

BOMBING STARBUCKS

A NOVEL

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for Hannah Haas
and Kat McLellan

“Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable in the same way that we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world.”

-Marshall McLuhan
Understanding Media
1964

“Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV
And you think you’re so clever and classless and free
But you’re still * peasants as far as I can see.”

-John Lennon
“Working Class Hero”
1970

* Omitted at the insistence of E.M.I.

PART ONE

BARNES AND NOBLE

I

Samantha stops in front of a stately shelf in a somewhere-in-America Barnes and Noble, and reaches. She tilts a book into her hand the same way she'd maybe tilt a box of Triscuits towards her were she in the grocery store; she opens the book, flips past its title page, its dedication, its printer's indicia; she begins to read the first few lines. Something had inspired her to take this book off the shelf, but before she's through the first paragraph she's already begun wondering what it was. Perhaps the careful arrangement of images and fonts on the cover, the *feng shui* utilized by the graphic designer, had caught her demographic eye? Perhaps the words on the book's spine activated linguistic associations software'd into her brain, triggered complicated sequences of mental impulses which became the desire to *know more*, a desire which translated into an action, the action of reaching out and picking up the book? Something—what was it?—had inspired her to open the thing and start reading, but now she stares at the daunting gray page of text in front of her, and she can feel that inspiration (whatever its cause) beginning to degenerate; she has begun to tire of following the long chains of all those sentences (laid out in their meticulous lines, like rows of corn in a strange and dreary cornfield) and so at the conclusion of the first paragraph she closes the book, puts it back on the shelf, and turns her attention back to the surroundings of the bookstore.

It's not that Samantha isn't a reader. Yes, she was born in 1978, so it's true that she has never known a time when TV was not ascendant, and, yes, it's true that she was raised in rooms lit by TV's pulsating eyeball, and she had the normal sorts of comings-of-age that those raised by TV tend to have: at age three she learned Spanish and the basic shapes from the cuddly urbia of Sesame Street; at age eight she saw herself within the screen for the first time (news coverage of Santa making a parachute landing at the elementary school, the folks Betamax'd it); at age fourteen she saw her first penis, a hulking thing belonging to a porn star—she watched it ejaculate onto a gigantic labia, watched the flung semen progress through air with a geological slowness (her friend Susie had pressed the remote's Fast-Forward and Pause buttons simultaneously to get Extra-Slow; the orgasm took almost five minutes to play out to the final dribble; and Samantha had watched the whole thing with, strangely, the identical transfixed fascination she'd felt when she'd watched flowers bloom and collapse in time-lapse sped-upness in Science class). So, yes, TV tinkered with her formative experiences, gave her rites of passage that she would not have had in a world with no TV, but the fabric of her attention, woven more tightly than that of many of her less-fortunate peers, stayed more-or-less intact through it all. If she were asked to fill in a circle on a questionnaire—Do you find reading: a) unpleasant b) somewhat unpleasant c) neither pleasant nor unpleasant d) somewhat pleasant e) very pleasant?—she would fill in the circle for e) completely and she would make her mark dark. And she wouldn't be thinking of like Grisham and Grafton, either. She's just out of college. She majored in Political Science and minored in Women's Studies. She read Simone DeBeauvoir's *The Second Sex* and found it e) very pleasant. She read Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* and found it e) very pleasant.

But it's Friday night. And this Barnes and Noble is having its Grand Opening. And for some reason, reading seems less interesting than looking around the store, exploring this universe that Barnes and Noble, have planned down to the last detail. Samantha thinks that those twin divinities have done something even God couldn't do: they've created a universe that is not only complete but also infinitely replicable. They've composed a system of organizational rules and economic mysterium and aesthetic order. Turn it on and it manifests itself in the form of a bookstore, in the same way that God's system manifested itself in the form of the universe. The difference is that God's system, the once-and-done creation of a universe, played out so long ago—even if you take the creation scientists at their word there's still 6,000 inactive years to account for. Whereas the Barnes and Noble system manages to open a new micro-universe for business every four days now, in the last point-five percent of the twentieth century.

Samantha doesn't believe in God anyway. She believes in the forces of production and distribution and exchange. She believes that these are the forces that control us, make us or destroy us, and here, in this superstore, she can see those forces all made concrete, or, more accurately, made into plush carpet and teakwood and light and the faint strains of classical music. When she walks up the center aisle towards the glowing promenade of magazines that stretches across the back of the store, she knows that she is crossing the flightpaths of the invisible angels of fixed capital and circulating capital. The Plan, symbolized, becomes the temple.

And she knows she needs to hate it. She's never seen a picture of Barnes and Noble, the individuals—she's not even sure if the names correspond to real people—but she visualizes them as Romulus and Remus, foundlings and founders, their mouths straining up to clamp on the dangling breasts of the wolf, and she knows she needs to hate them in the same way that the early Christians

probably found themselves beginning to hate those born-lucky Roman babies the thousandth time they got ripped to pieces by lions.

But it's Friday night. If there's one thing she learned in college it's this: there may be a revolution, but it won't happen on a Friday night. And, besides, look: magazines!

How can you hate this system? she asks herself. There's a part of her brain that still relishes all forms of capitalism, a part she characterizes as a tiny gnome hiding out in a fluorescent-lit corner office in her skull somewhere. *Just look at what you get*, this inner money-loving dwarf says, as Samantha wanders in a mostly-diagonal line across the luminous piazza of Magazines. Yes, it's true, right here in front of her she's got images, thousands of images, God, millions probably. Pure abundance. She sits down in an overstuffed chair and lets her eyes race from one end of the semicircular rack to the other, taking in Italian gowns (green & taffeta-looking) and hi-fi stereo components (matte black & dildo-sleek) and Johnny Depp's face (white w/ethnic touches) and an arty photograph (cracked lightbulb, crazy filament: sepia & out of focus) and a dinner roll (torn in half, textured as an acid trip, the melting pat of butter startlingly featureless, a metamorphic alien blob) and a slim woman (Gauguin-brown skin, yellow bikini cut to accentuate her pubic triangle) romping in digital-blue surf at the edge of some island that's probably got a hundred athletic shoe factories packed dense just beyond the next ridge. Samantha relaxes in the chair—*ahhh*—and she finds that sitting here in Magazines she's become almost imperceptibly turned on. She's not sure exactly what did it. She uncrosses her legs and spreads them a little at the array of magazines, and her mind parallel-sequences two weird fantasies simultaneously. One: that she's inviting the galaxy of images to fuck her with its chromatic cock, and two: that she's the one who has birthed these images into the world, that each of them has passed through the parentheses of

her ilia and the hot canal of her cunt, that she's the Mother of Capitalism. Her tongue presses against the back of her teeth.

She thinks, for a pointed and pleasurable moment, about trying to see Dmitrovitch later on—giving him his shot at pleasing the Goddess of Information; seeing if he can reach the womb mighty enough to hold all of Materialism—and then the static of guilt disrupts her, she remembers that she's here to talk to Gregor, to see if he wants to hang out with the YesMen tonight, and the fantasies submerge back into the psychological mire they'd risen from.

She's still charged up though, so she jumps out of the chair, skips lightly from one end of the magazine rack to the other, and fills her arms with a slippery pile of glossy paper, grabbing everything that looks interesting. It's the summertime. It's Friday night. She wants to party like it's 1999. And it is.

She's wearing a grimy pair of overalls and a T-shirt that says "Donut King" on it and the magazine on top of the pile says "7 Great New Styles From Milan." If you pointed this out Samantha would tell you the thing about 1999: the thing about 1999 is that there's no paradox there. She twirls out of Magazines, hugging the pile close to her chest: it's time to go find Gregor.

There are three authors signing books at three tables set up along the midway. This is part of the Grand Opening. The first author is surrounded by a tidy crowd of four somewhat interested-looking people; the second one is talking to a blond woman in a leather bomber jacket (Samantha suspects it's the author's girlfriend, bussed in for the occasion); and the third one has no audience and in fact is engrossed in reading what appears to Samantha to be a copy of his own book. She is careful not to make eye contact with any of the authors as she goes by; she doesn't

want to see the hopeful glimmer that might appear in their eyes if they think she's here to see them.

She hears: "I just love your book. I never knew that ordinary macaroni could be so versatile." Cuts left.

She's in the Bargain Books now. Books under \$10. Books under \$5. Gigantic tomes of stock illustration culled from the engravings of the pre-photographic era. Fodor's Guides from the early 90s, representations of outdated Frances and Italies and Spains. A book of bad Picasso reproductions. An opulent cookbook, thick as the Metro Yellow Pages, cover photograph depicting a Mediterranean kitchen in which every object and surface appears to be gilt-edged—\$8.95!

This is where Samantha pauses for a moment. *\$8.95?* she thinks, *that isn't bad*, although she has no kitchen of her own, only the one in Professor Laura McMillian's house, a kitchen that will be hers only from now until January. In January Laura will get back from her Visiting Professorship in Fairbanks, and Samantha will give up the housesitting gig and—well—from there she's not quite sure what she's going to do. Samantha gives another longing glance to the hundred and one radiant copper pots on the cookbook's cover, then she remembers that the built-in shelves in the kitchen Laura's at are amply stocked with cookbooks of many nations, cookbooks she's never opened or even touched, much less used to make a meal, and she figures that investing \$8.95 now in a mythical future is probably a foolish way to invest \$8.95. In her mythical future she has the fabulous cosmopolitan apartment of her dreams, full of really snazzy modern cookbooks that she actually uses to make gorgeous meals, which she serves to her fabulous cosmopolitan friends on bold primary-color plates that compliment the food and reflect her personal iconoclasm, but

spending \$8.95 tonight, with 25% of her stuff in temporary disorganized piles in Laura's living room and the remaining 75% boxed up in her bedroom at her parents', would not result in her coming one step closer to her ideal life; it would result in her having one more underutilized book to cart around when she leaves Laura's house for good. She recognizes this, and forges on.

She comes out of the claustrophobic discount world. There it is. It opens up before her like the Pacific opened up before whoever-it-was from what's-that-year. Airy and noisy. Clean and well-lighted. Starbucks Coffee.

Samantha takes a quick survey of the twenty-or-so people sitting in the bookstore cafe and *types* them—a bad habit left over from her early college days, when making snap judgments about people proved your quick wit and requisite cynicism. She takes one look at the people here and divides them up into subcategories. Old married couples. New lovers. New couples, who are thinking about becoming lovers, and so have come to the Grand Opening because they know there will be books there (and thus a steady supply of conversational prompts). Weird loverless guys with strangely bad hair who think that sitting alone in Starbucks brandishing a book on *tai chi* or Tantric orgasm will increase their chance of meeting a soulmate. Plus a few normal-looking people sitting by themselves and—Samantha's glad to see—reading. They're reading books that belong to a corporation, a corporation that also owns the space they're sitting in, but still, they're *reading*, like they just got engrossed in what they were looking at and needed to *know more*, needed to sit down with the book and go deeper, with a hot cup of stimulants just within reach. She thinks she sees one person taking notes. She types this group as the *readers*, and she feels a faint affinity towards them which is genuine.

All the subcats eat and drink, of course, that's why they're here, to indulge their basic consumptive urges. Samantha types these people down to what they're drinking. The lovers drink coffee, replenishing their energy for the upcoming fuck; the married couples eat carrot cake and sip decaf; the Eastern-philosophy guys nibble elegantly at phallic biscotti and enjoy glasses of some kind of murky tea; the couples-to-be are having different drinks, not yet in sync, one has some froufy thing topped with a dissolving mountain of nutmeg-sprinkled whipped cream, the other has a bright red granita. Overlooking the rituals is a huge mural depicting a cafe populated by various literary figures (labeled with their surnames) all engaged in what must be deep and interesting and fulfilling conversations about books, driving home the time-honored connection between literature and coffee beverages. Samantha remembers something Gregor, acting in English-major mode, once told her: that Balzac—who's not in the mural—died from caffeine poisoning: he used to have sixty cups of coffee a day. Barnes and Noble should build a statue.

Samantha notes that the cafe depicted in the mural is sort of German-expressionist, full of dramatic angular shadows, and is remarkably unlike the Starbucks it hangs over. She tries, idly, to fit the figures in the mural into the subcategories of the people she's set up. She can see Kafka all too easily as one of the unlovable guys in sandals. The others are trickier: would, say, Mark Twain be settled down happily with Virginia Woolf, the two of them hopping out for dessert after filing the dirty dishes in the dishwasher? Or would he be whispering nasty bawdiness into poor Emily Dickinson's ear, recognizing the sexiness of a shy girl out of her element?

She looks back at the eating and drinking and courting subcategories filling the tables. If she and Gregor were sitting down together there would be another subcategory: ex-lovers. (She supposes, to be fair, that some of the couples she's identified as new-couples-thinking-about-it

could also be Exes; both categories exhibit the same sorts of tentativity on the surface, but for some reason every couple Samantha sees looks like a current couple and not an ex-couple.

Samantha supposes it's because when you're trying to stay friends with your Ex it always seems, somehow, like no one else in the world is trying the same thing.

Ex-couple, Samantha thinks, trying out the still-new word in her mind. *No*, Samantha thinks. *Fuck that. Ex-lovers*. She thinks of Gregor that way, *ex-lover*, firmly *ex-lover*, although he'd want her to say "ex-boyfriend," and he'd want her to think of herself as his "ex-girlfriend." This is a semantic knottiness she doesn't want to be bothered to puzzle out. She didn't want to puzzle it out when they were still lovers, either: the missing "ex-" prefix made the problem, if anything, even knottier back then. In fact it's part of why the whole thing ended.

Gregor isn't sitting in the cafe. He works behind the counter. This is his first job out of college. He's been training for a week and tonight is showtime.

There he is, busy behind the counter, in his green apron. He hasn't seen her yet, and she takes a minute to study his anxious profile. She thinks of him as a lovely rabbit: big feet, beautiful nervous eyes. She waits until the person in front of her buys their Ghiradelli chocolate bar and their Davinci soda and then she slips up to the counter while his back is turned.

She says: "Hi, I was wondering if you could help me? I'm looking for *The Communist Manifesto*? I don't know who wrote it, but it's got a red cover?"

He turns, blinks at her, smiles. "I'm sorry, I'm not authorized to talk about anything that even looks like a book. You'll have to go to the Information Kiosk, ya Commie rat-bastard."

"Hi."

"Hi."

“So this is it, eh?”

“Yeah. Check this out.”

He pulls the name badge, pinned through the apron, away from his chest. It says, across the top, “Barnes and Noble.” Underneath that it says “Gregor.”

“That’s great,” she says.

“Yeah, it’s cleared a lot up for me.”

Someone else comes into line behind her.

“When do you get a break?”

“Soon. You want to hang out and talk?”

“Yeah. I’ve got some magazines to keep me busy.”

“So I see. You want anything?”

“What can I get for free?”

“There’s a broken cookie in the case. We can’t sell the broken ones. I’ll give you a piece if you want.”

“That’s capitalism for you,” she says. “If you don’t play all you get are the broken cookies.”

He leans across the counter, looks directly at her. “Truly,” he says, “we are not yet revolutionaries.”

“This is not your father’s anarchism,” she says.

He goes to get the cookie pieces. She looks at the green circles. Starbucks. A mermaid with two tails, one splayed east and one splayed west. A woman spreading her legs. Her smiling head flanked by stars.

2

She has nine magazines. She waits for half an hour or so with nine magazines' worth of gloss sprawled out in front of her. She has just enough room on the table to keep all nine open simultaneously and still maintain a small square of space in which to place her stolen cup of coffee and her saucer with the bits of broken cookie. Periodically, she'll look at all nine magazines at once, pulling her attention out of whatever particular article it might have been enmeshed in, in order to take in the whole. When she does this, the nine magazines generate a kind of magic square: each image seems determined by its relationship to the ones surrounding it. When she flips one magazine to a new page she finds, shortly thereafter, that she needs to turn the pages of all of them, to maintain some kind of harmony, some particular ordered grid.

She flips the pages.

She pairs the bronzed pectorals of a model in frothy sand with a cheerful blue Volkswagen; she positions a woman in a cellophane shirt above an aerial photograph of Barcelona's convulsed streets. With the invisible order reestablished in this way, she can permit herself to go deep again, to descend into engagement with a page of text for another few minutes.

She is deep in when Gregor comes over, coffee cup in hand, and pulls up a chair.

"I've got fifteen minutes," he says.

"Sssh," says Samantha, without looking up. "I'm trying to take this quiz."

"What is it?"

“*Marie Claire*.”

“What’s the topic?”

“How Long Will You Live?”

“How are you doing?”

“I lost big points on the smoking thing.”

“How can you take a quiz like that without writing down your answers? Don’t you have to tabulate everything at the end?”

“I knew if I wrote in the magazine I’d have to buy it.”

“If you really could find out how long you were going to live, wouldn’t it be worth it?”

“Nah.”

“Nah? This is the ultimate knowledge we’re talking about and you shrug it off with a *nah?*”

“Yeah. Nah. What’s the point? What would I do any differently?”

“You really don’t think you’d do anything differently?”

“Let me think. I’d stop paying taxes.”

“You don’t pay taxes. You don’t have any income.”

“Not true. Laura’s paying me a hundred bucks a month.”

“Are you planning to declare it?”

“No.”

“Well then.”

She sticks out her tongue at him and looks down at the quiz again.

“What would you say is my total percentage of body fat?”

“Well, it’s been a while since I’ve had the opportunity to—”

“You can stop right there, mister.”

“So what *are* you going to do about a job, anyway?”

“I’ve still got student loan money left over.”

“You’ve *still* got student loan money? Jesus. How much?”

“And when that’s gone, I’m going to make a coffee-table book. How’s this?: a book of photographs of celebrity houseplants.”

“Most houseplants fall short of the threshold of fame generally required to create celebrity, I think.”

“Don’t play beautiful. You know what I mean. Photographs of the houseplants that *belong* to celebrities. Like, you know, Goldie Hawn’s ficus tree, Tom Cruise’s rubber plant. Each page has a giant color photo of the plant and a little black-and-white inset photo of the celebrity. A block of text in the margin where the celebrity talks about their relationship to the plant. The book sells to celebrity hounds and plant aficionados alike. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a pretty crappy book.”

“Look around you.”

“Touché.”

“People get paid to create junk like that. Can’t you see me driving around LA?”

“In a red convertible.”

“With a cellular phone.”

“And a pager.”

“Making appointments with celebrities.”

“To photograph their houseplants.”

“Living fat off my fat advance.”

“Picking up a giant cocaine habit.”

“Please. This is the nineties.”

“Scientology habit?”

“Perfect.”

“Your hair blowing in the wind.”

“Why can’t this happen? What stops me from pitching this to a publisher tomorrow?”

“Decorum?”

She is about to say something but instead she looks at him. His face makes her bite her lip. He is the youngest-looking twenty-one she’s ever seen. She knows people who, by graduation, looked like veterans of a secret war: bits of metal splintering the cartilage of their faces, bar codes and biohazard symbols and pink triangles tattooed on their shoulders and wrists, great bags of violet flesh hanging from their lower eyelids. She knows a girl who had the backs of her legs branded with sigils when she turned eighteen. Whatever tremendous fire passed over those children, changing them into scarred adults, seemingly spared Gregor: if Samantha had to use one word to describe the way he looks it would be *soft*. His expressive lips are soft (she knows); his hands, magically unblemished despite the bass he plays, are soft; the beard he can’t quite grow is downy and his face beneath it, again, is soft.

Seeing this softness in him frightens her. She believes, almost, that he won't survive, that he has only been lucky so far, and that something—she couldn't really articulate what it might be—is going to come along and hurt him irrevocably. He cried the first time they made love.¹

How can such a boy survive? Samantha had wondered then, and she wonders it again now, looking at his pretty, expectant face. *How has he even gotten this far?*

She didn't like that he had cried; she didn't want that responsibility; she wanted to think of lovemaking/fucking as something that was fun and felt good and relieved tension, and of course she *felt close* to Gregor *emotionally* and all that bullshit, but for her the plain act of fucking had forever been just something that you *did*, like going out to a movie, only free, and sometimes more exciting, and yet there she was, on the couch in her mom's house, with this *boy* in her arms, smiling and trembling, with tears coming out of his giant blue eyes. That was only last summer, last August, when her mom and her mom's new beau were in the Caymans, but it seems a long time ago, now.

Gregor is balancing his coffee on his knee—there's no room on the table—and he's tracing the rim of the mug with his pointer finger and not making eye contact with her.

“Samantha?”

“What?”

“Are you sure you don't want to start the band up again?”

“Oh, Gregor.”

¹ *Made love*—she hates the words. That's not her way. She wants to say he cried the first time they *fucked*. But Gregor's a boy who can't *fuck*, if he were to even *pronounce* the one harsh glottal stop of the word he would just shatter. With her and Gregor it was always *making love*, he was always tender and gentle in the exact way the words suggested, and the first time—she found out later that it was his first time with anyone—he cried.

He's still not looking at her. "I just miss it. I'm not saying that we have to get together again—I mean, I'm not saying that we have to be boyfriend and girlfriend again—"

"Will you knock it off with that boyfriend/girlfriend stuff? You know how I feel about that." She says this, and she's sorry immediately, hearing it come, too harsh, out of her mouth.

"Come on, Sam, you know what I mean. I'm not asking for the relationship back. What I'm asking for is that we just play together. Like we used to. I still get up in the morning and I practice the old basslines and it just sounds so fucking stupid without you there."

"I don't know, Gregor."

"Come on, Sam. We were pretty good for a while there."

"Yeah."

In July of 1998, Samantha and Gregor—the "just friends" Samantha and Gregor—stretched out on a blanket in the park after midnight and changed their friendship into something different with one unexpected kiss, which they would later come to call the Nameless Relationship². A week before this kiss, they had agreed to form a band, which they called Now Hiring. It featured Samantha on vocals and acoustic guitar, Gregor on bass. Their entire senior year they'd supplemented their student loan money by playing shows every other month or so at Wingz, the non-alcoholic pub in the basement of the University's Union Building. They got a

² There had been a terrible fight in Gregor's bed one night, conducted in angry whispers until roommate Jason climbed exasperatedly out of the top bunk, informed them that they shouldn't even *bother* whispering, struggled on his black pants and black shirt, and declared that he was heading down to the computer lab to check his e-mail and that by the time he got back they'd better be done. The compromise they reached, at 3:18, six minutes before Jason came back into the room all baleful-eyed, was that they could agree to call their social interaction "Nameless Relationship," or, alternately, "It."

hundred bucks per show, enough to keep Samantha in cigarettes and Gregor in indie-rock CD's until their next slot on the University Activities Calendar would roll around.

To their surprise, they began to develop a small loyal following, and they'd actually started to get off-campus; they played one successful show downtown at a club called Access All Areas (Triple A, in the vernacular). Gregor had expected this trajectory to continue: he'd only just begun to articulate his aspirations, in the shyest and most effacing of ways, but real hope lit his face any time they'd talk about the band's potential future, Samantha could see it. And maybe, she thinks, maybe seeing that he'd grown invested in that future together was what caused her to feel that the pressures of the Relationship, nameless or not, were crushing some fragile and earned independence within her. And so, eight months into the Nameless Relationship, after they played their March slot at Wingz and lugged the equipment all the way back to Gregor's townhouse, Samantha told Gregor that "It"—whatever "It" was—was going to have to end.

He'd exhibited an admirable degree of resolve when she told him she didn't want to be in the Relationship any more, but then he asked, in a wavering voice, whether they could still play in the band together. She dissolved Now Hiring with a single exasperated roll of her eyeballs, and that was when he cried. He sat right down on his amp and looked at her and let his rabbit face sag and disintegrate into tears³.

"We were great," Samantha says. "But you can't be sentimental about that past. Remember? We promised each other we wouldn't be sad? For the sake of the friendship?"

"Yeah, I know," Gregor says.

"There's got to be lots of bands around this burg looking for a good bassist."

³ Jason had walked in then, too, taken one look at the tableau before him, said "I'm going to check my e-mail and then have a long and powerful drink," and walked right back out.

“Yeah.”

“Besides, you know I’m not playing now. Not until I figure out what I’m doing with my life.”

“I know.”

“We were all just so privileged, you know? All there in our little middle-class college. We didn’t have to work. The government gave us money not to work. We were being subsidized to fuck around. Is it any wonder that we all tried to be artists?”

“That’s not what it was about.”

“Look at us. Look at this society. Where is the good art supposed to come from? People working at Barnes and Noble? How many of the people working here have college degrees?”

“A lot.”

“You better believe it a lot. They probably all thought they were artists in college and are now struggling to put in forty hours a week here putting *Windows For Dummies* on the shelves and writing their Great American Novel on the weekends.”

“So what? Could happen.”

“It could *not*. It’s irresponsible to art to try and be an artist in your spare time. What are you going to end up with? Spare time art. Rainy day art.”

“People need to eat, pay the bills. They need to have jobs.”

“You end up with a society in which ninety-five percent of the artists either produce art on the weekends or are still in college. A society in which ninety-five percent of the art is either a

hobby or made by the immature. I'm not going to pick up my guitar again until I find a way to live sustainably with it at the center of my life instead of a job."

"I don't look at playing my bass as a hobby, exactly."

"Then why are you here, Gregor? Why are you here in the Barnes and Noble Cafe when you could be at home playing your bass?"

"Because I don't have a band. Remember? You took it away."

That ends the conversation for a good minute. Gregor looks down, and Samantha's insides are like a slow-motion explosion. Forces point violently in all sorts of directions. She half feels guilty, aware that what he's saying is half true; another part of her knows that the band wouldn't work, *can't* work under the current circumstances of their friendship. In a way she feels resentful that he's even asking. The resentment and the guilt engage in infinite recombination, creating a half-dozen hybrid emotions that all clamor for expression simultaneously, jamming the switchboard. Gregor seems to be engrossed in picking a fleck of something off of the rim of the cup with a fingernail.

"Look," Samantha says, finally.

"I'm sorry."

"Look, Gregor, I didn't come here to pick a fight."

"No, it's me; I'm sorry; I have to respect what you want; I know that."

"Look, I came here because I wanted to see you—"

"I have to be getting back soon," Gregor says. "My fifteen minutes are about up."

"Look, Caccian and Jason are having people over tonight; I'm supposed to ask you if you want to come over when you get done here."

“Yeah,” Gregor says. “Yeah, I probably will.”

He sips his coffee.

“So,” he says. “How long *are* you going to live?”

“I don’t know,” Samantha says. “I smoke. I’m drinking a cup of coffee instead of a cup of green tea.”

“I’d sneak you a cup of tea except the bags count as inventory,” Gregor says. “We’d both go to jail.”

“How long do you think you could live without buying anything?” Samantha asks.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“You could grow your own food,” Gregor says.

“You’d need land.”

“Purchase a lot for a dollar at a government real estate auction. I’ve heard it can be done.”

“That counts as buying something.”

“So you’d be homeless.”

“Propertyless, yes.”

“Living on the streets.”

“Living in the rural South. Stealing Farmer Joe’s cabbages.”

“Sneaking into peach orchards.”

“One step ahead of the law.”

“Sleeping under the open night sky.”

“Menstruating in time with the moon.”

“Nice. Wild armpits.”

“Thanks. So: how long do you think I’d live?”

“I don’t know,” Gregor says, and he looks at her, as if imagining her feral in Alabama.

She watches him avert his eyes then, and watches the slightly rueful smile on his soft lips, and she knows he’s thinking about the corpse of the Relationship. Then he snaps out of it, looks at her again, grins, downs the rest of his cup of coffee.

“I should get back,” he says. “Oh, don’t forget. Sunday: Mother’s Day.”

“Oh, shit,” Samantha says. “I would have, too.”

“How can you forget? Don’t you ever listen to the radio?” Gregor says, getting up.

Mom loves chocolate, and the Barnes and Noble cafe has big fancy boxes of it piled up on quasi-Victorian glass shelves. *As long as I’m here*, Samantha tells herself, and she passes nine bucks and change over the counter to Gregor for the medium-sized box. He slides the box into a Barnes and Noble bag emblazoned with a faux woodcut of Steven King’s smiling, faintly simian, face.

“Thank you for shopping the Barnes and Noble Cafe, featuring Starbucks Coffee,” he says.

“I’ll see you later on tonight,” she says to him, lingering at the counter. He nods, already engaged in the complicated work of assembling the latte of the next person in line.

The night outside is cool and balmy. She ties the ends of her shopping bag around her bike’s handlebars and begins to ride down the quarter-mile of sidewalk that demarcates the stripmall’s northern edge. The breeze flutters the plastic of Steven King’s folded face. She transports that tiny image of him past the windows of Barnes and Noble, past PetSmart, past Kinko’s and the Sports Authority and Ultimate Smoothie.

She veers left then, points the bike down the curb ramp, and cuts across the vast acreage of the parking lot, heading past the stripmall's jocular satellite, the red and yellow moon of McDonald's.

High above, the American flag catches in the wind, crumpling then snapping wide again: the sound of it popping in the air catches Samantha's attention; she looks. Directly beneath the American flag flies another one, one that emulates, mimics, every twist and ripple of the American flag. This second flag bears the logo of McDonald's. The golden arches move with the wind in Friday night's floodlit sky.

She looks back at the pavement blurring beneath her tires. She cuts a straight line into the darkness before her.

3

The YesMen, Jason and Caccian, the brothers Price. A year behind Gregor and Samantha, they will be returning to the University in the fall, and have opted to spend the summer living at their parents' house. The boys live in a development called Poplar Hills South, and sure enough, clustered behind the carved-wood sign that announces this nomenclature to the stream of cars that progress along the bypass highway are a good half-dozen trees that Samantha guesses are, in fact, poplars, and, sure enough, some of the streets do actually go up and down in a fashion that actually defines them, empirically, as hills. Every time Samantha rides over to the YesMen's, particularly at the moment when she starts standing up on her bike to pedal it harder up the first, southernmost hill of Poplar Hills South, she gets an odd feeling about that sign that refers to something that's actually there.

She guesses, as she rides up the hill, that this truth-in-signifying approach might be part of what the development has in mind when it calls itself a "Luxury Housing Community." This subtitle is carved on the wooden sign right underneath the words "Poplar Hills South," and Samantha suspects (the cognitive chain gets long; that first hill is a real grade) that the trees right behind the sign are there less to reinforce the connection between the development's name and the tree visual—she knows that hardly anyone can identify trees by type anymore; even *she's* not certain that those trees even *are* poplars—and more to reinforce the connection between the entire name/tree/hill package and the idea of "luxury housing." What luxury housing means, Samantha

thinks (she's at the top of the hill now, preparing to coast; she needs to conclude, quick) is that the people who organized the development care enough to give the impression that they care enough to integrate the words on the sign with the physical reality around those words, so as to spare the development's inhabitants the rudeness of daily ontological shock.

Other things that Samantha has identified as indicative of "luxury housing," mainly from comparing life in Poplar Hills South to life in the neighborhood where her parents and most of her belongings live:

—the houses, of course, are bigger

—these bigger houses, although clearly all built within the parameters of some consistent aesthetic guidelines, all seem to be different from one another, or if not all different, at least built around more models than her home neighborhood (which is to say more than two models, or, more accurately, more than one model and its mirror image)

—although Poplar Hills South is not a gated community, and there are no surveillance cameras up anywhere that Samantha can see, the entire place has an ineffable sort of prison quality to it; there's a certain concentration-campness in the way that the roads implode into shaving-curl patterns, patterns that allow people to go round and round but seem to prevent them from going in an actual direction; there's a certain subtle oppressiveness in the way the tallest hills of Poplar Hills South are laid out around the edge and lined with trees that loom over the basin of the development like watchtowers; there's a vaguely fascist *something* in the fact that everything is *lit*, not just the street but the jogging path that parallels it, not just the front lawns of the different-model houses but the communal playground. Where there's no darkness there can be no secrets

(Samantha learned this in PoliSci 425: "Prison And Torture In Western Civilization") and she

figures that anxious adults like the Prices would probably pay extra to live in a place that's psychologically designed like a prison camp if it meant that nothing creepy would ever intrude upon the life that they had so carefully organized.

Samantha makes a mental note: *Get-rich-quick idea: houses for the semi-wealthy that are designed to be completely germ-free. Windows that don't open. Inside the front door a decontamination airlock with like giant UV lights that burn through you and your groceries when you get home. When people are safe from everything they become terrified of invisible germs. This may be an idea the general public is ready for. The Prices would love it.*

She remembers, suddenly, that Jason and Caccian do not live in a family that she can call "The Prices." They live with their public-relations writer mother, who divorced their dad when Jason and Caccian were kids, and the mother's lover, a guy who is going through one of those divorces that strings out for years and who does something nameless for a company that's just initials. Samantha gets nervous around the YesMen's mother because she doesn't know what to call her—she doesn't know if she still goes by Ms. Price, or if she's reverted to her maiden name, or if she's taken on the name of the live-in lover, which is "Syklombowski" or something else polysyllabic and complex and Old Country and totally out of keeping with "Ms. Price's" sleek modern image. Each of the few times Samantha's encountered "Ms. Price," she's said "Nice to meet you, Ms.—" and followed it with a hopeful trailing off, waiting for "Ms. Price" to supply the appropriate surname. In this gap, "Ms. Price" invariably waves off the unspoken question and suggests "Oh, just call me 'Mom,'" a compromise which Samantha finds deeply unacceptable. She's sure she's asked Jason and Caccian what to call this woman on at least three separate occasions, but whatever answer they give her goes, for some reason, into short-term memory, and is lost by the next time the question comes up.

Samantha is adjusted to dorm rooms and living under other people's roofs, and she thinks that any housing that's in an actual house counts, really, as luxury housing.

She locks her bike to a well-illuminated stop sign, walks across the lawn on a trail of stone lily pads and presses the doorbell.

She hears someone deep indoors—she knows it must be Jason—scream “Come in.”

The YesMen have their equipment set up in the living room. Three milkcrates holding an assortment of mics and clamps and wires are stacked on the coffee table. The floor is the new home for the displaced copies of *Architectural Digest* magazine and the earthenware bowls. The floor is also covered in cables, miles of cables, cables labeled with little masking-tape flags, cables plugged into scratched-up and duct-tape-marred outlet strips set up in the center of the room. An armchair the color of wine holds a giant amplifier. The TV is on, muted; it's showing a dramatic 3-dimensional computer simulation of the evening's precipitation patterns over the Valley, in which an imaginary camera flies over the simulated city and between the simulated hills in order to directly enter the complicated calculus of tonight's predicted clouds. Caccian, the quiet twin, sits on the sofa, face hidden behind the pointy teeth of his combed-forwards black bangs. He holds his guitar in his lap and periodically twangs a string, cocks his head to hear the sound as it dwindles off, and adjusts a knob. Jason, the loud twin, is sitting on the tiled semicircle in front of the fireplace with an Octopad in his lap and a fat joint in his hand.

Jason beats on the Octopad with the heel of his hand and a speaker set in front of a pot of ivy makes a programmed *qwong qwong* noise.

“Ay,” he says.

“Okay, I give up,” Samantha says. “Where are your folks?”

“Aspen, if you can believe that.”

“Wow,” Samantha says. “Your parents can afford Aspen?”

“Who knows? It’s all credit these days anyway. They don’t *need* to be able to afford it if they’re perceived as being *able* to afford it. They don’t need to pay it back, they just need to keep the credit bureau thinking they’re going to pay it back eventually. And you said parents, as in plural, and that guy’s not my dad.” *Qwong qwong*, and he takes a giant hit on the joint.

“Hi, Caccian,” says Samantha.

Caccian looks up from the guitar and smiles. “Hey.”

“You want a hit off of this?” says Jason, proffering the joint.

“Sure,” says Samantha, and she sits on the edge of the coffee table and takes it.

“Did you see Gregor?” Jason asks, after she’s taken a massive dragon hit and returned the joint to his waiting fingers.

“Yeah.”

“How’s life at Starbucks?”

“Eh.”

“Did you tell him to come over?”

“In fact I did.”

“Is he coming?”

“I believe his exact words were ‘probably.’”

This is where she gets nervous. Maybe a fraction of it is the early onset of weed paranoia, contact anxiety, but mostly it’s because she knows that she’s been lying. Okay, not lying, but not disclosing the truth openly and fully. Nobody knows that she’s seeing someone new. Neither the

YesMen nor Gregor knows that Dmitrovitch even exists, and even if they knew he existed they wouldn't know that three nights ago she sat next to him on the roof of his warehouse and drank half of a bottle of wine and watched the moon reel in the sky, and they certainly wouldn't know them that she kissed him and took his shirt off to get at his nipples, or that he unbuttoned her shorts and slid them off and went down on her until she came, right on that blanket on that rooftop, twice, in a hot diatomic cluster of coming. They wouldn't know this because she hasn't told them. She won't tell any of them all of it, probably ever, but she needs to tell them—eventually—more than what she has so far: basically nothing. When Gregor called her up two mornings ago and said “So what did you do last night?” her cunt felt a guilty and pleasurable jolt of memory but she answered “Oh, I just pretty much sat around,” an answer true only in the most technical of semantic senses.

She is afraid to tell. She is afraid it will wound Gregor in a terrible way; that it will rip his heart irreparably. Her intention, of course, is not to hurt him, is, in fact, to *never* hurt him, but she finds herself approaching a juncture where she must acknowledge the incompatibility of her intentions and her actions. She wants to put off this acknowledgment for as long as possible.

“So, when are you guys going to get back together?” Jason asks.

“Huh?” Samantha says.

“You and Gregor.”

“Gregor and I are just friends now.”

“Pff,” Jason says, dismissively, and he takes a giant hit on the joint. “Broken-up couples don't stay friends unless they're each secretly thinking about getting back together. It's a scientific

impossibility. Besides, you guys are perfect for each other. Everybody knows it. I know it. Caccian knows it. Gregor knows it.”

“Look,” Samantha says. She knows this is the perfect opportunity for her to say *actually, I've kind of begun seeing someone else*, but, frightened, she decides to pursue a different tack, and she says “Gregor and I are better off as friends.”

“Plus,” Jason says, “if you and Gregor *stay* broken up, eventually my brother and I are going to be asked to choose sides.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Not at all. Let’s assume for a moment that you really don’t want to get back together with Gregor.”

“I really don’t.”

“It’s obvious, though, that he wants to get back together with you.”

“When, in fact, tonight at Starbucks he said he did *not*, in fact, want to get back together with me.”

“Exactly. If you *really* don’t want to get back together with someone, you don’t need to reassert it, out loud, every time you see the person. So eventually the situation will strain, feelings will get hurt, etc., and each of you will seek a sympathetic ear to hear your side. I’m not talking rocket science here. Both of you will look towards my brother and I to provide sympathetic listening, and, by definition, it’s impossible to be both sympathetic *and* impartial. So we’ll have to choose sides.”

“So whose side would you choose?” Samantha asks.

“I wouldn’t care to have to say,” Jason says. “Better simply to get back together with him and sidestep the whole problem.”

“Don’t listen to him, Samantha,” says Caccian, from the sofa. “You do what you want.”

“You see?” Jason says. “I’d choose one side, my brother would choose another, the YesMen would be torn by internal strife, we’d break up, never get the opportunity to make a video, never get our heavy MTV rotation. The ancient Egyptians believed that if you sowed discord between a pair of twins you’d lose all your teeth within one year.”

“He doesn’t mean to give you shit,” says Caccian. “He’s just looking out for Gregor.”

“Gregor and I are getting along fine,” Samantha says.

“Wait until you start seeing someone else,” Jason says. “Then see how fine everything gets along.” *Qwong.*

“Leave her alone,” Caccian says.

Jason shrugs. “I’m just trying to look out for everyone involved. I want my heavy rotation.”

“How are things with the band, anyway?” Samantha asks, desperate to change the subject.

“Fine,” both of them say in unison.

The YesMen are the up-and-comers of the University music scene. They’re a tight techno-angst combo that Samantha first saw two years ago, fall of her junior year, when they decimated everyone else at Battle of the Bands. They were a thing to see, Samantha thought then, two kids, just nineteen, one growling something about lab animals and crucifying Jesus, his face compressed into a tight red fist, his voice massive, like a train bursting through a forcefield of distortion and static, his arms moving up and down banging out sounds on the drumpad; the other

kid crouched over his guitar, drilling out brittle hot clusters of noise, periodically punching buttons on a synthesizer which doused the auditorium with programmed sequences of sleazy-sounding data. She thought they were great. She saw them a few times at Wingz (it was packed full of white-faced, black-clad teenage girls every time Samantha went to see them play) and she finally met them at a party that spring, and started hanging out with them on a regular basis at the end of the semester and into last summer. That's how she met Gregor: he was a bassist that the YesMen were thinking about incorporating into the band, he'd played with them a couple of times, but he couldn't quite fit into the dialogue that the twins had established. One May afternoon he asked Samantha if he could jam with her, and there—*there* something clicked. It felt as though something had been set into motion, something that could turn out to be great. She and Gregor became Now Hiring; the YesMen stayed the YesMen.

“Oh, hey, it's that commercial!” shouts Jason, and he begins groping frantically about in the two-foot radius of things-set-down-within-arm's-reach for the remote.

He must eventually find it—the Mute comes off—but Samantha couldn't tell you where he finds it, because the second she saw Jason's attention go to the TV her own attention went there as well. Even someone who hates TV, like Samantha, can't help but look where everyone else in the room is looking.

What she sees is this: grainy videocam footage of a cook in a fancy restaurant kitchen leaning over someone's meal and spitting. The cook's face is scrambled into a blur. The TV is saying something like “This Sunday at eight, see people who thought they could get away with anything—on the job!” Cut. Some poor schmuck in an office looking both ways—everywhere but at the camera—and loading his ergonomic keyboard into his backpack. Cut. Some

scrambleface unzipping his fly while standing over what must be the corporate coffeepot. The TV is saying something like “*Busted on the Job 3*—it all begins Sunday at 8—only on FOX.”

“Making surveillance fun again,” says Caccian.

The screen changes to a rainforest. It’s a camera commercial. Jason remembers to Mute it.

“Don’t they have to get your permission before they can broadcast your image?”

Samantha asks. “I find it hard to believe that that guy pissing into the coffeepot voluntarily signed off to be nationally humiliated.”

“Humiliated nothing,” says Jason. “His face is all blurred out.”

“Does it count as them using your image if they blur your face out?” Caccian asks.

“Of course it does,” Samantha says. “That’s still you.”

“Besides,” Jason says, “I’d be proud to be on that show. I’d sign whatever form they gave me.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Samantha says.

“I *would*. These shows promote workplace sabotage. They put the idea in everyone’s head. These shows are a gigantic advertisement for stealing stuff from work and fucking over annoying customers. I wouldn’t even *go* to a restaurant the day after one of these specials airs.”

“But all those people are punished; they all got caught. The idea these shows promote is that if you try to fuck around at work you’ll be punished. They’re trying to put the idea of surveillance in your head even when there’s no surveillance in effect.”

“The requisite moral,” Jason says. “For your average viewer, the moral doesn’t stick: too abstract. What sticks is the image of the guy who puts the computer in his backpack.”

“I don’t think they need to ask your permission,” says Caccian. “If you’re breaking the law don’t you waive your right to control over your own image? If I went up on top of a rooftop and started shooting, they’d broadcast my image all over the news and I don’t think they’d wait until they got my signature.”

“Don’t they have to prove you guilty in court before they can establish that you’ve broken the law?” Samantha asks.

“There’s no law against pissing in a coffeepot, anyway,” Jason says.

“Are you sure?” Samantha asks.

“We could ask Gregor,” Jason says. “I’m sure they briefed him.”

“That reminds me,” says Caccian, to Samantha. “We thought of a way you can live without working for you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Tell her,” says Caccian to Jason.

“It’s like this,” says Jason. “You get your student loan money at the beginning of a semester, right?”

“Yeah,” Samantha says.

“Here’s what you do, then. It’s so easy I can’t believe nobody’s thought of it yet. Register for classes, get your loan money, then just drop all of your classes and live off the government loan. Next semester do the same thing: just keep perpetually registering and dropping. As long as you keep registering, you keep deferring the eventual payback. You could be like this eighty-year-old student.”

“That wouldn’t work,” says Samantha. “If you drop all your classes you have to pay your loan back right away.”

“Oh.”

“We didn’t know,” says Caccian.

The YesMen don’t know this because their college education is paid for by some sort of complicated lawyer-orchestrated arrangement between the YesMen’s estranged parents.

“Thanks anyway,” says Samantha. “I’ll figure something out yet. What are you guys doing for money this summer?”

“Temping,” they both say at once.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” Samantha says.

“No, I love it,” Jason says. “It’s the most fun I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Why? You finally get a chance to feel oppressed?”

“No. You get these temporary windows into these strange horrible worlds. It’s like traveling into other dimensions. You come into a place and they put you in a room and make you fold ten thousand identical letters and put them into ten thousand envelopes. You read the letter and it’s a settlement notice for people who brought a class action suit against some chemical company; they live halfway across the country in this town where the whole town got poisoned, and now each person’s getting their share of the settlement, which is like six thousand seven hundred and fifty-six dollars and twenty-two cents, and you’ve never even heard about this case, but here you are, you’re the one mailing these poisoned townfolk their letter, and suddenly you realize that you don’t know what this company that you’re temped out to *does*, it’s not a chemical company, it’s not a law firm, it’s someplace called Tetradyne Information Resources, and here you

are, with all the moisture leached out of your fingertips from all the paper you've been folding, and a wickedly painful but cosmetically invisible cut right down the palm of your hand from the envelope, and your brain ringy and insane from the ten cups of coffee you've had so far, and the quick system you created—take letter from top of pile, lay flat, fold the bottom one-third up, fold the top one-third down, with your left hand pick up the letter, with your right hand get the envelope from the top of the pile, open the flap, put the letter in, put the whole thing in a pile for sealing later—that system has begun to break down, paper is everywhere, this is the very definition of Information Resources, a fucking pile of paper destined for poisoned Americans but right now stuck sliding all over a table that it's your duty to organize and clear off, it's three hours before you get to walk up the street to Taco Bell and right now all you want, all you feel like you could ever want, is a 7-Layer Burrito, the reality of all those poisoned people is so less tangible than the idea of the tomato and lettuce and refried beans that you get to eat in one hundred and eighty minutes—and it's horrible, but the thing is, the whole time you can be happy, the worse the assignment is the more you can enjoy it, because you know that the assignment is a one-day assignment, and that tomorrow you'll go somewhere else, you'll sit at a fluorescent-lit kidney-shaped desk and answer the phone for nineteen businessmen—and the beauty of it all is that you get to see, in excruciating close-up, but through windows that are blissfully ephemeral, exactly what you don't want to spend your life doing.”

“But,” Samantha says, “while you're looking closely at what you don't want to be doing with your life, you are, in fact, spending your life doing precisely the sorts of things you don't want to be doing.”

“Ah, not true. The *non-temps* at those workplaces are doing what I don’t want to be doing: they’re stuck there. Me? I’m a deep agent. I’m someone brought in from outside, chaos introduced into their order. By letting me into their system they only serve to expedite the breakdown of that system: I don’t belong, I’m not a part of it, I have the freedom to do exactly what’s *not* expected of me. Tetradyne doesn’t expect me to read that letter; they expect me to be a more efficient and less expensive version of a letter-folding/envelope-stuffing robot. But I’m going to read the letter; I’m going to steal the twenty-diskette value pack from the desk drawer; I’m going to overcharge everyone a buck for their lunch order so that I can have mine on the house. Temps are like a creative cancer. Tempropy. That’s *exactly* what I want to be doing with my life. Shut this whole system down.”

“Wait a second,” says Samantha.

“You want to know something?” Jason says, as he’s getting the joint relit. “I could destroy any company I work for. Remember when the computers in the University lab had that nasty new virus on them? Technoscreed? The one that could get past Norton? Remember they had those yellow-and-black signs up at all the stations saying ‘don’t put your disk in these computers’ until the guys down in CompSci reformatted everything?”

“Yes, yes, I remember.”

“Well, guess what?”

Samantha shrugs.

“I put my disk in. Got it infected on purpose. I’ve got Technoscreed on a disk upstairs in my room. It’s marked with a skull and crossbones. All I need to do is plug it into one of the network computers at one of these places and start opening files and the whole show will go down

within a couple of hours. Technoscreeded out. What does it mean if Data Management 9000 loses all their data? It means no more company. Temps have everyone by the balls—” and a giant hit on the joint.

“Pass me that when you’re done with it,” says Samantha.

“I have a vision of the future,” says Caccian, dreamily, staring into the TV. “Whole companies, made up of nothing but temps. They form spontaneously. On the days when temps don’t have assignments they get together to run these companies. There’s no central headquarters; everyone links up through the Internet. Temps from all over America coalesce into a huge information structure. They pool their resources. They buy the temp employment agencies. They use the capital and leverage to buy up the companies that the temps are farmed out to. The system becomes a closed circle. Money can be concentrated at any point on the circumference that the owners of the circle desire. The temps make themselves rich and bankrupt the companies that support them. The corporation dissolves back into the ether from which it assembled itself. The temps have no responsibility to anyone. All they ever were were just temps.”

“We’re all just temps,” Jason says. “Some of us just haven’t figured that out yet.”

He passes Samantha the joint. They smoke and watch commercials in Mom’s luxury-housing house in Poplar Hills South until Gregor shows up an hour later.

4

Samantha's lying diagonally on the couch. Her head hangs off the edge. She is looking at Gregor upside-down and feeling an inexpressible sense of longing.

He's got this hair. It's what Samantha likes—liked—to call, playfully, “mad scientist hair.” It's this prematurely-thin furze that resists all attempts to tame its direction. When he gets a little bit stoned, his face takes on a peculiar marijuana swollenness, and he begins to look exactly like an youthful Einstein: brilliant and perplexed, rumped and adorable. He's sitting on the floor, in front of the chair with the amplifier in it, staring at the remote control. Samantha finds the way he's peering at the thing, with this intense stoned concentration, to be utterly endearing; it's a gesture that contains the essence of what she likes—liked—about him as a lover, as an “It”: quiet attentiveness, placid curiosity, depth of focus.⁴

It's getting on towards being the middle of the night and the TV is broadcasting a show that appears to be nothing but mountain biking accidents. Jason is pacing the room with his hand on his goatee. Caccian's sitting on the floor, out of Samantha's line of vision, his back against the

⁴ Samantha realizes, a bit distantly, that she's reading a lot into the actions of someone who's just zoning out on a handheld remote. Then again, there have been a number of times when she's watched a person perform some mundane action and felt that she's caught a glimpse of some basic fundament of their character, and even though this usually happens when she's high, her assumptions are almost always borne out later, so she's gradually become convinced that people's characters are revealed by their tiniest gestures, and, furthermore, that getting stoned does not cloud her reading of these gestures, but, in fact, decontextualizes the gestures just enough to enable her to read them correctly.

couch's armrest, continuing to tune his guitar. No one has spoken for Samantha's not sure how long.

"I do believe," Gregor says, still staring at the remote, "that this remote actually has a button labeled Surf."

"That's right," says Jason. "Saves you the trouble of having to hit the Channel button all those times."

"I'm genuinely amazed," Gregor says.

"It's all about convenience," Jason says. "All about giving the people the maximum amount of what they want with the minimum amount of effort. Right now in an underground laboratory in Los Alamos teams of scientists are working on complicated computer TVs that will be able to change the channel for you. You won't have to push even a single button. The TV will analyze your viewing tastes. You'll take a little interactive personality quiz when you first buy the computer. 'I always like: alternative music videos, nature documentaries on insects, cartoons suitable for an educated adult audience, girls in bikinis. I occasionally like: the weather, world news reports, well-made commercials. I never like: congressional reports, baseball. I like to watch the average channel for five-ten minutes, with an option to stay in for the whole program. I don't like seeing the same commercial more than once in a week.' You'll answer all these questions and sit back, and the TV will inspect the incoming content and orchestrate it for you in accord with your preferences. Scientists with white coats and goggles and giant color maps of the brain are working on it right now. It's the new space race. The corporation who gets this TV first controls the world."

"That's crap," Samantha offers, head upside-down.

Jason stops pacing. “No, no,” he says. “It’s an automated crap *valve*. That’s the whole point.”

“Not the TV,” she says. “The idea that the extra buttons on the remote in some way represent what we want. It’s not about what we want; it’s about what they can sell us. Who *asked* for all these channels? Who asked for the Surf button? Who asked for TVs that read our minds and change the channel for us? I don’t remember any populist clamor for that stuff.”

“I didn’t actually say that the TV would read our *minds*. I’m strictly talking tastes and preferences.”

“You know what I mean,” Samantha says. “This stuff is all about *novelty*. It’s not about what we want or what we can conceivably use. It’s about what the newest possible thing can be. Who do you think *uses* those TVs where you can split the screen into like nine different frames simultaneously?”

“God?” offers Gregor, who’s still looking at the remote.

“Ted Turner?” suggests Jason.

“Maybe,” Samantha says. “The point is, nobody *we know* uses or *will ever use* those features. They’re intended as novelties. So the salesman can have something to show off in the store. In the store you think ‘hey, this is great, I’ll use *that* all the time.’ Then you buy it and you bring the thing home and you never use it at all. The novelty is the bait. The product is the hook. That’s the way they intend it, not as *convenience*.”

Caccian speaks up from his position behind the couch, in the tentative voice of the introspectivist. “Have you ever noticed,” he says, quietly, “how when we’re complaining about the way the world works, it’s always ‘they?’ ‘They’ control us this way. ‘They’ control us that way.

'They' have this plot. 'They' have that plot. We don't even know who's in charge anymore. In the Sixties you could at least hate the government."

"I still hate the government," Samantha says.

"Yeah, I guess," Caccian says. "But don't you have the feeling these days that the power is flowing from somewhere else? That's what we mean when we say 'they,' isn't it? We're not talking about the government at all, are we? It's something bigger."

"More invisible," says Jason.

"Behind the scenes," says Samantha.

"They," Caccian says. "A pronoun with no referent. We don't even know who to fight."

A bunch of teenagers whooped up on an electrolyte-laden sports drink use hockey sticks to demolish a field full of snowmen on the TV. There's a minute where no one talks.

"I *have* noticed that the rate of novelty is going up," Gregor says. "There seems to be a higher rate of turnover in music. Is that just my imagination? That musicians don't stay as popular for as long now?"

"Remember Alanis Morissette?" Jason says. "Everywhere one day. Now: gone."

"Remember—oh, what's his name?" says Samantha.

"Remember the Squirrel Nut Zippers?" Jason says. "The swing band revival?"

"But that's not *novelty*," Gregor protests. "That's *retro*. That's an old style reborn."

"An old style with a new face," says Jason. "If a style dies, reviving it magically makes it a novelty again."

"Remember that band Enigma?" Samantha says. "Gregorian chants?"

“Gregorian chants and smutty old French poems,” Jason says. “Antiquity as novelty. Brilliant, right? But it played out. The next day: gone. Off the map.”

“It’s amazing,” Gregor says.

“It’s something,” Jason says.

“You want to hear amazing?” Samantha says.

“Shoot,” Jason says.

“What’s amazing is that we’ve got all these people working so hard to generate novelty. but we hardly ever get anything genuinely new. Has the popular song really changed over the past hundred years? No. Novelty is all about selling us the same shit in a shinier package.”

“That’s right,” Jason says. “The shiniest package gets the record deal.”

“You sound almost happy about that,” says Samantha.

“I *am* happy about that,” says Jason. “The YesMen’s package is pretty God-damn shiny. We explode onto the scene; we get a couple of good years when we’re the top of the heap. Sure, once our arc is finished we’ll be regulated to the remainder bins, but I’m OK with that. I see a couple of really good years in there. I see hordes of screaming fans. I see a lot of expensive drugs and anonymous sex.”

“But you’re not trying to do anything new with your music?”

Jason shrugs. “New package,” he says. “Newer, prettier faces. That’s something. Why? What are you trying to do with Now Hiring that’s so new?”

“There is no Now Hiring,” says Gregor.

These two comments hit Samantha from two directions—each of them should really be addressed separately—and as a result her mind kind of spins in place, a crossfire victim. In fact she

wasn't trying to compare the YesMen⁵ against Now Hiring, she was comparing them against Dmitrovitch.

Dmitrovitch is a musician but he's not a musician.

He doesn't play an instrument. He doesn't have a band. What he does is assemble samples. He does things with samples that Samantha's never heard done before. He goes out and records things—noises—with a digital microphone and then puts them together on his computer with pieces of other people's songs, creating dense assemblages that are as different from popular songs as a bird's nest is from a cardboard box. He puts them out on the Internet, downloadable, for free, to anyone who wants them and anyone who can find them. On his webpage he calls himself DJ Blackmarket. If she's going to talk about pushing the parameters of music, she wants to talk about Dmitrovitch/DJ Blackmarket, but she has to stop herself—if she starts lauding the town sampler everyone in the room is going to become aware that something funny is going on. She's not ready for that. Not with Gregor muttering woundedly about the dissolution of Now Hiring twice in one night.

Caccian's voice, from behind the couch: "Did you tell them about the call?"

"No," Jason says.

"Tell them," Caccian says.

"What call?" says Samantha.

"We got this call today," Jason says.

⁵ Although they do it well—exceptionally well, Samantha thinks—there is no avoiding the reality that the YesMen follow the model of gloomy industrial-dance music popularized by Nine Inch Nails in their debut record *Pretty Hate Machine*, released way back in 1989, when the YesMen were ten years old.

Everyone pauses; listens. Bottles of Pepsi explode through pools of water and ice on the TV. Jason, standing in the center of the room, makes eye contact with everyone before continuing.

“We got this call from two A&R men today. They’re holed up at the Doubletree. Talent scouts. Looking for acts to sign.”

“You’re fucking kidding,” Samantha says.

“I’m not fucking kidding,” says Jason. “They’re here by executive order of the David Geffen Company. At the Doubletree. Not to return to Los Angeles, California until they’ve signed someone from our sleepy little hamlet.”

“You’re fucking kidding,” Samantha says, again.

Jason gives her a look.

“Wait,” Samantha says. “Two guys from the *David Geffen Company* called you up today? And made noises like they were interested in *signing* you?”

“We never even sent them a tape,” Jason says. “Industry word, apparently, is that our town is about to have one of those explosions of talent that you hear about every ten years or so.”

“Seattle, Washington,” Gregor says, automatically.

“Athens, Georgia,” Samantha says. It’s like a mantra. If it could happen in Athens, Georgia, it could happen anywhere.

“Geffen wants to be on top of it,” Jason says. “He’s got these two guys parked indefinitely in the Doubletree, monitoring the scene.”

“Waiting for the explosion to happen,” Gregor says.

“And it *will* happen,” says Jason, “especially now that they’re here. Their very presence is the catalyst needed for the explosion to occur. Who knows how many local bands they’ve contacted? Let’s say dozens.”

“I didn’t think we even *had* a dozen local bands,” Samantha says.

“Each of those bands wants to be the one to walk into Dave’s lovin’ arms,” Jason says.

“Each of them is now pitted against the others. An aura of competition permeates. This competitive aura assures acceleration of development. The bands that have it will get more of it faster and the bands that don’t will learn that they don’t faster. Overall you get large-scale, rapid, spectacular expansion. Explosion of the scene.”

“But we don’t *have* a scene,” Samantha protests. “It’s Friday night and we’re sitting around smoking joints and watching TV. This town is no hipster paradise. There *is* no scene.”

“It doesn’t matter if there’s a scene or not,” Jason says. “David Geffen Company is big enough and powerful enough that if it wants a ripe scene to exploit it can just *create* one. Those two guys are just going to sit there in that hotel room and a scene is just going to generate itself because they’re there. What matters is that we keep them *thinking* that there’s a scene long enough for the scene to manifest itself. If the *perception* of this town as the Next Big Thing holds up, the town will *become* the Next Big Thing. Reality very rarely intrudes upon mass hallucination anymore, you know?”

Gregor, still staring at the remote, nods.

“Here’s how it’ll go. Geffen will start signing people. Warner Brothers will go ‘hey, what’s going *on* over there?’ and they’ll send their own Artist & Repertory flunkies to start signing people. The first wave of records will hit the markets. Radio drones will start playing the songs.

Pundits will start analyzing the 'sound' from here and isolating what makes it unique and special. Kids in other towns will hear the records and read the commentary and incorporate our town's sound into their own sound, hoping to ride the coattails of our success. Next thing you know—more signings. Everywhere now. It's a national phenomenon, part of rock history. Bam!—a hundred thousand fourteen-year-olds across America start trying to play Caccian's guitar lines and start hitting Stop and Rewind, Stop and Rewind, Stop and Rewind so they can try to figure out exactly what it is I'm screaming.”

“Yeah, right,” says Samantha.

“Come on, Sam. We're talking about *success* here. Talent is clearly optional. The scene is optional. There's only two things that are mandatory. One: you need a company powerful enough to shape what people want to listen to, and two: the band needs to be able to be packaged.”

“You cynic,” says Samantha.

“Look. Those guys came here to get something huge and they're not going to leave without getting something huge, even if they have to *make* someone huge in order to do it.”

“I don't think so,” Caccian says.

Jason looks at him.

“Okay, boy-fucking-genius, if you're so smart, what do you think?”

“I think,” Caccian says, “that they came here to get DJ Blackmarket.”

Samantha begins coughing in a furious panic. Everyone turns to look at her.

“What do you guys know about DJ Blackmarket?” she says.

“Why don't you ask Caccian, since he seems so gung-ho to talk about it,” Jason says.

“I hear he’s the whole reason for the buzz on this town,” Caccian says. “He’s this guy working on the Net. He makes these sample-things and puts them online for free. All the netheads are really excited—his name is *all over* the place on the Net. Word is that he’s from around here somewhere.”

“You think that’s why Geffen’s out here?” Gregor asks.

“Probably,” says Caccian, shrugging. “The greatest sin of capitalism is to give away for free something that you could charge someone for. The record companies want their share. So they send out their A&R men. You know: spies. But nobody knows who he is; nobody knows how to get in touch with him; he can’t be contacted. *That’s* why I think they’ve been talking to some of the other bands. They figure they’ll either find the way to him or they’ll find a suitable substitute, a neighbor or friend doing the same sort of thing.” He shrugs and lapses back into silence.

“Are you sure about that?” Samantha says.

“They mentioned his name on the phone in a sort of question-mark capacity,” Caccian says.

“They think they know what they’re looking for, but they don’t,” says Jason. “Record companies always think they want something tremendously avant-garde but they always wuss out and take the same old thing in a new package. Caccian and I are going to be that new package.”

“They’ll shoot for him but they might take us,” Caccian says.

“I think you’ve got a chance,” says Samantha. “I don’t think DJ Blackmarket is going to sign.”

Everyone's eyes are on her again. She feels a bubble of tension swelling in the room; she feels her shoulders begin to knot up.

"What do you know about it?" Jason says.

"I know him, sort of," Samantha says.

"You know him?" Gregor says.

"Sort of," Samantha says. "I mean, I've met him."

"You met DJ Blackmarket?" Jason says.

"Yes, yes, yes," Samantha says. "It's no big deal. He's friends with the guy who runs Virtual Mall in the mall. I was hanging out over there last week and I got in a conversation with this guy about computers and it was, you know, I mean, it just turned out to *be* this guy, DJ Blackmarket. And I just don't think he'll sign given what I've heard him say."

"Huh," says Jason.

She remembers, in fact, that Dmitrovitch said he would *never* sign, she remembers that the exact way he phrased it was that he'd rather be *castrated* than sign over control of the distribution and production of his music and have to put up with the papers and the lawyers and the executives, but she leaves this out, because these are the things he said up on the rooftop with the bottle of wine and the spinning moon, minutes before they kissed, and she's worried about that if she tries, stoned, to relay any part of this narrative, she'll miss the right moment to break it off: what she doesn't want is to start telling them about his politics and wind up telling them about her on her back coming into his face.

"I just don't think he would sign, is all. So if you're right, and they're going to be signing *someone*—"

“That’s what I’m saying,” says Jason. “They’re not going to go back to LA empty-handed.”

“There’s that ‘they’ again,” Caccian says.

“This isn’t the anonymous sinister ‘they,’” Jason snips. “This is the ‘they’ of two middle-aged guys who probably have like ponytails, sitting over in the Doubletree Hotel.”

“So what’s he like?” Gregor asks, in a kind of low voice, a voice that doesn’t yet sound hurt but sounds close to being hurt: vulnerable; more vulnerable, she thinks, than it should be at this point.

“What?” Samantha says. “Oh. I don’t know. He’s fine. He’s just this guy.”

The conversation seems to be over. Gregor presses a button on the remote and the screen flips from channel to channel to channel.

“What do you know,” he says. “It works.”

Finally he settles on a channel and they all stare at it for a while.

It’s late. The commercials with the high production values have gone. They’re stuck watching the shitty local commercials for like used car lots where giant words like “Truck Sale” whoosh into the frame over the chattering face of a lot manager, some middle-aged guy who’s clearly in love with the idea that he finally gets to be a star.

“This,” Samantha says. “*This* is our local scene. Are you watching, David Geffen?”

Nobody else says anything.

The advertisement changes to an advertisement for a local Chinese food restaurant. It’s a static shot of the restaurant’s exterior. It cuts to a static shot of the restaurant’s buffet. It cuts to

the same shot of the restaurant's exterior, now smaller and enclosed in a brown frame that has the restaurant's address and phone number superimposed on it.

“The important thing is to talk over the commercials,” Samantha says. Some faint variety of panic has begun to settle in her bones. “Talking over the commercials is how you know they're not brainwashing you.”

Nobody else says anything. Eventually the evening ends.

5

What Samantha needs is a plan.

Her days, these days, at Laura McMillian's begin with her waking up in a bed that doesn't belong to her. It's made out of blondish pine and it has kind of a spare Danish look to its style; it has clearly been designed with elegance and clean lines in mind. The bedclothes smell, somehow, like pure oxygen. Samantha's sure this bed probably cost more than she grossed all last summer taking tickets at the art-movie house. There's sort of a melty quality to falling asleep in it, a feeling like she's merging with the mattress. It feels, in fact, like the most comfortable bed Samantha's ever slept in. She wakes up at around 8:30 in the morning, cocooned in Laura's comforter, this grunky down comforter that is both heavy and light in that down-comforter sort of way. Brilliant parallelograms of light drift through Laura's white muslin curtains and glide onto her face. Since she wakes naturally, Samantha doesn't ever use Laura's alarm clock. That she doesn't really have anywhere she needs to be is kind of secondary.

It's normally at this point, lying in Laura's Magic Danish Bed, the backs of her still-closed eyelids infused with red light, that she begins to think about needing a plan.

After a while she usually peels herself out of the comforter and finds Laura's cat, Adrienne, who's usually somewhere else on the bed, coiled up into a little at-sign in one of the sunbeams, and Samantha hauls the cat up into her lap and sits there in bed for a while longer, scratching the sleek belly and the smooth plane of skull just behind the cat's ears. Samantha's been

in Laura's house for two weeks now, and each day Adrienne seems increasingly wary of Samantha—seeming to suspect more and more that Samantha may be a permanent, inferior replacement for her beloved Laura—but at least the two of them have unguarded time together in the form of these mornings.

One of the first things Samantha did when she got to Laura's house was figure out how to program the coffeemaker to turn on automatically in the mornings. Every night before she goes to bed—even when she staggers in stoned and fuzzy-edged, like she did last night—she grinds some beans in Laura's vaguely vibratorish Krups grinder, puts a fresh cone filter in the glossy black machine and slides the switch over to Auto. Every morning, then, at nine, the smell of coffee permeates the air of the house, and that's when Samantha scooches Adrienne off her lap and pads groggily into the kitchen to get her fix.

The kitchen has built-in bookshelves, and giant glass jars that hold staples like long-grain rice and spaghetti and natural cereals, and a counter with bar stools, and a fruitbowl imported from Mexico with a giant blue Picasso-type bull's head painted at the bottom. The bull stares up at the ceiling's circular fan with endearingly huge goggle-eyes.

Laura's life is the life that Samantha wants. It's not an ostentatious life—the house is modest compared to the luxury monster that the Prices live in; it's just a one-floor, five-room job (kitchen, dining, living, bedroom, study/office, plus bath)—but it has things like furniture, real furniture, furniture that's kind of nice, not the secondhand junk that populates the dorm rooms she's used to. No sagging floral-print armchairs for Laura. No sofas that smell like cigarettes and bongwater. Not a purloined milkcrate or cinderblock in sight. Laura doesn't have that stinky 20-buck department-store screw-together halogen lamp that Samantha calls the "Generation X

light.” You open up Laura’s refrigerator and there’s actually *food* in there, and not only food but also amenities like salad dressing and Dijon mustard, not just a half-empty jar of pickles and a carton of rotting takeout. There’s an unopened bottle of wine on top of the refrigerator, coffee beans in the freezer. It’s a kind of mild abundance that seems achievable and reasonable to Samantha. She thinks that if the world was closer to the way she wanted it to be, this lifestyle would be the common denominator for everyone. The government should just *provide* at least this much for everyone. It’s not too much. She can see that there have been concessions made. There’s extra virgin olive oil imported from Italy in the cabinet but there’s also Thriftway generic flour and sugar. Laura even goes with the generic peanut butter.

Samantha recognizes that to get here she needs a plan. She calculates how much money she would need to take on this lifestyle—she guesses somewhere between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year—and she starts to think about how she could get that much money.

She won’t make it in retail. God knows she won’t make it going back to the movie theater dressed in that fucking monkey suit. Corporations are out. She’s not going to drone in someone else’s hive, getting carpal tunnel and sick building disease and that peculiar maggotty paleness that people who toil their daylight hours away under fluorescent lights seem to get. She doesn’t want to just help generate capital for some financial abstraction, even if it would kick enough back to her to enable her to line her nest in the way she wanted.

She gets her coffee together. Strong; black. She feeds Adrienne. She fills up Laura McMillian’s copper watering can at the sink.

She could probably make \$30,000 a year being one of those super-temps: signing on with more than one agency, playing each one against the other to score the prime assignments, working

something like 70 hours a week, but those people always seem a little bit cybernetic to Samantha, like people with extra-human capacities for processing information and doing repetitive work, and she can't really see herself as among their ranks. Waiting tables is a possibility; she's heard you can earn enough in tips at one of the more upscale places to manage a pretty decent living. But Samantha has a particular mental stitch: as soon as she starts thinking about working for tips she throws out waiting tables and turns her mind instead towards topless dancing. She knows the tips are better; she's got nothing against it in theory; and as long as you're going to demean yourself for a pile of one-dollar bills, you might as well go all the way. Samantha's young; she has good skin and a body whose dimensions fall within reasonable parameters—why not? Only now she's on the slippery slope, and things go from bad to worse: she thinks *if I could do topless dancing I could probably do prostitution; how bad could it be?* and from there she inevitably proceeds to *all I need to do is find some rich old guy who will support me in exchange for the occasional fuck.*

She walks around the house, blowing on the coffee that she holds in her left hand while her right hand tilts the watering can over the plants in Laura McMillian's house.

It's only once her mind goes down Sugar Daddy Alley that she begins to capitulate. *Fuck that, she thinks. I'm not letting some withered old cocksucker put his wilted dick in me just so I can sit around and eat fucking bonbons all day. I don't need all this shit.* And she looks around Laura's house and suddenly it looks like a bourgeoisie paradise, full of junk that she doesn't need, that *nobody* needs. Samantha begins to ask herself questions: What's with this clay mask hanging on the wall? How much did it cost? Twenty bucks? Thirty? Fifty? Who needs a Danish Magic Bed? Couldn't Laura just sleep on a foam pad on the floor and give her money to somebody who needs it? Why a coffeemaker that looks like a part from a jet engine? Why six kinds of herbal tea? Why a glass jar for the

oatmeal when it comes home from the store in a perfectly good cardboard cylinder? Why cable? Why moist cat food? Why lampshades? Why a coffeetable? Why a book of photographs of Amish quilts for the coffeetable? Why a vase made out of blue glass for the coffeetable? Why a knitted cozy to go between the vase and the table's surface? Why *not* make bookshelves out of stolen boards and cinderblocks? Why have more than two chairs? *Fuck all of this stuff*, Samantha thinks. Buy a fucking VW van and put some egg-crate foam in the back of it and buy a little hotplate that you can plug into the cigarette lighter. Live off bread and peanut butter and ramen soup and cans of beans. Travel around the country. Play guitar on the streetcorner and live off the quarters that people throw into the case. *I could do it*, Samantha thinks. *I really could do it. Fuck this system and its God-damn jobs.*

She goes outside, gets the newspaper, and sits on Laura's porch in the mild morning sunlight in one of Laura's teal wicker chairs, and she drinks coffee made with Laura's beans in Laura's coffeemaker, from out of one of Laura's mugs. The day is lovely; the coffee is strong and good. She opens the paper, just to see, to the Classified section. Help Wanted. Just to see.

Someplace is hiring a Donut Fryer.

She needs a fucking plan.

Her life is a mess. No job, no prospects, no real interest in grad school (she's met some Master's candidates at some parties, and they just seemed like such joyless twits)—she really feels like she's doomed, as though the abstract dead end that she'd always dreaded ending up in became a tangible reality when she wasn't paying attention.

She hasn't even *touched* her guitar in weeks. She moved it to Laura's, hoping to at least *practice*—she can feel her hands (maybe she's just imagining this?) beginning to lose the memory of

the chord fingerings already—but the guitar case, with its Meat Is Murder sticker and its Free Tibet sticker,⁶ has remained exactly where she put it that first day of housesitting. Leaned up against the stereo case in Laura’s living room. Unopened. Undisturbed. She sort of meant what she said to Gregor in Barnes and Noble—about not wanting to play until she straightened out her future financially—but part of her, a reasonably sizable part, feels like she *should* be playing, like she should be using the time and leisure that Laura provided as time to practice, to *improve*. Surely, when Laura gave Samantha free reign of her house—of her *home*—she was trying to do something *more* than just acquire a free servant for cat-feeding and plant-watering duties; surely, in keeping with her Women’s Studies inner directives, she was trying to give something to Samantha, something more than just a temporary place to crash; surely, in accord with the feelings of mentorship that she felt towards Samantha (feelings she’d privately acknowledged one day in her office, the two of them watching wet snowflakes flatten on the warm, slightly foggy window), Laura was hoping to give Samantha *opportunity*, the opportunity to have a room of her own, the space and privacy to grow as a creative woman, to practice, to improve, to *get better* without having to worry about bills and timecards and money, which, despite everything, are exactly the things Samantha’s worrying about.

⁶ Oh happier days! It seems hard to believe that she once felt so demonstrably uncynical about issues—and not so long ago, either, she only *bought* the guitar the January before last (Christmas money) and she felt really proud, then—a genuine, old-fashioned, uncomplicated pride—to use the guitar case as a sort of self-made billboard for issues that seemed really important. But just last week, a short year and a half later, Jason came over to check out Laura’s place and he looked at the guitar case and said “Free Tibet, with purchase of one Tibet at regular price,” and she caught herself off guard by snorting with laughter and not being offended and not even *thinking* about like tortured monks and bombed monasteries until a good twenty seconds after her bubbling giddiness had subsided.

That and boys. Fucking *boys*. Gregor's the only one she can really talk to about music, the YesMen are too wrapped in their own project, and what Dmitrovitch is doing is too different from what she does, but she's afraid to even admit out loud to Gregor that she feels like she's neglecting practicing, because she *knows* that what he'll try to do is get her to practice *with* him; he'll try to get her to reform Now Hiring. She's not interested in that right now. She wants to practice by herself, but she's afraid to articulate this to him because she's afraid of hurting his feelings. Samantha tries to imagine what Laura would say to her if she told her that she hadn't been playing guitar because, in part, she was afraid of hurting her ex-boyfriend's feelings. She imagines Laura opening her mouth and letting rip with something tremendously scornful, although part of the basis of the relationship between the two of them is that Laura listens to what Samantha has to say and responds with a complete lack of scorn. Still. "Fucking *boys*," she imagines Laura saying.

And then there's this whole situation with Dmitrovitch, and how to tell Gregor, and all of that stuff is just absolutely paralytic to think about as well. She needs a plan, she needs a plan, she *needs a fucking* plan.

Inside, the phone starts to ring. She throws the paper down and heads inside, bringing the coffee.

"Hello?"

"Good morning," says an unfamiliar voice. "Ms. Samantha Faraday, please."

"Speaking," says Samantha, immediately suspicious. Who the fuck knows she's here?

Only a handful of people; none officious enough to refer to her in full like that.

“Good morning, Ms. Faraday—hey, I don’t mean to be forward here, but can I call you Samantha? This whole formality thing makes me feel like a bit of a suit, you know what I mean?”

“Who is this?” Samantha asks.

“Well, Ms. Faraday—Samantha—my name is Johnny Sax. My associate, L. McLeggs and I—”

“L.?” Samantha says. She can’t be certain, over the phone, if he’s saying ‘L.’ or ‘Elle.’

“That’s right,” says Johnny Sax. “Hang on. I’ll get him on the line.”

Samantha can hear him calling to someone else: “Hey L., get on the line.” She frowns. She hears another voice in the background, L./Elle’s, saying “I’ll dial in on the cellular.”

“L.’s going to dial in on the cellular,” says Johnny Sax.

“Great,” says Samantha. “Who did you say you were again?”

“How do you do three-way calling on this phone?” she hears L. say, distantly.

“Samantha, hang on, just a moment, we’re having a telecommunications breakdown over here.”

“I’ll hold,” says Samantha. She listens to a long succession of beeps and clicks.

“How’s that?” says the voice of L. McLeggs, now speaking directly into her ear.

“Fine,” Samantha says.

“Shit, now we lost Johnny,” says L..

“No, I’m here,” says Johnny.

“And we have the girl?” says L..

“Yeah, I’m here,” says Samantha.

“Well, great,” says L..

A pause from all three parties, as though the entire point of the call was just to get all three of them together.

“Hi, Samantha?” says Johnny Sax finally.

“Yeah.”

“Nice to finally get to talk to you.”

“Who are you again?”

“My name’s Johnny Sax. This is my associate, L. McLeggs.”

“Hey,” says L. McLeggs. “How’s it hanging?”

“We represent the David Geffen Company,” says Johnny Sax. “We’d like to take the opportunity to meet with you sometime in the next couple of days.”

“Is this about Now Hiring?” Samantha says. “Now Hiring broke up a couple of months ago.”

“Now *Hiring?*” L. McLeggs says. Samantha can hear papers being rustled about.

“Nnno,” Johnny Sax says. “No, we didn’t want to talk to you about Now Hiring. Are they also under your management?”

“Huh?” Samantha says.

“Look, Samantha, I’m sure you’re busy, so we’ll get to the point of our call.”

“Okay,” Samantha says.

“The point of this call is DJ Blackmarket. We’ve taken an interest in his work. David—Mr. Geffen—has taken a *particular* interest in his work. We have, as of yet, been unable to meet with Mr. Blackmarket in order to convey this interest to him.”

“Uh huh,” says Samantha. “So you’re calling me why?”

“We received word earlier today that Mr. Blackmarket is an artist under your management. That you represent him. We were hoping to take the opportunity to meet with Mr. Blackmarket—and yourself as well, of course, Samantha—to discuss a potential relationship between Mr. Blackmarket and Mr. Geffen that would be, shall we say, *beneficial* to all parties involved. This would, of course, include you, Samantha.”

“Wait a second,” says Samantha. “You heard that I’m DJ Blackmarket’s *manager*?”

Silence on the other end of the phone.

“Well, yeah,” says L. McLeggs.

“Is there some discrepancy?” Johnny Sax asks.

“I’m not saying there’s a *discrepancy*,” Samantha says. She knows that you should never end a conversation until you’ve made the decision, consciously, that you can’t have any more fun with it. Some conversations are worth staying in just to fuck around with the person on the other end. “I’m not saying that there’s a discrepancy,” she repeats, to assure them. “I’m guessing, just guessing, mind you, that you received this information from a one Mr. Jason Price?”

Silence on their end. Shuffling papers.

“That’s right,” says Johnny Sax. “He called us this morning and told us that you managed Mr. Blackmarket as well as his own band, the, uh...”

“YesMen,” L. McLeggs supplies.

“The YesMen, that’s right,” says Johnny Sax. “Anyway, Samantha, we’d like the opportunity to take you and Mr. Blackmarket to a lunch sometime this week and discuss with you the potential for an arrangement between Mr. Blackmarket and the David Geffen Company, and, of course, yourself as well, being Mr. Blackmarket’s manager.”

“We’re prepared to use the word ‘lucrative,’” L. McLeggs says.

Samantha pauses here. There are countless things she could say to fuck with these people. Part of her thinks she should take them up on it, because hey, free lunch. Part of her wants to just tell them to fuck themselves and go back to L.A.—it’s so infrequently that she gets the opportunity to roar with self-righteousness. Part of her wants to tell the truth, that she’s not DJ Blackmarket’s manager at all, that they’ve been totally duped, but this seems so improbable, so goofy, so crank-cally, that she almost begins to giggle.

“I gotta go,” she says, suppressing (barely) the rising laughter, afraid her composure is going to completely disintegrate.

“*Waitwaitwaitwait*,” Johnny Sax says. “All I’m asking for is one lunch with no obligation.”

“Are you coming on to me?” Samantha asks, all giddy recklessness now.

That stops Johnny Sax dead. After a second or two of silence, L. McLeggs picks up the slack: “Look, uh, Samantha, there’s a lot of misconceptions flying around out there about exactly what it means to sign to a major label. Let’s just go out. Kick back a beer, maybe a shot or two; chew the shit for a while. We won’t bring a contract or a lawyer or make you sign anything. We’ll just be *talking*. We want to show you that we’re not just industry goons. We’re music lovers. Like yourself.”

“Is your name ‘Elle’ or ‘L.’?” Samantha asks.

“Huh?” L. McLeggs says.

Samantha’s beginning to get tired of the joke now. “Look,” she says, “I gotta go. I’ve got an appointment with Warner Brothers in fifteen minutes.”

“What?” Johnny Sax says.

“Don’t sign anything!” L. McLeggs shrieks. “Those fuckers will gouge you!”

“Right,” Samantha says. “Look, if I decide I’m not interested in their deal I’ll call you. But I’ve heard word of six figures.”

L. McLeggs is still going “Those fuckers!” It sounds like he’s dropped his cellular. “Six figures?”

“Look, Samantha,” says Johnny Sax. “We’d just like to have the opportunity to sit and talk with you for a while. To make sure you understand all of the opportunities available to you and Mr. Blackmarket. You wouldn’t buy a car if it was the only one you test-drove, would you?”

“I don’t know,” says Samantha. “If it was a nice enough car, maybe.”

“All we’re saying,” says Johnny Sax, “is that we want to help you make sure you make the right decision for Mr. Blackmarket’s career.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll try. Look, really, I gotta go.”

“Take a pen and write this down,” Johnny Sax says. “Doubletree Hotel, Suite 454. That’s where we can be reached. Or you can reach us on the cellular. Or you can page us.”

He gives her a whole bunch of numbers, and she actually writes them down.

“Thanks,” Samantha says. “You guys are going to be in town for a couple of weeks, right?”

There’s a sort of sickened silence on the other end. “Um,” Johnny Sax says.

“Never mind,” Samantha says.

“No, wait,” Johnny Sax says.

Samantha hangs up the phone. A second later it rings again.

She picks it up. “What?”

The voice on the other end—a different voice, this one tinged with conspiratorial low-decibilty instead of the espresso-charged hypercasualness of Johnny and L.—whispers “Hey, Samantha,” into her ear. She recognizes this new voice, after a moment’s lag for processing, as Jason’s.

“Oh, *hello*. I thought you were someone else.”

“Look,” says Jason, continuing in the secret-agent whisper. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Yeah,” Samantha says. “I suspect you *do*.”

“I called up those agents this morning,” he says. “Now, don’t freak out about this, but I told them—”

“I *know* what you told them,” Samantha says. “I just got off the phone with them.”

“You’re fucking kidding,” Jason says.

“Nope.”

“Man. They didn’t waste any time. I just *talked* to them fifteen minutes ago. I thought I could take a shower and still beat them to you.”

“That’s why they’re record company executives and you’re not.”

“Good point. So I was calling you to tell you not to blow it when they call. Did you blow it?”

“I don’t even know what ‘it’ is supposed to be.”

“Did they figure out that you aren’t a manager?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good. Are you mad?”

“I don’t know that either. I don’t even know what the fuck you’re *doing*. I told you last night that Dmitr—that DJ Blackmarket isn’t going to sign.”

“I don’t give a fuck *what* your new boyfriend does,” Jason says. “This isn’t about him. This is about you wanting to help me and my brother out.”

“He’s not my *boyfriend*,” Samantha says, inflecting her voice with maximum acidity, hoping to drive that idea out of Jason’s head through sheer force.

“Uh huh, uh huh, remember what I said about people who feel the need to deny things? Anyway, like I said, I don’t *care* what he does. What I care about is getting these two Geffen fucknuts to give my brother and I a listen. And that involves them sticking around for a while. I thought about it and decided that Caccian might be right—they might be here to get this Blackmarket guy—and so it’s important that they at least *think* they’re going to get a chance at him. Did you tell them otherwise?”

“Not exactly,” says Samantha.

“Good,” says Jason. “Can you try to keep them in limbo on the whole thing? Eventually, if Blackie’s a no-show, they’ll start getting frustrated. Then they’ll want to look for something else. It’s crucial that they not go home empty-handed, you understand. I figure, if they think that you’re representing Blackie, and Blackie’s the one they want, they’ll assume that you have taste. If they think you have taste, they’ll want to hear the other musicians that you represent, and they’ll be prone to listen to those bands with a prejudiced ear.”

“Meaning you.”

“That’s right.”

“You really think this is going to work?”

“Of course it’ll work. Taste is a totally manipulable commodity. Execs don’t trust their own ears anymore. There’s too much money riding on it. Imagine you’re an executive. You hear something you really like, you pull the strings to get it signed for big dollars, it gets put out there in the marketplace and imagine: it bombs. Or, worse, you hear something, you bring the demo tape to your boss, he listens to it and scowls and sticks out his tongue. Bang—you’re finished. So why let something as slippery as your *taste* determine whether you stick your neck out? Why not capitalize on the taste of someone more hip than yourself? You find the person with their ear pressed hardest against the ground and you ask them what *they’re* listening to these days. Hipsters like nothing better than to impress people with the hip thing they’ve found. You don’t need to pay them or anything. And the best part is, if it goes wrong, it doesn’t reflect badly on your own taste at all: your own taste had nothing at all to do with it. Some exploited hipster somewhere in America takes the fall. Samantha, I want *you* to be that exploited hipster.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, come on. I’ll let you direct our videos.”

“I just don’t think—”

“All you have to do is keep saying our name to those Geffen guys. Eventually they’ll get so sick of hearing it that they’ll sign us just to get you to shut up.”

“So you really want to sign with Geffen, huh? The majors.”

Jason shifts his dialect inexplicably, suddenly begins talking like a black woman. He says “Hell, yes, sugar.”

Samantha ignores this shift and goes on. “You really think that’s the best direction for you as a band? I’m starting to think that maybe you shouldn’t sign, even if they ask you.”

“You’re starting to think that we shouldn’t sign?”

“They call those people sellouts for a reason, you know.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm what?”

“Hmm, I guess it’s true what everyone says about you.”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re a crazy bitch.”

“Up yours,” Samantha says, and she hangs up the phone. She shakes her head. Jason is one of those people whose excesses of personality Samantha can find endearing in their non-endearingness, but not without having to continually remind herself *oh, that’s just the way he is*. And periodically it feels healthy to just swear at him, slam the door in his face, hang up on him, etcetera.

She’s hung up on two people (three, technically, she corrects herself) in the past ten minutes. She takes a sip of coffee from Laura’s mug. It’s cold.

“Goddamnit,” Samantha says, and she dumps the coffee out into the sink.

She feels something on her calf. It’s Adrienne, insinuating herself between Samantha’s legs, back high. Samantha crouches down to pet her. Adrienne must assess the petting as substandard, because she gives Samantha that look, that particular total-disdain look that only Siamese can get away with, and Samantha gets a good solid second to read that look as saying *you’re not Laura; you’re not even close*, before Adrienne stalks away without so much as one look back.

“Fuck you, cat,” says Samantha. “I’m trying.”

6

There were seven Women's Studies minors at the university when Samantha was there. One was Samantha; one was her roommate, Nicola, who gave her a box of Rainforest Crunch for her birthday three years in a row⁷; one was a fifty-five-year-old divorce attorney who'd just divorced her own husband (another divorce attorney) and had decided that becoming a politicized lesbian was the way to go; one was a sensitive-looking boy with blond, almost white hair who stuttered and sometimes brought a tambourine to class and claimed to listen to a lot of Ani DiFranco (Samantha felt certain he had gravitated to Women's Studies because some remnant of his id thought that Women's Studies women would be impressed by his meekness and general flacity, and thus fuck him; Nicola just thought he was 'sweet'). The remaining three were intelligent and well-spoken women with whom Samantha and Nicola sometimes sat in the cafeteria, women Samantha liked, with whom she'd exchanged addresses with before graduation, but who she can't really see getting together with now. She's become more ironic and cynical in the past year, ever

⁷ When Nicola told Samantha that she was going straight into the Peace Corps post-graduation, Samantha was surprised to discover that her first reaction was *relief*—relief at not having to maintain relations with this woman who she'd lived with for so long. She knew, all at once, that she wouldn't run into Nicola around town for years to come, she wouldn't get railroaded into making endless plans to get together that would never consummate, she wouldn't need to feign empathy about the next guy who'd screw Nicola her over, etcetera. It felt, frankly, as though she'd had a heavy iron anchor pulled out of the silt of her heart. All through years they shared a room—the Rainforest Crunch years—Samantha believed that she regarded Nicola with a reasonable amount of fair affection, and realizing, in a blinding flash, that she really felt Nicola was a self-centered, faux-artistic housewife in a hippie dress was shocking, although many of the previously-inexplicable conflicts in their relationship suddenly made a lot more sense.

since she started hanging out with the YesMen, really, and that made the sincerity of the sisterhood stuff they talked about seem sadly corny, a little dated, like something left over from the 1960s. (After reading a book about the female Beat Poets that she'd lent him, Jason began to refer to her cafeteria group as the Minor Characters: she thought the label was funny, and she used it to designate them in her mind, but she could never bring herself to repeat it to any of them.)

She liked the conversations, she'd had with them, though; they were conversations that she needed to have, conversations she probably still needs to have now. Sometimes these conversations would focus on a topic that could be lumped under the larger umbrella category of feminism; sometimes the conversations would turn to the umbrella itself. What is feminism? Are we feminists? What form does the practice of feminism take in *your* life? Important questions. They could all agree that they were feminists but they couldn't agree on what you had to do to be a "real" feminist. They gave one another "yes, but," answers a lot over their seven-bean salads.

For Samantha it was, and is, pretty simple. Being a feminist means being a woman (none of that men-as-feminists shit) who actively seeks to maximize the amount of control she has over her own life. That was, and is, it. Politically, then, she supports policies that increase the amount of control women have over their own lives (she's for abortion on demand and without apology, for import and distribution of RU486, for free and unlimited access to condoms from junior high on) and she's against policies that consolidate decision-making power in the hands of small, closed cabals (she's against any sort of limitations on pornography). The question of control is trickier for her when she's thinking about her personal life: she wants the freedom to be able to reject traditional religious wisdom, and well-meaning paternal advice, and the image set up by the media that she's supposed to emulate, and so on, but once she's ditched all the guidelines that

don't make her cut, she's not always sure what's left for her to become. And whenever she really begins to think about how to really control the way her own life is constructed, she remembers that she's living in a country where you need to pay to eat, and it all begins to seem a little bit academic. Because the bottom line is you either play along with the system or you starve. In the moments when she realizes this—and this whole summer so far has seemed like one long succession of those moments—she feels like *all* the options she has about how to run her life are illusions, substitutes for authentic control over her circumstances, and she realizes that her own life, therefore, must be totally out of control. And that makes her feel like she's on a headlong plunge into Nervous Breakdownland.

When Samantha's life begins to feel that way, her instinctual reaction is to get laid, with a new lover if at all possible.

Before she does it, she always feels like it's a totally reasonable impulse. What better way to reassert dominance over your own life than going up to a guy who you're considering fucking and arranging the circumstances so that it happens? Samantha makes the decision to do it and, when she can see that it's going to happen, she feels so great that she suddenly gets why guys get off on things like climbing up a mountain and pissing when they get to the top. It's like this *pure act of will* altering the face of the world.

How she feels about it afterwards sort of depends on how good the sex is. When she told the Minor Characters about this quirk some of them looked at her in horror and chastised her, heavily, for entering into new sexual relationships at the times when she is, by her own admission, at her most vulnerable. That's not *regaining* control, they said, that's *yielding* control for the *absolutely* wrong reasons, and, she must admit, when the sex is bad she feels that that diagnosis is

absolutely accurate. She remembers when her dad's cancer metastasized: the night he went into the hospital, she walked to the Tin Hopper, a billiard bar near campus, rubbing tears out of her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket the whole way. She got inside, took off her jacket and drank vodka gimlets at the bar, alone, until she caught somebody staring at her tits, this scraggle-haired guy wearing a baseball cap and a "1-800-COLLECT" T-shirt. His face was kind of cute, though, and she wanted to make something happen as soon as possible, so she walked over to him and said "You want to fuck? Okay. Let's fuck."

Of course it was awful: the apartment a vortex of dirty clothes, with holes punched in the plaster and a pile of trash on the floor next to the swollen trash can (*these people are the reason why landlords require security deposits*, she remembered thinking); he had to chase his roommates off his Sony Playstation, gesturing at her by means of explanation, so he could have privacy in his own room (she could hear the roommates shuffling around in the hall outside, giggling, the entire time she and this guy got undressed); she had to fluff his limp dick for a good ten minutes before he managed to think of a fantasy exciting enough to get it twitching (*Pam Anderson?* she wondered, looking down at his clenched-shut eyes and screwed-up face). By the time it was over, not long later, she had decided that this was the end, that she was not going to do this again, that she was demeaning herself and probably karmically shaming her *dying father*, for Christ's sake—she decided she was just *through* with this sort of bullshit. The emotional fallout from that experience and the criticism that the Minor Characters heaped upon her in the follow-up conversations with in the cafeteria are part of what helped her to get as deep as she got into the Nameless Relationship the next year. The Minors all told her that she needed to look for something that could be stable and lasting, sustainable, monogamous, respectful, with a guy who was sweet and kind, and for a

while she believed that Gregor was that guy and that the Nameless Relationship was that relationship, and that she should accept it and be satisfied.

But when the sex is good, when she has a guy's cock in her for the first time, and orgasms surge up the length of her spinal cord and explode into a prickly haze inside her skull, and she knows that the pleasure-bomb of each one is absolutely the result of decisions and choices that she's made—fuck, she'd tell you, there's no better feeling in the whole God-damn world.

So this morning, rejected by the cat, irritated by Jason, finding no job in the paper more appealing than Lot Attendant,⁸ and watching the guitar case loom like a horrible Pandora's box (one she's certain she'd find full of insecurities and doubts and senses of failings and inadequacy were she to actually open it intending to practice), she made the decision to ride her bike down to the warehousing district, bang on Dmitrovitch's sun-scorched metal door, stare at the sign still mounted on it (Shipping/Receiving: Go To Back Entrance) until he answered, go inside with him, kiss him hard, and get laid. She had no doubt that it would be good with him; she had no doubt that he would be an absolutely magnificent fuck; she had no doubt that if she could get him to make her come she would feel, one hundred percent, that all was well with the world.

They've just finished up. She's only just peeled herself off his chest and rolled off of him, pressing her sweaty back against the cool of the bedsheets. He's just pinched her condom off his cock, knotted it, and dropped it into a metal car-ashtray that he's got mounted on the wall to the right of the bed. Her flappery cloche of black hair, normally kept flat against the contour of her skull with the post-shower application of the tiniest daub of gel, is now all crazied up; little tufts of it point out in all directions, as though a friendly dog has just completed an energized licking

⁸ At least, she thinks, she'd be able to sit and read.

of the knob of her head. She'd say she's *well-fucked*. Strangely, though, she doesn't feel that all is one-hundred-percent well with the world. She'd give it maybe ninety—pretty damn good—but she wouldn't say one hundred. The missing ten percent stems from the fact that she's thinking about Gregor.

She props herself up on her elbow, drapes her other arm across Dmitrovitch's chest, and looks down at him. He told her he was Russian but he doesn't look like what she imagines as Russian (furry hats, Bolshevik beards, she can't help it.) He looks like what she imagines as Greek: his head covered in a dense thicket of dark ringlets, his skin a sort of smooth pestoey color. It would not be unfair to say that his body is classically-proportioned. She traces the oval of his lower abdomen with a finger, follows the lines as they taper into his groin; *God*, she thinks, *that's nice*. It's been a long time since Samantha last looked at a guy's body and saw the defined lines of real muscles coming through the flesh. Gregor was skinny, too skinny, maybe; the muscles she could feel on his body were too rangy and soft for her tastes; they lacked the sculptured compactness, the delicious tensile resilience of the muscles in Dmitrovitch's arms and legs and back. And Gregor's face, with its great blousey girliness, looking always sort of tender and shocked, like someone's just thrown a glass of water into it—it's certainly not anything like Dmitrovitch's face, which not only has the symmetry and clarity of an angelic child's, but also has a certain resolve set into its lines that could only belong, Samantha thinks, to a man, a man with a capital M—a *Man*. Samantha would guess that that look—seriousness, solidity—is genetically coded somewhere in the pairing of the X chromosome and the Y chromosome, the pair that makes maleness, but she'd bet that that whatever gene sequence produces that look doesn't get switched on until guys turn maybe twenty-five. Dmitrovitch is twenty-eight: he's got that look. Gregor's twenty-one: he

doesn't have it. She doesn't know if he'll ever have it; she doesn't think that sweet kind of twitchy sensitivity will ever grow out of his face, to be replaced with the kind of fire-tempered stillness that she sees in Dmitrovitch's face here in front of her.

Certainly what she's doing here, on this mattress, in this warehouse, wouldn't help Gregor feel more solid and secure as a man. She nearly groans with dismay thinking about how to tell him. Now that she's fucked someone else she's going to *have* to tell him, soon. It's different than when she'd just let Dmitrovitch go down on her. Fucking in the actual old-fashioned sense seems to lend some kind of *reality* to the proceedings in this converted warehouse, and she's going to have to find a way to inform Gregor of that reality in a way that's not going to scramble his fragile mind forever. That wrecks at least ten percent of the universe for her. Fifteen?

"Did you have a good time?" asks Dmitrovitch, his eyes still closed.

"*Did I?*" Samantha asks. "The short answer is yes."

"And the long?"

"The long is 'yes, yes, oh God yes.' You're a remarkable specimen."

"Mmm. I'm glad. I really enjoy pleasing you."

"What about you? Did you have a good time?"

"Sure."

He takes her arm and moves it from his chest, and he sits up.

"You want to hear what I've been working on?" he says.

"Uh, sure," says Samantha. Really she wants to be held for a while, she wants him to run his fingers lightly over her cooling body, but she knows that that whole drama—the woman wanting to be held and, like, comforted, then feeling maudlin when the man gets up to work on,

like, his *project*, is all a bullshit drama, all built around preassumed gender roles, so she decides that the urge to be held just isn't cool, comes from somewhere that is not herself, and so she just lets it go unspoken.

Dmitrovitch stands on the mattress—there's no box spring or frame, there's just a mattress on the floor at the edge of the studio—and he steps over her, off the mattress' edge. He begins walking, naked, to the other end of the space, towards the altarish setup of his computer, which he doesn't ever seem to turn off. Shelves and shelves of equipment ring the numinous blue light that glows forth from the center. His penis hangs pointing down to the ground like a shovel.

“Sound,” Dmitrovitch says, grabbing a wheel-mounted chair on his way and dragging it rattlingly along behind him.

Samantha rolls off her side onto her stomach into the spot—a six-foot long patch of sheet—where his body had been stretched while they'd fucked. The spot's moist from his sweat, and now her body feels wonderfully cool against it. She stretches her arms out in front of her so that her fingertips just touch the wall.

Hanging on the wall, just above her fingertips, is a two-foot tall image of a cosmopolitan-looking woman's smiling head, printed on a thick, cardboardy paper that's ragged and torn at the edges. Samantha suspects this image has been liberated, a bit crudely, from a Virginia Slims billboard. The woman has the exact sort of voracious smiling mouth that telegraphs the idea of oral consumption to the viewer; blazing away in her eyes is the exact sort of self-satisfied you've-come-a-long-way-babyness that Virginia Slims knows their target market craves in themselves. It's a little unnerving, to Samantha, to have this image of pure appetite looming down over her.

Dmitrovitch has all kinds of advertisements and parts of advertisements hanging up around the inside of the converted warehouse: the visual equivalent of his sample-music, of his Blackmarketing. After the conversation at Virtual Mall had turned into going out for a cup of coffee, which turned into a maybe-you-should-come-back-and-see-my-place/what-are-you-doing-right-now? type of conversation (but before it had turned into a bottle of wine on the rooftop), she'd walked in through the blistered door and been caught off guard by the ads: the first thing she saw when she entered the warehouse were these foot-high letters on a red background: "UD." She knew that they'd been cut right out of a Budweiser billboard. It was immediately obvious. She knew without even having to think about it.

Dmitrovitch must have noticed her start a little at the sight of them, though, because by way of explanation, he'd said "I'm working on a consumer model of consciousness." She'd waited for more but he hadn't given more, and so she retorted a moment later with "Yeah, the Ud and the Super-Eggo?" at which he didn't laugh or even smirk. He just said "Yeah," and continued on his way into the warehouse, without looking to see if she was following him.

She lifts her head to see what he's doing. He's crouched down on the floor, rolling the chair back and forth, back and forth, watching the wheels turn. He hasn't yet made it over to the wall of computer stuff.

"Hey," she says. "I thought you were going to play me something."

"Sssh," he says. "Listen to this."

He moves the chair back and forth.

"There's this incredible squeak coming out of this thing."

“You know what they say,” she says. She knows this is going to sound inane, even before she says it. “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”

“Are you kidding?” he says.

She thinks on this. “I don’t know,” she says.

“I wouldn’t grease this thing for a million bucks,” he says. “That’s a great sound. Maybe I can put it in a piece.” He gets up, goes over to the wall of shelves that surrounds the computer altar, and fishes around in a cardboard box for something.

“Not for a million bucks, eh?” she says. He keeps fishing. “Say, that reminds me. I got an interesting call this morning.”

No response.

“Would you still rather be castrated than sign a contract?” she asks.

“What are you saying about castration over there?” he asks, without turning around.

She sighs, sits up, pulls the crumpled sheet over her knees. “I’m saying, I got a call from David Geffen Company today. About you.”

“Who?” Dmitrovitch asks. He gives up with the fishing and returns, empty-handed, to the chair. He sits on the floor and tilts the chair’s seat back and forth, staring into its workings.

“David Geffen?” Samantha says. “Record company? Nirvana? Sonic Youth?”

“Oh, yeah?”

“They’re very interested in the DJ Blackmarket project.”

“Why were they calling *you*?” he asks.

“Uh,” she says. She decides this maybe isn’t a good time to tell them that she inadvertently posed as his agent. “They don’t really know how to get in touch with you. They

know you're from around here, but they don't know who you are or anything, so they've been calling up folks from the local bands, sort of asking after you."

"I didn't know you were in a band," Dmitrovitch says.

"Oh, well, I'm not, really. Not anymore," Samantha says. "Used to be."

"What band?"

"Ah, you probably never heard of us," Samantha says. "We were strictly small-time. A little band called Now Hiring?"

"Nope," Dmitrovitch says. "You're right, I never heard of it. What did you play?"

"Uh, the guitar."

"Hm," Dmitrovitch says. He's still examining the workings of the chair. "So, did you tell him anything about me?"

"It's not a 'him, it's a 'them,'" Samantha says. "Two guys. And, no, I didn't tell them anything. Your secret identity is safe with me."

"Hm," Dmitrovitch says.

"I took their pager number and stuff down, though," she says. "I thought you might be interested in talking to them. I think they're pretty ready to sign you. It might be worth your while to hear what they have to say."

"Nah," Dmitrovitch says. "You know I'm not interested."

"You know," Samantha says—and she can feel herself beginning to slide into a sort of perverse post-sex contrary state, trying to goad Dmitrovitch a little bit, hoping to elicit a response that will get him to stop staring at that fucking chair—"A lot of my friends are in bands and they'd kill for an opportunity like this, getting signed by a big company."

“Then I suggest they kill someone,” Dmitrovitch says.

“You really don’t have any interest?”

Now he looks up, finally. “Why would I have interest in that? What can the labels give me that I can’t give myself? Record companies are obsolete now because of the Internet. The Net changes the way the entire business of production and distribution is done. I make my music on a computer; it’s a piece of encoded information. I can make an infinite number of copies of it for free and send them over the phonelines directly to the people who want it. They can burn it onto their own CDs right at home. Why let a record company take a cut of that? The reason your friends want to get signed is because they’re insecure that their little bands aren’t any good, and they need a big, jolly *corporation* to reassure them that they’re fantastically popular.”

“That is *so* not true.”

“It *is* true.”

“You don’t even *know* them.”

“I don’t *need* to know them. In this day and age the only reason—*only* reason—to play along with the system is that you’re either stupid or insecure. I’m willing to presume that your friends aren’t stupid. Tell them that they should forget about trying to please the tastemakers and they should just write their fucking songs. They don’t need the system.”

“It’s all about getting outside of the system for you, huh?”

“That’s right. Reject the system and reclaim your own life. Ignore the king and become your own king.”

“You’re *not* outside of the system, though,” Samantha says.

“What are you talking about?” Dmitrovitch says. “I live in a warehouse that I pay \$150 a month for. I don’t have anything that anyone would recognize as a job. I don’t even have a fucking *phone*. I don’t put up with any shit that I don’t want to put up with.”

“Right, but you have lots of computer stuff. You make your music for other people with computers.”

“So what?”

“So, if we’re talking about not trying to participate in the systems of capitalism—”

“Oh, here we go with the Poli Sci stuff—”

“—putting your music on the Net like that, and only on the Net, insures that if people want access to it, they can’t just plunk down fifteen bucks and get the CD, they have to buy an entire computer system and a modem and a CD burner and pay for Net access and yadda yadda yadda. By trying to *become* the system you’re making the people who want to hear your music take on the burden of *being a record label*. That gets pretty expensive. You’re insuring that only the rich have access to culture; you’re helping to keep class divisions in place—”

She only stops because Dmitrovitch is shaking his head sadly, as though he were speaking to an idiot child. “No. No. Words like ‘class divisions’ sound real nice in the classroom, and I’m sure it gives you a nice easy model to think about, but reality is a lot more complicated than that. Your professors can say that computers are the province of the rich, but I’m not rich. Most of my listeners aren’t rich.”

“Do they have rich parents?” Samantha asks.

“Who the fuck knows?” Dmitrovitch says.

“Do *you* have rich parents?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You’re a computer programmer, Dmitrovitch. That’s how you pay for this warehouse, right?”

“I whip off a few lines of code now and again.”

“I want to know: did you grow up poor? Did you teach yourself how to write code on the streets? In the back of a cardboard box? Or did you have rich parents?”

“I’m a renegade American artist,” Dmitrovitch says. “I’m not supposed to have parents.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“What I hate about all this Marxist crap about the computer as some kind of toy for the rich is that people don’t realize that the computer is *really* a tool for the masses. Do you know what the prototype name for the Macintosh was?”

“Nope.”

“They called it the Bicycle.”

“So?”

“They called it the Bicycle because some anarchist a hundred years earlier thought that the bicycle was the most potent tool the individual could possess. It was affordable enough to be within the means of anyone who saved a little and it raised the amount of what you could do in a day exponentially. You didn’t need a license to own one. You could own one whether you were a man or a woman—it was an affordable, accessible, empowering technology. That what the people who made the Macintosh knew that they were making.”

“A Macintosh isn’t that affordable.”

“Show me a waitress who can’t—if she really wants to—put enough aside in a month to afford a basic computer.”

“And what good would that computer do her? She’d get access to the World Wide Web? Big deal. It’s just a bigger mall.”

“It’s just a bigger mall because Luddites like you can’t conceptualize of it as anything but a bigger mall. If Karl Marx were alive today he’d be using the Internet to popularize his ideas.”

“Right, and they’d be out there, lost in a swamp of crap.”

“If he signed with a major publisher they’d just be out there in a different swamp of crap. This is why America gets the Unabomber. Remember? He couldn’t bear the idea of taking the Manifesto to a normal publisher, having it get printed, and then having it disappear into, like, Barnes and Noble. So he threatened to bomb like computer stores if the big papers wouldn’t print his stuff on the front page. What he didn’t realize is that there is no pure venue, there is no venue you can express ideas in which isn’t also a venue that’s full of filler. A lot of forgettable stuff gets published in the big papers, too. Threatening to blow something up in order to democratize the media is the stupidest thing ever, because the Internet *is* the democratic medium everybody wants. The Unabomber Manifesto is doing really well on the Internet, actually.”

“Ted Kaczynski must be spinning in his grave,” Samantha says, shaking her head.

“Spinning in his cell, you mean.”

“Whatever.”

“Round and round, furious that his work is being read and seriously considered in the wrong medium. Forgive me for saying that that sounds stupid.”

“This just takes me back to what I was saying, though—the Internet *isn't* a democratic medium. Only people who can afford computers can use it.”

“Think about it. The ability to make and disseminate copies essentially for free after a *tiny* initial investment? An infinite number of copies of the Communist Manifesto that can be transmitted to anywhere in the world for the price of a local telephone call? Think about it, for real. If Marx had the Internet, he would have gotten his global Communist revolution.”

“That’s bullshit,” Samantha says. “The workers of the world are too busy trying to feed their fucking kids to have the time to surf America Online. If we got the global Communist revolution, there wouldn’t be any Bill Gates to sell the fucking programs that make all this shit run.”

“Then maybe I don’t want the global Communist revolution. Think about the technologies of this century and just how much they increase the ability of the so-called ‘common man’s’ voice to be heard. The Internet. Desktop publishing. Three-cent photocopies. David Cronenberg says that the camcorder is one of the most revolutionary technologies ever and I believe him.”

“David Cronenberg made commercials for Nike. Not exactly the actions of a revolutionary spirit.”

“So what? I’m *glad* he made commercials for Nike. Why shouldn’t he take some corporation’s money for expressing himself?”

“So why is it you don’t want to talk to the guys at Geffen again?”

“Argh,” says Dmitrovitch. He stands up, presses on his eyeballs, and walks over to a metal locker bolted to the wall, underneath a giant image of a juicy hamburger on a sesame seed bun. “I think this conversation is over.”

He pulls a black T-shirt out of the locker’s depths and struggles it over his head. “I have to go down to the Virtual Mall and see what Gordon’s up to,” he says.

“Okay,” says Samantha. She finds her shirt in the wreckage of sheets and fits her dog-lickey head through it while Dmitrovitch pulls on a ratty pair of black jeans without putting on a pair of underwear.

“If you want to get together later,” Dmitrovitch says, “I’ll be here.”

Samantha paws through the bed, looking for her panties. She remembers him snaring them in his fingers and sliding them around her ankles—and then tossing them over his shoulder—but she can’t find them anywhere near where she thinks the trajectory of their short flight might have ended.

“I can’t find my underwear,” Samantha says, as Dmitrovitch is pointing his toes into his high-top black boots.

“That right there,” Dmitrovitch says, “is what you call the entropy of passion.”

He doesn’t explain any more than that. She’s shoving her hand between the mattress and the wall, her ass in the air, looking for them, and she can hear, over her shoulder, Dmitrovitch beginning to slide the chair back and forth across the floor again.

7

Dusk on a warm Saturday. Samantha rides her bike out of the warehouse district under an orange sky striated with powerlines and heads north, through a residential part of town. Gusts of May wind flow down the streets and whirlpool invisibly in the parks, rippling flags, assisting Frisbees, inflating lawn geese, passing over the faces of couples out walking after dinner and making them go *ahh*. Samantha doesn't stop to lie in the grass for a while; she doesn't pause to watch the sunset. She's headed to Barnes and Noble.

She rides close to the shoulder of a four-lane highway. Trucks and buses barrel past her. One of them—a McDonald's truck—comes awfully close; the entire left edge of her field of vision fills with the image of a red cardboard sleeve holding a golden cornucopia of french fries; this image moves past her at forty-five miles per hour, and she wobbles momentarily, caught in a bulging pocket of air displaced by the truck. She regains control after the truck passes—it was really only scary for a second—but she can't help imagining herself crushed under it, even now that it's gone she keeps thinking about herself pinned beneath its tires, blood coming out of her mouth and eyesockets, flattened by twelve tons of rubber and steel and a nine-foot tall image of America's Favorite Fries.

At Barnes and Noble, the Grand Opening is still in effect. She skips Bargain Books and Magazines this time and goes straight to the Barnes and Noble Cafe, featuring Starbucks Coffee.

She watches Gregor surreptitiously for a minute or two, then slips up to the counter while his back is turned.

“Hey,” she says. “I was wondering if you could help me? I’m looking for *Conversations With God?*”

He turns, blinks at her, smiles. “Well, I know a guy who could hook you up with some great peyote.”

“Hi.”

“Hi. I get a break in five—you want to hang?”

“Sure. Gimme some coffee. And start breaking some cookies.”

“Can do.”

When he comes and sits with her she’s got her Discover card lying out in the center of the table and she’s staring into the depths of its sun over water.

“Did you ever think,” she asks, “about just trying to escape this whole system?”

“What system?” he asks. “Starbucks?”

“Not Starbucks,” she says. “Not *just* Starbucks. The whole thing. The entire culture. The networks of commerce. Books and coffee and CDs. Shampoo and gel and conditioner. Cars. Nuclear missiles. Dollar bills. You ever just think about trying to escape it all?”

“Where would I go?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’d miss you,” he says.

She smirks. “Yeah, I miss you too.”

“What?”

“I said I’d miss you too. If you were to go away.”

“Oh.”

They both take a sip of coffee.

“Besides,” says Gregor. “I think it’s much more productive to use the systems for your own gain.”

“Spoken like a true capitalist.”

“I’m no capitalist,” Gregor says. “But you can’t just cut yourself out of civilization. Everyone compromises with it in some fashion or another. The people who are successful just cut better compromises. I’m obviously not very good at that process.” He gestures around him, taking in the mural, the chocolate shelves, the espresso machines.

“Compromise with it? No. No. Not if you can figure out a way to gyp it,” she says. “*That’s* the form our revolution is taking: people living off the system without compromise. I’ve got this idea.”

“Celebrity houseplants?”

“Ssh,” she says. “I’ve got this credit card, right?”

She taps the card.

“Uh huh,” Gregor says.

“Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to start ringing up purchases until this card’s close to being maxxed out.”

“I like this plan so far,” Gregor says. “New stereo!”

“Mail-order humidior,” says Samantha. “Then I’m going to apply for a new credit card. I’m living at Laura’s, right? So in the blank for ‘Combined Household Income’ I’m going to include hers, too.”

“It’s brilliant,” says Gregor.

“When I get my new credit card, I’ll pay off the balance for this Discover with the other. Discover will be so impressed that I paid off my giant balance that they’ll raise my credit limit. My name will appear suddenly in the databases of other credit card companies, with green lights and smiley faces next to it. I apply for everything that comes my way. I pay off the second balance with the third credit card.”

“Genius,” Gregor says.

“By this time, I’m recognized as a remarkably responsible credit card owner. I start to get the really good offers from the really good companies. Platinum Club. Unlimited lines of credit. They trust me. They know I’m not just some snot-nosed kid. Every month, when the balance comes, I just roll the whole thing onto a different credit card. All the companies are happy just bouncing the numbers between them. I’m happy because I get a free life. Eventually I either get run over by a truck or they figure out my scam. If that happens, I disappear, using my last working credit card to set myself up with a new identity somewhere else in America, never to be found.”

“Sounds great. Send me a postcard c/o the Barnes and Noble Cafe, okay?”

“The only problem is getting started,” she says. “The first step is to max out my card, and if there’s some kind of fatal flaw in this plan, I’d like to know *before* I’m stuck with having bought like a fucking breadmaker and non-stick wok.”

They both laugh at this, and it feels, to Samantha, like they're laughing at just everything that's absurd about the world, not just breadmakers and woks but the credit cards and nuclear missiles as well.

"Seriously," says Gregor.

"Did I say I wasn't serious?"

"Seriously," says Gregor, "I think you should consider talking to those Geffen agents."

"What?"

"This is what I was saying about compromise," Gregor says. "You're spending all of this time and energy thinking about ways that you can gyp society and live for free so you can play the guitar and write songs and not have to work. But that's what record companies are *there* for. You sign a deal exactly so you *can* tie together your music *and* your work."

"David Geffen Company's not exactly the National Endowment for the Arts, Gregor."

"No," Gregor says. "But it'd sure beat working at Starbucks for the rest of your life. I think you could do it, Samantha. You're a great guitarist; you used to write these awesome songs. You should put together a tape and go over to the Doubletree and put it in their hands."

"But I don't want to reform Now Hiring," Samantha says.

Gregor smiles. Samantha can see some sadness in it, but he *is* smiling. "I'm not talking about Now Hiring," he says. "I'm talking about you. Samantha J. Faraday; solo artist. You're the one with the talent. I just play the bass. They'll sign you," he says, "I'm sure of it. I can just feel it."

"Well, I've got the image," she says, her voice exaggerated, irony heavy in it. "I'm young, single—beautiful."

“You *are* beautiful,” Gregor says, a softness in his voice.

“Yeah, well, if I appear on the front of my CD in like a cut-off T-shirt with my navel sticking in everyone’s face, I want you to track me down and shoot me.”

“You may be beautiful, but you also know how to write a fucking song,” he says. “You should talk to them before they take off.”

“What about you?” she says. “What are you going to do?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m never going to be big.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true.”

“It’s not true.”

“It *is* true. Jason and Caccian are so dedicated to getting famous; they’re so passionate about it. And you’re passionate, too.”

“I haven’t played my guitar in weeks,” says Samantha.

“Yeah, but that’s because you’re trying to create a space for yourself. You don’t want to play while you’re worrying about what you’re going to do for the rest of your life. You treat your guitar like it’s a holy thing. That’s passionate. I’m not as passionate as you guys and I’m not as talented as this—what’s the guy’s name? That DJ guy?”

“DJ Blackmarket?”

“Yeah.” Gregor looks into her eyes; he’s searching for something there, some flickering sign that will reveal to him what’s going on. She wonders if he sees it; wonders if she’s giving it away right now, even as she’s wondering—and so she looks away, down at her mug. *Fuck*, she thinks. *That did it. If he didn’t know before, he knows now.*

“You’re plenty talented,” says Samantha. She doesn’t look up.

“No,” Gregor says. “I’m *dedicated*. I get up in the mornings and I practice. That makes me dedicated, but it doesn’t make me talented or passionate. I think you need all three to make it.”

“So what *are* you going to do, then?”

“I want to move out of my parents’ house,” he says. “I hate living there now. I can see them thinking that they blew \$150,000 on my college education every time they look at me. Getting out is the first thing. I almost have enough saved up to put down the deposit on an apartment.”

“Great,” Samantha says.

“And then... I don’t know. I don’t want to work *here* for the rest of my life. I think I might apply to grad school. I’d like to learn more about the bass. I’d like to get better. If I get financial aid it’s another couple of years before I have to worry about a job. Maybe then I could get a job teaching music somewhere.”

“God, you’d be great at that,” Samantha says. She’s looking up at him again now, and he gives her a sort of crooked smile.

“Yeah: I don’t know,” he says. “I guess I would be good at that.”

“You *would*,” Samantha says. “You’ve got such a gentle nature. You’re so patient. You’d make a great teacher.”

“It’s hard, you know, to give up on the idea of being a rock star. I always sort of secretly wanted to be one. But I don’t think I’ll ever be big. Ah, you know what they say: those who can’t do, teach.”

“That is *so* not true. Being a teacher is such a noble thing.”

“Noble,” Gregor says, as though he’s trying it out. “Well, it gets together the work life and the artistic life. It’s a compromise, to be sure. But it’s a good compromise. Better than working here till I’m old and gray.”

“Yeah,” Samantha says. After a minute or so, she says “You probably *could* get signed.”

“No,” he says. “*You* get signed. I’ll get to say ‘hey, I went out with her.’”

“Enough,” Samantha says.

“Okay,” Gregor says. “I should probably be getting back to work, anyway. I’ve taken my fifteen minutes.”

“Bye.”

“Is anything going on later tonight?”

“When do you get done?”

“Not until midnight.”

“Ew.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I don’t know what Jason and Caccian are doing. I don’t think anything.”

“Well,” Gregor says. “I guess I’ll talk to you tomorrow, then.”

She takes a look at him, imagines him seated at the front of a classroom of youngsters, with his bass across his lap. She tries to see him as one of those cool middle-aged teachers: maybe he’ll have gotten an earring by then. Maybe he’ll shave off the mad-scientist hair, get some black T-shirts and a pair of rimless glasses, so that he’ll look like one of those fierce intellectual musicians, one of the type that people always refer to as “a musician’s musician.” She knows this

probably is a false vision. Gregor is Gregor and she doesn't think he'll ever really grow into himself. She sees the future Gregor as a sheepish smile in a rumpled blazer, the hair even wilder, the flustered way he bumps up against the world even more pronounced. But she thinks he'll be a good teacher anyway. She thinks he might come alive when he's working at the bass, his long soft fingers hitting the strings in complicated configurations, right on every time. He's not flustered when he's playing, he's *never* flustered when he's playing. It's as if the bass is the only way he can really express himself. That'll come through to his students, she thinks. He'll say things to them like "Look. Look at this. I want to teach you how this works," and he'll play for them, and they'll recognize that something is happening right there in front of them, talent is entering the world, brilliant streaks of it, coming through this man with this instrument, the same way light comes into a dark room through a gap in the blinds, and they'll want to learn to do it themselves. She thinks of him and she sees a future that is not bad. She thinks of herself and she sees a blank, a sort of whirling emptiness, a nothing that is terrifying and that she cannot possibly admit.

"Call them," Gregor says.

On her way out she pauses at the new releases. She hasn't read anything all summer—granted, it's only been two weeks, but that's a long time for her to spend without a book—and she thinks that maybe she should pick something up, that perhaps something like satisfaction or inner joy could sprout out of the fertilizer of a good book, maybe happiness is inside her, tight and compact like a seed, and all she needs is to surround it with the earthy manure of a stimulating writer and it'll crack open and send bountiful tendrils through her body and mind. She remembers looking at a book last night, remembers holding it in her hand. It had seemed

interesting. She hadn't gotten far in it; she'd been distracted from it somehow. Maybe, she thinks, she should find the book again and buy it, bring it home (*to Laura's, she reminds herself, not home*) and read it.

No, she thinks. Save your money. You need to save your money.

She's almost out of the store when she sees a table full of books that are mother-related. A cardboard flag announces that May 24—tomorrow—is Mother's Day. The table's got memoirs written by daughters remembering their mothers, heavy-looking collections of photographs of mothers across America, slim anthologies of cartoons featuring mothers and children making witty exchanges with one another, and then the *really* sentimental stuff with wedding-invitation cursive on a pink background spelling out cloying titles like *Thanks, Mom: A Lifetime of Wisdom*. Samantha has to suppress a shudder and a gag reflex. She doesn't want this. What she wants is for her bookstores to be like university libraries: cluttered, full of obscure things, dense with information that only a few people need but that seems somehow crucially important to the survival of whatever the spark is that makes humans human. What she doesn't want is for her bookstores to be like a gift shop, peddling lowest-common-denominator platitudes like maternal love in easy-to-purchase parcels that people mistakenly call "books." *These books aren't books, Samantha thinks. They're a hundred greeting cards bound together.*

Cards, she thinks. Fuck. I didn't get my mom a card.

Fortunately, there's a rack nearby. She buys two cards—she can't decide which one she likes better, both are kind of stupider than she would really like—and she buys a roll of wrapping paper with an antique-map print, too, just so she won't have to wrap the chocolates in a cut-apart

grocery bag, as though she were making a cover for an elementary-school textbook. She pays \$14.33 for it all and takes it back to Laura's.

She wraps the chocolates in the maps of the world. She throws away the bags, throwing away the faces of Steven King and Emily Dickinson.

She feeds Adrienne a can of moist cat food. 99¢, she thinks, after the cat's done eating.

She sits on the wicker chair on the porch for a long time and finally goes inside and picks up the scrap of paper on which she wrote down the numbers of the guys at the Doubletree. She calls up and asks to be connected with Johnny Sax or L. McLeggs. The polite and well-spoken woman who answers the phone says "I'm sorry, those gentlemen checked out this morning."

"Oh. Thanks anyway," Samantha says.

Samantha supposes that she could page them. She holds the scrap of paper in her hand.

After a while she crawls into bed. She leaves the light on for a while and sits there, her back propped up with downy pillows. For a long time she stares at the clay mask that hangs on Laura's wall. She stares directly into its empty eyes.

Her guitar case sits in the other room and she is in someone else's comfortable bed because she doesn't have a bed of her own; she is frightened and she is bored, and she is frightened about being bored, and she is bored because she's so frightened all the time, and there is not a single book anywhere in Barnes and Noble, anywhere on all those shelves, that she could read that would tell her what she needed to do. Not *The Communist Manifesto*, not *Conversations With God*, not *Thanks Mom: A Lifetime of Wisdom*. She is absolutely on her own.