

PART TWO

VIRTUAL MALL

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Everything is perfect. Happiness. Bliss. Samantha has spent whole days lying in a lawnchair behind Laura's house, drinking a glass of lemonade and doing precisely zero. Weeks have gone by like this. Nothing has really changed. But now it's fine. She doesn't look at the paper in the mornings anymore because she doesn't want to wreck her buzz. She wants everything to stay just perfectly perfect. It's summertime and the living is easy.

It's hard for Samantha not to feel like things are perfect in the early days of July. Dissatisfaction would simply mean she'd have to change something, and the days are way too sticky and hot for that. So she sits in Laura's lawnchair and drinks Laura's lemonade and nothing changes—she still hasn't told Gregor about Dmitrovitch, she still hasn't tried to page the guys from Geffen, she still hasn't found a job or figured out a way to live for free or practiced her guitar—but now it all seems fine. Even the most unacceptable circumstances seem okay after you've adjusted to them. It's a perfect world. How hard it is not to see that.

She is in the middle of one of these perfect mornings, busy not doing things, when Laura calls, from Fairbanks.

“Hey, Samantha,” Laura says. “How is everything?”

“I'm fine,” says Samantha. “Everything's perfect. How's Fairbanks?”

“It takes a little bit of getting used to. But it's beautiful up here; gorgeous country. Did you get my postcard?”

“I don’t know,” Samantha says. “I’ve just been fishing out the things that look like bills and putting everything else in a giant heap.”

“Uh oh,” Laura says.

“Yeah, it’s like this mountain of junk mail. There’s probably a little Fairbanks buried in with ten thousand catalogs and circulars. Somewhere in there tiny pine trees struggle against the tide of T-shirts and expensive footwear and quality paperback books. It’s the basic drama of late capitalism, being played out right on your kitchen counter.”

“Samantha?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Samantha says.

“If the pile threatens to bury Adrienne, throw some of it out, okay?”

“Sure. Which catalogs should I get rid of?”

“Use your best judgement. You know my consumer tastes.”

Samantha thinks about that for a minute, and is sort of surprised to realize that it’s true.

“Okay,” she says. She looks at the pile on the counter and slides the top catalog (Nordstrom’s) off into her hand, and rolls it into a heavy, glossy tube.

“It *is* a picture of pine trees, right?” she says. “On the Fairbanks postcard?”

“I think it is,” Laura says, laughing.

“‘Beautiful country’ just *equals* pine trees in my mind,” Samantha says.

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Laura laughs again, a bright and clear sound that you can almost *hear* intelligence in. Samantha used to be happy when she managed to extract that laugh from Laura, but today she doesn't feel anything: the laugh is so distant, so incomprehensibly far away, separated from her by all those miles, all those time zones. Thinking about that distance leads her into thinking about the whole thing, the whole relationship, which all begins to seem inconceivable.

What *is* this person Laura? Samantha asks.

Her answer begins like this: Laura is a bundle of cognition transplanted to Alaska to teach Women's Studies in the midst of the pine trees and wildlife reserves and oil fields, a collection of data and electricity wrapped up in cellular matter, sent to Alaska to replicate some of those patterns of data in the minds of college students, a pattern firmamented in a body that's now using an intracontinental system of wires and satellites to contact Samantha (who is a complicated spiderweb of thought and feeling in her own right) in order to discuss the runnings of this household that the two of them have decided to temporarily split responsibility for, a decision made, in part, because the two of them share a lot of patterns of mental electricity—oh, God, Samantha thinks, it's all too much, too complicated, too strange. Isn't there a way to make the world *stop*?

"How is everything at the homestead?" Laura says.

"Great," Samantha says. "I mean, nothing's burned down or anything. I haven't even broken a glass."

"Good, good," Laura says. "Have you been working on your music?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm kicking some stuff around."

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“I hope you’ll play some of it for me when I get back?”

“Sure,” answers Samantha.

“Well, look,” Laura says, “I should probably get going; it’s expensive. I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine,” Samantha says.

“Okay. Will you call me if you need anything, or if there’s any problems?”

“Sure,” Samantha says.

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye,” Samantha says. After she hears Laura hang up, she says, quietly, “Oh, one last thing: I think I’m having a nervous breakdown.”

She flips through the Nordstrom’s catalogue for a while. All these clothes. \$129 for a blouse? That’s more than she’s making in a month right now. Can Laura really afford these clothes? Why does Nordstrom’s imagine that Laura can really afford all these clothes? Did Laura buy something from Nordstrom’s once or did she just buy something from a company like Nordstrom’s that decided to sell her name and address to other mail-order clothing suppliers? Is Nordstrom’s a part of Laura’s identity or is Laura a part of Nordstrom’s identity? Or both? She looks at the women wearing the Nordstrom’s clothes and tries to visualize Laura as one of them. Then she tries to visualize herself as one of them.

Right now, Samantha is wearing a shirt that says “Grease Monkey” that she bought for 99¢.

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She rolls up the Nordstrom's catalogue again and uses it to smash flies on the kitchen countertop. "I'm only having a *nervous breakdown*," she says—her voice is loud—and she spots another one, at the corner of the sink, and—*wham!*—she uses the thick bludgeon of possible clothing-oriented futures in her hand to convert it into a tiny patty of fly parts. Adrienne slinks into the room and then runs out again.

The world is becoming too much. She wants it to slow down, to stop, to come under her control again, to regain at least the illusion of perfection.

"I've got to get out of here," she says, and she locks up and gets on her bike and rides down to Gregor's parents' house.

The bitch of it is that she's not going over to Gregor's to regain a handle on the world, or even to feel any better. She knows, in fact, that when she sees him she'll feel worse, because she's continued to withhold all information re: Dmitrovitch from him, and so even when he's behaving in his normal, nice, non-critical, Gregor-y way, she feels wicked foxes of shame skulk through her, she feels nauseous and sick, and the only thing she can conceive of to do to alleviate those feelings is to go hide out in the warehouse with Dmitrovitch. (Dmitrovitch doesn't question her about, or even seem to care about, the unpleasant complexities of her relationship with her ex, so when she's with him those complexities can, temporarily, be forgotten.)

So the state of affairs things have come to now, in this imperfect July, is this: she rides over to Gregor's parents' house in the mornings, like this, past the whirling sprinklers and plastic recycling bins that decorate the lawns of residential neighborhoods in mid-range cities like this

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one, so that she can see Gregor, check in with him, exchange pleasantries for a few minutes, find out if he's working at Barnes and Noble that night, and then take off.

She doesn't go to visit him at Barnes and Noble anymore. She no longer spends fifteen-minute fragments of her evening with him, no longer refuels, at nine o'clock at night, with a strong cup of Yukon Blend or Guatemala Antigua and a careful negotiation of their shared emotional minefield. She has her reasons. Barnes and Noble had become too depressing, for one¹⁰. But there's also the fact that a night when Gregor's working at Barnes and Noble is a night when she can see Dmitrovitch and not have to make up an excuse for why she's not available to hang out. This is what her summer has come to.

A breeze blows across her scalp, filters through the tight mesh of her hair. Her face is warm from the sun. She has a whole day in front of her with nothing to do. She pedals through the last leg of the twenty-minute route between Laura's house and Gregor's parents' house, passes the memorized landmarks of the route—*steep downgrade, novelty pig-shaped mailbox, house with "Beanie Babies Here" sign by driveway*—just checking them off mentally as she goes by as if to reassure herself that the world, strange as it is, has some kind of order to it, an order that, if not permanent, at least seems the same from one day to the next, at least for the time being.

Perfect, she thinks, insisitently, as she rounds the final corner and sees Gregor sitting on the porch of his parents' house before her. *This day is perfect.*

¹⁰ All those books that she wants to read and hasn't yet, all those books that she knows she should read but doesn't want to, and, worst, all those books that she knows she shouldn't read, and doesn't want to read, but which seem to be highly-promoted and selling to everyone else in the whole stupid world: each time she'd visit, a sour blend of guilt and righteous fury that would swell up in her craw, and she found she could no longer stomach it.

There he sits, electron cloud of hair in a sort of wispy suspension around his skull, his bass across his lap. He doesn't see her ride up and lock her bike to the "CAUTION DEAF CHILD AT PLAY" sign. He's looking down at the bass, practicing different fingerings, his face rigid with concentration. She watches his hand for a quiet minute, watches his fingers jump from position to position on the strings. Such skill there, so visible: some memorized thing taking form in a conjunction of strings and hand; such a pleasure to watch: the competent muscles of the fingers, the careful transitions in the positioning of the bones underneath. She remembers, now, watching him, how sexual she found his skillful hands back when they were together; she looks at the elegant loveliness of his long fingers pressing on the strings on the porch and she remembers them moving up inside her, her cunt clenching them tightly: she remembers being delighted at the softness, the delicateness, of the skin, delighted at the fine competence of the muscularity beneath.

She watches him. She watches his fingers change, like he's spelling out some progressive sequence of ideograms. She wishes she could hear the notes he's striking, but she can't. The bass isn't amplified. He doesn't play with an amplifier at home: the next-door neighbors complain. So he just sits there on the porch, practicing, his fingers move carefully, deliberately, and he produces nothing but a muted series of *twangs* and *thunks*.

"Gregor," Samantha says. "Hey."

He looks up, and his hands stop doing what they were doing at the bass. "Hey, beautiful," he says, smiling.

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She smiles back, but doesn't say anything: she's not quite sure how to respond to that. She climbs the stairs leading up to the porch and sits in the chair next to his. He looks at her face, smiling, she would actually say *beaming*. *God, she thinks, why does he do that? Doesn't he get it?*

"So," Gregor says. "What's new?"

"Oh, nothing," Samantha says. "And with you?"

Gregor shrugs, looks down at the bass, frowns a little, strikes a fingering. "You know," he says. "Practicing. Trying to get better. Same old stuff."

He strikes another fingering. *Thunk*

"That MFA program at the university is pretty competitive," he continues. "I'd really better keep practicing. I'm afraid, you know, that if I stop practicing, even for like a week or a day, that I'm just going to start, you know, *forgetting* how to do all of this stuff. I've worked for twenty years to accrue whatever little pool of talent I've got—Christ, twenty years, that's a long time—and I don't want that pool to start evaporating because I can't get up in the morning."

"Yeah," says Samantha, and she laughs nervously. "Well, look, I'm really just passing through, running some errands, you know, and I thought I'd stop by and say hi."

"Uh huh," says Gregor.

"So, uh, hi."

"Hi," says Gregor. He's not looking up.

"What are you doing tonight?" Samantha asks. "I feel like I haven't hung out with you and the YesMen in like forever."

"I have to work," Gregor says.

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“Oh,” Samantha says. “When’s your next day off?”

“Monday, then Wednesday.”

“Hmm,” she says. “You want to get together Monday?”

“Wednesday there’s this band playing at Triple A. Lost Dog Reward? Do you know them?”

“No.”

“They’re on Matador? They’re this band out of San Francisco. Kind of like noise instrumentals. It should be pretty interesting to see live. Anyway, I think Caccian and Jason and I might be going, if you want to come.”

“Yeah,” says Samantha, “maybe. Maybe I will.” Although as she says it she realizes that she’s not actually planning on going (although it sounds like the sort of thing she might like), that although she says *maybe*, in reality she’s not even *thinking* about going, that in fact she is chalking Wednesday up as another night that she can get together with Dmitrovitch with total impunity, and thus she realizes how far she really has begun to fall from Gregor and the boys. And this realization makes her recognize whole fields of limitations to her merits as a friend that she hadn’t previously recognized, and this recognition releases a light fog of depression into her brain; and that miasma of dejection begins slowly to permeate her entire mental apparatus (her mood, good or bad, always seems to tint the color of her whole sphere of existence), until finally she just puts the brakes on the whole process, clears her mind by snapping her attention, almost violently, back to the concrete reality of the porch, the texture of the flaking slate-gray paint on the wood, the shapeless furze of a cobweb in the corner, the thousand tiny articulations of the metal coil of each

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string of the bass. She's forgotten what they were talking about and her mental hue is a few shades gloomier, but otherwise she's caught herself; she's okay.

Gregor hits a few fingerings on the bass. *Thunk Thunk Thunk*

"Oh," he says, eventually. "I saw something on the news last week that I thought you'd be interested in. It's a way you might be able to live for free."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. They said that supposedly all of these women who are like your age are donating their eggs. You know, like to infertile couples and stuff. It gets you like five thousand bucks."

Samantha wrinkles her nose. "Yeah," she says. "I've heard about people doing that."

"They gave a number," Gregor says. "I memorized it for you because I thought you might be interested."

"I don't know about that whole thing."

"The number is 888-411-EGGS."

"I don't think I could do that."

"Five thousand bucks is a lot of money."

"Yeah, but, I don't think I can do that."

"You worried about the idea that you'd have a kid running around out there?"

"No, I wouldn't care about that. It's not *my* kid if I don't lug it around in my womb for nine months."

"Well, technically."

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“Well, technically, sure. But I care a whole hell of a lot less about the technical ontological status of some baby that shares some of my genetic code than I do about having to dope up my body with hormone injections for however many months it is.”

“You have to do that?”

“Hell, yes. And you have to go into the doctor’s office like once a week, which *sucks*.

And

when you’re done they stick a giant needle through your vaginal wall to get the eggs.”

“Yow.”

“Yeah, so there are some drawbacks that go a little bit beyond just being a mother at some kind of meaningless molecular level.”

“I see you’ve already given this some thought.”

“Of course I’ve given it some thought. I bet practically every single woman my age has at least turned it over in their mind once or twice.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Why? Because we’re all hard up for the money. Because jobs for people our age are sucky and tedious and soul-devouring. If you’re a smart young woman you think about these things. If all you’ve got is a college degree, odds are, these days, that you’re going to get some job where you’re not going to be asked to use the full range of your intelligence; you’re going to sit somewhere and your brain is just going to *atrophy*. Come on, Gregor, you work at Barnes and Noble—don’t you see that happening?”

“It’s not so bad. At least we work around books. That keeps us at least a little bit smart.”

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“If it’s not so bad then how come so many women are donating their eggs these days? Five thousand bucks is *not* that much money and I don’t think getting a needle stuck in your vagina is that much fun. God knows what could happen if the procedure goes wrong. But women are doing it. Women are doing it so that they can *have lives*, lives that aren’t dominated by work. I know that’s why *I* considered it.”

“Huh.”

“Nobody talks about how bad things are for people our age; how fucking *dismal* the job market is; how it’s still fucking *dominated* by the Boomers; how fucking *horrifying* it is to be a receptionist or a copy editor when you’ve just spent the last four years grappling with the entire history of political science. Try and talk to your parents about it sometime and they’ll assume you’re just lazy or a whining ingrate. They won’t assume that something *real* is happening. But something real *is* happening. Everyone comes out of school and is presented with basically two options: slavery or starvation. And if you don’t believe me, if the work offered to us isn’t a *very real* form of slavery, explain how you wind up with a nation of young women who are willing to rent themselves out as organ farms to these middle-aged couples who live in some stratosphere of wealth—wealth that you or I will probably *never* see—just to avoid taking one of these entry-level jobs that are supposed to be so great? Something very real and very frightening is happening when this is the type of world you end up with, believe me.”

“I believe you,” Gregor says.

“Well, thanks for the suggestion, anyway,” she says.

“Just trying to help.”

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“I know. I appreciate it. I didn’t mean to bite you in the face.”

“I know.”

Thunk Thunk

Their conversation goes on in this tentative, stop-and-start manner for a while, and her interior mood continues to darken, with each progressive uncomfortable pause everything grows shadier, murkier, closer to the bottomless blackness of total panic: she can feel the two of them failing to engage like they used to, and each comment she makes, no matter how innocuous or simple, begins to count for so much; each comment she makes either is laden with the potential to engage them or acts as a symbol of that failure to engage; the conversation gradually becomes heavy with the unsaid weightedness behind each *yeah* and *I don’t know* and *not really*, and it begins to destroy itself under the force of its own gravity. A part of her brain splinters away from the main processes of relating to Gregor/building a conversation with him, that same part that went to maximum zoom-out when she was on the phone with Laura, and it begins to provide a kind of hysterical running commentary on the relationship. What *is* this person named Gregor? it asks.

Gregor, it answers, is a system of software folded up and packed inside a skull, a system that can only be intuited by examining his actions, the expression of his system’s operations through the medium of a body.

Some time ago, this commenting fragment continues, her operational system noticed particular similarities between its own patterns and the patterns of Gregor’s operational system. When the two compatible systems operated in the same place at the same time, they harmonized, formed a third operational entity that contained elements of each system but also contained

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newly-generated elements, derived not so much from either system independently as they were derived from the *union* of the two systems.

They decided to name this third operational entity Now Hiring. Their two bodies also formed a union, not long after, and there was some of the same fruition there, but in a way that couldn't be named in the same way the union of the parts of their brains that made music could be named. This lack of agreement about what to call the arrangement of physical energies revealed previously-unseen disparities between their operational systems, and the knowledge of those disparities introduced discord into the parts of the operational systems that had formerly operated harmonically, until eventually the construction of third-system energy that they had created together needed to be dismantled.

Although it hasn't been dismantled so much as it's been *turned off*. The system of energy that they constructed together still exists between them, only fossilized: a structure with no life channeling through it. She wonders what it would be like to play with him now; wonders what it would be like to see that dead structure light up again.

This is what love looks like when you feel like you're having a nervous breakdown.

"So," says Gregor. He's been talking for some time and she hasn't been listening; she's been too caught up in analyzing the relationship from the heights of space. "What do you think?"

Vertigo. Sudden zoom-in. She's crashing in that way that people who are really stoned crash when they've been off on some prolonged introspective mental voyage and they're suddenly called upon to do something basic and grounded in a physical reality, like answer the phone, or

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pay the pizza delivery guy. Switching realities at that speed is too much for the ordinary mind to take.

“I’m sorry,” she says. She stands up. “I’m just—I don’t feel very well—I’m sorry. I should really go.”

Gregor looks at her and frowns slightly: she can’t tell if it’s concern or disdain. She can’t guess what’s going on inside him anymore. She can only rely on what she sees expressed and right now that’s him frowning at her.

“Are you okay? Can I get you a drink of water or something?”

“I’m fine,” she says. She’s backing down the porch steps now, headed for her bike.

“Hey,” Gregor says.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Samantha says. She fumbles with the U-lock, finally gets the key in it, unlocks the bike, mounts it, and rides off, wobbling a little as she goes.

She rounds the corner, heading away from Gregor’s parents’ house as fast as she can. Even the novelty pig-shaped mailbox cannot console her now. The world is too much. She’s fucking up. Things are happening too fast. She wants it all to slow down, to take on a form that makes sense, to order itself in a way that is nothing if not logical, to organize the complex and bewildering array of its materials in a way that she can control, manipulate, make her own.

She rides faster. There’s only one place that she can go. She keeps her head down against the wind and heads there.

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9

The Virtual Mall is inside the real mall.

Samantha locks her bike outside; she negotiates the clutch of smokers huddled by the massive concrete butt urn; she passes through the grimy airlock that marks the transition between outside world and mall space (“Mall Is Private Property,” reads an authoritative-looking sign, “Patrons May Be Ejected At Any Time”); she passes the computerized Information board and the Piercing Pagoda (where she worked for one unfortunate teenaged summer in the mall’s early days); she passes Foot Locker and That’s Entertainment! and babyGap; she has no glance to spare for the gigantic audioanimatronic Tyrannosaurus Rex that periodically roars and lurches, jaws a-snap, towards the startled consumers on the mezzanine; she rounds a corner; she ignores the giant-screen TVs mounted twenty feet above the concourse which broadcast the giant faces of multiracial models down at the transfixed shoppers, instructing them to remember both the shape and the color of the indicator that designates the region of the parking lot where they parked their vehicles and also suggesting that if they’re tired from all their shopping they should stop off and visit the new additions to the second-level Food Court¹¹; she maneuvers through a crowd of small children in identical uniforms holding great clusters of colored balloons and there in front of her is the plastic lightbox with “Virtual Mall” printed on its face in tall black serified letters.

¹¹ 10,000 Yogurts and Professor Crawdad’s Big Hot Cajun, respectively.

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She gets her Discover card ready.

The interior of the Virtual Mall space is mainly taken up by two identical gigantic hunks of equipment, two frightening black apparatuses, each designed to fit an entire human being inside the trickiness of their cable-thick space. They're Virtual Reality consoles, the most state-of-the-art that someone who's not involved with the government can get. In fact, Gordon, the brain behind the Virtual Mall project, the guy sitting over there behind the counter, with the mirrored high-tech-looking sunglasses and the blond ponytail, reading *Wired*, bought these directly from the government, picked them up at a military liquidation auction when the local Air Force base closed up three years ago¹².

"Hey, Gordon," Samantha says, sliding her Discover card across the counter.

"Samantha," Gordon says. "Dmitrovitch is around here somewhere. I think he went up to Millenium Taco to get some lunch. You want on?"

"Yes, please," Samantha says. Gordon swipes her card.

Gordon won't let anyone on the consoles until he swipes their card. The Virtual Mall system needs a credit card number in its memory in order to work effectively—otherwise when you were ready to buy something you'd have to struggle out of the goggles and gloves to fish your card out of your wallet—and plus it has the added bonus (from Gordon's oft-stated

¹² Like all machines black and glossy and techy and militaristic, these machines radiate expense: for a long time Samantha couldn't figure out how someone like Gordon could afford them, even through an auction. When she asked Dmitrovitch, one night, how he managed it, Dmitrovitch informed her, whisperingly, that the Virtual Mall prototype had been funded by an unnamed investor who gave Gordon the money to buy the VR consoles in exchange for one thing and one thing only: exclusive ownership of the Virtual Mall franchise rights.

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perspective) of prohibiting high school kids or members of any other economically-unreliable social strata from getting on the system and hogging up time and space unprofitably.

“Two is open,” says Gordon. VR console One, Samantha can see, has a guy in a sharp-looking suit with a shaved head in it, wired in, goggles on, glove pointing left and right, up and down. Gordon catches her looking, leans forwards, and whispers to her, “That guy’s bought nine hundred bucks worth of luggage in the past fifteen minutes.”

“I don’t think I’ll beat today’s high score,” she says, and she steps onto the treadmill of VR console Two, the one Dmitrovitch affectionately calls “Epileptor,” because some early bugginess in Two’s programming created a kind of strobe visual effect that gave three customers petit mal seizures in the Virtual Mall’s first week of business¹³.

She pulls down the goggles, affixing the screen over her face, and she slides her hands into the bulky gloves.

You start the Mall by flexing your hands as though grasping for something. That activates the screens.

The first thing you see is a luminescent keyboard. It hovers just almost out of your line of sight; you can only bring it to the center of your field of vision by aiming your eyes upwards, taking on the expression of the supplicant.

¹³ Dmitrovitch tells the story, with obvious relish, of how one of them, a young woman who Dmitrovitch characterizes as “one of those trust fund liberals,” angrily picketed the store with a sign that said “Virtual Mal,” but gave up after two frustrating days of being mistaken for someone who was trying to promote the new store and simply couldn’t spell correctly.

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In the lower left corner of your visual field is a blinking hourglass. After about three seconds the blinking hourglass is replaced by letters which spell out your name—Samantha J Faraday, in this instance—and, below that, the sixteen digits of your credit card (twenty counting expiration date). The numbers that are the way your identity is spelled in the Mall. The only name that matters in this realm.

Once the numbers are up, the Mall appears. It manifests as a hallway built from virtual materials: towering slabs of what appear to be a glossy black stone, like onyx, held together with long, handsome beams of some kind of wood/metal hybrid, a sort of chromium oak. The hallway appears to stretch infinitely forwards¹⁴, and is lined with doorways on either side. Above each doorway floats a brilliant rectangle, with no visible means of physical support, each bearing the logo of a company, and, beneath that, a second, smaller rectangle, containing the company's Internet URL. Floating in the space of the hallway are two glowing hands: Samantha's virtual hands. When she moves her hands inside the gloves, the hands made of light mimic those movements.

Samantha wants to buy a book. She hasn't read a good book all summer. She's looking for the distinctive sinuosity-within-trapezoid capital A that designates amazon.com. Normally when she enters the Mall it's directly on her right, but what's there right now is a floating rectangle holding that two-tailed-mermaid-in-green-circle: Starbucks.

“Hey,” Samantha calls. “When did you guys get Starbucks?”

¹⁴ The Virtual Mall's Concourse is not, of course, infinite, but that it gives the illusion of infinity because the Mall is shaped like a donut: go far enough forwards and you'll come around to where you started again.

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“Dmitrovitch and I finished writing the platform for it last week,” she can hear Gordon say. “It got put in on Monday. You should check it out.”

“You gave it amazon.com’s spot.”

“It’s the middle of summer. People have bought all their summer reading already. Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are receding memories. From now until Back To School the things people most want to consume are from the Ice family: Iced coffee, Iced tea, Ice cream. We haven’t figured out a good way to sell ice cream through the Net yet, so Starbucks gets the prime Mall spot. amazon.com’s just down the hall, for Ford’s sake. Use your legs.”

When she takes a step, the visuals scroll backwards, and the treadmill beneath her spins slowly; in this way, the illusion of forward motion is completed. In the non-virtual world, of course, she goes nowhere. She knows that she can also go forwards in the Mall by pointing directly in front of her with her index finger and balling the rest of her fingers into a fist, which would cause the Mall’s visuals to scroll backwards extremely quickly, giving her the sensation of rapid forwards motion without using her legs at all, like a sort of frictionless waterskiing. Travelling in that mode has always tended to unnerve and disorient Samantha, so she tends to stick with quote walking unquote.

She begins to move forwards, heading down the hall towards where amazon.com must presently reside.¹⁵ But then she remembers that the supply of freezer’d coffee beans in Laura’s

¹⁵ For all of Samantha’s suspicions about both corporations and computers, she’s always had a special fondness for amazon.com. She’d had some concern, ever since junior year (Soc 325: “Models of Contemporary Urbanism”), that now that America’s cities had emptied out into decentralized rings of affluent suburbs, a terrible culturewide homogenization had begun to occur—people in one suburb had begun resenting going to the next suburb over to visit, say, a Barnes and

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apartment is beginning to run low, so she turns her head towards Starbucks— the entire orientation of the virtualscape rotates with the motion of her head, as though she were revolving in an office chair—and she steps forwards and passes through the door. The hallway dissolves away into a fizz of pixels and is replaced by a mock-up of a Starbucks retail store. The setup is economized, of course, made up mostly of brown and green polygons fit together, but the shape of the space nonetheless feels familiar: it's a long room full of circular tables, there are walls lined with shelves, in front of her is a counter. Various windows—rectangular blocks of light containing words and options—appear around her, gently drifting, like lethargic fish. The natural, childlike impulse is to reach out and touch them—they seem as beautiful and ephemeral and mysterious as soap bubbles on a sunny day—but you have to be careful: if you just start touching things in here you end up buying stuff you never intended.

This is the way the Virtual Mall works. Gordon surfs the Net and finds websites belonging to companies that he wants in the Mall. Any sort of website that sells anything will

Noble, or a sixteen-screen theatre, or a Red Lobster, and so each enclave had begun to build their *own* identical copies of everything that was everywhere else to assuage this resentment. What Samantha hoped would result from the existence of something like amazon.com was that a new type of decentralization would manifest—each town (at least each town hypothetically populated entirely with Net-literate computer owners) would no longer need its own cookie-cutout shopping center, because the products could be shipped directly to the homes of the populace by virtual entities that didn't need to bulldoze a lot full of trees in each and every podunk suburb in America in order to sell books to Americans. In fact, when Samantha first went to the Virtual Mall, she expected to hate it, because she saw it as *counteracting* the decentralization process: it recreated a solid and spatial point of access for something designed to be fluid and ethereal, thus defeating what Samantha saw as the point, wrecking the Internet's potential to subvert the dominance of stripmall culture, reduce traffic, etc. But that first visit was when she met Dmitrovitch, and so her feelings about the Virtual Mall are now all mixed up with sex and orgasms, and shopping in the Mall's space gives her the same feelings of control that sex gives, and, naturally, some of her objections have fallen by the wayside in the face of that sort of euphoria.

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work, technically, but Gordon is picky: he looks for really-well-designed websites from companies that really have something to offer. Then he and Dmitrovitch write code for platforms that create VR interfaces between the person strapped in the console and the website. Instead of getting to, say, amazon.com by typing in the URL on your at-home Net browser, you just walk through the door. Instead of using your mouse to point at the buttons you want to press, you just point with your finger and then make a fist. When you need to type something in—like the name of a book for amazon.com—you use the keyboard that’s floating there above your forehead. All Virtual Mall has really done is make websites into places you can walk around in.

Samantha touches a window that says “Have Starbucks Coffee Delivered Right To Your Home!” which disappears in a puff of computer-animated dust, replaced by nine more windows that appear out of tadpoling swarms of light.

The corporations in the Virtual Mall don’t seem to care about its existence one way or the other. Virtual Mall doesn’t technically make any money off of the corporations; they make their money by tacking a 5% charge onto anything you buy through them. And the platforms Dmitrovitch and Gordon write only run through the consoles, so they don’t affect the corporations’ websites any more than if you were to put stickers on your monitor at home. In fact, the corporations make money in the exact same way they would through any websale, so they’re perfectly willing to let it happen. The only cut Gordon takes is from the consumer.

Samantha touches the window that says “Gold Coast Blend.”

“Hey, Samantha,” Samantha hears Dmitrovitch say, behind her, and a half-second later she feels a finger jabbed into the small of her back. She turns around, wanting to see him,

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forgetting that she's in Mallspace; she twists her head and shoulders to the right and the entire Starbucks configuration revolves; the floating windows reel around her like a school of insistent fish, quickly resituating themselves in their favored positions (slightly off-center) even as the room continues to redraw itself—it's like trying to look around a restaurant and having the open menu keep bobbing into view. Of course Dmitrovitch isn't behind her anyway, not in here, she's the only person in the space of Virtual Starbucks¹⁶, and even though she knows he must be right behind her, even though she knows she must be looking right at him, there's the illusion of a dozen feet of open space firmly positioned between her and the sound of his voice. A wave of disorientation passes through her body; she wobbles.

“Whoa,” Samantha says.

¹⁶ She's often heard Gordon talk about the nationwide Virtual Mall franchise that will exist, and she knows that his dream is to turn Virtual Mall into a MOO (Multi-User Domain, Object Oriented), so that all the users of the Mall consoles nationwide will be inhabiting the same virtual space, so that when you walk around in it you won't be just walking around in an eerily-post-apocalyptic row of empty stores, but rather walking around in a space thronged with walking representations of Virtual Mall users from all over America. When Gordon and Dmitrovitch get really excited they begin to talk about the potential for interaction between these virtual representations of shoppers from around the nation; writing programs that would allow you to not only see what the other shoppers were doing but that would enable you to, say, speak to them, thus turning the Mall into a sort of giant chat room, where you could go into Virtual Starbucks and be in there with Starbucks aficionados from Des Moines and Orlando. After Gordon's drank like his third jumbo Dr. Pepper of the day he'll sometimes start ranting to Dmitrovitch about how the need would arise for Mall users to rent what he calls “avatars”—if you're going to walk around in the Net with other people you're going to need to put on some kind of face, you're going to need to have a body, a costume, etc. Basic users would get a kind of featureless mannequin; they'd have to walk around in the Mall like one of those poseable artist's dummies, but people who were willing to pay extra could rent pre-made corporeal representations, a body with a recognizable sex and average looks and generic clothes. People who were willing to pay even more could get bodies with heightened levels of sex appeal, more distinctive features, more ornate costumes, distinctive identities. You could walk around in the space as a fully-done-up geisha or a waif in a Gautier ensemble or a dreadlocked black athlete. Or so on.

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“Easy there,” Dmitrovitch says. “Take the rail.”

“Right.” Samantha lowers her gloved hands and holds onto the bar at waist level in front of her. The Virtual Starbucks freezes; it no longer moves to match each movement of her head; it becomes like looking at a photograph rather than inhabiting a space. She lowers her head towards the rail. (She’s seen people lean into this position and vomit between their own arms down onto the treadmill before; the very thought of it makes her straighten up, breathe deep, struggle for composure.)

“How was Millenium Taco?” she asks.

“Ew,” Dmitrovitch says. “I don’t eat that poison. I went to Salad-O-Rama. What about you? What are you doing in there?”

“Throwing up on the floor in Starbucks.”

“Thatta girl,” says Dmitrovitch. “I’ll let you to it, then. See you when you get out.”

Samantha waits a minute to recuperate, then lets go of the bar. Starbucks springs back into motion around her. She goes back to buying her pound of Gold Coast Blend, reaching up over her head to enter Laura’s address on the glowing keyboard.

She hears the shaved-head, luggage-buying guy on One get out and walk to a counter behind her that doesn’t exist in here.

“This is great,” she hears him say. “I can get all of my shopping done in one easy stop now.”

“Oh, yes,” Gordon says. “Virtual Mall is synonymous with easy.”

“Well, I just love it,” Luggage Buyer says.

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“I can tell you why,” Dmitrovitch says.

“Huh?” says Luggage Buyer.

“Are you familiar,” Dmitrovitch asks, “with the concept of consumer consciousness?”

“Nope,” Luggage Buyer says.

“Not this again,” Gordon sighs.

“It’s the way companies construct images for themselves in the mind of the consumer by appropriating things from the world,” Dmitrovitch says. “I’ve spent years studying it. They build up a system of association between the things in the world and themselves and your mind. It’s triangular.”

“‘Things,’” says Luggage Buyer. “What do you mean by ‘things?’”

“I’ve told you not to bore my customers with this stuff,” says Gordon.

“He’s not bored,” says Dmitrovitch. “Are you, sir?”

“Nope,” Luggage Buyer says.

“Well, then,” Dmitrovitch says. “‘Things.’ You can think of it probably most simply in terms of colors. Different companies identify themselves with different colors. Over time, you begin to associate the colors with the companies. Let me show you. Close your eyes.”

“Okay,” Luggage Buyer says.

“Now picture the color red,” Dmitrovitch says. “Just a field of the color red.”

“Okay,” Luggage Buyer says.

“Now,” Dmitrovitch says. “Quick. A company.”

“Ah. A company. Coca-Cola?”

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“Very good. A company appropriates a thing from the world to build an image for itself in your mind. You see? Blue.”

“Blue now?”

“Yes, blue.”

“IBM.”

“Excellently done. Now yellow.”

“Um... Century 21.”

“Interesting. But you see how this works. The triangle of consumer consciousness. Company, thing, your mind. Combinations work, too. Red and yellow together?”

“McDonald’s.”

“Of course. It’s no mistake that the first registered trademark in England was the red triangle. The triangle: the model of how trademarks *work*. Red: the first color on the spectrum. Hence: the first trademark.”

“Huh,” says Luggage Buyer.

“Bass Ale, in case you were wondering.”

“Huh,” says Luggage Buyer.

“It works with words, too,” says Dmitrovitch. “You want to try a few?”

“Sure.”

“Do it.”

“‘Do it’ are the words or you want me to do the experiment?”

“‘Do it’ are the words.”

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“Um. Nike. Just Do It.”

“Uh huh. Always.”

“Always. Coca-Cola.”

“Very good. Be.”

“Um. Be all that you can be. That’s um, the Army, right?”

“Right. Billions.”

“That’s McDonald’s again. Billions and billions served.”

“That’s right. Every time you hear the word ‘billions’ you think—distantly, unconsciously—of McDonald’s. On one hand you’re thinking of a sort of colossal, unimaginable abundance and on the other hand you’re thinking about a six-piece McNuggets. Because they don’t just appropriate the *word*, they appropriate the *concept*, too. They’re hoping that when you think of the concept, you’re going to think of the company, too. Joy. Cheer. Life. Companies seek to build an identity up out of concepts; so that they can sell those concepts back to you. It’s more complex than just words. It’s everything. You want to buy American hard work and integrity and small-town values? You buy a Saturn.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Luggage Buyer says, in enthusiastic agreement.

“That’s why the Virtual Mall is such a success. Because Gordon here has taken it to the next level.”

“How so?”

“Here it comes,” says Gordon, sounding bored.

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“The concept that Gordon here has appropriated is the concept of shopping itself. The system of consumption has become self-sustaining now; it need only appropriate itself. What you’re buying in the Virtual Mall is the experience of shopping.”

“Yes,” says the Luggage Buyer. “I love that.”

“It’s the one concept that all shoppers uniformly believe in.”It’s a closed system and we’re all inside it. With our charge cards.”

Samantha’s glowing hand touches the window that says “Buy,” and in Seattle, Washington, some zeroes turn into ones and some ones turn into zeroes and a cardboard box holding a pound of coffee beans is labeled with Samantha’s name and Laura’s address and a company becomes some dollars richer. Discover is notified. They add 12.53 to the number after her name. Samantha J Faraday.

#

She thinks for a moment, her mind glowing post-consumptively. She’d like to see a room in the Virtual Mall where you could get cash advances from your credit card. It would look like a vault. You’d go into the vault and sitting on a table would be an orderly pile of cash—your available credit, bundled into neat stacks of twenties and hundreds. You’d go up to the table and just take what you needed. You’d feel so frugal just taking one twenty from that pile. You’d feel like you were exhibiting incredible self-control. Even if you were to take two you’d still be a model of financial responsibility. Because look at that pile! Look how much is still left, look at all that cash piled under your name, look at all that is yours, all that is available for the taking someday!

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All she needs to be is sixteen digits and an amount.

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10

This is what a piece of Dmitrovitch's music sounds like: at first, just hissing. Snow. Static.

At 00:30 the static is interrupted by a quick *think think* and then it recommences. *Think* Static. *Think* Static. If you're old enough, you can recognize the *thinks*: it's the sound of a knob on an old-fashioned TV being turned, changing the channel from one staticked station to another¹⁷. You hear that *think* repeating now in a rhythmic pattern, offset by long bursts of white noise. *Think. Hssssssssss. Think. Hssssssssss. Think. Hssssssssss.*

At 01:15, over the think-hiss rhythm of the channel-changing, a piano line comes in through the left channel—taken from it sounds like a tango record?—a bold, aggressive spill of notes (*plang PLANG plang-plang-plang-plang*) which plays for no more than five seconds when it stalls, catches, twitches like a muscle stuck on a piece of barbed wire, starting in place again and again, yeilding the familiar, distinctive jerky sound of digital error: *pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla pla...*

By 01:30 that skipping begins to descend into the background; you've accepted it as another layer of rhythm. Then the car crashes begin over top of it. A squeal of tires, the crunch

¹⁷ This sound is from back when TVs still had knobs that you had to actually get up and go over to turn, knobs that exerted a slight resistance on the hand, that seemed to want to hold their position on the dial; when they would finally turn, they'd clunk over to the next position with a kind of car-door-slamming sound that would punctuate the change of channel, more solid and audible than the microblip of silence that punctuates today's channel-changes.

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and smash of metal crumpling and glass shattering in some kind of horrible collision¹⁸. There's one and then another and then a third, and then what sounds like the first and second together, laid over top of one another, and then all three overlaid together. When all three cars are wrecking at once over the *pla pla pla pla pla* and the thunking/hissing TVs you start to feel like all your mental space available for listening is filled up: the sounds of the wrecks are large enough to dominate the consciousness, and the dead effeiveness of the static, shapeless as it is, sifts through the mind, fills the spaces not taken up by the jagged aural shapes of the wrecks, and the stuck piano runs hypnotically through it all—and then, at 2:20, once the sound of the wrecking cars has swollen in volume until it's almost painful to hear, it drops out, goes silent, leaves you with just the underlayer of the piano and TVs, you can feel your mind empty, and it feels, weirdly, like you are falling, plunging. The sensation lasts for a second and a half and then the crashing comes in again, peak volume, and your attention is thrown back into that whirl, and the crash is on for a second and a half and then it goes out again, off for a second and a half and then on again, the sound of the crashing cars has become a rhythm of its own now.

At 04:15 the Voice comes in. The Voice is one of those deeply unironic Organization Man voices that's used to narrate any sort of good propaganda. What it's saying here, at first, is this: "Whenever possible."

Crash crash. "Whenever possible." *pla pla pla pla pla* "Whenever possible." Crash crash.

This goes on for some time.

¹⁸ Dmitrovitch got these sounds from an old Ohio State Police driver's-ed film, *Signal 30*.

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It's at 06:00 when the crashing and the TVs go out in that rapid decelerative blur of sound that you get when you stop a turntable with your hand: the sound slows down and melts into a bassy glob, pitch lowering and swelling into a point of total stasis and silence. The *pla pla pla pla pla* continues for a fraction of a second and then it kicks out with a kind of digital twitter. The Voice says, from the depths of a startling, hastily-created void: "Whenever possible, emphasize your similarity with the hostage-takers."

The screeching tires of Car Crash One begin again, but then abruptly elongate, rising in pitch, rapidly stretching out of aural existence.

"We are more inclined to cooperate with those whom we perceive to be similar to us than with those who are different in some way," says the Voice.

The rhythm of the crashing cars comes in again, now supplemented not with TVs and skipping piano notes but with a driving synthesized rhythm pounding behind the crashes. The Voice keeps speaking through it all, although now you can barely hear it: "Try to break down any ingroup/outgroup distinctions. Cooperation is at least twice as high with an ingroup as it is with an outgroup, even if the relationships in the ingroup are tenuous and newly formed. It might be effective, for example, to show that you have had similar experiences in life and that you perhaps come from a similar social background."

The rhythm drives on and on.

Finally, at 09:15 it all stops, all at once, and the sound of the changing channels comes on again: *Thunk. Hsssssssss. Thunk. Hsssssssss. Thunk. Hsssssssss.* A new voice, male, authoritative in a different sort of way, a husky/sexy way, probably taken from daytime television, says: "I'm

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It's an incredibly boring process to watch. He hasn't completed a new song in the entire time they've been together, although he's played around with something every single night she's stayed over. "It takes a lot of time to get one of these pieces together," he'll say, if she asks him even the most innocuous question (like "How's it going over there?"). "I'm not writing music for open mike night at the coffeehouse here. I can't just slap a couple of chords together on the guitar and write some treacle about some time I got dumped and how sad I felt. I'm dealing with a lot of pieces of things here. Fragments of a culture. It takes time to figure out what the secret connections between those fragments are. It takes time, time and concentration." And so now, normally, when he goes to work on the computer, she shuts up, and she lies on the mattress, stares up at the billboard woman's smiling mouth, and smokes. (She'd quit; she's started again.)

Tonight, though, she's dragged Dmitrovitch out of the warehouse, and they're walking on the railroad tracks. They're not talking much right now. Dmitrovitch is carrying a laptop computer with him. She's not carrying anything, except the occasional empty Colt .45 40-oz. bottle, which she'll pick up and swing at her side like a pendulum as they walk. After a while, she'll wind up like a pitcher—one foot up off the ground and all—and she'll launch the fucker down the tracks and watch it explode. A few minutes later she'll pick up another: the last thing there's a shortage of down here is empty 40s. King Cobra. Olde English 800. Smash. Smash.

She'd had enough of sitting around in the warehouse. They'd come back from the Mall and fucked and he'd pulled up "How Many Zeros?" for the third time in as many evenings and she thought to herself *my God, how did I end up here, doing this?* She'd long had scorn for what she called "band girlfriends," those girls—so many of them!—who seemed perfectly happy to spend

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endless afternoons watching their boyfriend rehearse with his band, who seemed to get some kind of weird vicarious satisfaction from sitting on a carpet remnant in someone's crappy basement and looking beamingly on while Boyfriend X tuned up his bass or tried to get that drum part right for the dozenth time. Samantha had always sort of wanted to grab those girls, shake them back and forth, and shout "Don't just *watch* the band—be *in* a band!" And so when she found herself there, lying on a mattress, bandless, smoking, and not even watching someone practice with, like, other guys, but watching someone dickey around on his *computer*, for Christ's sake, she knew she needed to seek some change of venue, a minor one, anything.

"Can we do something tonight?" she'd said, catching a glimpse of the stridence in her tone, knowing how it must sound, hating it. "Can we *please* go out? And don't say 'I have to work on 'Zeros' because you've been saying that all week and you haven't done any work on it at all. "

"But I *am* working on 'Zeros,'" he'd said. "And I don't appreciate your pre-empting of the response that you knew I was going to give. Where does that leave me?"

"Okay," said Samantha. "Fair. Let me rephrase the question. *I am going out. I am inviting you to come. If you want to stay here and work on 'Zeros' by yourself, fine. If you want to come with me to go somewhere, now is your chance to talk about what you might like to do.*"

He revolved around in the chair to look at her. He linked his hands and put both pointer fingers up against his lips thoughtfully.

"What do *you* want to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Something free."

"Sounds," Dmitrovitch said.

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“What?” Samantha said.

“I do need to go out and record some sounds.”

“I don’t care. Anything’s better than just lying around here again.”

“Gordon found a box full of porno videos last week. I’ve been meaning to go over to his place and record sounds off of them. You can get good human moans and people saying stuff like ‘oh yeah, baby, stick it in me.’ Porno videos are samples just waiting to happen.”

“Ugh,” Samantha said. “No. I’d rather drink hot wax than sit around watching you and Gordon watch pornos all night. That guy gives me the creeps. He’s one of those people who gets ironic about pornography: he pretends to everyone that he’s urbane and witty enough to enjoy pornography just because it’s campy and weird. That’s really like this veil to hide the fact that he’s titillated by it like every other computer dork in the world.”

“I think it’s interesting,” Dmitrovitch said, “that you’re becoming one of those women who badmouths my friends and doesn’t let me get any work done.”

“I badmouth *your* friends? At least I’ve *met* them. I’ve noticed you don’t show much interest in coming out to meet *my* friends.”

“What about this famous ex of yours who’s not allowed to know about me?”

For a while, this went on. Samantha continued to insist that she would go out by herself the second Dmitrovitch acknowledged that he’d rather stay home, and Dmitrovitch hinted strongly that he’d rather not leave his computer, but didn’t openly say so. (His end of the conversation seemed, to Samantha, more aimed at getting her to admit (why?) that going out was not a necessary component of their lives.) Finally she said “Can’t we just go for a walk?” and he

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said “A nice place to go is the train tracks,” and she said “Okay, I’m going, are you coming with?” and she actually got off the mattress and stood up, and he looked at her, carefully, as if gauging something, and he said “Okay,” but first he’d gotten his laptop and his battery pack and his digital mic all together—he wanted to record the train as it went by.

She arcs her arm back and flings her eighth malt liquor bottle of the evening up towards the moon. This time—and quickly—Dmitrovitch swoops down, scoops up a hefty rock, calculates some number of vectors with a scrupulous and sharp eye, and throws the rock, low and hard. The long line of the rock’s flightpath intersects perfectly with the descending edge of the high parabola of her throw: the rock, midair, transforms the bottle into a *bang* of sound and a rain of brittle light. Samantha stands agape. Watching it, she remembers what’s been good about being with Dmitrovitch this summer: sometimes they have moments where everything they do together seems to be blessed with the glorious magic that blesses all improbable intersections, when every motion or word or touch that passes between them is suffused with the beauty of two forces coming together, and fitting in some unexpected, pleasing way: working. There have been those moments. *It’s worth it*, Samantha tells herself. *It’s all worth it for moments like this.*

Love is the science of manufacturing scintillating intersections.

They stop. They sit on the tracks, and watch the point, some yards distant, where the spray of falling glass came to rest.

“The amazing thing is that this is free,” Samantha says. “Walking around at night like this, with you, it doesn’t cost anything. The moon and the railroad tracks and the broken glass: it’s wonderful, and the most wonderful thing about it is that it’s free.”

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Dmitrovitch opens the lid of his laptop computer and a rectangle lights up above his knees. "Information is becoming free," he says. "Almost everything can be made into zeroes and ones nowadays. Pictures, words, sounds. Nobody can own zeroes and ones."

"I don't know why I ever spend money at all. I could live out my life doing things like this. Just walking, talking."

Dmitrovitch fishes a tiny digital microphone on a wire out of the pocket of his jeans and plugs it into a port in the back of the laptop. "With this tool I can record the whole world," he says. "I can create my own world out of the ruins of the old one. I can inhabit a world of my own design."

"I should just take my guitar and go on the road," Samantha says. "Spend my days sitting in parks in different cities in America, just writing songs, playing songs with anybody who wanted to come by and play. Jamming with old homeless bluesmen. Mainly just talking to people. Hearing their stories. The most important thing is connecting with people. That's still free. No corporation can put a price on that."

"I've begun to trade sounds with people through the Net," Dmitrovitch says. "I've got little sound spies all over the country now. All over the world. Sonic agents. They record the sounds of their section of the planet and send them to me. Traffic from Pittsburgh. Surf from San Diego. Audio surveryors. Together we're building a new world, one piece at a time. There's this guy, Conrad, in Philadelphia, who I trade with. He knows somebody in Seattle who found this tape in Kurt Cobain's house. Turns out Kurt was recording his suicide for posterity. Conrad's going to send me the sound of Kurt Cobain's face exploding. Can you understand how important

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a sound like that is? It becomes more important every time it's sent to someone new. The more you replicate a sound the more power it gains. The more a piece of information is repeated the more true it becomes. These things gain amplitude from their replication. Repeated information becomes a new culture."

"This culture. This culture tries to sell everything that we already have back to us. Entertainment. Peace of mind. Dignity. All of these things are bottled and canned for us at the local store. Respect. Love. Human communication. But all of that stuff is free as long as you know how to find it on your own. You don't need to buy it through the culture."

"The culture is finished. It's come apart at the seams. Cobain was the last real agent to try to use the mouthpieces of the culture to communicate a message about humanity to humanity. His death taught us all that that's now impossible. There's nothing left to be said through those venues anymore. The gamut has been run. The last hundred years of music did love and dancing and sex and love and peace and understanding and social involvement and the bitterness and maturity that comes with failed love and political rage and mutual assured destruction and self-loathing and finally self-obliteration. What do you say after that? There's nothing left. The only project that's left is to take the culture apart. And the thing is, we can now. We own it all now, every last beat. When you can get into the digital code of things it's like entering into the very molecules of a sound or an image. You can take one simple drumbeat and manipulate every last hundredth of a second of it in any way you like now. We've all become God. What can culture offer God? Nothing. God is going to take the dead clay of culture and breathe life into it. A new holiness will grow out of the wound in Cobain's head. After I finish my Cobain piece

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I'm going to work on a project. I'm going to take apart the great jazz drummers. Max Roach, Philly "Joe" Jones, Gene Krupa. They're finished. I'm going to digitize their solos and just take them apart. Each beat. Then I'll classify them. Organize them by duration and pitch. Make their entire careers fit inside my toolbox. I can reorganize the beats any way I want. I can create whole new structures that have never been heard before."

"All I need is to keep my needs simple."

"I own the culture. It's mine."

"The most important thing is to keep learning. Learning. That's free. You have to spend time with people, talking to them, listening to them, reading their words, hearing what they have to say."

"Listen," says Dmitrovitch. "Do you feel that?"

She wraps her hand around the glossy metal of the rail. There is a vibration coming through it, there is a hum there in the metal, a sound that can't be heard, a sound that she can only detect through the flesh of her hand.

"Train's coming," says Dmitrovitch.

They both crane their heads to look down the tracks. The further down the tracks they look, the closer the two parallel rails seem to draw towards one another—perspective—and at the point where the rails meet in illusory convergence, the darkness is ripped by a hot point of white light. It's approaching.

"I'd better get set up," Dmitrovitch says. He gets up off the tracks and walks about ten feet away; places the laptop on top of a discarded brick. He unwinds the mic's wire and digs a

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small hollow in the gravel about two feet away from the tracks. He sets the mic in this hollow, points its windscreen end towards the space of air that the train will pass through.

Samantha sits on the rails and watches the dot of light come closer. As it approaches it increases in size, taking up a progressively larger fraction of her consciousness; as it grows, it seems to be eating the rails beneath it and the air around it; it seems to be consuming everything in the world, distilling it all into an intense hot whiteness, a nothingness. The train blows its whistle and a howling swells to fill the world around her.

Dmitrovitch is doing something at the computer.

She's hypnotized. Some part of her is recognizing that she's hypnotized and is informing her. She can hear this part of her but she can't pay attention to it yet. The night is howling. The world is filling with bright light. The world is filling with emptiness.

"Oh, God," Samantha says. A part of her warns her that she's sitting on the train tracks. She can't pay attention to it yet. She watches the light double in size and then double in size again. Dmitrovitch comes and stands in front of her, one foot on each rail, stands between her and the terrible awesomeness of that light. At the same moment the howling whistle goes silent and she can hear the train: she can hear the slow chuffing roar that carries that light and propels it forwards, and she knows, then, that that roar is the sound of *metal*; the sound of pistons and valves and crankshafts and axles, all working to drive themselves forwards through the darkness; she knows that behind that brilliant screen of light lies a nightmare of bulky tonnage, fueled, oiled, maintained, powered by fire and explosion, heavy and dangerous, a technology that has nothing to do, nothing to do at all, with the softness of flesh, the softness of the body.

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Get off the tracks, a part of her says. Now. Please.

“Oh, my God,” she says. She scrambles off the tracks without even standing up; she performs a quick scuttle on her hands and knees, scraping both, she rolls off the rails, and down the slight gravelly incline at the tracks’ edge.

“Dmitrovitch,” she says. “Get over here!”

He turns to look at her. He’s not even looking at the train that’s rushing towards him.

“There isn’t any need to be afraid,” he shouts over the roar. “Do you control the world or does it control you?”

Samantha doesn’t know how far away the train is. In her panic, she can’t tell. “Get off the tracks, Dmitrovitch,” she screams, from the gravel where she lies sprawled. “Please!”

“Kurt Cobain was afraid,” Dmitrovitch shouts. “Afraid to control the world. He was the last artist to let the culture eat of his body. He tried to feed the culture and it ate him until there was nothing left. No more! The time has come now for the artists to eat the culture! To get fat on culture! We will hear the sound of Cobain’s exploding face and we will play it in the streets and we will say *no more!* That sound is the first sound we will steal back! It is only the beginning! *We are going to make the world ours again!*”

The sound of the train begins to rip apart the air.

“*Dmitrovitch!*” Samantha screams. On the other side of the tracks she can see the rectangle of the computer screen glowing silently. The night is nothing now but brightness and noise.

She can make out Dmitrovitch screaming something about *martyrs*.

Then he’s gone.

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A wall of wind and dust hits her in the face. She clamps her eyes shut against the blast of displaced air that shoves a handful of grit into the wet cave of her mouth. The train is roaring past. Once the explosion of force has ridden over her, she spits, opens her eyes, watches the train go by, reads the words as they pass: *Union Pacific Union Pacific Union Pacific*. She doesn't see Dmitrovitch anywhere.

She stands up. She looks around for a body, frantic, her face rubbery and wet with tears.

The train moves on through the night.

Dmitrovitch is standing on the far side of the tracks. He's closing the lid of the laptop and gathering it up underneath his arm. She runs across the rails, half-crashes into him, flings her arms around his body.

"Jesus Christ," she says. "You fucking asshole. You fucking asshole. You could have been fucking *killed*."

"All you have to do is know is when to get out of the way," Dmitrovitch says. "I'm going home. I need to work on 'Zeros.' Are you coming?"

"Yes," Samantha says. She's still frightened, still sobbing. "Yes, I'm coming. You shit. You stupid shit."

The train, behind them, moves on through America, roaring into the night.

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11

Awake; alert. Rays of light slant in through the warehouse's bank of pivoting windows, tinting the space (its motey air, its steel pillars, its many, many shreds of ads) with that particular color that just *is* morning, washing everything through with that unmistakable, diffuse shade, that peculiar variety of paleness that only post-dawn light can hold. Papery. And she's aggravated, too; bristling, actually, with aggravation. Last night, you know. Plus to that the world. She's up and she's smoking. This is breakfast at Dmitrovitch's.

Usually she doesn't stay over. Doesn't like to; it makes her feel weak in a sense; deficient; staying over feels incriminating, like evidence that she needs *something* from Dmitrovitch that she can't get in just an evening. She's heard enough guys (Jason in particular) complaining about not having enough "space" in a relationship to know: trying to mine some ineffable *something* out of the depths of a reluctant guy is instant relationship death. And she's pretty sure that she wouldn't want it anyway, were she to get it; when she stays over she gets this suspicion that she's caught herself looking for *security* or some peculiar variety of *intimacy* or one of those other banalities that those jerks who pretend that they "get" female psychology are always loudly insisting that women prioritize. It's a bunch of dumb stereotypes that she's not interested in valisating. To say that women want those things (and, as a woman, to want those things) is, she thinks, just to retread that tireddest of paradigms, the hunter-gatherer model: the men go out and hunt for mammoth or

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whatever while the women stay home on the bearskin, all pregnant, waiting desperately for the men to come back. She tries to avoid behaving like that pregnant cavewoman at all costs. On nights when she comes over she usually fucks Dmitrovitch and heads out the door before too late; she sleeps by herself in her own bed¹⁹ and she feels fine with that. Plus she likes to take the mornings to water the plants and feed Adrienne and the like.

Last night, though, she felt shaky and weird and scared and she stayed.

This morning she's thinking about the world and the way she sees the world isn't exactly helping her work through the shaky/weird/scared business.

Dmitrovitch is still asleep and she's walking around and on her third cigarette of the morning: aggravated.

So she presses the rumpled shape of her sock-clad toes into the thicket of his curly head.

"Dmitrovitch," she says. "Wake up."

"Mmm," he says, into the pillow.

"Dmitrovitch," she says, flexing her toes as though she were trying to grip his skull with them.

"Mmm!" he says, more forcefully.

"Dmitrovitch," she says. "I want out."

That gets him to roll over onto his back. She stands over top of him, resists the temptation to ash her cigarette on his chest, and waits until he opens his eyes.

"What?" he says.

¹⁹ Well, Laura's bed.

“I want out,” she says.

“You can go,” he says. “I don’t make any claim on you. You want out? The door’s right there.”

“I’m not talking about you,” Samantha says. “I’m talking about this fucked-up society.”

“You’re nuts. Go to bed.”

“I’m serious. Jumping trains and talking about the death of culture’s not going to do it for me. That’s no escape.”

“Normal people don’t talk about this kind of thing first thing in the morning.”

“I’ve been up for a whole hour.”

“Lucky you.”

“And I’ve decided I have to escape.”

“Escape what?”

“Escape this system.”

“There *is no* system. Not anymore. You’re talking like a crazy woman.”

“How can you say that? It’s everywhere. The whole world is becoming like this giant marketplace. Consumer consciousness, remember? We can’t even have thoughts anymore that aren’t infiltrated by the marketers?”

He’s closed his eyes again. “I don’t get too upset by it.”

“How can you not get upset about it?”

“If it’s everywhere, where are you going to go? How are you going to make your big escape?”

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“I don’t know. I feel like I should go to Africa and work to control the spread of HIV in villages there or something.”

“Have fun.”

“People do stuff like that, you know. People our age are out there doing that sort of thing.”

“Do you know any of them?”

“That’s irrelevant. There’s people out there making a difference—a real difference—while we sit around and try to see how many defunct grunge bands from the early 90’s we can still recollect.”

“You think keeping one tribesman in like Ghana from getting AIDS makes some real difference in the grand scheme of things? Cosmically speaking, we’re talking a drop in the bucket here.”

“More than you or I are doing.”

“More than... what do you mean when you talk about ‘making a difference?’ Making a difference from what? How is the world different because some twenty-one-year-old chick goes to Ghana to assuage some of her middle-class guilt? Everything we do every day makes the world *different*, in ways we can’t even conceive of. Don’t you know that by now?”

“Oh, don’t give me that tired old chaos theory rap again,” Samantha says. She flicks her cigarette butt across the room.

Dmitrovitch gives her a foul look. “It’s like that whole thing about ‘resistance’ or ‘dissent,’” he says. “Back in the 1960s there was something actually *to resist*, there was an actual, you

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know, *war* on, people were actually getting *killed*, kids were running down the street with like napalm burning their bodies and stuff. Resistance nowadays is just this pathetic shadow. People don't know what to resist. Because there's nothing *to* resist. There's no 'enemy.' There's no 'system.' There's no 'man' anymore. Say 'stick it to the man' nowadays and some kid's going to go shoot his school's vice-principal. Talk about 'resistance' and you're talking about a bunch of kids picketing a McDonald's because they missed all the fun back in the 60s. You get punks making stickers that say 'Boycott Corporate Coffee.' What's the fucking point anymore? A government that drops like ten tons of unofficial bombs on noncombatant villagers, has got a little more ideological charge, enemy-wise, than the local Starbucks."

"There's a new one going up, you know."

"And I should care about this precisely why?"

"Oh, let me see. Homogenization? Everyplace everywhere becoming more and more the same? The death of quirky local things that make each town different? The world becoming corporatized, increasingly becoming a collage of recognizable brands, a self-sustaining mesh of money and power woven so tightly that no new visionary can mark it in any way? Eventually individuality will die; the world will become a hive; the people will become mindless drones serving out tiny pointless roles for some, some *swollen eminence* that's behind it all, and you can lie there and honestly say you don't *care*?"

"I didn't say I *don't* care, I asked you why you thought I *should* care."

"Interesting distinction."

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“Anyway, you’ve got it all wrong,” Dmitrovitch says. “Do you realize what a paranoid you sound like? There’s no longer this great fat octopus called *capitalism* sending its sinister tentacles through everything.”

“Maybe paranoids are just people who can truly perceive what’s happening in a culture.”

“Yeah, *maybe*. But culture isn’t this all-powerful force taking over everything. It just isn’t. It’s easier to stay out of culture’s way today than it ever was. I mean, look at me. I don’t ask culture for anything and culture doesn’t ask me for anything. We have a mutually ignorant relationship. But to hear you tell it I’m like some kind of slave because I’m not moving to Subequatorial AIDSland?”

“Dmitrovitch, look at this place. It’s covered in *advertisements*. You’re not going to convince me that you’re some kind of cultural naif.”

“But my relationship to these ads isn’t the relationship that the all-powerful culture that you’re imagining wants me to have. If everyone was as enslaved as you imagine, a Burger King commercial would come on TV and we’d all rise up and go straight out to Burger King. Instead the commercial comes on and people get up to take a piss, they jump to another channel, they Mute it and make up obscene dialogue for the actors, they tape it and they cut the images up and reassemble them into antifascist videos. You shouldn’t be afraid of culture, Samantha; culture should be afraid of you. Those corporations are desperate for just a tiny share of your attention. You can reject them with just a flick of your wrist or just by turning your head in the opposite direction. And people *do*. Now will you stop *worrying* about all this stuff and come here?” He opens his palms and draws his fingertips back towards his chest, beckoning.

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“A lot of people go to Burger King.”

“Come here.”

“A lot of people who think they’re too smart for commercials to have any effect on them go to Burger King.”

“Come on.”

She falls to her knees, one on either side of his chest, and he reaches up and locks his hands at the small of her back. He smiles.

“How come we’re always fighting about this?” he says. “Aren’t we getting along, you and I?”

“I guess,” Samantha says. She sinks forwards, resting her head on the hard plate of his sternum.

“I just worry about you,” he says. “Waking up at seven o’clock in the morning worried about consumerism; it’s just not normal. You just need to relax.”

“I don’t want to relax,” she says, sadly, her voice almost catching in her throat. “I want to see it all go down in flames.”

“Why?”

“There’s no room in this system for me. There’s nothing in it I want to do. I don’t want to work in a stupid bookstore or serving coffee. I want to write songs.”

“You just need to *make* a role for yourself that you can live with. That’s what’s great about being alive right now. You really can live a life of your own making. Look at Gordon.

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Look at me.” He moves his linked hands up to her shoulders and he holds her tight within the oval of his closed arms.

“I guess.”

“Let me give you an example. Let me tell you about this new idea I had.”

“Okay.”

“It’s sort of like the counterpoint to the Virtual Mall. Gordon and I hope to get it up and running by 2000.”

“What is it?”

“It’s going to be an alternative marketplace. Virtual Mall is an alternative way of shopping mainstream places, right? What we need is a mainstream way to shop for alternative goods.”

“Alternative goods?” Samantha says. She can feel the muscles in her back tense. “What the hell do you mean by ‘alternative goods?’”

“Within the past twenty-five years there’s been an explosion of new technologies for self-expression. Tape recording. Home videocameras. The Xerox machine. Public access television. Desktop publishing. Webpages. Downloadable sound,” he says, ticking them off on his fingers. “And, accordingly, there’s been an explosion of individuals expressing themselves through these new technologies. It’s become increasingly easy to create something of professional quality in your own bedroom.”

“Uh huh,” Samantha says.

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“The masses you care so much about have seized the means of production,” Dmitrovitch continues. “The central problem is now one of distribution. The means of distribution are still in the hands of a few big companies. Say you make an epic film about suburbia on your video camera and you edit it with QuickTime on your Macintosh and say it’s great—what do you do once it’s all done? Maybe you could show it at Sundance and hope that one of the big distribution companies will pick it up—but how do you even arrange for the film to be shown there? You or I don’t know how to *begin* negotiating those corridors of power. But trying to distribute it yourself is so hard. What do you do? You could take out an ad in a film magazine, but the ad’s life is limited—maybe there’d be a few orders the first week or two the magazine was out, but then it’d be gone. You could set up a webpage, but who knows that you’re there?”

“It works for you,” Samantha said.

“Shh. Listen. I’m trying to make a point. The point is that there are lots of artists out there who have produced *quality product* but can’t access the right audience. The mainstream systems of distribution are busy churning out their mainstream crap. But the filmmaker can’t distribute their film themselves; they’re supposed to be a *filmmaker*, not a distributor. So you’ve got a glut of good alternative work with no conveyance to the audience which is looking, desperately, for something good.”

“I think I see where this is going,” Samantha says, cautiously.

“So Gordon and I are going to set up a webpage. An alternative distribution point. A marketplace for the underground. We’re going to call it ‘invisiblecity.com.’ Gordon and I are going to seek out the top people doing self-published ‘zines, pirate videos, self-recorded music,

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self-written software, whatever, and we're going to create a singular point where our customers can go to look at it all."

"Wait a second," Samantha says.

"And why stop with just video and music and magazines? People make lots of things we could sell. T-shirts. Bumper stickers. Postcards. Buttons. Handicrafts. Fonts. Desktop icons. We don't know what's out there yet. America's full of strange people making strange things. Gordon and I intend to bring those things to a strange batch of consumers."

"For a five-percent service charge, I'm guessing."

"invisiblecity.com will work better—it will sell more—than each independent operator can sell through their webpage alone, because, through me and Gordon, consumers will be able to get everything good from one outlet, instead of needing to search through the Web for each individual thing. Plus we'll be in the *business* of promotion: we'll have the time to make the links between creator and audience that the creators can't make themselves, because they're too busy creating."

"Oh, Dmitrovitch."

"The genius of this is that when the Virtual Mall franchises start opening—it should be around the same time—Gordon and I are going to write a platform allowing Mall shoppers to access invisiblecity. Immediately we get a national audience of shoppers without having to pay a dime for rent."

"Wait."

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“And invisibility doesn’t require us expending even a *cent* of our own money towards production. The creators are responsible for producing their own work. We just help them to move units. Someone pays us for some filmmaker’s opus, we take our ten percent, we send the money and the customer’s address to the filmmaker, the filmmaker ships the video and everybody’s happy.”

“*Ten* percent?”

“Jesus, Samantha, what’s wrong with you? This is the most benevolent idea there could possibly be. How can you frown on a project that seeks foremostly to help a nation of artists find an audience?”

“Oh, Dmitrovitch.” She wriggles free of his embrace and sits up. “Your project doesn’t seek to do that *foremostly*: it seeks to make *money* foremostly.”

“So what? If I can make some money helping out artists, what’s so awful about that?”

“It’s the same reason you didn’t want to sign with Geffen,” she says. “You didn’t want someone else to take a cut of your hard work. But now you turn around and say that you want to take a cut out of a whole nation’s worth of artists and you won’t even help to foot the bill for production? It’s like a record company saying they’ll sign you but you have to pay for the pressings. It’s *awful*. Next to you, the record companies look *good*.”

“You’re nuts,” Dmitrovitch says. He closes his eyes and puts his hands behind his head.

“You’re so mixed up you don’t know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are anymore.”

“You’re creating a giant parasite,” Samantha says.

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“All we’re creating is a conduit,” Dmitrovitch says. “Just a simple toll road between Point A and Point B. The two points still maintain total integrity.”

“It’s revolting,” says Samantha.

“Get out of here,” says Dmitrovitch. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I don’t want to talk to you at all until you settle down and get some fucking sense.”

“Fine,” says Samantha. She pulls her shoes on and stands up.

“Really you’re just jealous,” says Dmitrovitch. “I’ve escaped this all-powerful *system* you’re so afraid of and you’re still shivering in its shadow, wetting your pants.”

“You haven’t escaped a thing,” Samantha says. “You just know how to play along better.” She walks towards the door.

“Come to the Mall when you change your mind,” he says, still lying there, naked, in bed. “That’s where I’ll be.”

“Don’t hold your breath, asshole.”

She unlocks the door and bangs out into the new day; she gets on her bike and goes, pedaling, mad, through the light that scorches the non-invisible streets of her city, past the warehouses that used to hold coal, past the orange billboard with the pixellated pointed hand that announces “This Way To The Internet.” Past the building with the banner: Opening Soon Another Starbucks Coffee. Under the overpass swarming with cars.

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Fuck him anyway, Samantha thinks. She's on her bike, angry. How come the guys who are the biggest assholes are always the ones who think so fucking highly of themselves? If I could just meet one guy—one guy—who was a real asshole and just knew it, I'd get such a fucking satisfaction out of it.

She exhales through her mouth forcefully, exasperatedly. She's aware that her array of potential satisfactions, romance-wise, has nearly been depleted. She's no longer asking to meet the perfect guy, she's no longer asking even to meet a guy who's not a piece of shit—right now she'd settle for just meeting someone *willing to admit* that they're shit. That's a bad sign.

So what? she thinks. She pushes herself through the memorized sequence of landscapes that line the way back to Laura's, angrily—pedaling! pedaling! So things on the romantic end aren't going so well. Big fucking deal. There's always a new boy waiting just inside the next coffeehouse, another goateed sketchpad-bearer just waiting for a petite guitar-playing beauty to wander along and admire the stupid charcoals he did of his ex. She'll admire, he'll suggest that maybe he could draw her sometime, she'll demurely accept, they'll set up a time in a couple of days, she'll go to his apartment (she can practically see the shelf full of beat-up Kerouac books and the candles jammed into the necks of old Merlot bottles now), he'll suggest that he could get a better “sense of her form” if she took off her shirt, one thing will lead predictably to another, and romance will blossom anew. Inevitable as fucking rain. Never mind that Dmitrovitch was like

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the first lover she's had in this accursed town²⁰ who was doing something a little more interesting than trying to construct a reputation for themselves as the University area's Alpha Hepcat. Never mind that *at all*. That's not the point. The point is that as long as she lives in a two-bit city like this one there are always going to be guys, and so dissatisfaction on the romantic front is always liable to be transitory: if she's going to be alone it's going to be for like two weeks, and she thinks she'd be better served, frankly, by taking this opportunity to focus on some of the other major points of dissatisfaction in her life at the moment.

She gets to Laura's, dismounts, locks the bike in the gated backyard.

What she has to do is write a song. And, goddamnit, she's going to do it.

She realizes that she stopped practicing her guitar roughly around the same time as she started seeing Dmitrovitch, and when she overlaps those two facts in her mind—when she takes a minute to contemplate whether there's a kind of causal relationship there—she feels an inky dread rising towards a high-tide marker in herself, and any number of questions begin leaking into her mind: questions about why she's into the whole music racket in the first place and whether the relationship between her music and her love life isn't suspect in some way, and then she begins to wonder if her whole line about not wanting to play the guitar until she finds a way to *centralize* it in her life isn't just *bullshit*: maybe she just plays the guitar because boys dig it, and maybe when she felt like she'd met the right boy she could just quit.

²⁰ She mentally excludes Gregor while she takes stock in this fashion. *Not counting Gregor*, she thinks. *Gregor's different*. She couldn't tell you why she sets him aside for special consideration; if you asked her she would just stare at you as though the answer were obvious and she'd repeat it: *Gregor's just different*.

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That thought is a hideous and frightening one. And she wants to put it away by putting boys out of her mind, sitting down, and just writing the best motherfucking song she can. And yet she's smart enough to notice that this impulse kicked on about fifteen minutes after she called Dmitrovitch an asshole and walked out on him, and this raises the causal questions again and makes her hold her own motives suspect again, and drives her back into the murky chamber of identity-dissection in which she's already spent more than her share of fruitless time this summer.

Fuck it, she thinks, as she jams the key into the hole in the doorknob. She's not going to humor those questions any more with even a fraction of her attention. What she's going to do is go inside, get her guitar case, and write a new song.

She goes inside.

The first thing she hears is Adrienne meowing and meowing, in that particularly strident register that only a pissed-off cat can achieve.

What she's going to do is feed Adrienne, then get the guitar case and then spend all afternoon constructing at least the skeleton of a new song.

She goes into the kitchen. It looks like a crime scene. The crying Adrienne sits on the counter (she's not allowed) and the slippery pile of junk-mail catalogs has scattered across the floor, has fused messily with the also-spilled pile of letters and bills.

She's going to feed Adrienne, reorganize the mail, then sit down and get the guitar out.

She scoots the bitch off the counter and looks at the squat black toad of the answering machine, whose one red eye blinks and blinks at her. She tries to count the blinks. Six? *Six* people called? She hasn't even been away for twenty-four hours and *six* people called?

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She's going to play the messages—*oh, fuck*, she thinks, *pen and paper*—she's going to get a pen and paper, play the messages, feed Adrienne, organize the mail, she'd better water the plants, too, and *then* she'll be able to get to work on that song.

She should probably take a shower, too, she realizes. And now all of a sudden she has to piss. She gets the pen and paper.

Adrienne says “Meow, meow.”

Samantha presses Play on the answering machine. The toad clicks and hiccups and she can hear the *whir* of rewinding tape emit from its guts. And then the phone rings.

“Jesus Christ,” she says, and she picks up the phone.

“Hello?” she says.

“Hello, Samantha,” says this voice that she recognizes, chirruping with a cheer that is tremendously, enormously false.

It only takes her a second to place. “This is Johnny Sax, isn't it?”

“There's a smart girl.”

“Where's your charming cohort?”

On cue, the second voice, L. McLeggs: “Right here. How did your appointment with Warner Brothers go? Are you enjoying the six-figure deal they cut you?”

“I told them they were a bunch of corporate tools and that they could kiss my rosy red asshole.”

“Is that a fact?” L. McLeggs says.

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“Samantha, level with us,” says Johnny Sax. “There never was any meeting with Warner Brothers, was there?”

“It’s hard to say,” Samantha says. “The phone over here has been ringing off the hook with offers. Geffen, Warner Brothers, Polygram—after a while, I can’t tell them all apart. Surely you can’t expect me to just remember the name of every corporate entity that waltzes in here with a contract and a pen?”

The answering machine is done rewinding and it begins to play. She can hear Gregor’s voice saying something. He needs to talk to her. Something. She sticks her index finger in her free ear.

“You’ve caused us to lose a lot of valuable time, Samantha,” says Johnny Sax. “We had to fly back to L.A. and reconsider our plan. There were a lot of meetings.”

“A *lot* of meetings,” says L. McLeggs.

“Imagine how we felt when we found out that there *was* no counterdeal. Can you do that for a second?”

“All those meetings for *nothing*,” says L..

“Can you take just one second to put yourself in our shoes? To imagine how betrayed we felt?”

“I mean, the cost in pastries *alone*.”

“Two months of time lost. That’s two months of time that Mr. Blackmarket’s career could have used to grow. Two months of partnership—potentially *fruitful* partnership—with the

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people who work for Mr. Geffen: down the tubes. Let me just ask you this question, Samantha: do you really feel that that's the best way to market your artists?"

She can hear Gregor saying something on the answering machine. *God, Samantha, I know it's late, pick up, I need to talk to you.* She takes her finger out of her ear and uses it to slide the tiny Chiclet of the volume control down in its notch, sending Gregor's voice down to the level of indistinct buzz.

Johnny Sax is saying something that ends with "so we're going to give you one more chance to set up a meeting with us."

"Look, guys," Samantha says. "Let me give you the best advice you've heard all day."

"Is this the part where you tell us to kiss your ass?" Johnny Sax says.

"Cause if so, you can imagine that we don't want to hear it," says L..

"We think you misinterpret our whole venture here, Samantha. We think you view us as businessmen. And we don't view ourselves as businessmen."

"That's right," says L.. "Fucking suits. We hate 'em as much as you do."

"We view ourselves more as documentarians," Johnny Sax says. "Archivists."

"That's right," says L.. "And you wouldn't tell an archivist to kiss your ass, would you?"

"It's our job to examine the scene and capture certain elements of it for posterity. We preserve the best material in the permanence of a storable medium. Compact discs last forever, Samantha. Long after you and I are dead and gone—" ("Me, too," L. interjects) "—Mr. Blackmarket's music—music with a real historical relevance for our time—will still be in existence, in libraries and collections. Our job—the job we are *paid* to do—is only to see that Mr.

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Blackmarket—and yourself as well, Samantha, as a part, an important part, of Mr. Blackmarket’s project—is reimbursed fairly for his contribution to the rich cultural heritage of American music. I know you’re afraid that Mr. Blackmarket—and yourself, by proxy—will lose some kind of ‘street cred’ or ‘integrity’ by signing with a major label, but I can personally assure you that by choosing to go with the people who work under Mr. Geffen you are insuring that Mr. Blackmarket will be relevant to musical history long after the opinions of all the local too-cool-for-their-own-good culture junkies have been consigned to the collective dustbin.”

“We give you our word as archivists,” L. says.

“No, no, listen,” Samantha says. “I’m going to give you guys an insider’s tip.”

“We’re listening,” Johnny Sax says, with a sigh.

“The DJ Blackmarket project is finished. He’s washed up. He’s got nothing left to say. His work has imploded. It’s become digressive; diletantish. He just keeps pulling up the old songs and staring at them for hours. He’s become a liability. The group you should be hearing is the YesMen.”

“Argh, here it comes,” says L..

“The old bait-and-switch,” says Johnny Sax.

“You’ve shown us the Lexus and now you’re going to sell us the Toyota,” says L.. “Is that it?”

“We’ve seen it before,” says Johnny Sax.

You don’t get to be an archivist if you’re fooled by that old schtick,” says L..

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“Bait-and-switch my ass,” says Samantha. “You want Blackmarket? Take him. Get him off my hands. But I have to think about myself here. And I’ve decided that it’s in my best interest to establish a working relationship with the people at Geffen.”

“You have?” says Johnny Sax.

“Indeed I have,” says Samantha. “Now what looks best from my perspective: to sell you boys this guy—this washed-up computer geek—who’s going to go out to the studios in L.A. and just sit there and stare into space and waste the expensive time of a whole squad of producers and engineers? Eventually you might coax a new record out of him—a record that’ll probably only be a shadow of the quality of the work he’s done in the past, but you’ll funnel thousands of dollars into production and design and promotion, throwing away good money after bad, and you know where the whole thing will go? Precisely *nowhere*. Now that’s bad for Mr. Geffen: I think we can all agree on that. But it’s also bad for *me*, as a woman trying to work out a sustainable arrangement with Mr. Geffen’s and the agents of his corporate empire. Think about it, boys: isn’t it better for me to give you the best I’ve got? I can find more talent. Clearly I’ve demonstrated my nose for the stuff. If the first group I package for you proves to be lucrative—and I can give you my personal assurance that the YesMen are going to be more lucrative for you than DJ Blackmarket—then you’re liable to come back to me for more. And that serves me a lot better than pulling a bait-and-switch.”

Right after she spins out this scenario for them—making most of it up off the top of her head—she has this horrible moment where she realizes that almost all of it might actually be true. All of it might be true except the thesis: that Dmitrovitch is the liability and the YesMen are the

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moneymakers. She *is* pulling the bait and switch, it's exactly what she wanted to do, a favor to the boys. Except that in trying to convince Sax & McLeggs that she wouldn't pull the switch because she could benefit immensely and sustainably from *not* pulling it, she has also wound up half-convincing herself, and as she listens to their silence as they consider what she just said she feels a hysterical urge to take it all back, to sell them Dmitrovitch after all, to see if it could be possible to live off of what she can pilfer from Geffen's coffers by giving them the best thing she has.

"Okay," says Johnny Sax, finally. "I'm not saying we don't still want to meet with DJ Blackmarket. But send us a tape of the YesMen; we'll listen to it."

"Ah," says Samantha. "They don't, uh, they don't exactly have a demo ready. That's how fresh they are. This is brand-new stuff. Cutting-edge, guys, I'm telling you."

"There's no demo," Johnny Sax says. It's a statement, not a question.

"Uh, you don't always have *time* to make a demo when you're pushing the envelope of aggro sound. And that's what the YesMen are doing."

"When are they playing next? We could go see them perform if they're so great," says L..

"I don't know when they're supposed to perform next," Samantha says.

"What kind of manager *are* you anyway?" L. says. "You represent these people that nobody can get in touch with, these bands that don't exist—no tapes, no shows—why the hell are we doing business with you *at all?*"

"Fine. Look, I'll give you their number, okay? You're so hot on wanting to hear them? *You* call them. Get a pen."

"We've got their number," Johnny Sax says. "And maybe we *will* call them."

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This isn't good. Samantha feels like she's losing her chances at everything. Although she's not sure what chances she even imagines that she has to lose. She remembers—the fact of it seems distant—that she actually isn't a manager at all, that actually she stands to gain *nothing* from the signing of either Dmitrovitch *or* the Price brothers. And yet, she thinks, there must be a way, there must be a way to get it to work in her favor: she realizes, now, after having fucked with these guys and fucked with these guys, that what they literally represent is a faucet, a faucet tapped straight into a huge iron tank full of Geffen's cash, and if only she could figure out how to get the faucet to turn, she might be able to get it to pour into the drying-up reservoir of her bank account again and again. She thinks about how angry she is at Dmitrovitch—she's been calling him a leech in her mind all morning—and now she finds herself thinking: *to survive in this country you need to be a leech. Integrity just consists of leeching off of someone who deserves to be leeches off of.* And right now she can't think of someone who deserves to be leeches off of more than David Geffen.

“Hey guys,” she says. “I've been meaning to tell you. I'm not just a manager; I'm also a musician.”

“Oh, God,” says L..

“Maybe sometime,” she begins.

“Look, Samantha,” Johnny Sax says. “We might have to move fast on this YesMen thing. We think that when we probed Warner Brothers to see whether they were actually looking into the DJ Blackmarket opportunity, we inadvertently tipped our hand. We think they're watching the scene here very closely. If, as you say, the YesMen are really the band to watch from this area, we're going to need to make our move soon. WB thinks we're looking at DJ Blackmarket.”

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“And we are,” says L..

“Yes, we *are*. But they’ll expect us to be looking at him exclusively. They’ll think they can come in here and scoop up other quality bands from the area while we’re negotiating with him. If we act now, we can get have a pre-emptive effect.”

“Yeah, yeah,” says L., and Samantha realizes that right now the two of them are talking just to each other, and not to her.

“Now, Samantha,” Johnny Sax continues. “It’s strange, but you don’t particularly seem interested in helping to manage the deal between us and the YesMen.”

“Oh, no, I am,” says Samantha. “I just also have some songs, and I thought—”

“So we’re just going to call up the gentlemen. We can manage this deal ourselves.”

“*We* discovered them,” says L..

“We talked to them before we even talked to you,” Johnny Sax says. “In fact, *they’re* the ones who gave us *your* number.”

“Yes, yes, I realize, but—”

“Look, Samantha, don’t fret. We’ll be back in touch with you when we want to set up a meeting with Mr. Blackmarket,” says Johnny Sax.

“But I also think you should hear *my* songs,” says Samantha. “They’re good. I mean, I’m a good musician.”

“We gotta go,” says L..

“That’s right,” says Johnny Sax. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Are you back at the Doubletree?” Samantha asks.

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“We’ll call you when we’re ready to meet with Mr. Blackmarket, Samantha. Right now we’ve got calls to make. Goodbye.”

Double-click. Samantha is left standing in the center of a sprawl of mail. Images of smiling women wearing thick luxurious sweaters and sitting on homey weather-worn porches surround her. They stare up at the ceiling and offer no counsel.

“Fuck,” Samantha says. Adrienne meows and meows.

“In a minute, in a minute,” Samantha says. She pushes Play on the answering machine and turns the volume back up.

There are five messages (she’d miscounted):

Hey, Samantha, hi, it’s Gregor. It’s, oh, fuck, it’s about six o’clock. I—look, something’s wrong I need to talk to you. Give me a call as soon as you get in.

Samantha, hi, it’s me. Look, I really need to talk to you. I’m hurt. I really fucked myself up. They sent me home from work. I—shit—look, please, just give me a call. It’s like eight-thirty. I thought you were just going to stay in tonight. Are you just in the shower or something? Shit. Please, call as soon as you hear this message.

Hi, Sammy, it’s Mom. Hope everything’s okay out there. Your friend Gregor just called here looking for you. It sounded pretty urgent. I just thought you should know. You might want to give him a call. Love you sweetie.

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God, Samantha, I know it's late, pick up, I need to talk to you. Where are you? I don't know where you are. Look, I'm just going to wait here by the phone, and when you get in, call. Don't worry about waking me up. I really want to talk to you tonight. Bye.

Samantha. It's Gregor. It's morning. I guess it's like eight o'clock. I hope I'm not waking you up. I—well, you know. I'd like to talk to you sometime. I should be at home all morning. Call me if you get in.

She stands there in the swirl of mail and listens to these five messages. When they're done she doesn't call him. She goes out the back door and gets her bike, and wheels it through the gate and onto the street. She mounts it. She begins pedalling. As fast as she can.

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Through the neighborhood. Past the pig-shaped mailbox. Past the sign for Beanie Babies. Towards Gregor's. Her heart jerky with panic. Her brain worn beneath the pressure of her concern.

The day looks like it's going to stay beautiful like this: a brilliant clear expanse of sky, marred by nothing except a few cotton-candyish cloud strands forming a faint skein high in one corner of the atmosphere. And an occasional jet. It's a perfect summer day. It's lemonade, it's potato salad. It's a badminton birdy aloft. It's a vodka-filled watermelon.

For Samantha, it is remorse and a kind of mute terror.

It is the gnash and click of metal teeth meshing with a metal chain when she shifts gears.

She comes around that last corner and sees Gregor there on the porch. She locks up her bike, hastily, sloppily—it takes her three tries to get both ends of the U-lock to slide into the holes in the proper alignment, she's in such a hurry—and she half-runs across the street to see him. He's just sitting there. No bass, head down, staring into his empty lap.

"Gregor," she says. "I'm sorry I didn't come earlier. What is it? What's wrong?"

He holds up his right hand. It is swaddled in gauze, from the tips of his nails to down beyond his wrist, his fingers taped straight and wrapped flat, the whole hand forced to assume and

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hold a shape that Samantha recognizes as belonging mainly to crossing guards and traffic cops: a shape for people who use their hands to say *stop*.

“Starbucks mishap,” he says.

“Oh my God, Gregor,” she says, climbing the porch steps. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

He shrugs. “Somebody—it might even have been me—ground the beans on the wrong setting. They ground it for a cone filter instead of a drip filter: that’s a finer grain than we normally use. It had been ground so fine that it went through the filter and it caused a clog in the line. The basket filled up with water and began overflowing onto the floor. I didn’t really realize what was going on; I just saw like, the mess, and I thought *oh shit* and I grabbed the basket to empty it out. I pulled it towards me, not thinking that the thing was full to the brim with boiling water and hot grounds. The next thing you know—well, what you see is what you get. This wave of scalding coffee slopped over the rim of the basket and just, well, poured over my hand.”

“Oh, no.” She works up her face into an empathic wince, and sucks air in over her tongue, making a kind of sizzling noise.

“It probably wouldn’t have been so bad if I had just dropped the basket, stuck my hand in the sink, ran cool water over it. But—here’s the thing—I didn’t want to drop it. I’d been so nervous about the mess and fixing the mess that *I didn’t want to drop the basket*. I held onto the damn thing and set it safely into the sink. Picture me? I’m standing there, biting back a scream, my

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hand burning away, and all I can think is that I'm going to catch hell if I drop that basket and get grounds all over the floor." He snorts the tiny, bitter snort of self-deprecation.

"Jesus," says Samantha.

"You should see this hand," he says. "The skin is like melting off. It's like I'm wearing this dead, clammy glove."

"Uck," says Samantha. "Can I do anything for you?"

"I foresee a lot of pus in my life in the near future," Gregor says.

"Gregor, really, if there's anything I can do for you, just let me know."

"I tried to call you last night," he says.

"Yeah, I know, and I am *so sorry*. I just got those messages just now and I came straight over."

"So, where were you, anyway?" he asks.

"Gregor," she says.

"You said you wanted to do something for me. That's what you can do. Just tell me where you were."

"Gregor."

"Just tell me the truth, Samantha. I'm not an idiot, you know. I've hardly seen you at all this summer; the YesMen have hardly seen you at all this summer. Just, for Christ's sake, I'm asking you, just tell me the truth."

"Okay, okay. I'll tell you the truth."

"Okay."

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“I’ve started to see someone new.”

Gregor laughs, one little, pained laugh, and he presses his face into the palm of his left hand.

“Gregor,” Samantha says.

“When did this start?”

“Gregor.”

“Will you just *tell* me, Samantha?”

“Okay, okay, okay. About a week after graduation.”

“Who is it? Is it anyone I know?”

“It’s that guy. It’s DJ Blackmarket. His real name is Dmitrovitch.”

“Dmitrovitch is his *real* name?”

“I don’t know how it happened. It just kind of *started*. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. It just—there never seemed to be a time when it was really, you know, *right*. I just wanted to tell you when the time was right.”

“DJ Blackmarket, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“No wonder you don’t want to slum around with us anymore.”

“Oh, God, Gregor, it’s not like that *at all*.”

“Hm.”

“You think I’m some kind of groupie? You think the reason I’m with him is just because he’s scraped together this little anthill of fame? That’s not the reason.”

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“You just like him more?”

“What? No. I mean, I *don't* even like him more.”

“Huh.”

“It's just—I don't know.”

“You'll forgive me for being curious about why you choose to spend all of your time involved with a guy who you don't like any more than me? You'll forgive me for pushing for an answer on that one?”

“The thing is, I *don't* like him any more than I like you. He's kind of a jerk, when you get right down to it. God, I can't really imagine that you'd want to hear about this.”

“You know, it's been the same with every woman who's ever dumped me. They always describe the next guy they go out with as a jerk. They always say they should never have left me. But none of them ever come back. I think I just should start being more of a jerk.”

“Oh, Gregor.”

“Samantha, you shouldn't have to put up with someone who's not treating you the way you want to be treated. Why would you want to be with someone who's not going to treat you well?”

“It's *complicated*. It's just—I don't know—when I'm around him I really feel like I'm around someone who's *doing* something, someone who's, I don't know, doing something that's bigger, bigger somehow, bigger than just, like, I don't know...”

“Hanging out at the diner?” Gregor suggests.

“Yeah.”

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“Talking about how much they want to be famous.”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m sorry, but... I’m just starting to want something more out of my evenings than just sitting around getting high and shouting things at the TV.”

“It does get old, doesn’t it?” Gregor says.

“Yeah,” Samantha says. She realized, though—as soon as she said what she said about wanting more out of her evenings—that what she’s getting out of her life now, with Dmitrovitch, is a bunch of evenings spent mainly sitting around watching him fuck with his computer. She doesn’t say this to Gregor, though, doesn’t want to give him a sign that she’s having second thoughts. What she says instead is: “I know that sounds horrible, I’m sorry.”

“No,” Gregor says.

For a long time he looks down at his bandaged hand. “I just still want you to come back,” he finally says, quietly. “I’m just still hoping that you’ll come back.”

“I know,” Samantha says.

“I mean, I know that I won’t treat you like a jerk. I mean, I love you.”

“Gregor,” Samantha says.

“I’m sorry,” Gregor says.

“Gregor, you’re a really great guy.”

“Blech,” Gregor says.

“Listen to me. You *are*. And you’re going to find someone who can see that in you, and you and her are going to be happy. But I’m not that woman. You’ve got a really strong nurturing streak in you and I’m at a point in my life where I’m *just not looking* to be nurtured.”

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“I don’t want to nurture you. I just think I’m ready to give you what you want.”

“You shouldn’t be thinking about what *I* want. You need to be concentrating on what *you* want.”

“I want you back.”

“I know, but Gregor, you can’t have that.”

“I don’t want anything else.”

“You’re a fucking liar. Come on, Gregor. What else do you want from this world?”

“Oh, you know,” he says, and he looks up at her and grins a kind of pained grin across the porch at her. “I want to be a rock star. Isn’t that what we all wanted to be?” He sings the opening bars to “Smells Like Teen Spirit”—“*Jink* a-jink, jink-jink-a-jink *jink* a-jink”—and he engages in a moment of self-parodic headbanging.

“Well, that’s great,” Samantha says. “I don’t want to say it can’t happen. But you can’t just sit around, waiting for me to come back and be in a band with you.”

“I can’t do anything with my hand all fucked up like this.”

“Oh, fuck. I didn’t even think about that.”

“So, basically, I get nothing.”

“Come on, Gregor, there must be something else you want from this life.”

“Let me think,” he says.

She sighs. He sighs. They both sigh together. The world around them continues to happen. The sun is shining. A squirrel is cavorting pointlessly on the lawn. Some pre-recorded

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authority a block away proclaims, loudly, to apparently no force more threatening than the deep summertime blues of the sky: “You are too close to the car. Step away immediately.”

“I wish you’d just been honest about this when it first started,” Gregor says.

“No you don’t,” Samantha says. “It would have hurt just as much then. You’re only saying that now because you know if I’d told you then you’d be over it by now, and you wouldn’t be sitting here now feeling miserable.”

“Yeah, exactly,” says Gregor.

“Everyone wants to trade their current misery for misery that they experienced in the past,” Samantha says. “Nobody gets to.”

“I guess not,” Gregor says.

“It could be worse,” Samantha says.

“Yeah, that’s true,” Gregor says. “I’m always telling myself that. Things might be shitty but it’s always worse for somebody else. I mean, at least I’ve got a roof over my head.”

“You’re middle-class.”

“My *parents* are middle-class.”

“Same difference. The chances that you’ll starve to death in the streets are pretty slim.”

“I’m educated.”

“You’re white.”

“I’ve got my health.”

“You’re not stuck in one of those bubbles for the immuno-suppressed.”

“I’m not some dissident being tortured in a cell somewhere.”

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“You’re not toiling in an African diamond mine.”

“I’ve still got both eyes.”

“You’re young. You have no terminal diseases. You don’t even smoke.”

“Not very well. I’m not in any danger of being conscripted.”

“You’re not on trial for a crime you didn’t commit.”

“I didn’t just learn that my son deals drugs.”

“You haven’t been decapitated by a flying helicopter rotor.”

“No tornadoes have passed through my town in recent memory.”

“You’re not the only thing that stands in the path of total destruction of all life on earth as we know it.”

“In conclusion, I am a totally privileged individual, and any sort of dissatisfaction I feel is just middle-class whining, the post-teen angst of a spoiled bourgeois only child born to parents who are so bourgeois they didn’t even get *divorced*, so I might as well just shut up and be happy because nobody wants to hear it out of me anyway.”

“That’s right,” Samantha says. They sit there on the porch and watch the squirrel.

“It’s not working,” Gregor says. “I work at a fucking *coffee dispensary* and my fucking *hand* is now *deformed*. I still feel miserable.”

“Yeah,” says Samantha. “Me too.”

“You’re breaking my heart, you know,” Gregor says.

“I know,” Samantha says. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Gregor says. “I’m sorry too.”

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The two of them sit there some more.

Samantha wants to buy a book. She wants to hold the solid object of it. What she's thinking right now is that the world is fucked up, the world is all too fast, too insensible, too out of control, not just for dissidents and bubble people and diamond mine toilers but also for people like her and Gregor, kids really, and what she wants is to go out and buy a book by someone like Marx or Foucault or Noam Chomsky, someone who will confirm what she sees, who will reassure her that yes! the world *is* fucked up, but who will also tell her that it's fucked up for reasons that are clear and understandable and that can be set down in enumerable order. She wants to hold a pile of reasons in her hand. She wants to know the reasons why everyone she knows is getting shafted, why everything has to cost money, why work has to suck, why TV is so bad, why everything she sees is a commercial, why she doesn't have any female friends anymore, why she can't fall in love, why she can't tell Gregor what she wants more than anything to tell him which is *yes I love you, yes I want to take you back, yes, yes, come here, let me hold you, my sweet sweet love*. She wants to find the books that contain the reasons and hold them in a heavy stack against her chest and plan a summer full of reading, a summer full of words, a summer marked by word after word in careful rows that she can read, one after the other, until the world falls into place and begins to make sense again.

Gregor begins to cry.

"I don't want to see you right now," he says. "I'm sorry. I need you to go. I need you to get out of here."

"Gregor," she says. "Gregor, I'm sorry."

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His face is knotted up, crumpled like a damaged puppet's, shiny and red and wet. "Will you just leave me alone?" he says. "Will you just go away and leave me alone? Can you do that for me? Go away? Leave me alone? Now? Please?"

"Gregor, please listen."

He keeps talking without a pause. His sentences are no longer sentences. They've broken. They're short bursts of words interrupted by sobs. His face appears to be bending out of shape. "Get out of here. Get out of here. It hurts. Hurting me. Go. Leave me the fuck alone. Leave me. The fuck. Alone."

She can't stand to see this anymore. She's up and stumbling off the porch, covering her mouth like she's trying to hold back something that she might scream, hurrying over to her bike, tears coming out of her own eyes as she tries to unlock it. Black words on a yellow background. CAUTION DEAF CHILD. The sky blue and beautiful.

If she could find the books with the answers in them she would take them to the register and she would happily pay for them. She would pay whatever price they asked. Cash, charge, debit card. Visa, Mastercard, Discover, American Express. Check with check guarantee card. Quarters, dimes, nickels. A pile of pennies. It wouldn't matter. Just give her the books. She just wants the world to make sense again, one word at a time.

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14

Malls are landscapes of chaotic release. They are zones where the cultural planners warehouse leftover noise and flash; they are areas carefully organized to contain and direct the pointless energy of a nation of brand-new teenagers discovering piercings and brand name clothing and sexual urges for the first time; they are wondrous galaxies, huge stellar systems, every point within them a flashpoint, a site, hot and active, where the thousand and one mild dissatisfactions and confusions of adult life can be transmuted into an invisible whorl of alchemical flame and one singular perfect new belonging.

The cheery faces on the cheery televisions mounted high above the concourse are making helpful suggestions. Molecular clusters of children—maybe not children, but human beings younger than Samantha, anyway—collide, form temporary compounds, explode into giggles, trade members, split off from one another, reel away in opposite directions. A Range Rover sits beneath three interlocking arcs made of balloons linked together. There are sculptors going at six-foot high blocks of ice with power saws. The air around them is a brilliant, swirling haze of flying ice dust. Samantha smells popcorn, then coffee, then cotton candy. Then the chemical stench of nail polish remover (from Pedicure Palace, three doors down.) Tyrannosaurus roars and snaps with the exact same fluid lunge it used yesterday. Something in a magician's hand explodes into green light.

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Samantha knows—it must be true—that somewhere in the world there is a point where all of this money runs out, that somewhere there is a culture of slavery that all of this abundance is built upon, that there are whole nations of people working in factories to create this wealth of *things*, human beings chained to sewing machines with armed guards marching on catwalks above them, it must be true, there must be a place in the world that receives shipments of all the trash generated by this mall, by this town, *her* town, she knows that must be a hole in the earth somewhere filling with all of this waste, she knows all of these things, learned them in school and understood them and registered her disapproval, but in here, actually *in* the mall, deep in this labyrinth of clamor and light, she can't think about those things, she has trouble holding them in her mind for more than a solid second.

People pass her, veggie wraps in their hands, eating and walking at the same time. She maneuvers through a swarm of bobbing paper cups, a confetti farm of straw sheaths coming off of the individual plastic straws they had been deployed to protect. The world seems a flurry of receipts. Security guards strut confidently around her, articulating careful codes into their walkie-talkies.

She goes into Virtual Mall.

“Dmitrovitch isn't here,” says Gordon. “He hasn't been in yet today.”

“I don't want to see him anyway,” Samantha says, sliding her Discover card across the counter.

“This is probably a pretty bad place to hide.”

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“Do you make it a point of practice to encourage *all* your customers to shop elsewhere, or am I just special?”

“Jeez, what’s with you today?”

“Just swipe my card, Gordon. I need to shop.”

She gets in Epileptor and flexes. Her hands appear in front of her, glowing in the space of an imaginary hallway, freed, in here, of any discernible connection to her body. She’s happy to find herself disembodied. Right now her body is wavery, like a blur; it’s upset, nauseous, and shaky; it’s dangerously close to making the descent into tears or screaming, and it’s also reporting signals, inappropriately, of being turned on. Her brain is fatigued. Her patterns of consciousness are brittle and sharp-edged. She’s happy to be in here, to be a pair of hands and a cluster of digits. At this moment she wants to be nothing more. No body, no mind, and thus no problems, no ambitions, no urges to create or to love, none of the unpleasant potential for frustration that accompanies those urges, nothing but the need to acquire and the ability to do so.

Today she decides not to walk. She just wants to *move*. She points her index finger dead ahead, towards the Concourse’s vanishing point. She balls the rest of her fingers into a fist and she goes forwards, surfing the Mall, controlling the flux in her direction and speed by just pointing one finger.

Stores appear and streak backwards, appear and streak backwards. She rushes forwards into the infinite without moving a muscle.

She passes:

Starbucks Coffee

(www.starbucks.com)

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NetGrocer	(www.netgrocer.com)
Etoys	(www.etoys.com)
California Luggage Outlet	(www.california.luggage.com)
Cyberian Outpost	(www.buycomp.com)
Virtual Vinyards	(www.virtualcin.com)
amazon.com	(www.amazon.com)

amazon.com, of course, is where she intended to go. But she's high on surfing at the moment, high on waves of disorientation, so she goes past it, keeps pointing, keeps moving through the scrolling field of graphics, now moving through the ranks of stores that lack mass appeal, the ones that don't bring in a lot of money but that Gordon likes having in the Mall for the esoteric cachet they provide—Cult Film Site (sepnnet.com/rcramer/index.htm); Dusty Groove America (www.dustygroove.com); Good Vibrations (www.goodvibes.com)—and still she keeps scrolling forwards, until she concludes her trip around the donut and the stores begin to repeat themselves, the names and websites of two dozen companies begin downloading into her overloaded cortex a second time, now she can barely even make sense of the data, it all registers only as the shifting, continually-mutating blur of visual information that it truly is, an indecipherable wash of weightless shapes and letters: *Starbucksnetgroceretoyscalifornia...* This is exactly how she wants it to be.

There is a bang, then, and everything goes dead. The screens pop in her face—brilliant white, like a firing flashbulb, right in her face—and then they go black.

“What the fuck?” she hears Gordon say, as she crashes back into her quivering body. She's adjusting. She's adjusting. Her mind had been accustomed to the illusion of rapid motion,

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and now the illusion is gone, replaced by dark screens and orange blobs pulsing across her singed retinas. She has to adjust to the sudden stop, but there is, of course, no real stop to adjust to. Her body, confused, wrenches in the darkness: it's too much: she can't take it: she doesn't know where she is: she grabs for the rails and misses and falls on her knees (her arms, still wired into the gauntlets, stretch out above her head), and she leans forwards, sobs once, and then vomits down her shirt.

“Aw, fuck,” Gordon says.

Samantha coughs, gags, coughs again, then finally slides her hands out of the gloves, wipes off her face, spits down onto the treadmill. “What’s going on?” she asks, when her mouth is clear.

“Fucked if I know,” Gordon says. “Some kind of blackout. Are you okay?”

“Cleanup to Console Two with the mop,” she manages. “Cleanup, Console Two, with the mop.”

She struggles the goggles off of her face and looks around, but aside from the fields of color which her flash-bedazzled optic nerves continue to register, there's not much to see: the Virtual Mall is dark. She gropes around for the railings, finds them, and pulls herself up, away from the half-digested puddle of last night's tofu stir fry that sits there stinking on the stilled treadmill.

“What the fuck's going on?” she asks, again. After she gets her bearings she backs out of Console Two. Her eyes have begun to adjust to the darkness: she can see, now, that the pedestrian concourse outside of Virtual Mall is suffused with the amber glow from emergency lights. She is struck by the new silence of everything.

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“Maybe the power will come back up in a second,” Gordon says.

“My God,” Samantha says. “I think the whole mall’s gone out. Come and see.”

“I can’t leave,” Gordon says. “I’ve got to stay here with the machines.”

“They weigh two tons each, Gordon. It’s not like somebody’s going to steal them.”

“Somebody’s got to keep an eye on the place. Maybe the power will come back up. It could come back on any second.”

Samantha goes out into the smoky new world.

The TVs are off; the clean polyethnic faces have vanished. The T. Rex has been stopped dead in mid-lunge. You could climb into its frozen wide-open mouth and count its teeth if you wanted. She wanders into the plaza, and joins the others gathered there, a growing group of people, standing among the half-finished ice statues, stunned, silent, looking around wondrously. The mall, the entire mall, is now only lit by the warm yellow light from those small round bulbs—funny that Samantha never noticed them before, they’re everywhere—and by the red EXIT signs.

She nearly bumps into an old man wearing a porkpie hat; he, too, is making his slow way around the plaza; he too is craning his head around to take in the freshness of the sight, the novelty of witnessing the world of novelty struck still. The two of them scope each other out for a second—something about him, his stooped-professor shuffle, or *something*, reminds her of her departed dad—and each of them simultaneously cracks a grin that mirrors the other’s.

“What do you think of all this?” asks Samantha.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” he says. “I’m seventy-one. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

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“It’s great,” says Samantha. “It *is* amazing. Amazing is exactly the word.”

The two of them fall into walking side-by-side; they round the array of ice blocks; they say nothing, but together they examine the strange pleasingness of the half form/half formlessness of those unfinished sculptures. Samantha admires the way they have shape, some order coming out of chaos, but she also admires that the ice surrounding the emerging shapes hasn’t been all carved away yet; she likes that the tender new order is still married to the material it is made from, the chaos that surrounds it; she wishes that they would be left that way.

“Hmh,” says the old man, a satisfied sound.

It makes her think of songs. She wishes that she could write songs containing an element of that union, equal parts structure and noise, equal parts chord and wind, equal parts harmony and water. And she begins to hear a music in her head. She begins to remember the things that she can do; she begins to remember what is possible. This music in her head comes from somewhere, she couldn’t tell you where, it pours in like it’s from another dimension, it plays and plays and plays, each note suggests the next, it constructs itself as perfect as anything, and it’s not like anything she’s written before and it’s *good*. She knows it is good.

She turns to the old man. “I’m writing a song about this,” she says.

“Good for you,” he says.

“I mean *right now*. I’m writing a song about this *right now*. I’ve got to get home. I’ve got to get to my guitar.”

“Well, don’t waste your time here talking to this old fool, young lady. Get to it! Off you go.”

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“Right,” she says.

She is tuned in to the music. She is listening. She doesn’t hear the clatter of footsteps behind her. She turns.

Two security guards rushing in the opposite direction bump into her, spinning her around in a half-circle. One of them, the one who struck squarer against Samantha’s shoulder, also spins; he and Samantha each turn around the pivot of their colliding shoulders. Each of them end up facing the other, but turned around in the opposite direction from which they were headed. The guard goes half-crouched and puts his palms up towards her—either to catch her were she to fall or to ward off an attack were she to attempt one—and he surveys her face for a second. Whatever mixture of equilibrium and nonaggression he’s looking for there, he apparently finds, because he drops the protective stance and starts to run off after his companion, who had only grazed Samantha, and hadn’t spun, or stopped.

“Okay,” shouts the lead guard, into his walkie-talkie. “We’re just coming through Concourse Plaza A now. We’ll be there in a minute.”

The old man is at her side. “Are you all right?” he asks.

“Ouch,” Samantha says, rubbing her shoulder.

“I’m seventy-one, and that’s one thing that I’ve certainly found to remain the same through all my days,” the old man says. “Police will always be police, and they will always care the least for the people they will say they are protecting. Now: are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Samantha says. She hears a baby crying somewhere far off in the mall’s depths.

“I’m fine. I’ve just got to go.”

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“It is nice to have met you.”

She turns again and starts following the trail of glowing red EXIT signs. People are beginning to *run* past her, as though the mall had become a deathtrap and not simply gone a few lumens darker. *God, Samantha thinks. Turn off the registers for five minutes and everyone gets hysterical? So fucking absurd.*

She crosses in front of the maw of one of the mall’s big “anchor stores”—Sears—and she hears this roar, a dull roar, low, angry, coming from the store’s darkened bowels. She stops walking, stands there, peers into the murk of the vestibule. A woman hastily pushing a two-baby stroller emerges, spares Samantha one quick look, and hurries on down the concourse.

“Hey,” Samantha says. “What’s going on?”

The woman looks back at Samantha for a short moment, shakes her head and says “Goddamn *kids*, bunch of *menaces*,” and then continues on her way.

“What?” Samantha says. She can’t comprehend from whence this woman’s hostility might be coming. She’s just *standing* here, after all, in front of Sears, her hands jammed in her pockets, listening; she may have an alluvial fan of vomit down the front of her shirt, but she’s certainly not participating in any really *menacing* activity, and, besides, it’s dark and you can’t really *see* the puke anyway.

The roar from the inside of Sears grows louder. She can hear a beat pounding through it. Beat, beat, beat, beat, roar. Beat, roar. She stands there, with a definite sensation that she could call *wanting to go* welling up inside her, and yet she does not move.

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A man in a dress shirt and tie runs out of the roaring darkness, his face gory with blood leaking from a nasty gash in his forehead. By the time he registers, he is past her and gone. Beat, beat, beat. She can hear the howls of ecstatic children emerging from the wilderness of racks of blouses, from the dark country governed now only by mannequins and the expensive hardware of dead alarm systems. The music in her mind, *her* music, which she'd thought was safe, cloistered there in the velvety cell of her head, pales and withers. All at once, it seems like nothing. In the face of the beat and roar and the screams in the darkness, it seems like nothing.

The concourse around her is filling with a thick pulse of people moving hurriedly towards the exits, any exit, whichever is nearest. The TVs offer no guidance. Now no one will ever remember where they parked.

She recognizes the music surging out of Sears now. It's this band called Rage Against The Machine—Jason used to play a CD of theirs obsessively, the one with the immolating monk on the cover. It's a band that she's enjoyed at times²¹ but one which frightens her when she hears it coming at top volume of the recesses of a blacked-out department store.

Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me

Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me

Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me

²¹ She particularly remembers one day in the townhouse when her and Gregor jumped around on a bed in their sock feet, posturing and sneering and grabbing at their crotches and air-guitaring the big metally riffs, and she remembers that when Gregor modulated his voice to match his gringoid inflections to those of the band's angry frontman, she'd collapsed on the bed in a fit of giggles and kicked her feet in the air until Gregor fell down next to her and they laughed themselves out and kissed until they were silly again—a pleasant memory, but one that shoots Samantha through with hot veins of dread and fear given the mileage between that setting and the setting in which she hears the same music now.

Something whizzes past her head. It lands somewhere behind her, and skitters away down the concourse, scrabbling over the tiles. She turns to see what it was and something hits her in the soft pocket underneath her ribs, hard, she actually cries out: the thing falls and clatters against the floor. It's a D battery.

Four kids—they can't be over eighteen—come out of Sears. One of them has a handful of those heavy batteries, another carries on his shoulder a portable stereo—the kind Samantha used to hear called a “ghetto blaster”—emitting Rage at top volume, the third has his arms loaded up with CDs, still in the plastic anti-theft cases, and the fourth one carries a hammer and what appears to be a woman's arm, a prize apparently wrenched from an unfortunate mannequin. All the boys are white and all of them look affluent, almost preppy, dressed in clean button-down shirts and fancy athletic shoes, their haircuts neat and up-to-date.

The one with the batteries—he's got blister packs full of them jammed into his waistband, Samantha notices—plucks another one from his supply and wings it at Samantha's head. She ducks. It's definitely time to go.

“You rotten pricks,” she says.

“Fuck you, bitch,” says the one with the stereo. They're only about fifteen feet from her. Other pedestrians are hanging back; they don't seem to want to get too close; the drama unfolding here, in front of Sears, is totally blocking the way to the nearest exit, though, and so the pedestrians seeking escape are kind of piling up, forming a crowd. Babies are crying, little kids are screaming.

“Call Security!” someone shouts. “Where's Security?”

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“Don’t call Security,” Samantha shouts, turning her head to address whoever-it-was in the crowd. “You think the rent-a-cops are going to make things any *better*? Everybody needs to just *calm down*. We need to just calm down and work things out *together*.” She can barely hear herself over the blaring stereo. A battery, thrown hard from only a short distance away, hits her behind the ear, sending a star of pain through her head.

“Ugh,” she says, her hand going to the point of impact. Her equilibrium is off; she can barely stay standing. Her head is ringing. Someone is screaming “Security! Security!” Someone else goes “You want to fuck with someone, you God-damn kids? I’ll give you someone to fuck with.” She stumbles directly through the cluster of boys, trying to get away, to disappear into the crowd. A dozen CDs in anti-theft casing hit the floor and scatter. Plastic crunches under her feet. She pushes through the crowd and through the yellow light. The kids seem to have dropped their bounty and are splitting up, they’re going four ways through the ring of shrieking pedestrians, chased after by a handful of angry shoppers, middle-aged men gone passionate with the desire to be the hero, to save the day, to apprehend the bad kids, to beat them into submission if necessary. The fingers of heroes are jammed into the faces of bystanders. Purses are dropped to the floor. Samantha is pushing, pushing through the wall of panicked bodies; a balloon tied to the handle of a stroller bumps benignly against her face; her foot hooks on the stroller’s wheel, and as she pushes forwards she drags the whole contraption over. Samantha nearly stumbles, catches herself, yes, but just barely. A spilled child begins wailing. A mother screams.

My God, my God, look out!

Samantha runs.

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She wants to get back to the plaza with the ice sculptures, where everything was so calm just a few minutes ago; she wants to find that old man; she hopes that he'll say something comforting and sensible; except now everything everywhere is disordered, people are screaming, people are screaming just to keep track of where they are in the surging current of bodies, just to mark their identity in some small primal way; the old man is gone like a dream; there is no calm anywhere now.

Except there. Someone standing still. A rectangular light holding stable against the rush and pull of the stampede.

It's Dmitrovitch. He's got his laptop. He's standing in the middle of the concourse cradling the laptop in his left arm and holding the tiny mic up above his head with his right hand. She forces her way to him.

"Hi, Samantha," he says. "I think I've found the sound to trade Conrad for Cobain's exploding head. Mass panic at local mall. Pretty good, as far as zeitgeist goes." The expression on his face is one of absolute neutrality.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she says.

"It doesn't matter to me either way. This event is occurring in a culture I left behind a long time ago. Physically I'm here, sure, but physicality matters less and less in the electronic age. It's where your head is at. My head is everywhere, Samantha. Thanks to the Net it's possible to be everywhere. I care about this no more or no less than I care about an exploding bus in the Gaza Strip. My corporeal body simply happens to be here to initiate documentation."

"I knocked somebody's baby onto the floor."

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“I don’t mean to be rude, Samantha, but aren’t *you* the one who should be enjoying this? Isn’t this what you wanted? The culture going down in glorious ruin?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“Well, you’ve got the bases covered, at least.”

“It’s just not supposed to happen this way.”

“Shopping is the only thing that keeps Americans from reverting back to savages. Take it away and you take away our most civilized impulses.”

“Dmitrovitch.”

“I’m glad you came to see me,” he says.

“I didn’t—I’m not—I mean—”

“Come on,” Dmitrovitch says. “Friends again?”

“I don’t—”

“You’re bleeding,” he says.

She touches the spot behind her ear and, sure enough, her fingers come away sticky. She stands there, her shoulders and chest streaked with blood and puke, dizzy and confused, scared and achey and frustrated, and Dmitrovitch, God damn him, won’t even put down his computer to hug her, to hold her. According to what he says, he’s not even here.

She is here. It is dark and the world is full of noise, and the one radiant tendril of melody that she holds in her mind is drowned by it all, it is not enough to carry her away, not enough to transcend the crap of the world: she is here, stuck here.

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She imagines how she would appear to herself were she able to see through the eyes of the God she doesn't believe in; she pictures herself as a dot, a single dot positioned deep in the complexity of the mall's floorplan, labeled *you are here*. You are here. You are this dot. A tiny thing; a shape with no dimension. Packed infinitely dense with sadness and fear. That is exactly where she is.

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