

NIGHT AT THE DINER
ONE

There's this place that she goes to with the boys sometimes. Saul's. It's an all-night greasy spoon, a place they discovered at the tail-end of the semester before last, a time when they were all working hard and biting their nails over major papers and projects they had coming due, a time wherein an establishment like Saul's—into which you could stagger into bleary-eyed at any time, day or night, lay down a five-dollar bill and some change, and refuel with a huge heaping pile of home fries, greasy scrambled eggs, toast, and a non-stop stream of coffee—was the absolute best and most necessary kind of establishment.

It still is. It's June now, and Samantha and Gregor are finished with college, but the diner still draws them to it on a more-or-less weekly basis. The YesMen temp during the day, Gregor usually works evenings, so the only time they can all find to gather together tends to be late late night. And the diner is there for them. It's just far enough away from the University, and just downscale enough, that very few members of the spanking-clean-stuck-up-brat contingent ever poke their heads through the door. Samantha and the boys like it that way: for some reason they feel happier amidst the truck drivers and the jittery unemployed of the 3 AM diner crowd than they do amidst the polished-looking athletes and girlfriends-of-athletes who dominate the University and the ring of bars and restaurants that immediately surround it.

Bombing Starbucks : A Novel By Jeremy P. Bushnell : jeremy@invisible-city.com

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The diner is not glorious and that's what makes it glorious. They love it—its brown-and-orange decor, its chipped amber ashtrays, its murky light, its quiet out-of-date-ness—in a way that's not ironic, that isn't camp. It makes them sincerely nostalgic for something that they have never experienced: a time when all restaurants could have been like this, a time when restaurants didn't need to nail a bunch of eclectic shit to the walls, or enlist the aid of movie stars, or entertain the diners with singing waitstaff, or prepare dishes incorporating foods bearing beloved brand-names, or develop Disneyland-ish themes and a heightened sense of pageantry (costumes, sets, robots) in order to survive—a time when all a restaurant needed in order to survive was the ability to provide filling food (greasy, unhealthy, bad) and caffeinated coffee (weak, watery, tasteless) and rudimentary service (sometimes exhausted, occasionally rude, generally uncostumed, with no singing) and the ability to provide these things for an affordable price. Samantha and the boys are certain that that time has passed—not one of them is sure it ever even existed—so they let Saul's stand in for that entire time, bear the burden of representing an entire way of life that has almost vanished from the surface of the planet. Gregor once summed it up: he said “It's like every diner you've ever been in, only more so.”

The Ur-Diner. Gregor and Samantha are in there now, waiting for Jason and Caccian to show up. They've been waiting for about half an hour. They're both tired. They're each on their second cup of coffee.

“Why do we even come here?” Gregor says.

“You've forgotten,” Samantha says.

“It's not so much that I've forgotten,” Gregor says. “But I can't remember.”

“Uh huh,” Samantha says.

“I mean, we come here so we won’t be bored, right? But then we come here, and we’re bored anyway.”

“Like TV. Nobody actually likes TV, but everybody watches it anyway.”

Gregor drinks from his coffee and his face folds into a little frown. “I can’t believe you just compared coming to the diner to watching TV,” he says.

“I knew you’d remember,” Samantha says.

“Oh, I see,” Gregor says. He looks around the diner and smiles faintly at the decor.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Samantha says.

“Hey,” Gregor says. He rustles around in his bag, some beat-up, Army-Navy-surplus, canvas-saddlebag-type of fraying behemoth. “Speaking of entertainment—”

“I thought we were talking about being bored.”

“*Speaking* of entertainment, I picked this up at work today.”

Out of the bag he produces a rolled-up, slightly battered magazine, which he passes across the table to her. The cover is torn off, but she recognizes it right away as being that veritable Bible of the punk-rock community, *Maximum Rock and Roll*—the newsprint pages and the tiny, smeary type give it away, no other magazine that she knows of crams so much density of information into the tight space of one inky black-and-white page.

“Oh, cool.”

“The magazine guys were stripping them at work today, so I got it for free.”

She flips through the pages, scanning mostly the ads, checking what’s new in the way of punk and indie records, maneuvering optically through the demolished cartography that is punk

graphic design, feeding her brain page after page of scrawl and collage and ransom-note typography and images purloined by xeroxers and the rough chaotic lines that can only be produced by tearing pieces of paper and pasting them atop one another.

“Do you want to play?” she asks, after a minute or so of flipping through.

“Play?” Gregor asks.

“You know. The Maximum Rock and Roll Game.”

“Oh, *right*. It’s been a while.”

“So do you want to or not?”

“Okay.”

“Okay. I’ll pick.”

“Okay.”

To understand how the Maximum Rock and Roll Game works you need to understand this. *Maximum Rock and Roll*—the veritable Bible of the punk rock community, remember—provides a common locus of communication for punk rock musicians all across America. The thing is packed thick with articles that local punk scenesters assemble about their local punk scenes. Dense heavy with a billion tiny reviews. And the magazine lacks generic mass-market appeal so the advertising rates remain fairly low. Whenever Samantha reads *MRR* she imagines three hypothetical kids who work at hypothetical gas stations in the rural wilds of America. She imagines them learning the basics of punk song structure from mix tapes that one of their older brothers sent back to them from the big state University, setting up their drums and amps and some recording equipment in their tool shed/barn, sending their tape to one of the mail-order duplication services, and then, she imagines them pooling one week’s worth of minimum-wage

gaspumper checks and taking out a tiny ad for their band, the Agonizing Farts or the Iowa Fetuses or something equally anti-social. Samantha imagines that most of the ads in *MRR* emerge from this hypothetical heartlans—she knows how few social activities there are out there to keep those Middle-America punks entertained.⁹ Every couple of months the magazine goes out to thousands of lonely and socially-disconnected punks, and if you're in a band like the Iowa Fetuses, you're hoping for some of those others to send five wrinkled dollar bills through the mail to get your tape, or you're hoping that they'll send a tape of their own for trade. Some punks want to get tapes in the mail more than anything.

The end result, anyway, is that you've got hundreds of weird bands you've never heard of all taking out ads and competing—in the friendliest, most camaraderie-laden way possible—with hundreds of other weird bands you've never heard of.

Samantha misses the days when any band could send their tape to *MRR* and get it reviewed. When the magazine buckled under the sheer tonnage of mediocre tapes arriving in the mail every day and instituted the policy that they'd only review CDs, she felt that they'd lost some crucial element—but the magazine still represents a truly noisy collision of thousands of individuals all trying to communicate simultaneously. Because it's so democratic and accessible, what the magazine ends up documenting, mostly, is a scene which mutates rapidly, where bands appear and disappear without fanfare, where a band can take out a giant ad and then never be

⁹ The brainiest punks that Samantha's ever known were all straight-edge, refusing drugs and alcohol and cigarettes, and not only did this keep their minds and bodies clear of pollutants, as their rhetoric promised, but it also had the side effect of rendering inert even more of the social outlets their towns provide, which, in turn, made it even easier for the punks to save up their hard-earned ducats and put them towards enabling communication with other punks.

heard from again, where entire record labels get organized by ambitious high-school dropouts who taught themselves proficiency with the networks, who then one day get their GED and go to community college and become a data processor. The magazine is a periodic snapshot which contains the names of a lot of bands that you've never seen before and will never see again.

So the way the Maximum Rock and Roll Game works is this: one person takes the magazine and plucks two band names from the complicated mesh of the information within. This player then makes up a third, trying to fake the cadences and associative logic of the punk mind as authentically as possible, and they recite all three band names, the two real and the one fake, to their opponent. If your opponent can correctly identify the fake, you buy their coffee. If they fail, they buy yours. Whichever player loses can declare a double-or-nothing rematch, pick out another two band names and provide another false third name: fooling the opponent results in a cleared slate and the opportunity to have the game continue, failure to fool requires the twice-loser to buy both the other player's coffee and the other player's dessert, at which point the game ends.

Samantha has already decided that her made-up band will be the Ghidrahs, after the three-headed dragon that did battle with Godzilla in the old Toho Features picture *Destroy All Monsters*—the association evokes the exact right mixture of destructive power and ironic appropriation, plus the Ghidrahs, as a name, has a weird kind of inventible logic (if your band is, say, a three-man combo, a single organism with three heads makes sense) that makes it seem more real, plus she knows that Gregor will get the reference, but she also knows that he'll probably assume that she doesn't know the reference well enough to enlist it for her own purposes like this—it's *perfect*. She is busy paging through the magazine for two real names—it's easier to make

up names that sound real than it is to find real names that sound just slightly invented—when Jason and Caccian enter the diner and sit down in the booth. A round of *heys* ensues, and Samantha goes back to the magazine.

Jason's the first to identify what she's doing. "The Maximum Rock and Roll Game."

"That's right," Gregor says.

"Who's winning?"

"We just started."

"Okay," Samantha says. "Ready?"

"Ready."

"The Ghidrahs. Maddonica Lewinsky. And Champrot."

"Maddonica Lewinsky?" Gregor says. "That's too good. That's got to be made up."

Samantha makes a game-show buzzer noise. "*I'm* sorry," she says. "The correct answer is 'The Ghidrahs.'"

"Nuts," Gregor says.

"Beginner's error," says Jason. "The punk bands with the current-event names are always real."

"I knew that, too," Gregor says. "I just didn't think they were catching up so fast."

"Not all of them *are*. There's still bands in here who think they're being social activists by making fun of *Reagan*," Samantha says, waving the magazine in the air. "What were we? Six?"

Jason turns his mug right-side up. "Coffee please," says to the waitress.

"Sure," says the waitress. She points the end of her pen at Caccian. "You want coffee too?"

“Coke,” Caccian says.

“What gets *me*,” Jason says, “is that these bands—these bands with the current-event names?—it seems to me that they’re making a conscious choice to stay obscure.”

“How do you mean?” Samantha asks.

“Maddonica Lewinsky. Don’t you think a band should aspire to be bigger than some bogus political scandal?”

“I don’t know if you *can* get bigger than that particular political scandal,” Samantha says.

“Politics come, politics go,” says Jason. “Who do you think will be more remembered in twenty-five years, Monica Lewinsky or Nirvana?”

“Depends on who you talk to,” Samantha says.

“If I ever get my own band I’m going to call it the Starr Report,” says Gregor.

“I bet you can name twenty bands from the 1960s,” says Jason. “The Beatles. The Rolling Stones.”

“Jefferson Airplane,” says Samantha.

“Strawberry Alarm Clock,” says Gregor.

“What’s-their-fuck,” says Samantha, snapping her fingers. “Crosby, Stills and Nash.”

“And the God-damn Jimi Hendrix Experience,” says Jason. “But I will put one dollar directly into your hand for each of the Watergate co-conspirators you can name.”

“Nixon,” Samantha says.

“Nixon doesn’t count,” Jason says.

“Dewey somebody?” says Gregor. “John Dewey?”

“That’s the decimal system guy,” says Samantha.

“Who was the vice-president?”

“Spiro Agnew,” says Samantha.

“Was he one of the co-conspirators?”

“He resigned, that much is for sure.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah, that’s why we got Gerald Ford. Ford was the one president in American history who nobody ever voted into office, remember?”

“I don’t remember,” Gregor says. “I wasn’t born yet.”

“No,” Jason says, “But you weren’t born when fucking Strawberry Alarm Clock was around, either. Watergate happened in the *seventies* and all you guys have managed are the President and the Vice-President.”

“Give me a minute,” Samantha says. “I majored in Political Science, you know. It just takes a minute. To bring up the references up.”

“You guys can remember fucking *Strawberry Alarm Clock* and you can’t remember G. Gordon Liddy.”

“G. Gordon Liddy!” Samantha exclaims, in an I’m-smacking-the-heel-of-my-hand-against-my-forehead-now tone of voice.

“Who’s G. Gordon Liddy?” Gregor asks. “Wasn’t he that guy who, I don’t know, had that plan, you know, about like free energy? With nuclear reactors in every suburb? You know. Ran for President? Currently in jail or something?”

“That’s Lyndon LaRouche,” Samantha says.

“So you see what I’m saying,” says Jason. The waitress comes by with Caccian’s Coke and she fills everyone else’s mug. Jason holds the sugar pourer about a foot over his mug, turns it upside-down, and lets the crystals cataract down through space.

“All I know is that you owe me a dollar for Spiro Agnew,” Samantha says.

“I’m saying that to name your band after something political is to doom yourself to the dustbin once whatever the particular political issue or event in question passes on into the history books.” He stirs his coffee furiously.

“But there are lots of bands who are named after something obscure,” says Samantha.

“That doesn’t mean the band itself must be obscure. Look at 10,000 Maniacs.”

“Mudhoney,” says Gregor.

“Galaxie 500,” says Samantha.

“No, no,” says Jason. He sips his coffee, adds more sugar. “None of those bands were named after anything that were *current events*. If you name yourself after something inert from the past—some old movie or something—that’s not a problem. It’s only when you tag yourself and your band’s identity to something political that’s happening at the same time you’re happening that you create a problem for yourself. Who do you think’s going to be listening to Madonnica Lewinsky when Clinton’s out of office and the whole thing is just a distasteful fading memory?”

Samantha flips through the magazine until she finds the ad where she drew the name from. “I think their CD is all hardcore covers of Madonna songs.”

“Argh, even worse,” Jason says. “Sonic Youth did that ten years ago and it was just barely funny then.”

“So what?” Samantha says. “It’s a gimmick, big deal. I bet they sell more records than Champrot.”

“I’m not objecting to the use of a gimmick,” Jason says. “I’m in favor, actually, of musicians using gimmicks. Just at least use a good one.”

Samantha raises one eyebrow warily.

“Elvis was a gimmick,” Jason says. “The Beatles were a gimmick. Think about it. Four guys with identical cute haircuts? The Sex Pistols? Gimmicky right down to the phony names. A band with no gimmick fails overnight. I’m just saying you should be smart enough to use one that doesn’t automatically restrict you to being unheard-of five years down the pike.”

“What about Nirvana?” says Samantha.

“What *about* Nirvana?” says Jason.

“Wasn’t the whole point of Nirvana to have a band with no gimmicks? No costumes, no makeup, no theatrics? Throw away all that eighties junk and just play rock-and-roll?”

“That *is* the gimmick,” Jason exclaims. “The first gimmick, anyway. The second gimmick happens when Cobain commits suicide. When he commits suicide Nirvana automatically becomes the spokesperson for the ‘no hope generation,’ plus he’s granted instant entry to the pantheon of the isn’t-it-tragic-they-died-young rock star demigods.”

“Wait a second,” Samantha says. “You think Kurt Cobain committed suicide in order to *sell more records?*”

“Not really,” says Jason. “But that’s what happens, isn’t it?”

“Um,” Samantha says.

“They’re like the major rock band of our decade, aren’t they?”

“Well,” Samantha says.

“It’s a good gimmick,” Jason says.

“Okay, so, if the gimmick is so important, what’s yours?” Samantha says. “What’s the gimmick that will propel the YesMen to success?”

Jason puts his index fingers together and taps them against his lips. Then sips on his coffee.

“Ah,” he says. “I’ve got it. Rock and roll is all about breaking taboos, right?”

“Sure.”

“Elvis and his waggly hips. The Beatles with the long hair. We can agree on this, yes?”

“Sure.”

“By the late seventies the available taboos start to get grabbed up, though. Black Sabbath has Satan-worshipping cornered. David Bowie dresses up like a bisexual. Kiss dresses up like I-don’t-know-what kind of demons. The Sex Pistols promote total societal destruction. You agree?”

“Absolutely.”

“The eighties. Devo spearheads the initiative towards de-evolution. When they sing ‘we’re through being cool’ they challenge one of the fundamental tenets of rock stardom. Meanwhile, George Michael, in the most overt move yet, declares that he wants your sex.”

“Uh huh.”

“Here we are now, ass-end of the Nineties. There’s only two ways left to shock. One way is to get increasingly baroque. Look at Nine Inch Nails. They’ve assembled a great symphonic encyclopedia of sadomasochistic technique. Marilyn Manson? A Roman orgy, only with videos.

The other way is the opposite route. You strip it down, like Nirvana or Pearl Jam. They shock by throwing out all the theatrics, all the dress-up garbage. The mantle of rock and roll has been passed to these guys who look like some schmuck who works at a 7-Eleven: unshaven, long greasy hair, scuzzy flannel shirts, eyes glazed from getting stoned in the back room. You'll admit that it's shocking."

"Sure."

"So we ask ourselves: what's left?"

"This is the part where you inform me."

"Madam, I will. Rock still prides itself on being a fringe art form. That's the only thing left to strip away. There's some part of us that happily accepts convenience store clerks or transvestites or Satan worshippers as our rock stars—as long as they have some authentic claim to a vision of edgy hell, we let them get away with all kinds of bombast and pathos; and somehow we ignore the contracts and deals and stuff that are inevitably behind it. Social misfits of every kind have worn the rock star uniform; the only way left to enrage the audience is to have two kids who went to private high schools get up there on stage, declare themselves openly as affluent brats, and proceed to posture emptily."

"And you and Caccian are going to be those private-school brats?"

"No, we don't have the guts to be widely hated. But you have to admit, it'd be a great gimmick."

"Depends on how you define *great*," says Samantha.

"I know a surefire way to sell a lot of records," says Gregor.

"Oh yeah?" says Jason. "Let's hear it."

“You invent a new genre of music.”

“Just like that?” says Samantha, snapping her fingers.

“You invent a new genre of music, and you give it a catchy name. Look at trip-hop,” Gregor says. “A catchy name, journalists can attach to it easily, and so, sure enough, every music magazine starts doing articles on trip-hop as the next big thing, and—everyone wants to be in on the ground floor of any new movement—so all the musicians that started the new genre sell a lot of records.”

“Illbient,” says Jason.

“I still don’t think it’s just that easy to just wake up one morning, eat a bowl of oatmeal, and then whip off a new genre of music,” says Samantha.

“Can’t be that hard,” says Gregor.

“Hell no,” says Jason. “This is the postmodern era. There doesn’t actually need to be anything new about a new thing. It just needs to reconfigure old things in a fresh way.”

“Right,” says Gregor. “New musical genres can just shake up the old ones.”

“You can fuse ‘em together,” says Jason.

“So you just make a chart,” says Samantha, in on it now, “with a Column A, and a Column B—”

“Right,” says Gregor. “And you list all the musical genres you can think of in Column A—”

“—and then you write them all down again in Column B—”

“—and then you just mix and match until you hit on something that rings cherries.”

“Absolutely,” says Jason. “I’m seeing a new direction for the YesMen. We’re going to do all zydeco songs but set to a punk beat.”

“Zydecore,” says Caccian.

“Ska cappella,” Gregor says.

“Trip-hop with like a banjo,” Samantha says. “Tripgrass.”

“Nice,” says Gregor, smiling at her. “You know, I bet, if we’d stayed together, we could have turned Now Hiring into a pretty good tripgrass band.”

Samantha laughs, probably just a fraction too loud and a fraction too long, trying to hide that she’s uncomfortable. It must not work, because Gregor’s smile fades and he looks away. A pall of silence falls over the table. Everyone stares into different spaces for a minute.

The waitress comes by. “Can I get you all something to eat?” No one’s had anything except coffee, which happens sometimes.

“Could I get a side of fries, please?” says Gregor.

“I’ll have two eggs, over easy, white toast,” says Jason.

“Can I have a sundae?” asks Samantha. “Vanilla ice cream, no nuts, with hot fudge?”

Caccian puts his hand up to indicate *I want nothing*

The waitress refills everyone’s coffee and strides off.

“So you need a gimmick to get famous,” says Gregor.

“That’s right,” says Jason. “It’s simple marketing.”

“When I hear the words *simple marketing*, I reach for my shotgun,” Samantha says.

“Fact of the matter,” Jason says.

Samantha sneers across the table at him. “Sellout,” she says.

“I’ll get famous before you do,” he says.

“If I have to sell out to get there, I don’t want to be there,” Samantha says.

“Well, okay,” Gregor says. “So, my question is, how can an artist incorporate these little marketing gimmicks into their identity without selling out?”

“They can’t,” says Samantha.

“Oh, come on,” says Jason.

“They can’t,” says Samantha. “As soon as you put some kind of slant onto your identity for the purposes of selling more records, that’s selling out.”

“Bullshit,” says Jason. “Every successful band ever had to carve some kind of niche for themselves first. It’s impossible *not* to. Every song a band ever plays contributes to the construction of *some kind of* identity. Some of those identities are going to sell records better than others. Does that mean that every band that’s ever sold a record has sold out?”

“No—” begins Samantha.

“Let’s look at Ani DiFranco,” says Jason. “She starts her own record label because—as the mythology goes—she’s concerned, firstly, that she’d have to change her music to get signed to a big label, and she’s concerned, secondly, that if she did get signed, they’d take away her control, or they wouldn’t promote her effectively, or whatever-the-hell. Now, in the process of promoting her own music through her own label, she also, let’s say not inadvertently, promotes this story, and she ends up constructing herself as a fiercely independent anti-corporate woman. This is an image that resonates with a lot of other fiercely independent anti-corporate women—so she sells a lot of records to those types of women. But surely you can’t say Ani DiFranco has *sold out*.”

“No,” Samantha says. “You’ve got it backwards. It’s when you start adding on to your identity things that aren’t really you in order to better appeal to a record company that you sell out. It’s when the YesMen start doing zydeco songs that I start to question whether or not the gimmick has overtaken the music.”

Gregor speaks up. “But what if,” he says, “what if a big record company came up to Ani DiFranco tomorrow and said ‘we want to sign you’ and she accepted?”

“But she would never accept,” Samantha says.

“Well, yeah, but what if she did? What if they promised her whatever she wanted? Creative control, the ability to oversee promotional materials, everything. What if they promised to provide her with everything that she started her own record label to get, and she decided *okay?* Would people read that as selling out?”

“But she would never sign,” Samantha says.

“But why not? If they promised to give her everything she wanted?”

“Because it’s an important part of her identity that she does it herself.”

“The fiercely independent woman thing, remember?” says Jason.

“But she became independent in response to certain factors about the music industry,” Gregor says. He frowns, closes his eyes; he’s thinking hard on something. “And if you remove those factors does the insistence upon independence still make sense or does it become a false identity? A false identity that’s maintained because her fans demand it? And she knows that if she let the false identity drop she’d lose them? And sell less records? Isn’t she selling out then by *not* signing? By clinging to an integrity that doesn’t mean anything in the face of the majors’ willingness to play ball?”

“What *I* think,” Samantha says, “is that one of the factors motivating her desire for independence is that record company people can’t be trusted. And that’s a factor that the record company people can’t do away with no matter how many clauses they add to their contracts.”

“So to sign with the majors means you’ve automatically lost some integrity?”

“*I* don’t think so,” says Jason.

“It depends on what you have to give up to get there,” says Samantha.

“Say you don’t have to give up anything. Say you believe that the American info-entertainment complex is a cesspool of greed designed to turn us all into consuming slaves, and say you write a bunch of songs critiquing it honestly, from the heart, all that. A major label hears some of these songs on a local pirate radio station, calls you up, and offers to sign you and release your work. They promise you complete creative control, and you take the deal. People would say you’d sold out—but what have you given up?”

“That scenario would never happen,” Samantha says.

“But what if it did?” Gregor asks.

“But it never would,” says Samantha.

“But what if it did? Has that musician sold out? Have they given something up? Have they added on something false to their identity?”

“I don’t accept the hypothetical question.” She’s feeling testy, a little cornered: normally Gregor doesn’t come after her like this, normally she can count on him to be the one person on her side. She doesn’t know why he’s so doggedly pursuing this point, she doesn’t know what he’s on about here, and she finds that powerfully odd—normally it’s like the two of them have an almost telepathic link, and to see that link scrambled and futzed here in this conversation pains

her, bearing the burden of communication makes her feel weary. She wonders if he's not just being difficult in the way that ex-boyfriends—*ex-lovers*, she corrects herself quickly—will sometimes just be difficult. *You have to tell him about Dmitrovitch*, she thinks. *You have to tell him soon.*

She looks up at him. He must have detected the edge of irritation in her voice, because he seems to have snapped out of whatever personality had just momentarily encased him, his eyes are back to being wide and his nose is back to being kind of twitchy; he's reverted back to the normal, gentle Gregor, just like that. His restless fingers fix upon his napkin; he folds it up and uses it to blot up the rings and amoebas of moisture left behind on the table by the wet summertime bottoms of their glasses of ice water.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I was just asking."

"Well, what do you think?" Samantha asks. She's thinking about Geffen. She's thinking about how she called the A&R men up and what she might have said to them, what she might have asked of them, had they not already been gone. What this would have meant to her. "Can your scenario ever come true? Is there a way? Is there a way to market yourself successful just as *yourself*? Without adding anything on or taking anything away? Is there a way to sell yourself without selling yourself out? Is there?"

"I don't know," Gregor says, and he shrugs his shoulders. "I really have no idea."

They're all quiet for a bit. It seems as though the question has self-destructed, exploded into bits above the table, and they all sit there in the still post-explosion silence, half shell-shocked, half jump-started by caffeine and sugar into a weird half-trance state, a state where they're simultaneously exhausted and alert. None of them seem willing to hazard an answer to the question. It is into this funereal smoking crater of detonated argument that the waitress brings

two eggs, a plate of french fries, and a sundae dolloped with hot fudge and whipped cream and topped with a Rudolph-red cherry, perversely and unnaturally bright, like a sphere of neon sign dropped into her food, or a radioactive isotope that x-rays will be able to track as it passes through her digestive system. Her appetite vanishes the second this flamboyant thing in the tall metal dish is introduced into the leaden, depressing atmosphere that hangs in the space between her and her friends at this moment.

“Thanks,” Gregor manages, as the waitress clacks away.

She sticks her long spoon into the whipped cream, then takes it out again and sets it on her napkin.

“I’ll tell you one way to not sell out,” she says.

“How’s that?” asks Gregor.

“Call your band the Dumb Fucks.”

This is supposed to be a joke, but no one laughs. And after Samantha says it, she too suddenly feels that it might not be so funny.

She fishes the maraschino cherry—modern chemical masterpiece—out of her sundae, puts it between her teeth, and plucks it from the stem.

She imagines the night outside, and the glittering web of satellites and fiberoptic cable and computer screens that keep the whole planet glowing all night long, and she imagines the networks of massed numbers that commerce is, she imagines those banked digits rising and falling all night long, making some people rich and leaving some people poor. Samantha imagines that terrifying ocean of information, forming waves and eddies and whirlpools, sweeping across the earth in great numinous currents, and the waitress comes by and puts the check face down in a wet

ring of coffee, and Samantha reaches for it and looks at her three friends here, slouched low in the booth, hunkered down around the table, as though it, in conjunction with a few ranked principles set down in the mind and enacted by the will, could be the raft that could keep them, somehow, from drowning.