

NIGHT AT THE DINER

THREE

Turn around and it's already Thanksgiving. And none of them really feel like cooking or going to back home to eat with their parents. That's what the diner is for.

Samantha's the first one to show, and she sits in the booth alone, reading a book she took out from the library and drinking her coffee. The diner either predates or ignores the concept of the vegetarian entree, so she knows that having Thanksgiving dinner there means that she's basically restricted to a grilled cheese sandwich. But that's okay. Her student loan stash ran out around Halloween, and the hundred bucks Laura sent her for November is down to a five and some ones. She gets another hundred-buck installment next week—her last, since Laura comes back from Alaska January 3rd—but she needs to spend most of that on Christmas presents. The decorations have already hit town; an occupying army of plastic Santas and cardboard Frostys have been deployed to whip the shoppers into a pre-Black Friday frenzy, a relentless flogging of the populace set to the cheery endlessness of piped-in Christmas carols. Didn't they used to wait until after Thanksgiving to start laying in with the carols?

Regardless, the money she spends on tonight's Thanksgiving grilled cheese may be the last money she can spend on herself until she gets a job. Or figures out a way to live for free. She's got an idea, one last idea, something she's had banging around in her head for a while.

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

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“Hey, hot shakes,” says Jason, sauntering up to her table like a genuine delinquent, shoulders slung back, hands thrust in his pockets. He dumps himself into the booth, and Caccian slides in after him. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving yourself,” Samantha says.

“Did you see you guys are playing here?” Jason says. He means to the “Now Hiring” sign taped up in the diner’s window—it was a long-running in-joke, in the days of Now Hiring’s togetherness, that any sighting of a “Now Hiring” sign meant that Gregor and Samantha had been scheduled to play in that location. Staples, Arby’s, Wash Depot—it would have made for some interesting tours. This is the first time that Samantha can remember the joke being made since the band dissolved.

“Have you noticed that you don’t see those signs as much anymore?” Samantha asks.

“Now Hiring? Now they all say ‘Now Accepting Applications.’”

“They don’t want to give off the impression that they might actually give someone a job,” Jason says. “Anyway, this is a perfect opportunity for you and Gregor to change with the times. Get back together under a different name.”

“Could happen,” Samantha says. “We’ve been playing together a lot. Mostly informally.”

“Has he tried to jump your bones again yet?”

“You’re revolting.”

Jason shrugs. “The public demands to know.”

“They don’t and he hasn’t.”

“Would you be open to it if he did?”

“Can I register my objection to this line of questioning?”

“Register away. Doesn’t mean I’ll stop asking. Actually, I *should* stop asking. I don’t really *need* to ask. I can see it coming from a mile away.”

“Whatever.”

Jason looks over at Caccian. “You tell me,” he says to his brother. “Am I usually right about these things or not?”

Caccian looks at his brother calmly. “I don’t know that I’ve ever heard you predict anything about anyone else’s love life before in the entire course of my existence.”

“Last time I look to *you* for corroboration, you no-good ingrate,” Jason says. He turns back to Samantha and then proceeds to fidget in the booth, raising his hips off the seat to fish a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket. “Anyway,” he says. “We picked this up for you.” He slides the piece of paper across the table. Samantha takes it and unfolds it: it’s a job application.

“Coffee, please?” says Jason to the waitress.

“Just a Coke for me,” says Caccian.

Samantha stares at the application for a minute. It hurts her feelings a bit that Jason would razz her about her joblessness in this way—she doesn’t think it’s particularly funny. He’s gotten worse about it in the past couple of months, too, always prodding her a little bit about her unemployment, needling her about getting a job. She’d be irritated—more irritated—if she didn’t see it as an indicator of a certain degree of desperation. Over the past three months she’s watched Jason’s enthusiasm about getting signed to Geffen slowly fade—for the first two weeks after the Rave he talked about “the call” every day in a voice of starry expectation, but as the

semester wore on and on, and as he began to realize that his rock stardom was not forthcoming enough that he could stop going to classes and doing his homework, he began to talk about it less, and now, realizing that a reasonable season has gone by without even a single postcard's worth of expressed interest arriving from L.A., he doesn't talk about it at all. But without that vision of himself as a rock star to hang on to, Samantha imagines that he must be beginning to see his future as another six months of college followed by an endless lifetime of tempwork. And so when he bothers her, in that irritating way of his, about not having gotten a job yet, she can read his own desperation there: he wants her, she believes, to get a job, a good job, so that he can see that it's actually possible, that there is a way to work out the balance of life and work and art and happiness in a way that leaves you okay once you've managed it.

"I figured," Jason says, "that since you're here at the diner so much *anyway*—"

"—that I should have the corns and flat feet to show for it?" Samantha concludes. "'Fess up, Price, you just want me to be your servant."

"You read me like an open book," Jason says. He points at her library book. "What is that you've got there, anyway?"

"A history of class revolution," Samantha says. "Interesting stuff."

"I can't support any revolution in which I'd have to kill my own rich parents," Jason says. "So what *are* you going to do when Laura gets back? Are you going to take to the streets with a beret or what?"

"I don't know," Samantha says.

Enter Gregor. He slides into the booth next to her.

"Hey everybody," he says. "Sorry I'm late. Where's the turkey?"

“You’re just in time, actually,” says Samantha. “We were just talking about jobs and the lack thereof.”

“Yeah, Gregor,” says Jason. “What happened? You’ve been talking about liberating your scrawny ass for months now and you’re still jerking coffee.”

The waitress comes by with Caccian’s Coke and fills everyone else’s cup with coffee.

“Thanks,” Gregor says to her as she walks off. “I am going to quit. It’s going to be my New Year’s Resolution. I decided I needed the money and the employee discount to get me to the other side of Christmas.”

“I hear *that*,” says Samantha.

“But,” says Gregor. “Here’s the thing. I’m going to turn my quitting into a public spectacle.”

Jason finishes pouring sugar into his coffee. “Right on,” he says. “How do you mean?”

“You know that new Borders that opened up down the road from the Barnes and Noble?”

“Sure,” Jason says.

“They’re having this thing,” Gregor says. “Somebody at work told me about it. A big post-Christmas CD sale. It’s a tribute to, you know, the major figures of socially-conscious music. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, the post-Beatles John Lennon.”

“Think different,” Jason says.

“Exactly,” says Gregor. “They’re calling it the Singer/Songwriter Saleabration.”

“Egad,” says Samantha.

“Anyway, the whole thing culminates in this big event in the early hours of New Year’s Eve. They’re getting all of these local musicians to play in the Borders cafe, doing cover versions of the songs of all those old protest singers.”

“Right,” says Samantha. “All those old protest singers, who are now so revered that they’re totally safe. Thirty years have gone by, and now they’re so loved as icons that Borders can use them to promote themselves as some kind of company with a social consciousness.”

“Well, sure, that’s what I thought, too,” Gregor says.

“I want Chuck D on that setlist,” Samantha says.

“Anyway, I decided to try to get on the list to perform. But instead of covers I’m going to do all my own songs. Until they beat me into submission, anyway.”

“Oh, *yes*,” says Samantha. “Are you going to do ‘Monkey Wrench In the Espresso Machine?’”

“Yeah. I want to do ‘Monkey Wrench,’ ‘Star Fucks Coffee,’ ‘Burn Down the Corporate Bookstores,’ and then I might do *one* cover—but it’ll be ‘Kick Out the Jams, Motherfucker.’ Then I’m going to announce that I work at Barnes and Noble up the street—I think I’m going to wear my apron—and I’m going quit, right there in front of everybody. I’m hoping some of the Borders barristas will quit with me.”

“Right *on*,” says Samantha. “Walkout!”

“Even if it doesn’t happen,” Samantha says, “it’ll be sure to make the aging radicals in the audience reconsider their relationship to those barristas.”

“I’m hoping,” Gregor says. “I mean, who knows, maybe I won’t even get on the list to play. But I’m going to try.”

“What are you going to do then?” Jason asks.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Great,” says Jason. “Another unemployed bum.”

The waitress comes by. “Are y’all ready to order? We’ve got a special tonight for the holiday—turkey with gravy, mashed potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and a slice of pumpkin pie for dessert—for \$8.95.”

“I’ll have that,” Jason says. The waitress points her pen at Caccian and he nods.

“Make that three,” says Gregor.

“I’ll have a grilled cheese sandwich,” says Samantha.

“And she’ll have a side of class rage with that,” says Jason.

“What?” says the waitress.

“Shut the fuck up, Price,” snaps Samantha. “Nothing,” she says to the waitress. “Just the grilled cheese will be fine.”

The waitress nods, makes a note on the check pad, and walks off.

“Why do you always have to be like that?” Samantha asks Jason.

“Like what?” Jason says, showing her his palms.

“Never mind,” Samantha says, exasperatedly.

“Hey, hey, everybody,” Gregor says. “Thanksgiving, remember?”

Jason, mouth already open to deliver a rejoinder, falls into a silence that seems sullen from where Samantha is standing, over here within her own sullen silence.

“Thanksgiving might be my favorite holiday,” says Gregor. “A day set aside for giving thanks for the little things that make our lives livable. The minutia of existence. A good meal.

A strong cup of coffee. The company of friends. A day where we're encouraged to pay attention to those things in our lives. What we have to be thankful for." He looks around the table, beaming eagerly at all the sour faces, like a twenty-one-year-old Jesus, young, still optimistic, before the rages in the temples and all the pain and anger that came after.

Jason looks at this happy face for one whole second before speaking. "Let me ask you this," is what he says. "Why is it that protest songs don't work?"

Samantha doesn't want to pick up this strand of conversation, not tonight, not on Thanksgiving. She knows another symptom of Jason's new desperation is a sort of wholesale devaluation of the entire art form of music—almost as though he feels that if his songs weren't powerful enough to affect the guys from Geffen, the guys they were tailored to affect, then maybe no song anywhere can affect anyone in any significant way—this isn't a topic of conversation Samantha wants to pick up on Thanksgiving. She still feels thankful for music. Music can still get past all the deflective layers of her ballyhooed generational cynicism, and, once inside her, it can still trigger something like a feeling. And for this she's, yes, thankful.

She's realizing that Jason probably thought this Thanksgiving would be the one where he'd be able to give thanks for a record deal when Gregor picks up the gauntlet—it's only been really a second since it was flung—and responds: "What do you mean, why they don't *work*?"

"All those protest singers," Jason says. "Samantha was right. They're all safe. Society rendered them all impotent."

Samantha sings a lyric quietly, almost under her breath. "Reading the news, and it sure looks bad..."

"Their visions never came to pass," Jason says.

“...they won’t give peace a chance...”

“We can look at them nowadays as kind of quaint,” Jason says.

“...that was just a dream some of us had.”

“Because, you know, they failed.”

Gregor frowns. He looks over at Samantha as if for support, but Samantha looks down at the cup of coffee between her hands. She’s still staring into its glossy black eye when Gregor answers.

“How do you mean, failed?”

“Bob Dylan sings ‘the times they are a-changin’.’ But the times don’t change. They stay the same. We’re still a totally imperialistic nation. The people in power still hold power. The people who were oppressed are still oppressed. The songs didn’t change a thing.”

“You should have seen what it would have been like without the songs,” says Samantha, looking up from her coffee.

“There’s been a whole lot of protest songs and very little positive social change,” says Jason.

“There’s been a *lot* of positive social change in the last thirty years,” Samantha says. “An incredible amount. Feminism; civil rights; gay rights.”

“And you think the music has something to do with this? Give me an example.”

“I’m not saying there’s a simple cause and effect relationship.”

“I think your saying the music has no direct effect is the same as me saying that the music has failed.”

“Well, now, wait a second.”

“No, let’s talk about effects for a minute,” Jason says. He turns to Gregor. “You’re going to do this performance at Borders.”

Gregor nods.

“Leave him alone,” says Caccian.

“I’m just asking,” says Jason. “What effect do you hope that this will have?”

“Um,” Gregor says. “I was hoping to get some of the Borders cafe workers to quit.”

“You think this’ll have a positive social effect?”

“I think, um, yeah, I think it could leave Borders in a temporary state of chaos. I think creating chaos for a corporation is a good thing. I think corporations look for what’s causing chaos within their, um, what-do-you-call-it?, structures. And if they find out that it’s, you know, *disgruntledness* among their coffee bar workers, maybe they’ll improve conditions, make things better.”

“And even if they don’t,” Samantha says, “at least one man will have stood up and registered his dissatisfaction.”

“What’s the point of registering dissatisfaction if it doesn’t change anything?” Jason asks.

“It’s not the change that’s important,” Samantha says. “It’s the vocalization of dissatisfaction that’s important.”

“A whole lot of people write angry letters to corporations,” Jason says. “But you’re not going to convince me that they’re all social radicals. Some of them are just whiny people.”

“A letter about how you found a hair in your salsa is different from a song that critiques a system of exploitation,” Samantha says.

The waitress comes back, plates balanced across her forearms. Glasses and mugs get shifted around to make room. Samantha slides her library book into her lap, and she folds the application into thirds and thirds again and stuffs it into the pocket of her jeans. The waitress quickly deposits the four plates on the table—three steaming Thanksgiving platters and one grilled cheese—and hurries back towards the kitchen.

“Ahh,” says Jason.

“Mmm,” says Gregor.

“Let’s eat,” says Jason.

“I was hoping,” says Gregor, “that we could go around first and maybe say some things that we felt thankful for?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m thankful for,” Samantha says. “I had this idea,” Samantha says.

“Is this a how-you-can-live-without-working idea?” Gregor asks.

“Yeah,” Samantha says.

“I could tell. You had that how-to-live-without-working gleam in your eye.”

“You’d better hurry up on it,” Jason says, around a gnashed mouthful of turkey. “How much longer do you have in Laura’s house, anyway?”

“Anyway,” Samantha says, over the tail end of Jason’s question, “I was going by where they’re putting up that new Kinko’s the other day.”

“Getting a job at Kinko’s counts as working,” Jason says. “I don’t care how much you slack.”

“If you shut the fuck up you might actually find this interesting,” Samantha says to him.

“I am on the edge of my seat,” Jason says. He shovels mashed potatoes into his mouth.

“Well, you know those flyers up all around town? Lose thirty pounds in thirty days? That kind of thing?”

“We pay you to lose weight,” Gregor says.

“Yeah, those things,” Samantha says. “They’re all a big scam, right? They exploit, you know, fat women. They get you on this system of supplements where you have to keep buying more in order to keep proceeding through the system.”

“The Scientology of diet plans,” Gregor says.

“Right. I mean, this is Capitalism 101. The best product to sell is one that interlocks with another product somewhere down the pike.”

“Which then interlocks with another product,” Gregor says.

“Which then interlocks with another product,” Samantha says. “But, anyway, I’ve been noticing these flyers and stuff as I ride my bike around. And they really make clever use of public space. You know, there’ll be like a flyer taped to a traffic light, and then taped to the flyer will be like a little envelope, and inside the envelope will be all these business cards with the phone number of the person who’s selling the supplements or whatever—I mean, they’re really cleverly made. These people selling this stuff are taking guerrilla media to the next level. They invest maybe a hundred bucks at Kinko’s and the next thing you know they’ve got the whole town covered.”

“So what’s your idea?” Jason says.

“I’m going to author a diet pamphlet,” Samantha says.

Jason’s eyebrows go way up.

“I’ll hand it to you, Faraday,” he says. “That is *not* what I thought you were going to say.”

“Yeah, well, listen and I’ll explain it to you.”

“Do you have some kind of nutritionist credentials that you’ve been hiding from us?”

“No. That’s because losing weight’s not about nutrition.”

“This is news to me.”

“Diets are all about image. The image you have of yourself versus the image that’s promoted to you. That makes a diet less about nutrition and more about people struggling for control over their image. A diet’s all psychology. All these weight loss supplements and diet centers and stuff aren’t selling merchandise, they’re selling these women, very, very gradually, something that they already have—the psychological means to control their own bodies.”

“So you’re going to make this pamphlet that tells women that it’s okay to be fat?”

“No,” says Samantha. “That’s a losing battle. Because—regardless of whether it’s okay or not—women who are fat, at least the women who are exploited by this diet culture, don’t believe that it’s okay to be fat.”

“I have to admit, I have no clue where this is going.”

“Yeah, well, if you’d shut up, I’d tell you. Diets are all about psychology. So to diet successfully, you need to regain psychological control. Every capitalistic weight loss venture sells you psychological control in the guise of something else, some product, some supplement. You need to dress it up like that because otherwise there’s no product. People have the ability and they just don’t know it. You can’t be a rich capitalist if you’re telling people that they can rely on their own inner resources.”

“So this is what you’re going to tell people. To look inward. Something New Agey like that.”

“There’s two specific things someone needs to learn in order to lose weight,” Samantha says. “One is to break your own habitual cycles. Overeating is a cycle. Any health book can tell you that. You feel bad, so you eat as a comfort mechanism, and then you feel guilty for eating when you shouldn’t have, and so then you feel ashamed, which makes you feel bad again, and you eat more, and the whole thing just escalates. People need to learn how to break their own habits; that’s one thing. The other thing they need to learn is how to view the images society promotes with a critical eye. A healthy degree of skepticism. Fashion, TV, ads, they need to figure out that it’s all a nonstop flow of fictions. It’s those fictions that set the habitual cycles in motion in the first place. Control your own habits by resisting influence from the outside. That’s the way to gain control over your own life. And the thing is, the thing that makes this subversive, is that those two steps are the basic formula for any type of civil resistance. If you can resist the fashion and diet industries, you can resist the whole stinking materialistic capitalist machine.”

“So,” says Jason, “you’re going to make this pamphlet and sell it? Isn’t that participating in the exploitation of insecure fat women?”

“A one-time, low-level exploitation,” Samantha says. “That will teach people how to resist all future exploitation *and* help them to lose weight. I look at it as, well, as a kind of inoculation.”

She takes a big bite out of her grilled cheese sandwich.

“I don’t know,” says Jason. “You’re planning to build a new social radicalism out of an army of middle-class suburbanites? It doesn’t seem likely.”

“Why not?” says Samantha, after she swallows. She thinks about the waitress—*Rosalee*, she remembers, *the woman’s name is Rosalee*—and she wonders, when Jason made his crack about class rage, why she didn’t bother to try to explain, why she was so quick to change the subject. Aren’t the waitresses—the people who work Thanksgiving night and Christmas morning—aren’t they the exact people who would benefit the most from the whole system being turned upside-down?

“Samantha and her army of Ex-Fat Chicks. It just doesn’t seem—”

“Look,” Samantha says. “I just think it’s a worthy project to get people—anyone—to think critically about the junk that corporate America or the media or the government pumps into the world day in and day out. I think that any piece of art that’s truly subversive is going to have that—basic *skepticism*—at it’s core. And I think my project has that. And I think Gregor’s project has that. People are going to keep going to places like Starbucks and Barnes and Noble and fucking McDonald’s, for Christ’s sake, until they start thinking about them critically.”

“Yeah, but, you know, *MAD Magazine* has that. *MAD* makes fun of the media. But lots of people read *MAD* and don’t grow up to be radicals.”

“I don’t know,” Gregor says. “I think *MAD* is kind of subversive.”

“*Saturday Night Live* makes fun of the media.”

“*Saturday Night Live* is the media,” says Samantha. “It makes fun of itself, but so gently—there’s no real critique there.”

“So a critique shouldn’t be gentle? You’re saying heavy-handed is the way to go?”

“I’m *saying* that an entity can’t provide a critique of itself that’s anywhere near *valid*. You can’t look to the media for a valid critique of the media. You can’t look to the news for a valid critique of the news. You can’t look to corporations for a valid critique of corporations.

Besides—I mean, if we’re going to say *Saturday Night Live* is providing a cultural critique, which is dubious to begin with—towards what end is that critique working? It doesn’t help to alleviate the pain and suffering in the world.”

“You know, a PSA reminding people to fasten their seatbelts probably reduces more pain and suffering than all so-called subversive art all put together.”

“A, I don’t think that’s true, and B, the kind of pain and suffering addressed by, say, a protest song is a different kind of pain and suffering than the kind addressed by the PSA. The protest song addresses pain and suffering caused by social injustice.”

“Listen to you,” Jason says. “Let me get it straight. For something to be subversive it needs to interrupt people’s habitual patterns *and* it needs to make people think critically *and* it needs to work towards alleviating pain and suffering *and* it needs to address social injustice—this could go on forever. You could keep refining your definition until there’s not a single artwork left that meets all your criteria. And isn’t that just a way to defend yourself against my original point? That all the great subversive artists failed to affect social change? If there’s no artwork to point to, it makes it hard for us to talk about whether or not they succeeded.”

Caccian speaks, his fork paused in air midway to his mouth, the clump of cranberry sauce speared upon it quivering only slightly. “I have a vision,” he says. “I have a vision of an art that would be truly subversive. Tribal Web Radio. The honkies that run this country have always been afraid of what would happen if the Native Americans organized. Since the root of Native American social organization has always been music, the honky powers have needed to control and restrict the power of that music. The FCC’s kept Native Americans off the airwaves—which amounts to a government policing of their air—but the FCC can’t control what’s broadcast over

the Net. Real-time streaming mpeg audio makes every computer into a deregulated radio. The tribes can use this power to transmit their music without government interference. Soon Web radio will be dominated by a tribal majority. The Internet will slowly transform into a network alive with drumming and chants, the traditional chants, yes, but also new, a new magic, to reflect new forms of social organization. The whites, feeling threatened, will flee the Internet, and those who don't flee will be corralled into Net reservations, small pockets of websites where the old honky ways of commerce and ownership can still be quaintly practiced. It will be a great reversal of the way we took their country and parceled it. They will take our country—the Internet—and they will de-parcel it, turn it into one community, and it will become the means by which they will gain immense political power. ”

Caccian blinks, completes the trajectory of cranberry sauce into his mouth. Jason and Samantha exchange looks. Gregor is deep into the procedure of turkey-consumption.

“Where does he get this stuff?” Samantha asks.

“Don't ask me,” Jason says.

“You're the guy's brother,” Samantha says.

She eats some more of her grilled cheese sandwich while the boys push their remaining bits of turkey around to soak up the last streaks of gravy left on their plates.

The waitress comes by when all their mouths are full and fills the coffee mugs that need filling.

Samantha waits until Jason starts on his pumpkin pie to continue.

“I have one last criteria to add,” she says. “And then, I swear to fucking God, I'm done refining.”

“Listening,” says Jason, between bites.

“The subversive art? It has to be something that you can do for free, or almost free. A critique of social injustice always involves a group without power in conflict with a group with power. And the groups with the power are also the groups with the money. So the more money it takes to produce an artwork, the more on the side of the groups with power the artist needs to be. That’s why there’s so few subversive rock stars anymore. Because to be a rock star you need to pay for instruments and recording and the costs of touring and promotion and clearing samples and pressing singles and producing the album itself, and you need to pay the graphic designers to make an album cover and the directors to make a video and the models to act in the video and, I mean fuck, it just goes on and on. And there’s no way you can critique the power structure on one hand and ask for them to keep financing you endlessly on the other.”

“Unless—” Gregor begins.

“So what meets all of these criteria?” Jason says. “Free or cheap, interrupting habitual thoughts and inspiring critical ones, working towards an alleviation of the pain and suffering caused by social injustice? Just give me an example. Just so we can assess it.”

“Folk music,” says Samantha. “Civil disobedience. Peaceful protest. Sit-ins. Earth First! chaining themselves to old-growth redwoods.”

“None of those things have affected change by themselves. They’ve all failed.”

“But you admit that change has occurred,” Samantha says.

“Yeah, but do you know why change occurred?” Jason says. “I mean really. Do you know why really. It’s not because somebody sat down and plunked a couple of chords out on the guitar and figured out that *war* rhymed with *no more*. There’s only one language that the people in

power understand. It's not the language of folk music or art. It's *violence*. The race riots are what get people to begin paying serious attention to civil rights. The Stonewall riot is what brings gay rights into the public eye. Hundreds of angry queers literally pelting policemen with rocks and bottles. You can have a thousand consciousness-raising sessions and a thousand sensitivity-training courses, and you can write a hundred thousand songs that demand equality, but nothing breaks someone out of their habitual ways of thinking than a great big angry fairy ready to punch them in the nose. You want to talk corporations? You think corporations and their chain stores are the new power structure? Corporations are going to keep building chain stores as long as those stores are profitable. Now, you two can waste your days playing songs on the streetcorner, trying to convince one passerby at a time that they shouldn't go to McDonald's, but you're going to cut into McDonald's profits so slowly that you might as well be doing nothing at all. If you want to keep McDonald's from stamping out more McDonald'ses all over your town, you have to make the McDonald's in your town less profitable, and the way to do that the quickest is to go out to your McDonald's every night and throw a brick through their window. Make replacing that window every day a part of their operating costs. That's what my temp sabotage is all about. It's not about raising consciousness or changing the way people think. It's about hitting corporations in their balls. You guys don't like corporate coffee? How are you going to stop it? Are you guys going to sing your songs a hundred times over? Or are you going to go out to your local Starbucks with a bomb and blow the motherfucker sky high?"

Jason folds his arms across his chest and stares at Samantha with his face tensed into a pernicious scowl. She's not sure what percentage of the scowl is angst theatrics and what percentage is genuine frustration. She's calculating these percentages and trying to draft a response

that takes those percentages into account when Gregor finishes work on his pumpkin pie, and looks across the table at Jason.

“Gee,” he says. “I’ve always considered myself a pacifist. I can’t go out and start *blowing things up*.”

“Then why did you write a song called ‘Burn Down the Corporate Bookstores?’”

Gregor shrugs. “It’s the idea of the thing,” he says. “I want people to participate in a *metaphorical* burning of the bookstores.”

“Metaphorical my ass,” Jason says.

“What do you want from me, man?” Gregor says. “I already told you, I’m a pacifist.”

“A pacifist can blow up a *building*,” Jason says. “As long as nobody’s in it. And, anyway, you’re just proving my damn point. You write a song impelling people to burn down a bookstore but you know that no one will actually do it. The music is safe because it’ll fail.”

“I want people to think differently,” Gregor says. “If enough people start to think differently the whole world will change.”

The waitress comes by and puts the check down on the table. Samantha hasn’t said anything in a few minutes. She’s thinking about change. She’s thinking about whether the system will ever burn down, thinking about what it’ll take for change to happen—whether it’ll take re-education or a thousand protest songs or a million bricks through a million windows, whether every Starbucks in every somewhere-in-America city really needs to be reduced to smoking rubble before the world can just *be different*. Will it take a war? She imagines herself in that revolutionary beret, cocking back to pitch a Molotov cocktail. This is a possible future.

“Bombing Starbucks,” Jason says. “You want the world to change? That’s the way to start it off. We could do it, you know. I know how to make bombs from common household products.”

Her library book is a weight in her lap, and now she remembers something she read in it. There are social circumstances that lead to class war, and they can be enumerated and studied, and trends can be isolated and analyzed. And she knows, secretly, that Jason is right—there is a link between violence and accelerated social change. More than a link. They’re synonymous. Violence *is* accelerated change; accelerated change *is* violence.

“The information is out there. On the Internet. I could go down to the hardware store, spend less than fifty bucks, and end up with a little number that could disable a tank. A simple unarmored coffee shop isn’t going to be any problem for these babies.”

But she remembers something else. The social conditions that traditionally produce this violence, that set into motion the hot reaction of cultural explosion, are conditions of *emotional unbalance*: the poor enraged and disgruntled, only the poor. All other classes—the middle class and the wealthy alike—need to be complacent.

“We could go out there tomorrow and start on this. It would make national news. Other people, in other towns, would be inspired. They’d follow our example. Two days later someone else would blow up a Starbucks. The next day three or four would go up in flames.”

She thinks of the house in Poplar Hills South. She thinks of the YesMen’s mother—she of the unknown surname—vacationing in Aspen with her new boyfriend. She thinks of her own mother, scubaing in the Caymans. An empire made available by the invisible roads of credit and capital. This is the world that they stand to inherit in another twenty years, all of them.

“Within a week or two there’d be hundreds of blown-up Starbucks, all across America. Within a month the corporations would be waving the white flag. All we need to do is set it in motion.”

This is what she fears, most of all: that what all of them are, really, are privileged children playing a game, pretending to be disenfranchised in the new corporate world when, really, they are the ones who that world has been made for. And that by playing and pretending and faking discontent, by donning the cloaks of the middle-class revolutionary, they are doing the exact opposite of what they want to do: they are keeping the whole unfair system stabilized, keeping it all up-and-running, ticking along.

“It would only take one bomb to change everything,” Jason says. “One exploded Starbucks could make more difference than a thousand protest songs.”

If it's true, Samantha thinks, if middle-class rage only helps to keep the economic systems perfectly in place, then—she can feel her mind winding itself into a perverse knot—the best way for someone like her to affect social change, paradoxically, is to become more complacent.

“We could do it. We just need to get started.”

There must be another way, she thinks. And another way suggests itself, but it means giving up that which she could inherit if she were only willing to toil and wait, giving up the credit cards, giving up the dream of the modest abundance of home, the imported olive oil, the coffee beans, the Danish Magic Bed, giving up the fantasy of a University job, teaching Poli Sci and Women’s Studies to younger versions of herself, and choosing instead a path fraught with immense peril and difficulty and endless hardship.

“It could be done.”

When she goes she leaves the last of her money—a five-dollar bill and some ones—on the table. As she enters the darkness of Thanksgiving night—a darkness punctured with a million Christmas lights, a darkness shot through with a million lights of all colors—all she brings with her is one library book, and one application, folded tight into nine squares in her pocket.