminder about the upcoming company social, deletes a message about an upcoming optional tutorial on how to use MS Access, deletes the random spams that have snuck past the company spam-block. Then she goes into Yahoo!Mail and checks her personal account.

There's a message in there from Ingrid.

Ingrid and Janine are e-mailing one another almost daily now. This began over the summer, when, one evening, feeling dull and lethargic, Janine found a short message from Frankfurt in her Inbox. *I miss you*, it read. *What's going on in your life?*

What was going on in her life was that things with Clark had soured, and things with Thomas were temporarily off, and Janine was lonely and bored and grateful for some attention. She wrote back, and she apologetically stressed that she'd been meaning to call (a small lie) but (a probable excuse) she'd been inhibited by the vagaries of intercontinental telecommunications, the difficulty of finding a convenient moment to call a city so many time zones away. Perhaps e-mail was better, Janine suggested.

This opened the gates. Ingrid responded with a long message detailing her unhappiness in Germany. Long-term exposure to the culture's sterile fussiness had worn her down more than she'd expected. Stresses had appeared in her relationship with Elsa, fault lines that had not been obvious when the relationship consisted entirely of phone calls and adoring letters. The marriage had been postponed for a year in order for them to work out these issues. Janine responded sympathetically, and Ingrid began sending details more regularly, giving Janine a play-by-play on the conflict of the week. Janine didn't mind. Around that time Perihelion had shut down, and she was unemployed again, and responding to Ingrid's daily mail helped to kill a little bit of the dead time.

She may be employed again, but there's still dead time that needs killing. She learned early on that there aren't really eight hours of work for her to do every day: being studio manager mostly means she needs to handle incoming phone calls from clients, and between these calls she doesn't have to do much more than sit around, available. Yet if she spends that time tapping away at the computer keyboard people will assume she's hard at work on something. All part of the plan.

She reads Ingrid's message. It says that she's officially decided to come home this Christmas, to see her family. *I'd love to get together with you, too, it says, if you could find some time in there somewhere.*

Janine sips her coffee, and thinks: *Hmm.*