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The Chosen Way

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The Chosen Way

CAROL MARCKS

The room had become enveloped in a cloud of blue smoke from the many cigars and cigarettes. It seemed that whenever a meeting was held, every person had to smoke constantly because, after all, this is what one was expected to do at a board meeting. The smoke began to sting her eyes, and a feeling of fatigue and boredom irresistibly stole over her.

She was an attractive woman in her late thirties who carried with her an air of experience and efficiency. Her hair styled in a sleek bun, but this morning she had been very rushed, and now several strands had fallen loose and straggled down her neck and across her forehead. A slight line of concentration was etched between her eyebrows. Her make-up, which took such time and patience to apply each day, was now mostly worn-off, giving her face a pale and drawn appearance. Her chic, brown tailored suit was the smartest style last year, but now always seemed to have a slightly wilted look, and her expensive, matched shoes were dull and creased.

The meeting droned on. Unconsciously she reached back to tuck in a few loose ends of hair; she uneasily wet her dry lips, and she knew that long since the last trace of lipstick had disappeared. She guiltily fidgeted with the eraser of her pencil, pushed back the cuticle of a nail and glanced casually at her watch. It was twenty minutes after six; she had been sitting here for over two hours. Soon they would have to adjourn because the others were becoming restless and hungry. She finished the last sip of her third cup of coffee and patiently

waited for the note in the speaker's voice that would tell her the speech was coming to a close. Her face took on a fixed, interested expression, but her thoughts began to drift in other directions.

The long years that had gradually accumulated seemed to pass through her vacant mind. It was true what everyone said, she thought. She did deserve this top position in the firm, for she had devoted all her life to achieving it. She had worked long, and she had worked hard, sacrificing and disciplining herself against anything that would interfere with the plans she had so carefully mapped out. As with most of her business associates, love, marriage, children, and a home were all secondary goals. An intangible feeling of doubt shadowed her tired face as she recalled how she had unhesitatingly pushed aside any possible opportunity to share or give, for this kind of emotion could only hinder her in her ambitious climb. Uncomfortably, she shifted in her chair and recrossed her legs. The small, stuffy room was becoming unbearable. She remembered how, frequently, in the last few years, when she had been plagued with moods of depression, she had asked herself if she had made the right choice. But she had never stopped long enough even to think about the answer.

"Well, I guess that just about sums things up, and I thank you all for your patience," the voice said. She got up quickly and almost fled from the room. An unknown fear began to seize her and she felt enclosed and cramped in the office building; she must escape this feeling of suffocation. Without even stopping for her purse and hat she stepped into the first elevator and soon was standing on the city street. The air was warm and muggy, and suddenly the fear subsided. A cold, expressionless look came over her face, and she began to walk slowly, but in a deliberate manner while people hurried around her with shopping bags and brief cases. Suddenly she knew what she had subconsciously been avoiding: a realistic look at herself. This is what had caused her to panic momentarily, but now the initial shock was gone and she began to realize that this was more than just a frightened minute. She understood, it was something she could not run away from. This was the time to answer the question she had so long evaded because she was always too busy getting "there." Now that she had succeeded, the question and the answer must be faced.

She had worked so hard and so long that at first the actual accomplishment was met with an exhilarating relief of self-satisfaction, but gradually and increasingly came a void feeling of nothingness. Now there was a feeling of complete futility and, worst of all, a sense of defeated uselessness. She was alone, as she had chosen to be, and she would always be. Loneliness she had felt before, but now it was no longer just that, it was disillusionment too, and this is what made the aloneness unbearable. Thoughts flew through her mind. The hopelessness of the situation confronted her, nothing to look forward to with anticipation, and now, perhaps, nothing to look back on with pride. "Hopeless," a word she had never allowed herself to consider. Now it was more than just holding the word in contempt, it was a matter of deciding if it applied to her.

A slight drizzle had begun to fall, and she hurried the rest of the way home. She opened the door; the room was cool and dim. As she closed the door, an overwhelming sense of relief seemed to encompass her. She stood there for a minute in the safeness of her private, little world for which she had fought so hard, and the hardness melted from her face and heart. What a silly thing to ever think: she wasn't alone, and she had everything she could want, and she had many friends, important ones all over the country. She was important, too, and there was a great deal of meaning in her life. After all, she was indispensable at work, and she had accomplished something that most people are afraid to even attempt. And no one had helped her; she had done it all by herself. Yes, that was the most important part, she had done it alone.