

# PART THREE

## THE NIKE RAVE

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# 15

Summer dies. Every year Samantha forgets; every year the melancholia of the autumn that swells just ahead on the sidereal cycle catches her off guard; every year around this time she draws into a shell; she avoids everyone; she feels inexplicably sad and inexplicably sad and inexplicably sad for weeks; and every year it isn't until August begins gathering to a dusky close that she realizes that fall, the cancerous houseguest, has begun to forward his bags, and once again she has failed to prepare, failed to marshal the inner resources that will allow her to bear the visit stoically, with dignity. This realization alone is often enough to make her cry.

The earth passes through the Perseids, the sky goes hairy with meteors, Samantha sits in a lawn chair in Laura's back yard, drinks gin-and-tonics (slanted, ratio-wise, towards the gin) and she sobs uncontrollably until she's exhausted herself. She'll fall asleep and drop the tumbler onto the grass (where it shall discharge its sad broken wedge of lime); she'll wake up at four am—the flesh of her aching body feeling somehow *rumped*, her back twisted and twanging and sore—and she'll drag herself back to the Magic Danish Bed and sleep again until noon.

She hasn't seen the boys. She had begun to think that maybe Gregor *had* stayed away from the diner that last night because of her. She used that inveigling logic that depression provides for the mind to reason this way: if those three were all friends before she came along, and if her very existence was tearing that workable unit apart now, then maybe the best thing she

could do would be to *stay away*, let them all get back to their lives, back to the workable triad that predated her encounters with any of them.

She still sees Dmitrovitch, but since August hit she's only been going over there once or twice a week. There's a certain quality of *beatness* that she suffuses her entire life now; when she's alone she can detect it only if she focuses inward (she tries not to do this, and the gin-and-tonics help) but when she's around Dmitrovitch it jolts scarily to the surface of her personality; he brings it out in her somehow; his inattention, his perfunctory comments; when she's over there now she finds herself developing into this wheedling, craven creature; begging for a single crumb of attention; and there's a part of her that stands aside and watches it all happening and this part of her invariably lets loose with a rank torrent of contempt—*Why are you doing this? For God's sake, woman, be strong! Look at you. Look at you. You're turning into a helpless twit! Why? Get yourself together, you stupid bitch*—and none of it helps, none of it can translate properly into useful action, it all gets garbled; she'll find herself talking to Dmitrovitch's back while he's sitting at the computer—"I know, I know how this must look to you, I'm turning into one of those helpless twits, I'm sorry, I'm really not, it's important to me that you don't think I'm helpless, because, I don't know, you're really important to me right now"—and the only result is that the observing part of her brain will heap more contempt upon her—*oh, God, shut up, shut up, you're only making it worse. Listen to you talk. Listen to all that whining. How can you be so stupid? How can you be so God damn stupid?*

She's taken to passing the evenings by going to bars by herself. She goes to the Tin Hopper. The new semester at the U. hasn't started yet, but the place still fills up, and it fills up with people who provide a sort of bitter alcoholic entertainment for her. She scowls at the

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people slurring loudly along to the jukebox's Van Morrison CD. She levels withering deadpan looks at the flatheaded guys who smile across the room at her. She plays pool. She gets better at it. She beats the jerks who think that they can beat her because they're used to imagining themselves as being better at anything than women are. She takes their money. *This isn't such a bad life*, she finds herself thinking, sometimes, as she wobbles her way home on her bike (the pints of Guinness help.) Sometimes she goes to the bar in the afternoon, gets a pint, and sets up a rack just for herself. Just to practice. Sometimes she stays at the bar through dinnertime and into the evening. The longest she's stayed (so far) was eight hours.

It's a late August afternoon. If this were last year, or the year before, or the year before that, she'd be packing up boxes of books and school supplies and clothes, preparing to go back to college for another year; she'd be looking over her schedule of classes, reading the names of the courses and imagining what sorts of things she might learn from those courses in the next four months. She tries not to think about this. She feeds Adrienne, waters the plants, sorts the mail into its piles. She's getting ready to jump on her bike and head down to the Hopper when the phone rings.

The phone is ringing. That seems odd to her these days. The *phone is ringing*

"Hello?" she says, and the word comes out of her mouth in the register of genuine inquiry, it sounds not like an automatic greeting but like a real question, as though she is actually interrogating the object of the receiver in her hand, asking it whether there actually is someone on the other end.

"Samantha?" It's Jason.

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“Yeah,” she says. She suddenly realizes that she feels sleepy, or, more accurately, she feels cloudy in the mind. “Yeah, hi.” She realizes that she’s felt this way for maybe days now, and that she’d been assuming, until now, that the sluggishness—the syrupiness—of her recent brain was just *normal*, the way her brain *really was*, and it comes as a pleasant surprise (now that she’s pulling her thoughts back into the excited rhythms that come from talking to someone that she is just beginning to recall that she actually *likes*) to remember that the electric substance of her cognition really *isn’t* slow as mayonnaise and twice as thick. “Yeah,” she says, blinking. “Hey, Jason. How *are* you?”

“You know. Fine. Look,” he says—and he almost sounds abashed—“I’m sorry we haven’t been in touch in a while.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess—I mean—I mean I’m sorry too.”

“It was shitty for us not to call you for so long. It’s nothing against you; we’ve just been busy. We’ve been getting ready for this rave—”

“The Nike Rave,” Samantha says.

“Yeah, now look, I know how you feel about it, so—”

“When *is* it?” Samantha asks. “I don’t even know when it is.”

“When *is* it?”

“Yeah. I’ve sort of lost track.”

“Oh. It’s, um, tomorrow.”

“Shit, really?”

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“Yeah. There’s posters up all around town for it, at all the record stores and all. Fred printed up some really nice flyers. Full color.”

“I haven’t been getting out very much lately,” Samantha lies. “I’ve been, um, kind of busy taking care of things here.”

“Well, that’s part of why I’m calling—”

“What time is the Rave supposed to start tomorrow?”

“The invitations just say ‘after dark’... are you going to come?”

“Jason—” Samantha says, “of *course* I’m going to come. You guys are my *friends*.”

“I just—” Jason says, “it’s just—the last time we talked it didn’t seem like you really thought—it just didn’t seem like you were feeling very supportive. I thought you might want to sit out.”

*He wants me to sit out*, Samantha thinks, on impulse, and immediately she begins to wonder if that’s true. She has to bite back the urge to ask his permission; she has to consciously resist sliding into the mode that she slides into with Dmitrovitch all the time now, automatically.

“I just—” Jason says, still stumbling along in the face of her silence, “I didn’t—I guess I didn’t want you to be disappointed in us.”

“You’re still planning on doing your Patsy Cline thing,” Samantha says.

“Look,” Jason says.

“Hey, if that’s the way you plan on revolutionizing the world—”

“Samantha, look,” Jason says. “There’s some things we don’t agree on. Okay? I don’t want that to stand in the way of us being friends. Your opinion is really important to me, yes, but

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it's not the *only* opinion I have to think about. I don't want to spend all of my days fighting with *you* about what direction I'm going to take *my* band in. Okay?"

The angry yaw Jason's voice takes here shocks Samantha a little; she had a spirit of reconciliation stirring within her, preparing to manifest itself in a you-guys-are-my-friends/just-do-what-you-have-to-do-type statement; having that impulse blocked in this fashion causes it to sour somewhat, gets her a little mad herself.

"Okay," she says, finally.

"Look, I didn't call you to talk about the rave," Jason says.

"Go on."

"I called to talk to you about Gregor. Caccian and I are having a surprise housewarming for him."

"A housewarming?"

"Yeah."

"Gregor moved out?"

"Yeah. He moved into this new place at the beginning of the month. He got a workman's comp check from Barnes and Noble in the middle of July and he took it and put a deposit down on an apartment." Jason pauses. "I thought you knew."

"No. Gregor hasn't called me. I don't think he wants to talk to me."

"God, the two of you. . . *he's* been moping around for weeks saying that he thinks *you* don't want to talk to *him*. He feels really bad about cursing you out or whatever happened the

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day he fucked up his hand. So just come over and the two of you can work it out however you need to, okay?”

“Look, Jason, thanks for the invite, but—” Samantha begins, and she pauses, cringing, not wanting to ask but needing to, the army of insecurities amassed inside her insisting on it, “—but are you *really sure* you want me there? I want you guys and Gregor to have a good time. I know you think of me as like the ex-girlfriend who fucks everything up.”

There’s a lag for a minute. Samantha doesn’t know if he’s thinking it over or what. Finally he says “I don’t think of you that way, Samantha. I mean, for God’s sake, the whole time all I ever said was that I didn’t want to choose sides.”

“Yeah. I guess I always took that to mean that you didn’t want to choose *my* side.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of *have* to stay friends with you. There’s not too many women who will put up with all my shit, so I’d better keep you.”

“Nice,” Samantha says. She relaxes, a little, this sort of backhanded compliment at least recreating the illusion of the normal state between them.

“So, anyway, are you going to come?”

“You’re having a surprise housewarming?”

“Yeah.”

“How does *that* work, exactly?”

“We were over at his new place on Saturday, and he fell asleep on the couch. I left Caccian to watch him; I took his keys off the kitchen table, and I went down to the hardware store and made duplicates of all of ‘em.”

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“I don’t believe it.”

“What? You *want* your friends to have duplicates of your keys. In case you ever lose them or get locked out or something. It’s a really smart idea to let your friends have duplicates.”

“He didn’t exactly *let* you have a duplicate.”

“He was *tired*. He was *asleep*. He’s had to pick up some more hours, you know, to afford this place. I knew he’d *appreciate* the idea; I didn’t figure I should *wake him up* to *ask* him.”

“Did you *tell him* you’d done it after he woke up?”

“Not in so many words, no.”

“I love you, Jason, but you’re a son of a bitch.”

“Yeah yeah yeah. So, anyway, Caccian and I are going to go let ourselves into his place while he’s at work so we can throw him this party. Everybody deserves a housewarming party, but the irony of it is that when you’re just moving into a place is like the *worst* time to have a party—you’re busy and flustered and everything’s in upheaval. So we’re going to set up the party *for* him.”

“In his apartment? Without him knowing?”

“Yeah. Yes, yes, I’ll let him know that I made duplicates of his keys when he shows up. It’s not like he’s not going to *figure it out* when he sees us in his house, you know.”

“Okay, okay. What time?”

“He gets off tonight at I think nine. So you could show up at around eight.”

“Should I bring a gift or something?”

“Yeah. It’s like, a housewarming, remember?”

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“What does he need? I don’t even know what he needs.”

“He needs *everything*. His apartment looks like a collection of fucking rejects from a fucking church rummage sale. The guy doesn’t even have like two matching forks.”

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She points her feet and slides them into the worn jerkyness of her boots; she takes the splintered aglets between her fingers and makes the laces crisscross up the ladder, and she thinks on what Gregor might need. She thinks of what he needs and where she can go to get it.

She has money—Laura just sent her her monthly hundred bucks—and she’s willing to spend it. It’s important that she get this gift right: since this will be the first time she’s seen Gregor since they kind of fell out two months ago, the gift will do double duty, serve as both housewarming and reconciliatory offering.

Her mind turns first to alcohol. Everybody needs a bottle of some kind of good liquor for around the house. She could go out and pick up a bottle of Absolut, she thinks, there’s something about Absolut that’s classy—and the image of a bottle of it materializes in her mind, front and center, sort of glowing from within, the bold blue serifless letters that spell out the brand name levitating over the finer cursive that spells out all the particulars, yeah, indeed, it’s *classy—but God*, she asks herself then, *doesn’t it sort of freak you that you can see that bottle so clearly in your mind?* It’s not like she doesn’t know that that image in her mind has been put there on purpose (and the infinite variants on it, because of course she has some of the variants on it indexed up

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there as well<sup>22</sup>), it's more that she's not sure how concerned she should be about it: twenty-one years fills the great filing cabinet of the brain with a lot of stuff (the lyrics to terrible old songs, the names of boys she had crushes on in third grade, a fading, patchy list of ways in which an animal cell differs from a plant cell)—isn't it natural and forgivable, she wonders, that some portion of that stuff should be created by advertisers? Isn't it? Is it?

She doesn't know. What she knows is that by perpending on that bottle, and all the characteristics of it that she's inadvertently memorized—the gunmetally hockey puck of the cap, the seal that the faintly Leninish head broods forth from (his expression heavy with the weight of some unknown Swedish ideology)—she's begun to make it seem a little sinister. That she can hold this vision of this bottle, that it is unshakable, luminous as radium in the mind, that it is mutable only in the multifarious ways that a phalanx of admen and artists and salespeople has *designed* it to be mutable, that she can polymorph it—from a photograph of a bottle into a painting of a bottle into a pile of butterflies or a bouffant hairdo in the shape of a bottle into a page of prose which takes a bottle as its subject—but that all of these visions have been preconfigured for her by an organization whose name she does not know—all of these facts interlock to form a realization: some quadrant of her mental territory that she has only mapping for the first time now has already been colonized by a force outside of her. A company.

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<sup>22</sup> If you sat her down with a piece of paper she could probably list fifteen different variants without having to think about it too hard. Part of the reason this is true is that one of the Minor Characters, a cosmopolitan little pixie named Amy who owned no less than six little black dresses, used to tear out each new Absolut ad she'd encounter in a magazine and—for reasons that Samantha never thought to ask about—she'd tape them into a giant growing array on her dorm room wall. Samantha spent a whole bunch of evenings for the better part of a year (the year she was nineteen, turning twenty) staring at different advertisements for the same product. First three, then ten, fifteen, twenty-five. It peaked out at about thirty.

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Gregor barely even *drinks*. She's not thinking.

Okay. She thinks. She thinks about Gregor. She thinks about what Gregor likes to do. She knows he likes to smoke weed with the boys. She knows he likes to play the bass. (She wonders, though, if he still does—he seemed so down on his rock-star fantasy the last time she saw him, that angry day on the porch, and she thinks maybe that his wounded despair might have led him to the ill-considered decision to give up playing even once his hand had healed. She's not even certain how—or if—his hand *has* healed.) She could go down to Big Beaver Guitars and buy him new bass strings (she knows the kind he likes, but *God*, she thinks, *what a boring gift*.) She could get him a fakebook, although she knows that the bands she'd be able to find fakebooks for would all be way too commercial for Gregor's taste, she sees herself in Big Beaver trying to decide between the new Metallica or the Dave Matthews Band, knowing that whichever one she chose, Gregor would scorn—oh, sure, he'd do it self-effacingly; he'd make fun of himself for not appreciating the mainstream; he'd lampoon himself, ridicule his own pretension, yes, but the gift itself would be reduced to no more than a gag gift. Metallica as cutting-edge camp.

Besides, she scolds herself, what kind of a housewarming gift is a fakebook? Aren't you supposed to get something *for the house*? The type of gift you see written up in the newspapers in the "Living" section<sup>23</sup>? Half her mind turns, then, to housewares, appliances, furniture—the other

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<sup>23</sup> In theory, she thinks there's something pretty insidious about the late-90s emphasis on "Living" as a kind of high art or structured activity, evinced not only by the steady increase of those "Living" and "Lifestyle" sections in papers and magazines but also (particularly egregiously) by the near-total success of the *Martha Stewart's Living* phenomenon. Samantha would say that if you rewire the meaning of the word "Living," if you free it from designating the straight flush of basic biological processes, and make it instead signify the perpetual colorful picnic-lunch-in-Heaven fantasy vision of what the middle class is supposed to be, then you begin to treat your participation in daily everyday life with a heightened attention

half is still kicking around things Gregor likes to do (smoking weed the primary remaining option.) When these two halves coordinate she reaches the giddy conclusion that she should get him one of those giant bongos. How perfect, she thinks, plunk a five-foot-high tube of bright red controlled-substance-conveying plastic in the middle of the living room and—presto!—*instant* first apartment!

Maybe not. Gregor's always smoked his weed just fine using the old-fashioned ZigZag papers. There's no need to go spending a hundred bucks just to make a process more colorful and more cumbersome. She wants to get him something he *needs*.

She walks around the house, examining things that Laura has that Gregor probably doesn't have. Drapes. Automatic coffeemaker. Nesting pieces of Teflonny cookware. None of it is anything that is willing to buy; she's having one of those moments where the aura of self-importance generated by certain objects falters, a moment where she can see through the illusion and perceive which things are actually fundamental to the running of a home (the unglamorous things: the bucket under the sink, the garbage can, the lamp, the clock) and which aren't (that hook w/stand that you're supposed to hang bananas from, the egg slicer, the gravy boat.)

She looks at the built-in shelf of cookbooks and she thinks back—wasn't there a cookbook that she wanted to buy once? For cheap? Maybe she could go out to Barnes and Noble and pick Gregor up one of those bargain cookbooks. But no—Gregor works at Barnes and

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towards the materials with which the appearance of that life is manufactured. No longer need you buy an entire array of new pillowcases and bathmats and assorted gewgaws only for a housewarming or when little Janey goes off to college, the phenomenon suggests, now you should buy all of that stuff just because you are *alive* and it is your duty, as a living ("Living") being, to dress your existence up just as pretty as possible.

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Noble, any books that he wants he's probably already picked up. Besides, she's never really known Gregor to cook; she herself rarely cooks more than varieties on the basic stirfrys and vegetarian casseroles and chilis and pastas that she taught herself in high school; the cookbook would just serve as another lifestyle decoration.

She thinks of the clay mask hanging in Laura's bedroom and she repeats the word *decoration* and then she crosses it out and she thinks the word *art*. Art. She's not sure what the word means anymore, if she ever was, if anyone ever is. She doesn't know if the clay mask is art, she doesn't know if it's decoration, or anthropology, or what it is. If she thinks about what her friends, the brothers Price, the YesMen, are doing, she doesn't know if it's art, or commerce, or some hybrid of the two. She's not certain if she and Gregor made art with Now Hiring. She's not certain if Gregor is making art when he sits (*sat*, she reminds herself) on his parents' porch and touched strings with no voice to them—she thinks for a moment that maybe that's the truest art, just sitting somewhere, practicing, making pieces of things for yourself. She doesn't know. All she really knows for sure, about art, are three things, and she thinks them now, three thoughts, lighting up in quick succession. One: it is more important to have a piece of art in your home than another specialized appliance. Two: the fewer copies there are of something, the more each copy tends to cost, so for lots of people, for the people whose lives might be enriched the *most* by a one-of-a-kind piece of art in their homes, art is unaffordable (in the market of the world, the lower shelves—the ones within reach—tend to be stocked with appliances.) And three: to take it upon yourself to create a one-of-a-kind piece of art is scary—what if you fail? what if you make

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something that's just junk or trash?—but it can also be fun, and you don't need to pay just to try it.

Therefore, Samantha concludes, if she were to make something and give it to Gregor, she could provide him with a thing that—unlike a banana hook or a coffeemaker—he could probably never save up to buy for himself: a thing someone has created uniquely with their own hands, something intended to be *art*, whatever that may mean. And maybe—maybe—that will provide Gregor with an enjoyment of a certain flavor, different from the flavor that a banana hook or a coffeemaker might provide.

She looks at the pile of junk mail on the kitchen counter. The pile has grown and grown: now it's actually three piles stacked adjacent to one another. Catalogs. Nordstrom's, J. Crew, Patagonia, Victoria's Secret. Book catalogs, catalogs full of teaching aids, catalogs full of objects for people who enjoy the icons of cartography.<sup>24</sup> Thick piles full of images of what the world has for sale. There must be pounds. What the world tries to sell you in the space of a summer.

She fishes around in Laura's utility drawer until she finds a box of razor blades and a glue stick.

She cuts out pictures of stacks of T-shirts (teal, avocado, sienna). She slices water-chestnut-shaped fragments from the roof of a rich person's veranda. She's like the apocalypse. She finds the images of what she begins to mentally refer to as Imaginary America—a beaming

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<sup>24</sup> Envelopes fashioned from surplus maps, shower curtains printed with compass roses, T-shirts featuring renditions of the East Wind cut-and-pasted from archaic nautical charts (where he's usually portrayed as a wrathfully-exhaling hybrid of Dizzy Gillespie and God), desktop sextants, that sort of thing.

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mother and father reach out as their requisite toddler stumbles totteringly forwards; an older woman wearing a sunhat (\$55), reclines in a hammock in front of an explosion of rosebushes, her bucket and trowel out of focus nearby. She takes these images and shreds them. She tears the parents free of their baby, carves the smiles from their faces, and throws the rest of them away. She cuts off the baby's arms and points its fat grasping hands towards the opulent weave of photographically-enlarged neckties. She decapitates the teens in the spotless red convertible, sets their heads (and the \$90 sunglasses adorning them) aside, then starts breaking the shiny death car down for scrap, cutting long parametric ribbons of light from the door panels. She can't be stopped. She is ripping the world into pieces.

She's been on this task for an hour or so, moving her little scraps around on a piece of cardboard, gluing them down when they start to look right, increasing the density of images and text, creating a complicated advertisement simultaneously for nothing and everything, and she picks up the messy pile of a weekly circular; underneath it is a postcard, addressed to her. She recognizes Laura's handwriting.

She flips the postcard over. On the front is a picture of an elk standing in the midst of a coppice of pine trees and the words *Fairbanks, Alaska*.

She stares at the elk; she stares at the trees and into the clear air above them. She looks around her at the bits of the culture she has decimated. Stainless steel. Porcelain enamel. Pro-quality compressed graphite. Please indicate color when ordering. Ask for Department EQ783.

She stares into the trees.

There is a way, she thinks, to cut through the world, into another world.

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# 16

“You guys are like the Dirty Dish Fairies. Somebody goes out, they leave their sink full of dirty dishes, they come back and—like magic!—the dishes are clean and put away.”

“We’d have been *lucky* if he’d left the dirty dishes in the sink,” says Jason, thrusting his arms deep into the lacy froth of suds. “The sinkful of dishes you see before you is the result of some serious collection. There were fucking dishes *all over* this apartment. There was at least one dirty glass on *each shelf* of that bookcase.”

“There were three plates stacked on the sofa,” Caccian says, drying off a pan with a greyish dishtowel and placing it on the counter.

“I found a fucking *pot* like half-full of spaghetti in the motherfucker’s *bed*,” Jason says. “With a *fork* in it. Like, what, he fell asleep in the middle of his midnight snack? You don’t want to even *hear about* the basement. He brings like bowls of cereal and oatmeal and shit down there in the morning and I guess he gets into practicing or something because they were all still down there like all half-eaten.”

“The mugs down there had a serious mold problem,” Caccian adds. “Icebergs of mold.”

“I don’t need to tell you that once oatmeal hardens it forms like this *permanent bond* with the bowl it’s in. You can soak it all day and it won’t fucking budge. I think that’s what they

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hold jet engines together with.” Jason pulls a plate out of the foamy sink and scrubs at it with the scoury green face of the kitchen sponge. “He had better appreciate this, that’s all.”

“I’m sure he will,” Samantha says.

Even with the dishes cleaned up, Gregor’s apartment is not exactly luxury housing. Maybe once-upon-a-time: the apartment is half the ground floor of what must have been a pretty nice three-story house, once, in the earlier part of the century, before the white families of America fled to the suburbs, empowered by boom money and new automobiles and fear, leaving in their wake a downtown scraped clean of everyone who could afford to have that three-story house on the outskirts of that downtown all to themselves. Now the house is partitioned up, re-designed, re-compartmentalized into a crude hexad, repiped grotesquely, shot through with a tree of plumbing blossoming into toilets and sinks and gas stoves; now each resident gets an independent fraction of the grandiose whole that must once have been. Samantha imagines Gregor’s bedroom was probably once a maid’s quarters; the cramped, windowless living area with the uneven floor, a scullery. The place is lousy with the ghosts of little blond private-school girls and beautiful faceless mothers and stentorian fathers who pulled their money out of that strange zone of flux and numbers that produces wealth without labor. Samantha can practically smell the evaporated affluence; the affluence that has been replaced here by drab grey area carpet and naked lightbulbs, by walls made rough and uneven from a thousand coats of paint, each laid directly on top of the last flaking coat, by tile stained with a generation of indelible grime.

The scullery/living room is done up as festively as the twins could manage in a few hours. They strung a dozen balloons in assorted shapes and colors from the sagging ceiling; they shoved

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the dirty laundry into one corner to make room for the centerpiece of the apartmentwarming party: a long conference table. Jason told Samantha that, one night last week, he and Caccian had keyed into one of the places where one of them was temping, wrangled the table out of an unlocked storage closet, loaded it into the van and made off with it. Apparently there's been a lot of that going on, because the table's loaded up with office contraband of all sorts—pads of Post-it Notes (looks like a gross), a half-dozen coffee mugs from someplace called "Davis Rehab," four reams of copier paper, a pyramid of boxed rolls of Scotch tape and two of those heavy desktop tape dispensers, a time-date stamp, a vertical stapler, about a thousand ball-point pens, a pad of pre-printed "Employee Progress Reports," eight boxes of coffee filters, two huge, unopened canisters of non-dairy creamer, and, clamped to the table's edge, what appears to be a document shredder.

"I still can't believe you guys got all this stuff for him," Samantha says. "Lord, we thank you for this bounty that you have provided."

"We were going to go back and get some of those free-standing partitions, you know?" says Jason, draining the sink. "Those like—room dividers? But we ran out of time."

"I think the rooms in this place are divided up enough already."

"You got that straight."

"Why did Gregor move here, anyway? This place is kind of a dump."

"Yeah, I know, it's a real shithole. I think what it is is that he liked having access to the cellar," Jason says. "It's kind of dirty down there—the walls are all rough; the whole basement's basically unfinished—but he can go down there and play the bass and nobody bitches at him."

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This one's the only apartment that has basement access. It basically makes the apartment like twice the size."

"He's still practicing?"

"I guess. I think he goes down there like every morning. Isn't that what he told you, Caccian?"

Caccian shrugs and dries the last of the glasses.

"Yeah," says Jason. "Every day. Down into the dungeon to practice. Like some kind of monk in his cell."

"I guess," says Samantha.

#

It goes exactly as they planned: they turn out the lights and crouch in the scullery at nine-fifteen; they wait there, speaking only in hushed tones, until they hear the thunk-and-joggle of Gregor's key in the lock; they light the sparklers; they scream "Surprise!" the moment his head appears through the door; his golden sparklerlit face goes blank for a second, confused into a shocked muteness, as though he thinks he's dreaming, and then he breaks into a half-perplexed smile and says "You *guys*—it's not my birthday," to which Jason responds "Right, so, you're surprised, right?" Everyone laughs.

The sparklers burn out, leaving only ropey loops of smoke in the darkness. Caccian turns on the lights. Gregor scratches his head and blinks and, now that he can see, he looks at each of them in turn, still smiling—Samantha can tell by his face that he's happy to see all of them, even her—and he says "How did you guys get *in* here?" and everyone laughs again. Samantha gives him

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the collage—“Happy apartmentwarming,” she says—and he goes “Wow, thanks.” As he reaches out to take it, she looks at his hands. She can definitely tell which one’s the healed one—the new skin on the back of his right hand has a certain *blotch* quality to it, it doesn’t seem to match the rest of his skin exactly, it reminds Samantha of those spot paint jobs where the new paint just isn’t quite exactly the same as the old, so you end up with a wall that’s powder blue except for one irregular square that’s like robin’s-egg blue. There don’t seem to be any damages greater than the cosmetic marring—there’s no motor damage or anything like that, no shakes or twitches—the hand seems to have healed fine. Gregor is saying something like “Wow, you made this yourself?, I can’t believe it, thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” says Samantha.

“And where the hell did this *table* come from?” Gregor says.

“Nothing but the best in office contraband for you, my friend,” says Jason.

“Wow,” says Gregor, surveying the spread. “Just what I always wanted—a home office of my very own!”

“Ask and ye shall receive,” says Jason.

Gregor picks up one of the big canisters of non-dairy creamer. “This,” he says, “well, this is all just very special. Really. You guys—you shouldn’t have.”

“Nonsense,” says Jason. “Enjoy the thefts of our labor while you can get it.”

“That’s right,” says Gregor. “You guys are going to leave all of this behind soon, aren’t you? After tomorrow night you guys are going to be big bad *rock stars*.”

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Gregor says this, grinning like a fiend, but then his eyes flick over to Samantha for a second and his smile *fixes* in a way that doesn't seem quite natural. She knows that he must have heard about the last night at the diner; he must be wondering how she feels about it all, what she thinks about this *threshold of stardom* that the YesMen have found themselves positioned upon, whether she's lending her support to them or not.

Jason must catch Gregor throwing that glance her way, because his eyes shoot over at her too, just for a second, and then he looks back at Gregor, but he keeps her in the corner of his eye, and he says, with a little bit of a barb in his voice: "That's right. Tomorrow night is our big sell-out."

"The big sell-out," repeats Gregor.

"The Great Rock and Roll Swindle," Jason says. He's baiting her, she knows it.

"Sponsored in part by Nike Athletics, Inc."

She has to say something.

"Go ahead," she says. "*Sell out*. See if I care. I'm *on* your side. I *lied* to those Geffen fucks so that you could get what you want, remember."

The party freezes for a second, goes tense like fragile ice.

"Thanks," says Jason, finally.

"Just promise me one thing," Samantha says. "Promise me *one thing*"

Jason looks at her levelly.

"Promise me," she says, "that once you've got your nation of screaming fans that you'll get *really really preachy* on them. Then I'll forgive you."

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“Yeah,” Jason says, smiling. “That’ll be great. Once we’re rich and famous we’ll release all these records that critique entertainment industry greed.”

“I’d settle for a ‘Poverty Is Violence’ bumper sticker on your limousine.”

“How about a record of dark covers of Pete Seeger songs?”

She has to laugh at that one. “Truly you are a genius,” she says.

“Well, *duh*. Tell me something I *don’t* know.”

“I don’t know,” says Gregor, weighing the canister of non-dairy creamer between his hands, “I feel really happy for you guys. I mean, say what you will about selling out, you guys have a real opportunity here. If I were given the chance to sign to Geffen I’d jump at it, too.”

“They’d say ‘jump,’ and you’d jump, eh?” asks Samantha.

“Well, *yeah*. Being on Geffen—well, it *is*, it’s like being a rock star *for real*.”

Caccian goes into the kitchen.

“Oh, come on, Gregor, you don’t even *like* those major label bands. You haven’t bought a CD from a major label in like—in like the entire time I’ve known you. You’ve *never* bought a major label CD.”

“It’s more a political choice than an aesthetic one. Sonic Youth is pretty good. I buy the indie stuff because those voices are important to hear too. The Geffen stuff, or, whatever, the majors stuff, they’ve already got enough listeners.”

“Face it, both of you,” says Jason, “the only people who buy that indie-label stuff are people who are musicians and secretly know that they’ll never be good enough to get signed to a major label. They want to believe that there’s an audience for minor-label stuff, so they make

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*themselves* the audience. There would be no minor labels at all if there wasn't a nation full of mediocre artists to support them."

"I don't think that's true," Gregor says. "Is that true?"

"Secretly, everyone wants to be on the biggest possible label and have the biggest possible audience," Jason says. Samantha can hear Caccian rattling around with glasses or something in the kitchen.

"I'm starting to think this all has to do with the phallus," she says.

"You *would*," Jason says.

"Whatever happened to the joy of just being a local musician? Playing the local clubs and coffeehouses; performing for people who you actually recognize the faces of, or know the names of? Working to bring art to the lives of the people in your neighborhood? Isn't there some merit to that?"

Gregor shrugs. "I don't know. I mean, yeah, sure, I guess, it's just that we've all been told for so long how much we should want to be rock stars—it just seems natural."

"Come on, Samantha," says Jason, "I don't see *you* going out there and becoming the pop darling of our local coffeehouse scene."

"I never said I *wanted* to. I just asked—"

"I mean, we haven't heard peep one from you since Now Hiring broke up."

"Yeah, well, I've just been kind of busy—"

"I'm just saying that you should put your money where your mouth is, darlin'."

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Samantha opens her mouth—she’s about to say something that begins with *this isn’t about money, that’s the whole fucking point*—but Gregor turns his head towards her, puts the creamer canister down on the table, and says “So, yeah, speaking of money, Samantha, what *are* you doing for money nowadays?”

“Nothing,” says Samantha.

“Nothing?” Gregor says.

“I’ve deferred payback on my loans till 2000,” Samantha says. “And I haven’t really found a job that looks good, so, yeah, I’m just staying at Laura’s and passing the time for now.”

“You haven’t found a way to live for free yet?”

“No,” she says. “I’m thinking. I’m still thinking.”

Caccian comes back in with a heavy-looking tumbler in his hand. “I made gin-and-tonics for everyone,” he says. “I thought we could probably all use them.”

They all sit on the floral-print couch (must be a garage-sale find or an curbside acquisition or something; Samantha’s never seen the hideous thing before tonight) and nurse their gin-and-tonics for a while.

“I’m sorry this place is such a pigsty,” Gregor says. “You guys must have been pretty appalled when you came in here.”

“I think we could have done without the spaghetti pot in the bed,” Jason says. “Other than that—”

“—and the moldy mugs in the basement,” Caccian adds.

“—other than that, and the moldy mugs in the basement—”

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“—and the briefs that you’d strewn everywhere,” Caccian adds.

“—other than the spaghetti pot in the bed, and the moldy mugs in the basement, and the dirty briefs everywhere, it wasn’t too bad,” Jason finishes.

“I didn’t leave dirty briefs everywhere,” says Gregor. “That’s defamation of character.”

Jason and Caccian both shrug, as though it doesn’t really matter one way or the other.

“It’s just hard,” Gregor says. “I mean, I didn’t realize how hard it was going to be. You know, between working, and practicing, and trying to get out every once in a while, *and* keeping this place clean? You could give me like a thirty-six hour day and I *still* couldn’t do it all. I had no fucking idea. It takes like *two hours* to, like, cook a dinner, bring it out to the table, get silverware, eat it, put away all the ingredients, wash the dishes, dry the dishes, put the dishes away. I’m working eight hours a day at Barnes and Noble; an hour for lunch; I try to practice for at least two hours in the morning; I *need* at least six hours of sleep; it takes me about half an hour to get to work and half an hour to get back—that’s *eighteen hours*. I’m so drained after a day of it that I can barely keep myself from going out to Taco Bell just so I don’t have to *do* anything. I mean, I don’t *have* two hours to spare for making dinner, cleaning up dinner, forget about *shopping for* the fucking groceries—that’s at least another two hours right there. Fuck. I need a better job.”

“You don’t need a better job,” Samantha says. “You need to work fewer hours.”

“If I had a better job, I could hire people to do all the shopping and cleaning *for* me.”

“You’d need a *much* better job.”

“Fuck *jobs*, what you need is to get married,” says Jason. “Let your wife take care of all the home details.”

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“Right, like I can support a *wife* on a coffee jerk’s salary? I can’t even afford like the gas money to drive over to a woman’s house to pick her up for a date. Not that anyone’s expressed any interest in going on a *date* with me lately, anyway.”

“Get one of those mail-order ones. Charge it to Barnes and Noble.”

“All I’m saying is it’s hard. I’m behind on my practicing. I couldn’t play for like a month because of my fucked-up *hand* and I just need to like relearn my way back to the point where I was, and it just sucks to wake up in the morning and know that you’ve got a choice between practicing what you love to do and doing your laundry.”

“I hope, for our sakes, you choose every once in a while to do your laundry,” Jason says.

“Yeah,” Gregor says. “Yeah, I do. But that’s bad for what I want to do.”

“Don’t worry,” says Jason. He slams down the rest of his gin-and-tonic, throws the lime back between his molars. He begins to chew the wedge, while simultaneously trying to speak: “It’s like this. Tomorrow we get signed, we fly out to Taos for the Millenium, in January you quit and come out to L.A. and play sessionman on our record, problem solved. Can I smoke in here?”

“Come on, go outside,” Gregor says.

Jason fishes the pulverized lime out of his mouth with a finger. “You rotten P.C. bastard,” he says.

“It’s a filthy habit,” Gregor says.

“Yeah,” Jason says, “so’s leaving your dirty underwear in the living room.”

“Yeah,” Gregor says, “but one’s my filthy habit and one’s yours.”

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“Reserving the right to practice your own filthy habits while prohibiting others from doing the same, eh?” says Jason. “You realize that that’s the basis for like thousands of years of terrible wars, right?”

“Just go outside,” Gregor says.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Jason says. “Caccian? You coming?”

Caccian shrugs, tilts back the last of his tonic, and follows his brother.

“So,” says Gregor.

“Having fun?” Samantha says.

“Yeah,” Gregor says. Then he makes a face like he’s thinking about it. “Yeah,” he says again.

“Good,” Samantha says.

“Thanks for the collage,” he says.

“It felt good to make,” she says. “It’s like the first creative thing I’ve done in I don’t know *how* long.”

“You’re not playing the guitar, are you?” he asks.

“No.”

“You should come by one morning. We could jam. It’d be like old days.”

“Gregor.”

“I know you’re not really interested in putting Now Hiring back together,” he says.

“No, no, it’s not that. It’s just that I’m in this relationship right now—”

“Right,” he says. “Dmitrovitch. I remember. I don’t really care about that anymore.”

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“The whole thing is fucked,” Samantha says.

“Look, Samantha,” Gregor says. “I love you.”

“Gregor, don’t—”

“Shh,” he says. “Let me finish. I love you, and I’m probably always going to love you, unconditionally. That means whether or not you can say it back to me, whether or not you want to be with me, whatever, I’m going to keep loving you. And that means that what I should want for you is whatever is going to make you happiest. I was wrong to get mad at you that day, and I’m sorry. I want you to be happy. If you’re going to be happiest with someone else, then I want you to be with that person. It’s okay. I’d be wrong to try to stop you.”

He shrugs, and it’s a shrug that holds a complicated nuance, a shrug that seems to contain within it a half-dozen contradictory feelings: jealousy and acceptance and the ache of love. Samantha watches him, and she wants to hold that mixed-up shrug still in time, rewind it and watch it again, explicate every iota of meaning from it, but this is real life, and in real life the shrug only lasts a second and then is gone. She watches him, hoping his body will give her another glimpse of information, but it doesn’t, so she speaks:

“It’s just that I don’t know whether or not he’s right for me at all. I just feel like such shit when I’m around him.”

“Then you should get out,” Gregor says.

She looks at him. There’s something else that’s different since the last time she saw him. Something in his face has changed. It’s as though something fragile in his face broke and then repaired itself in a different shape. There’s something about him now that’s more serious, more

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solid; there's something, some look, in his face now that's more masculine; it's as though that scalding wave of coffee passed over his whole body—passed *through* what she'd have to call his *soul*, even—and burned away the remnants of what was boyish about him, leaving behind this person who she'd identify, unequivocally, as a *man*. It's strange: she'd never really thought about Gregor in that way before.

“I don't know,” she says. “Maybe I *should* get out.”

“If it doesn't make you feel good,” Gregor says, “you should quit it, because it's *never* going to make you feel good.”

“I don't know if that's true,” she says. “There's a lot of stuff that's great about him. His mind is really interesting. I just wish—oh, I don't know, I wish he could see me when I'm around you guys. I feel like a different person when I'm around him or his friends; they just make me feel so stupid; like such a fucking *girl*. When I'm around you guys I feel a lot more in control, a lot more like myself. Even Jason's bullshit—I feel like I can handle it, you know? I *like* it that he's always baiting me and pushing me. I feel like I can take him, you know? I feel like he says those absurd things—mail-order brides and shit—because he *wants* me to knock him down. When Dmitrovitch says shit to me, I feel like it's because he really wants to make me feel stupid or get me to shut up. I feel like if he could just see me around you guys he'd respect me a little bit more.”

Gregor shrugs. “Bring him to the Orientation Rave.”

“Oh, he'd never go.”

“If you tell him you want him to go, and he says ‘no,’ I'd say fuck him.”

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“Huh.”

Jason and Caccian come back in a little while after that. The talk turns idle: movies that are out, new records. It's not long before Samantha says that she's going to call it a night. The boys say goodnight and tell her they'll see her tomorrow at the Rave. She wishes them luck; she gets on her bike.

The world rotates into midnight. The floodlit vinyl banner draped above the Taco Bell's drive-thru says “Open Late,” and lights are on inside, through the windows she can see people in teal uniforms swarming; she can see capital changing hands through the drive-thru's airlock. She does not stop. She heads towards the warehouse with a head full of the things she will say when she arrives.

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# 17

She bangs with the edge of her fist on the cool metal of the warehouse's door. She stares at the dark pockmarks of corrosion that mar its surface for about a minute or so—she's working herself up to bang again when it finally swings open. Dmitrovitch stands there, just inside the door, hips out to one side in the classical pose. A blue shape of moonlight falls through the doorway and catches in the scalloped folds of his white T-shirt. His head is framed by advertisements.

“Hey,” he says. His voice is flat.

“Hey,” she says back, and, for once, her voice back to him is equally flat; it is drained of all affect—untinged by admiration or lust or the desire for attention. She is still inside towards him right now. When she speaks her voice echoes his. She wonders if he feels this still inside all the time, towards her, towards the world around him, towards the pieces of music that he makes. She wonders if he may not be that dead.

“You want to smoke?” he says, stepping outside.

“I quit,” she says. The door bangs shut behind him.

“Since when you quit?” he asks, sitting down on the concrete steps.

“I'd never been *unquit*,” she says, still standing. “I just had a couple of days where I lapsed a little. Moments of weakness.”

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“Whatever,” Dmitrovitch says. He takes a cigarette out of his own pack and lights it. Inhales. Blows smoke into the sky.

“I wanted to ask you about something. There’s something coming up on campus tomorrow night. I wanted to see if you were interested.”

“That rave thing? Yeah. I’m going.”

This manages to catch her off guard. She was prepared to have him say that he would never go in a million years; she was prepared to outline why it was important to her that he go; she was prepared to listen to his boilerplate dismissal; and, finally, she was prepared to rip into him for the past four months, prepared to take him to task for four months in which he never really once gave regard to anything she wanted that didn’t have to do with sex, prepared to use his refusal to go to this (stupid, fucking) *rave* as the latest example. She was prepared to tell him to go fuck himself, for real this time. But now he’s *going*. This rips a hole in her intended speech. She needs to buy time. She says: “What?”

“Yeah,” Dmitrovitch says. “There’s this rave-type thing up on campus tomorrow. Gordon and I are going to go.”

“You weren’t going to mention it to me? Didn’t you think that I might want to go?”

“Sure,” Dmitrovitch says. He drags on the cigarette. “I was going to ask you when you got here. You can come with us if you want.”

*This isn’t how this is supposed to work*, Samantha thinks. This is supposed to be a test; she’s supposed to be figuring out whether, for once—just *once*—he’ll relinquish his seven-year seniority and let *her* be in charge; this is supposed to be about him going to the rave *with her*, not about her

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tagging along with him and Gordon, *like always*. She doesn't know where to go with what she's got. She flails.

"It didn't seem to me like the type of thing you would like," she says.

Dmitrovitch ashes his cigarette. "Then why were you going to ask me if I wanted to go?"

"Because," Samantha says—she stops, thinks, rewords it mentally, while Dmitrovitch sits there smoking. "Because I'm going," she says, "and I thought you might want to go if you knew I was going. You know, like, *with me*."

He gives her this sort of arch look: it seems as though at any moment he may open his mouth and say *I don't even know how to begin telling you what's wrong with that*. To pre-empt this response, she keeps speaking: "I mean, I know, the whole thing looks kind of tacky, doesn't it?"

"Does it?"

"Doesn't it?"

"Why are *you* planning to go?" Dmitrovitch asks her.

She sits down on the steps next to him and sighs. "My friends are playing there. They're the opener. I thought I'd go lend them my support."

"The YesMen?"

"Yeah," Samantha says. "How'd you know that?"

"Their name's on the flyer. Are they any good?"

"I don't even know anymore. I haven't heard them play in, God, it must be nine months now. I think they're in the process of going through some what you'd call *artistic change*. It's because of those Geffen shitbags. The YesMen really want a piece of that action."

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“Who?”

“Those agents? Remember? That were making noise about signing you once-upon-a-time?”

“They’re still around?”

“Yeah. I’ve got them wanting to sign the YesMen now, I think. Or thinking about it anyway.”

“That sounds like it bothers you.”

“Kind of. I don’t really want them to sign. Not anymore. The whole thing leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Weren’t you trying to convince *me* that *I* should sign with them just a few months ago?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t know. It’s complicated.” She turns to look at his moonlit profile. “I think I want to live in a world that doesn’t really exist anymore. I want to be back in a time where art isn’t all mixed up with money. Money poisons art.”

“Money and art have always been inextricably mixed,” Dmitrovitch says. “Look at the music of the classical age—all of that stuff was written for rich patrons. Artists have *always* carried the favor of the rich. What you have to realize is that if you want to live in that kind of a world you shouldn’t look backwards, you should look *forwards*. You should look around you right now. Now we’ve got computers. Computers enable artists to draw new networks, independent of finance, to create and disseminate art through new channels. Wavelengths vibrating with samizdat. Great electrical webs of illegal art.”

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“Folk music,” says Samantha. “That’s what I want to see come back. Real folk music. The music that people in a region play to one another. A music that’s specific to the place where you live. Free of the influence of money. You play for me; I play for you.”

“Folk music has always been tied up with work,” Dmitrovitch says. “Slave songs. Mining ballads. Cowboy songs. Folk music is inextricably linked to commerce. If folk music still existed today it would be people in offices singing songs about paperwork. It would be clerks writing songs about being clerks. People listen to the radio at work now. The radio is what killed folk music. It was a good thing. It freed artists. There was an explosion of new art right when electricity was invented. Electricity freed all these people, allowed them to think beyond just what’s in front of them or around them. It started them thinking that someone else across the country might hear what they’d written. It to be better, more complex, more abstract than the regional. That’s why jazz happened. Jazz was the music of artists beginning to explore beyond their boundaries.”

“Sending a band on tour might once have made sense,” Samantha says. “Different towns, different cities, different music. You hit the road with your guitar and show ‘em in the next town over how it’s done in your town. That’s what I want. That’s what I miss. Now it’s all just celebrity-worship. People go to see bands that they’ve already heard; they’ve got every note memorized; they want to hear the songs just like they’re performed on the CD and they feel gypped if that doesn’t happen. Electricity homogenized this country. No matter where you go you hear the same bands on the radio; no matter where you go you see the same things on TV. There’s no identity of place anymore. What kind of folk music would this town produce? What

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kind of folk music *could* this town produce? With our Barnes and Noble and our Starbucks and our mall music stores?”

“Electricity makes all the world one town,” Dmitrovitch says. “Electricity makes all the world an invisible city. Your choice now isn’t where to go horizontally—across the surface of the earth; there’s no point to that; you’re right; it’s all the same now—your choice now is where to go *vertically*. Aboveground or underground? The luxury penthouse or the secret dark spaces? The sooner you realize that this is the only choice left that matters, the sooner you’ll be able to start making decisions that mean something.”

“My friends are going for the penthouse.”

“What are you going for?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere inbetween.”

“Inbetween is for the drones. The people who don’t realize that they have a choice. Remember that.”

“Why are *you* going to this rave, anyway? It’s hardly the underground, you know. It was put together to entertain a new bunch of college brats.”

“Gordon and I are looking for citizens,” Dmitrovitch says.

“Citizens?”

“For invisiblecity.com. We’re looking to get some of the local DJs interested. We need to be representing a sizeable bank of people if we’re going to get this thing off the ground; we figure we’ll talk to the DJs about distributing some of their mixes, if any of them are any good.”

“You think any of them will be?”

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“Maybe one out of the six. This DJ Microtonica guy Gordon says is interesting; he works with a lot of Indian stuff; could be okay.”

“Let me ask you a question.”

“Shoot.”

“You’re organizing this bank of artists who you feel are, well, can we agree on saying ‘marketable?’”

“Marketable. Yes.”

“Well, how would you feel about a band that made themselves really accessible to a market of, well, teenage girls?”

“Teenage girls?”

“You know, like by writing love songs and stuff. An edgy sound but content that was commercial—marketable—in that way. Would you be interested in getting them involved with your project?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It would be a failure in the long run.”

“You think? Why?”

“Why? Nothing sells worse than yesterday’s heartthrob.”

“But, in the short term, they’ve got the content that they need to sell millions of records.”

“Mmm,” Dmitrovitch says, making a face. “Nah. Not anymore.”

“You don’t think so?”

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“Content is obsolete.”

“Content is obsolete?”

“Content is obsolete. By providing an audience with material that contains content—*real* content—all you’re doing is insuring that some portion of the audience is going to be alienated from the music. Any unambiguous message will find opposition. People will think it’s flaky, or preachy, or offensive, or it won’t translate well into a foreign market—something. To succeed in a global marketplace you need to provide music that’s cross-cultural; that appeals to a broader mass than just one spectrum of U.S. youth culture—and that means the specificity of the content needs to be reduced. Why do you think the Geffen people wanted to sign me?”

“But your work is full of content. All those samples? Your work is *pure* content.”

“Yes, but it’s *flexible* content. I’m in the business of creating connections. I use my music to juxtapose elements of the culture, to draw a network. I draw it one way, but someone else might listen to it and hear it in a different way, draw different connections than the ones I intend. I never come right out and *say* what my message is; I never come out and say ‘okay, here’s what this is all about.’ Each person who listens to it can reach a different conclusion.”

Samantha thinks about “How Many Zeros?” Car crashes, channel-changing, hostage negotiation. Once she thought she had a clear idea of what Dmitrovitch had intended by this conjunction of sounds, and she once felt sure she could have articulated this interpretation to him, and she felt sure that he would have responded with a nod and a *yes, you’ve got it*, but now she’s not sure. She’s not sure at all.

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“That’s what I mean by Invisible City,” Dmitrovitch says. “We walk the same streets and we think we see the same things. Really what each of us sees could not be more different. The real city is invisible. Invisible beneath the layers of a billion contradictory convincing illusions.”

“I agree,” Samantha says. “That’s one of the things that makes the world worth living in. All these people *communicating* Saying *no, no, it’s like this, listen, let me tell you*. Conversations and books and teachers. People who want to explain and people who want to learn.”

“I agree.”

“That’s why I’m worried about consumer consciousness. Big companies stand to benefit by governing those million different perceptions of the world; by generating an image of an inescapable world in which they are indispensable. They want to replace the Invisible City with NikeTown.”

“You’re right,” says Dmitrovitch.

“Well, that’s why I’m worried about consumer consciousness. Always Coca-Cola,” Samantha says. “Give me a cigarette.”

“They’ll never succeed,” Dmitrovitch says. He passes her a cigarette. “The human mind is too slippery.”

“Why do we all smoke Camels?” Samantha says. “Light. Everyone I know smokes Camels.”

Dmitrovitch flips his Zippo upside-down, presses its wheel into the denim of his jeans up by his hip, and schusses it down to his kneecap—sparks fly out behind it. At the kneecap, he ski-jumps the lighter into the air: lit.

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“Thanks,” Samantha says around the cigarette in her mouth, leaning forwards to stick it into the tiny circumflex of flame. She drags. Heat inside her. She closes her eyes; there’s pleasure to this. Smoking. Talking.

“You know,” she says, still talking around the cigarette. “Nike is footing the bill for this rave thing.”

Dmitrovitch sits there for a second. “Yeah,” he says. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“No?” she asks, ashing. She drags again, hard.

“No. The only thing that surprises me is that it took this long for corporations to get smart to the idea of the rave. The rave has always been a great tool for brainwashing.”

“How do you mean?”

“Think about the way most techno music is structured. It’s built around a loud and repetitive *beat*. It really forces your mind to fall into step. That’s why people talk about raves as this kind of group mystical experience, you know—all these people in the same room, their brains throbbing at exactly the same rate, for hours and hours: of course people feel their egos dissolving and merging with those of the other people there.”

“That’s the exact thing I was talking about,” Samantha says. “A reduction in the diversity of human minds. That’s what I see happening everywhere.”

“The Ecstasy helps, too,” Dmitrovitch says. “But back to the music. On top of the beat you layer harmonics. Secondary beats. Layer upon layer of stuff. Chants or synths or just plain noise. Couple it with some lasers in your face and flashing lights and a room full of sweaty glittered people and candy and whistles and it’s way too much stimulation. Human beings can’t

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process that much stimulation. Their brains start to drop things out. Which means, of course, that you've got the opportunity for subliminal insertion, and I'm not saying that DJs don't use 'em, cause they do, but that's not really where the big bucks are—the big bucks come when the music *turns off* some of those layers of sound, silences them. Immediately big portions of the brain are suddenly free, it's like you're an explorer, hacking and hacking through dense jungle for weeks and then, suddenly, you come upon an ocean. A vast bright open emptiness. Whatever hits you next—whatever message hits you next—is going to seem huge. It's going to seem huge and it's going to seem important, because it fills all those newly-unoccupied sections of your brain. This is classic brainwashing technique: you overstimulate, you overstimulate, you overstimulate, then you cut out the stimulation and insert the message that you want the brainwashee to believe.”

“Yikes.”

“Fortunately most of the people messing around with this stuff are musicians like me. Most of us at least suspect that content—the old sort of content—is pretty much dead, so we don't try to use these techniques to push a message in that way. Some people put in messages meant to reassert that feeling of oneness, but I'm happy just to insert strange messages, weird clips of culture, things that don't make sense. I want to give people little mindfucks to carry around. That *is* my message. That teaches people everything I want to say. That teaches them that the old culture, linear culture, the culture of content, authorship, intellectual property: it's dead. It no longer speaks to us.”

“You just said that these raves have a powerful ability to brainwash. Maybe you or other artists don't use them for propaganda purposes, because, because, because I don't know why. But I

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don't think corporations are above using those techniques in ways that are deep and terrible—I really don't. I think corporations want, always, to reduce the amount of choice we have available to us, because in a world where we have choices we have the choice that they're the most afraid of, which is to *choose another brand*."

"You're right about that but you're wrong about the other," Dmitrovitch says. "I think I and the other artists I know *do* use raves to propagandize. It's just that the message we're propagandizing above all else is that the content of propaganda—the content of any cultural document—is *manipulable*. If you believe that the content is manipulable, then it ceases to have power. The message that I put forth is an inoculation. A exposure to a small dose of propaganda that creates an immunity. I like to think that I teach my listeners that anything that has content can be held suspect. If corporations are going to try to use rave methods to promote their messages, to sell Corn Flakes or Cadillacs, they're too late. The content can no longer take hold on the targeted audience."

"Unless they develop a message that doesn't have content in the old style."

"Right. But the advertisers who work for these corporations are always going to try to develop some kind of rhetorical argument to sell their product."

"So the ubiquity of a logo? The ubiquity of a logo that holds no content unto itself but merely insinuates itself into the fabric of everything that surrounds the targeted consumers? A logo that doesn't present an argument that can be ridiculed or disassembled or manipulated but just presents an image that the consumers can project whatever they like upon it? Something like that might work in the Invisible City?"

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Dmitrovitch looks at her closely.

“Something like the Nike Swoosh?” she continues. “This fall it appears on every athletic uniform at the University. Tomorrow night it materializes over the heads of six different DJs, hanging in the background of every message they promote. This doesn’t make you worry?”

“Wait,” says Dmitrovitch.

“Something like the Absolut bottle?”

“Wait,” says Dmitrovitch. “I’m thinking.”

“Something like the Coca-Cola stripe? How many times do you think you see the Coke logo in a day?”

“I don’t know,” says Dmitrovitch.

“Count sometime.”

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# 18

The next day the sun begins to set, and Dmitrovitch and Samantha make their way to campus beneath the apocalyptic oranges and purples of the sky, headed for the Rave. She checks the invite postcard again—it suggests only that the YesMen are coming on “after dark,” and she knows this, but for some reason she keeps pulling it out of her pocket and unfolding it to re-check for an actual listed time. She has to admit that Jason was right; Nike’s money has paid for some really nice production on these invites. They practically glow with the synthetic richness of a million digital colors. She tries to overlook the tiny Swoosh lurking in the lower right-hand corner. If she holds the invite by the edges, she can position her thumb right over top of it, and block it out.

She’d like to block out Nike’s presence all night. She almost doesn’t want to even go—last night when she was talking to Dmitrovitch about the iconic leverage of the Swoosh she thought, for a moment, that maybe she shouldn’t go, she began to *really feel* that if she attended she would end up a little more brainwashed than she was when she began—but of course, here it is, Friday night, and they’re going. *It’s not as if we could really have stopped it*, Samantha thinks, *and if you can’t stop it you might as well go*. Really she’s going to support the boys, she tells herself. Really she’s going because she wants to support the boys. She’s not going because she’s reached a threshold of boredom where she’ll attend any kind of spectacular youth culture event, even if the organization

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that is financing it is one that she doesn't want to support. She's going because her friends are playing, she insists to herself, not because the weight of life now behind her provides a certain heavy inertia that propels her towards any sort of entertainment that makes any attempt to look somewhat countercultural.

As they walk, wordlessly, towards campus, she thinks a lot about inertia. After she talked to him about logos last night they'd both kind of gotten quiet and they'd each smoked another cigarette (*I've got to quit, for real*, Samantha thinks, as she remembers.) After the cigarettes he turned towards her and said "So, do you want to screw or what?" She did. They did. She got on her knees to fuck him—and Christ, it was good; she likes feeling him enter her that way, pushing deep—but that wasn't *at all* what she'd intended to do that evening. She'd intended to sit down and have the long and necessary talk about "the relationship." But she'd felt good last night. She's not sure why—maybe seeing Gregor and the boys helped her to regain some confidence or something. All she knows is that she felt good kind of getting Dmitrovitch on the ropes in their conversation for once; she felt good fucking him; she felt good falling asleep in his bed. But now she's worried; she knows that if you're in a relationship where feeling good is the exception rather than the rule that you should get out, and she knows that in relationships like that the other person is most likely to try to make you feel good right when you're at the point where if you don't feel good soon you're going to put an end to it. And she knows that it's hard to end a bad relationship when you're feeling good. And that's inertia.

When they woke up in the morning they fucked again. And smoked cigarettes in bed.

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They enter campus through high gates. As they cross between brick buildings on long diagonal paths, they can hear the tinny sound of techno music being played through a public address system.

“Do you think it’s started already?” Samantha says.

Dmitrovitch cocks his head. “No,” he says, “that’s pre-recorded. They need to play something before the thing starts just to keep everyone amassed in one place.”

Sure enough, they round the Economics building and come upon the Mall, and there are the gathered freshmen—*my God*, thinks Samantha, *they look so young*—a few hundred of them in a mass, slowly eddying before huge banks of speakers and a stage bedecked with turntables and microphones. Stretched between the speakers is a huge navy banner emblazoned with the emblem of the Swoosh swooshing. White: like a hooked tusk or a glimpse of the Divine through a torn bit of sky.

“There’s my boys,” says Samantha, pointing at the stage beneath the vinyl banner, where the brothers Price are setting up their equipment. “Do you want to go say hi?”

Dmitrovitch pauses, looks at her for a moment, opens his mouth like he’s about to answer.

“Let me rephrase,” Samantha says. “I’m going over to say hi. Come with me.”

She pushes through the milling herd of freshmen<sup>25</sup>—and Dmitrovitch, behind her, follows the path she carves through the bodies before it collapses shut again.

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<sup>25</sup> The freshmen are mainly standing around looking half-disinterested in that way that only a crowd of people who don’t know one another but who all find themselves awkwardly cojoined in the collective act of anticipating something can look half-disinterested—a blend of cool detachment, self-conscious fidgetiness, and childlike agitated expectation that seems to Samantha to capture the precise flavor of her recently-concluded adolescence.

“How’s it going, boys?” she says, once she reaches the stage.

“Samantha,” says Jason, looking up from his examination of the tangle of wires emerging from the ventral surface of his drumpads. “I’m miserable. I just ran to the Education building to pee—my dick is like this *tiny stub*, I’m so nervous.”

“Charming. Hey, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Are those Geffen guys here? Have you seen them?”

“Did you even listen to what I just said?”

“That’s not an answer to my question.”

“And that’s not an answer to mine.”

“A-fucking-men,” says Jason, and he sticks his head under the drumpads again.

“Hey, Samantha,” says Caccian, who’s crouched down by an amplifier. “Have you seen Gregor? He’s here.”

“No, I haven’t seen him,” Samantha says. A cold bolt seizes her at the thought that he’s around somewhere: it’s not that she doesn’t want to see him, of course, it’s just that she’s not really comfortable with the idea of having to introduce him to Dmitrovitch. She knows he said he didn’t care, but she also knows there’s a world of difference between imagining yourself not to care about something and actually not caring about it when it suddenly materializes in front of your face.

“He was just here,” says Caccian. “I think he went over to sign the petition over at the Students Against Sweatshops tent.”

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“They’re here?” Samantha asks. She looks out over the crowd, and, sure enough, she can see a tent erected at the edge of the quadrangle. A flag flying over it bears the symbol of the SAS: four Swooshes interlocking at the center to form a rudimentary swastika.

“Fuckers,” Jason says, from underneath the Octopads.

Caccian shrugs. “They’re protesting. I think they’re trying to get the University/Nike deal reversed.”

“Good fucking luck,” says the still-in-hiding Jason. “It’s Nike money that’s going to pay us for this show at the end of the night. Once the dough starts getting handed out, the deal’s over. Did you say you saw those Geffen guys or not?”

“I wouldn’t even know what they’d look like,” Samantha says. “I’ve only talked to them over the God-damn phone. Will you come out from under there and say hi to my friend?”

“Okay,” says Jason. He clammers out from under the kit and sits down on the edge of the stage.

“Jason,” says Samantha, “this is Dmitrovitch.”

Dmitrovitch stops scanning the crowd and turns his attention to Jason.

“So you’re the famous DJ Blackmarket,” Jason says.

“I don’t know about *famous*,” Dmitrovitch says. “Fame is the crassest of all commodities.”

“Uh huh,” says Jason. Dmitrovitch turns back away and starts looking at the crowd again, and Jason goes on: “I suppose I should be thanking you, you know. If it weren’t for you—not signing with these Geffen guys and all—we wouldn’t be getting any of the glory that’s about to befall us.”

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Dmitrovitch turns around, stands up a fraction straighter, and looks at Jason with a level gaze. “I suppose,” he says. “The attention of a bunch of teenage girls has never really been that important to me, I’m sorry to inform you.”

“Ouch,” says Jason, in a flat way that reveals, mainly, that he’s not actually hurt in the slightest.

“Nice to have met you,” says Dmitrovitch. He turns to look at Samantha. “I’m going to go and try to find Gordon,” he says. “He’s supposed to be meeting me here.”

“Dmitrovitch; Caccian,” Samantha says, determined to get through these introductions. “Caccian; Dmitrovitch.”

Caccian looks up from his guitar and waves hello.

“Right,” Dmitrovitch says. “Samantha, I’ll meet you over by the protest site in ten minutes.” He turns away from the stage and disappears into the crowd.

“Nice guy,” Jason says.

“He’s been well-behaved all day,” says Samantha. “I think it’s something of a strain for him.”

“You sure know how to pick ‘em, is all I’m saying.”

“I’m friends with you, aren’t I? Clearly I’m fixated with assholes.”

“Lovely,” Jason says. “Look, can we talk serious for a second? I’m really pissing my pants over this Geffen thing.”

“I told you I wouldn’t know the guys if I saw them,” Samantha says.

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“I don’t mean that,” Jason says. “I just mean—you know, the whole thing we talked about at the diner.”

“The Patsy Cline?”

“Less the Patsy Cline and more the Pope Castration.”

“I love ‘Pope Castration,’” Samantha says.

“We all love it,” Jason says. “It’s a perennial favorite. Geffen’s going to hate it. We’re not going to do it. We’ve planned for the last two months not to do it.”

“So why do you bring it up?”

“I can’t think clearly. I’m in a panic. I’m a mess. This is the first time I’ve lost my cool since fucking 1994.”

“So why do you bring this up?”

“I need you to make a decision. I’m second-guessing myself and then I’m second-guessing my second-guesses. Do you think we should play ‘Pope?’”

“I think you should play ‘Pope,’” Samantha says. “Your audience loves it. It’s political *and* it’s in poor taste and that makes it okay in my book.”

“But what do you think the suits will think of it? It’s *too* political. They’ll be scared off.”

“They won’t be scared off,” Samantha says. “The entertainment industry loves stuff that’s in bad taste. Trust me; I’ve talked to these guys. It won’t even occur to them that there’s political content there. They’ll hear that it’s a song about the Pope cutting off his own dick and they’ll think that’s great just because it’s vile and shocking. And if you play it, it’ll help me to pretend that you’re at least not *totally* selling out.”

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“You’re the fucking greatest,” Jason says. “When the album is ready, I want it to be *you* posing on the cover in a scanty leather getup.”

“In your fucking *dreams*.”

“Caccian told you?”

Caccian jerks up his head. “Jason,” he says. “We’ve got to get ready. We’re supposed to be on, like, right now.”

“All right,” says Samantha, “I’m going. Do ‘Pope.’ It’ll pay off; I’m telling you.”

She is struck by a weird urge to kiss each of them—it’s the same urge, she supposes, that women seeing navy sailors off to sea during World War II must have felt, that you’d better kiss them because in a short time they might be dead—but she heads it off; instead she stands resolutely and gives each of them her broadest smile. Then she heads off for the protester’s tent.

The flag bearing the Swooshtika ripples in the limp air. She looks once over her shoulder as she moves through the muttering crowd and for just a moment more she watches Jason and Caccian busying themselves underneath the giant Nike banner.

*This is a war between iconographies*, she thinks, as she reads the posterboard-and-Magic-Marker signs scotch-taped to the battered conference tables set up within the tent. Nike : Enemy Of The Workers!; People Before Profits!!!; 13¢ An Hour=Unfair Wage! \$135 A Pair=Unfair Price!

It’s a war of images. Nike promotes its image in a thousand different ways that all equal, really, one way: the wavelengths of television may be densely packed with homilies to athletic triumph, each branded with the Swoosh: but the final message is this: the representatives of Nike

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(the company) are the earthly archpriests of Nike (the goddess of victory), and acquiring the shoes buys you communion with the divine.

The Students Against Sweatshops—there are maybe ten of them gathered here, clean-faced, earnest-eyed, somehow all smiles in the face of the solemnity of their task—promote the counter-image: that the Nike archpriests are really just the modern equivalents of the old plantation-owners: the ones presiding over a system of slaves and injustice in the name of production and demand.

These are the sides in the war. The side that will win is the side that is better at disseminating its information into the minds of the populace at large. Even as Samantha looks at the faces of the students gathered behind the stacks of flyers and leaflets—faces that manage the magic trick of looking both young and serious simultaneously—she fears, she *knows*, that Nike will win. Nike has the money to employ the mercenary armies of image-makers and image-disseminators well into the next century if necessary. The SASers have pluck and energy and a Xerox machine and maybe even are working on a website, but they do not have anywhere near as much money as Nike has. In the war of images, this makes them the smaller army: undermanned, undersupplied, inevitably doomed.

“Hey,” says one of the young serious faces, this one sporting the faint beginnings of a goatee. “Do you want your University to reap the benefits of global human misery?” He sticks a clipboard in her direction.

“Well,” she says, “it’s not my University anymore, but no, sir, I don’t.”

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She's signing her name to the petition—Kick Nike To The Curb—all the while knowing that Jason is probably right: once money begins to flow between Nike and the University and the people the University buys as entertainment (like, tonight, Jason and Caccian themselves) it means that the grafts have already taken; once the capital starts pumping it becomes impossible to distinguish the separate systems; if you think about them as things that you could pry apart, like a surly delinquent and your teenage daughter, you're thinking about them the wrong way. Once two entities begin communicating through the numbers that represent money you need to think about them as two parts of an organic conduit. The University can no longer reject Nike now any more than an organism can vomit up its own stomach.

"Hey, Samantha," she hears Gregor say behind her.

She finishes writing down her parents' address—hurrying through the ZIP—and she looks up at him; he's in a black T-shirt and black jeans tonight, a shadowy rail, a lean dark column crocketed with the wispy suspension of his hair.

"Fighting the good fight, eh?" he says, nodding at the petition.

"Somebody has to," she says.

They look at one another for a moment that begins to get long and a sort of quaint desire writes itself clearly in her mind; she wants to reach out, take both his hands in hers, and stand there, gazing at him, with him gazing back, as though they were some kind of prairie couple or something. She doesn't know exactly where this desire comes from: it simply comes out of the back of her cortex and sticks in her forebrain. She's about to do it—she's actually about to reach out and do it—when he speaks.

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“Where’s Dmitrovitch?” is what he says, and this causes her quaint desire to shatter like glass in a windstorm.

“He’s around here somewhere,” says Samantha. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” says Gregor. “I’m just kind of curious to meet him.”

She makes a pained expression. Last night she was excited about the possibility that Dmitrovitch could meet the YesMen, but she didn’t really think about him meeting Gregor. She feels that she’s spent the past six months imagining Gregor and Dmitrovitch as the polar antipodes of the globe of her life, and she fears that for the two of them come together—same place, same time—some kind of cataclysm is going to need to rip her world: shred her continents, boil her seas. She doesn’t know what form it might take but she knows she needs to keep it from happening.

“Can we go somewhere?” she says. “To talk?”

“Are you okay?” Gregor asks.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I just need to—I just want to get out of here.”

“The boys are going to start any second now.”

“I know, I just—”

“Look, Samantha, *it’s okay.*”

“I’m kind of freaking out,” she says.

“It’s okay,” he says. “It’s okay.”

She sighs and rubs furiously at her forehead.

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“I wanted to thank you for last night,” he says. “I really had a good time; you guys really cheered me up a lot.”

“Oh,” says Samantha. She relaxes fractionally. “I’m glad. I had a good time, too.”

“I picked you up a little something at work today. I almost brought it with me but I wasn’t sure if you were going to come tonight.”

“A book?” Samantha asks.

“I’m not saying. It’s a surprise. But you should give me a call and come over and I’ll give it to you. Just when you have some free time.”

“Okay,” Samantha says, and as the second syllable is almost out of her mouth she sees Dmitrovitch approaching, over Gregor’s shoulder. She manages not to run.

“Here he comes now,” she croaks. Gregor turns around, to look.

“Hey, man,” one of the serious young faces says to Dmitrovitch as he enters the tent, “Sign a petition to get Nike’s dirty human rights record off our campus?”

Dmitrovitch looks at the petition as though it were a dead fish that had been thrust out for him to take. “A petition, huh? Good old-fashioned paper radicalism? Wake up, man. The sixties ended thirty years ago. Those techniques don’t work anymore. You think a hundred signatures are going to get Nike off of your precious unsullied campus? The only way the relationship between Nike and this campus is going to break down is if you start hacking the systems that they use to communicate with one another. Start feeding each side bad data and noise and maybe you’ve got a chance.”

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“Don’t listen to him,” says Samantha to the young serious face. Then, to Dmitrovitch:  
“You don’t need to be that way with everybody, you know.”

“I’m just trying to help in the only way I know how,” Dmitrovitch says to her.  
“Everybody wants to relive the great Protest Era—nobody thinks about what a hundred or a thousand computers could do together. Oh, certainly, it lacks the glamour of the drugged-up sit-ins, of the golden days, the fun of free love, but—”

“Will you just shut up for a second?” Samantha says.

“Hi,” says Gregor. He extends his hand towards Dmitrovitch. “I’m Gregor.”

“So you’re the Ex,” says Dmitrovitch, leaving Gregor’s hand hanging there in space.

Samantha snaps an appalled glance over at him.

“I suppose,” says Gregor. He does not withdraw his hand. He keeps it out there, in the gulf between the two of them, palm open.

She looks at Dmitrovitch’s face, watches his eyebrows bunch together above the deep-set sockets of his eyes, and she can feel herself shaking a little, fearing something, the cataclysm, the words that may come out of that face, something. She looks, then, at Gregor’s hand. It is not trembling. It is held still in the air.

“Christ,” Dmitrovitch mutters, and he massages tight circles into his temples for five full seconds before he takes Gregor’s hand and gives it a quick pump up and down.

“I’m going to go out there,” Gregor says to Samantha. “I think they’re about to get started.” He gives Dmitrovitch the once-over for a second, appraising something—what, Samantha can not guess—and then he leaves the tent.

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“I swear to God, your friends—” Dmitrovitch begins, but then the thin tones of the piped-in techno music cuts out, and his voice stops along with it, and he cocks his head, to listen. The diffuse mumble of the amassed freshmen builds into a few scattered clouds of cheers, which move through the crowd, swelling, beginning to merge, and the instant they form one great rising cumulonimbus of applause, a blistering high-pitched wail shoots it full of needles of sound. Caccian’s guitar.

Boom. She hears Jason banging on the drumpads. Boom. Boom. She goes out to see.

For a second, she’s afraid; she’s seen bands play on the quadrangle before, and she’s seen some of these bands put scads of energy into a great performance, technically perfect in every way, and she’s seen crowds of people in front of some of these bands, just standing dead still, looking absolutely bored, as though they were watching the band paint a house.

But tonight people are dancing. The Swoosh—now floodlit, for the sky has gone dark—hangs over the proceedings like a distorted crescent moon, and in the face of it, these kids dance. “I go out walking!” Jason screams, through the lightning storm of distortion that crackles about his voice. “After midnight! Out in the moonlight!”

A few of the dancers up front begin to scream—whether it’s to encourage or discourage Samantha isn’t quite sure—the cries pulse through the crowd of freshmen and goths like waves—

*they rise in a coil of tumult, along with noises like the slap of beating hands, all fused in a ceaseless flail that churns and frenzies that dark and timeless air like sand in a whirlwind.*

The Swoosh hangs in the background: the constant.

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# 19

The YesMen roar. The freshmen flail. Jason and Caccian are a hit. With almost everyone. Maybe not Samantha. She's enjoying the show, but she can't help from keeping one cautious eye on their authenticity. She can detect spots—a lot of them—where the sound's been manipulated, “cleaned up.” It makes her wary. In just about every song there is a zone, about two-thirds of the way through, an instrumental break, which would normally have been battlescarred by the unusual shrapnel of Caccian's chords, which, now, is kept somehow *blank*. She's concerned, a little bit. It concerns her that she can hear how all of Caccian's usual aural constructions—his tight tangles of notes, the dense pontillism of his atonal noises—are now being kept clear of those instrumental zones. Now he's filling them by playing limpid sustained chords, uncomplicated, undangerous, shapeless, amorphous, all the better to let the beat come through, to get the audience to dance to those spots instead of *listening* to them. She doesn't know if this is a good sign. She's listening that much harder trying to find out. Which means she's not dancing.

Dmitrovitch and Gordon aren't dancing either. They're trying to hold a conversation. They're less than fifty feet away from two giant banks of speakers and they're trying to hold a conversation over the YesMen by just shouting at maximum volume into one another's faces.

Gregor is somewhere up in the front of the crowd, in the thick of the goths, dancing. Every once in a while Samantha can see his head bob above the swirling mass of black clothes.

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Each time she catches a glimpse of him she feels a certain yearning to be where he is, dancing and having fun, *with* him, a yearning that she does not want to name. That she has never wanted to name.

She sees two other people who are standing at the periphery, not dancing.

She needs to watch them only for the space of maybe three beats before she knows exactly who they are.

They're older guys wearing T-shirts. Okay, they don't look *tremendously* older, they're not like *forty* or anything—the taller one has a shaved head and a neat goatee and when he tilts his head in a particular direction light glints off of what must be an earring, and the short thick one has his hair slicked back, creating a kind of swing-y retro effect<sup>26</sup> that works at cross-purposes to the “contemporary casual” effect created by the T-shirt—they're the kind of guys, Samantha guesses, who can look in the mirror on a good day and see through the wrinkles (which, after all, are only just beginning to appear) and imagine themselves as indistinguishable from twenty-one-year-olds. It's only when they're surrounded by twenty-one-year-olds and younger that this illusion falters in a drastic way. Look: they're not dancing, for one thing. For another, they give off the strange impression—unfakeable by anyone who hasn't worked in an office for years—of being *uncomfortable* in their T-shirts. And they each have a clipboard.

It's Johnny Sax and L. McLeggs. *Has* to be.

She's proud to have spotted them, but she feels like she won't get full satisfaction until she's consummated the spotting by pointing it out to someone else, until she's gotten outside

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<sup>26</sup> It makes Samantha reflexively think the word “pomade,” to give you some idea.

verification. In short, she hasn't exposed them until she exposes them. So she leans over towards Dmitrovitch and Gordon, sticking her head into the loud corridor of shouting that exists between them.

Dmitrovitch is saying something. She waits for him to pause. She knows from experience that this can be a long wait. What Dmitrovitch is shouting into Gordon's face is this: "Yeah, I agree, I mean, if these *people*, these Sixties wannabes, really want to strike a blow to Nike—and I'm not saying that that's where the important battle is being fought, I'm just saying—if they want to strike a blow, the way to do it is coordinating people through the Net, you know? Information travels geometrically through the Net. It would be easy for them to write an e-mail saying 'on such-and-such a day'—say, like a week after Nike introduces some new line of shoes—'on such-and-such a day we want everyone to e-mail the Consumer Products Safety Council with complaints about twisted ankles as a result of shoddy manufacturing.' The e-mail spreads and spreads and suddenly, one day, the CPSC starts getting hundreds—no, thousands—of e-mails that say this new shoe is unsafe. The CPSC has to take this stuff seriously, you know. They're going to have to investigate these claims. Nike'll have to face the investigation. The news will break: bad PR: Nike has to funnel all this money into press conferences disputing the claims: the reporters are going to spin it as Nike saying thousands of their customers—injured members of the public—are liars: Nike decides to cut their losses while they can; they pull the shoe; they pull the ad campaigns, hundreds of thousands of dollars lost, and *that's* when these people should come forth—anononymously—and say 'yes, we did it, we organized this strike against you, we falsified complaints, and we'll do it again if you don't pull out of all universities.' Bad data is the newest

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and most effective form of terrorism. A petition? What's a petition? All the signatures on that petition Nike can write off as acceptable loss. But a couple of mil and a product line sank? That's serious collateral damage."

"Yeah, yeah," Gordon shouts.

"Dmitrovitch," Samantha shouts. "Look."

She points in the direction of the guys with the clipboards.

"What am I looking at?" Dmitrovitch asks.

"Those two guys," Samantha says. "It's the agents. It's those Geffen creeps."

"No shit," says Dmitrovitch. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Samantha says. "I was sure the second I saw them."

"Well, shit," says Dmitrovitch. "I'm going to go fuck with them."

"No, wait," Samantha says, but Dmitrovitch has already broken up the dyad he and Gordon had formed and begun heading over towards Sax & McLeggs. Samantha hurries behind him, shouting "Wait, wait," at his back.

He swivels around to face her, his face puckered into a scowl: "What?"

"Just let me handle this, okay?" she shouts.

"Handle *what?* I'm just going over to fuck with them."

"You can fuck with them all you want, okay? but let me talk to them first."

Dmitrovitch turns his palms skyward and looks up at his own raised eyebrows—she interprets this as a cross between *fine* and *why me?*—and then he continues on his way towards the outer edge of the rave, towards the two agents and the two clipboarded tablets they're writing

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things down on. Samantha stands there in the roar for a few more seconds, almost unable to believe that he's done this to her *again*—clipped what she was trying to say short *again*, dismissed her concerns by simply pretending that she's being unreasonable *again*—and then she runs after him, comes up from behind (it's all she can do not to curl her hands around that fucking asshole *neck* of his and commence throttling) and passes him. Ahead now, she sprints up to Sax & McLeggs, coming to a hasty sloppy stop in front of them; blades of fat late-summer grass squirt open underneath the force of her braking Converse All-Stars; her left foot, as if emboldened by this new slipperiness beneath it, shoots way out in front of her; she leans backwards to compensate for the abrupt shift in balance and *bam* she goes down on her ass. Even once down, she's still a body in motion (tending to remain in motion), so she keeps sliding for one horrible second, she can feel more grass liquefying beneath her banged rump, leaving—she's certain; she remembers the precise feel of that slick friction from her childhood—huge grassstains on the seat of her jeans.

“Mother *fucker*,” she says.

Johnny Sax and L. McLeggs look down on her.

“Hey,” says the short squat one who she's sure is McLeggs—she could have guessed from his phone demeanor that he was a Short Man Syndrome sufferer—“are you all right?” He crouches down next to her and puts his fingertips square on the icosceles triangle of her stomach skin that got revealed when her shirt got pulled up in the crash.

“Get the fuck off of me, McLeggs,” she says. He recoils. “I'm not some fawning”—she grunts, pushing herself up into a sitting position—“not some stupid *girl* who wants you to wave your fucking”—she grunts again as she clambers to her feet—“your fucking *magic wand* over her so

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bad that she'll look the other way while you fucking cop your *cheap feels*." She levels a withering look at him as she rubs her sore ass. Then she turns to Johnny—the tall and stylishly-bald and predictably earring-wearing one—and she sticks out her hand, and says "Mr. Sax, I presume."

Johnny Sax does not offer her his hand. "You absolutely *must* be Samantha," he says, drily.

Samantha stops rubbing her bruised behind. "At last we meet," she says.

"Why are you even *here?*" begins the red-faced, only-just-now-off-his-knees L. McLeggs. "We don't want to talk to you. We shouldn't *have* to talk to you. You don't represent the YesMen anymore. We're the ones who set this thing up. You have no legal claim to even one cent of our—"

"Easy now," says Johnny Sax, raising his hand in a beatific gesture. L. McLeggs clams. "Who's this?" Johnny Sax says.

All eyes turn to Dmitrovitch, who strides up coolly.

"Hey, Samantha, nice crash," Dmitrovitch says. "Way to play the situation to your advantage."

"Shut up," Samantha snarls.

"You guys work for Geffen?" Dmitrovitch asks.

"Mr. Geffen has entrusted us with certain, shall we say, procedural powers," says Johnny Sax. "For this we receive a certain financial remuneration, yes—but to characterize my colleague and myself as simple *employees* does, I feel, a disservice to the true nature of our relationship to both Mr. Geffen and to the artists we encounter. Johnny Sax," says Johnny Sax, flipping out a card to

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Dmitrovitch, who takes it. “I think of myself more as an independent agent who has, let’s say, *access* to some particular resources which enable me to make life easier—much easier—for the artists whom I represent.”

“Nice to meet you, Johnny,” says Dmitrovitch. “My name’s Dmitrovitch, but I believe you know me better by my handle: DJ Blackmarket.”

Johnny Sax and L. McLeggs exchange obvious looks. Samantha can practically see the dollar signs appearing above their heads.

“What’s with these terrible T-shirts?” Dmitrovitch asks, before they get a chance to speak. Samantha looks at them, and they *are* terrible: L. McLeggs is wearing a lurid red T-shirt with the giant image of a white goose in flight across it; Johnny Sax has a white T-shirt with a pregnant pig, apparently lowing, done up in a ghastly blue.

“I’ll admit the style has a certain juvenile aspect to it,” says Johnny Sax. “But teenagers have been known to respond to the sensational image, and teenagers do tend to buy a lot of records. These are the promo shirts for two of the latest bands to enter the family of artists that Geffen supports: the Geese, from Toronto, and the Sow Bitches, an all-girl band from Olympia, Washington—”

“I’ve never heard of these bands,” Dmitrovitch says.

“We haven’t debuted them yet,” says Johnny Sax. “We’re debuting them at our New Millenium Celebration in Taos, New Mexico. Perhaps you’ve heard that Geffen is looking to sign two hundred new acts between now and New Year’s Eve. Now, I think you and I can both agree—I mean, the Sow Bitches?—that some of what’s getting signed here is just plain tripe.

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Meant to appeal to teenagers. Garden-variety angst.<sup>27</sup> But Mr. Geffen prides himself on also representing a number of serious artists—artists pushing the boundaries of what music can do. Have you ever considered, Mr. Blackmarket, what Geffen could do for you if you were willing to switch representation?”

“*Switch* representation?”

“Yes. That is, give up Samantha here as your manager, and instead let Geffen manage the distribution of your work. We don’t have to make any decisions tonight, but—”

“Wait wait wait,” Dmitrovitch says. “Samantha’s not my *manager*.”

“Huh?” Samantha says, snapping her attention back into the conversation.

She catches Johnny Sax and L. McLeggs exchanging another set of looks.

“Wait,” Samantha says.

“We were led to believe—” Johnny Sax begins.

“No, no, wait,” Samantha says.

“She told you she was my manager?” Dmitrovitch says.

Johnny Sax tries again. “We were led to believe—”

“When were you going to tell me this?” Dmitrovitch asks, looking directly at Samantha.

“I—” Samantha begins.

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<sup>27</sup> Upon hearing the words “garden-variety angst,” spoken with this lucid disdain, Samantha begins to listen to the YesMen again. Jason is singing a new song, one she’s never heard before. Something about “embrace my body / sink inside my vein / our hearts will beat with love and pain.” She cringes. She’s listening to them with such involved dread that she only listens to the conversation between Dmitrovitch and Sax with a shred of her attention until she hears Dmitrovitch say “Samantha’s not my *manager*.”

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“*This* ought to be good,” L. McLeggs says.

“I didn’t think it *mattered*,” Samantha says. “You didn’t care about their offers. You told me a hundred times that you weren’t interested. I just *told them* that you weren’t interested. I didn’t *falsely represent* you.”

“She also told us that you were washed up,” L. McLeggs says.

Dmitrovitch looks directly at Samantha.

“She told us that we would be better off signing *this*—” L. McLeggs waves his hand in the air to indicate the YesMen’s music “—than we would be signing *you*.”

“Wait a second,” Samantha says. “That’s an unfair—that’s a misrepresentation of what I actually—”

“Yes, Samantha,” says Johnny Sax. He moves between her and Dmitrovitch. “It seems that you know all about misrepresentation.”

He and L. McLeggs and Dmitrovitch form a tight ring which she is now outside of.

“*Wait* a second,” Samantha demands.

“Anyway,” says Dmitrovitch. “I’m interested in learning more about what Mr. Geffen has to offer me.”

“Since *when?*” screams Samantha. “You told me you’d rather be *castrated!*”

“Ugh, God, listen to her,” says L. McLeggs.

“Perhaps,” says Johnny Sax, “perhaps we should adjourn to somewhere quieter.”

“You’re supposed to be here listening to the *YesMen*,” screams Samantha.

“She’s getting hysterical,” says L. McLeggs.

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“Yeah,” says Dmitrovitch. “She’ll do that.”

“What the *fuck?*” screams Samantha.

“Let’s go,” says Johnny Sax.

“You’re not fucking going *anywhere*,” screams Samantha. Her voice is exhausted by now, though, and the three of them are walking away across the quad.

“No,” Samantha demands. She follows behind them. “I said *no!*”

The three men walk past the Students Against Sweatshops tent, down the long ribbon of the pedestrian concourse, and around to the parking lot behind the stadium. Samantha follows them the whole way, hanging back about twenty feet. She can periodically hear them all laughing about something; she knows she shouldn’t assume they’re laughing at her, but she does anyway.

She sits down on a concrete abutment at the edge of the parking lot and she watches the three men file up to a black car and get in. Three doors slam.

*Fuck*, she thinks, as the black car drives off. Somehow she managed to fuck it up. Her worst fear was that she’d help to get the YesMen famous and then they’d use their fame unwisely, they’d use their fame to promote a vision of the world that she couldn’t rally behind, fame would fuck them up. But no. What happened instead is that she fucked them out of their fame. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck.

*Stop it*, she thinks. *Maybe the YesMen could still get signed. It’s possible. Besides, it’s not that great to get signed to a major label anyway. They would have just exploited the YesMen, made a quick buck off of them, and discarded them when it was all over.*

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The it's-better-not-to-get-signed line of logic isn't helping her to feel any better. She can all too easily picture herself trying to pitch the political economy of exploitation to Jason as a consolation prize—she knows the first thing he'd say in response is “I *want* to be exploited”—and she also remembers that he once called her a stupid bitch (jokingly, yes, but still) when she suggested that maybe his eagerness to get signed was misplaced. The YesMen want, more than anything else, to be famous. How the *fuck* is she going to tell them that she watched the agents literally *drive off* before they finished their set? How the fuck is she going to tell them that the agents drove off because of *her*?

Panic leaps inside her. She needs to go. She needs to get the fuck out of here. She needs to go to the Tin Hopper and get drunk.

“What's going on?” says a voice behind her. She turns around. It's Gordon, his pale face glowing out of the darkness like a pink headlight, corona'd by the crop of his albino-blond hair.

“Who were those *people*?” he asks. “Where's Dmitrovitch?”

“He split,” says Samantha.

“Yeah, but why?” Gordon asks. He sits down next to her on the abutment.

“Money is why,” Samantha says. “Do you have a cigarette?”

“No,” Gordon says. “I don't smoke.”

“Gordon,” Samantha says. She's exhausted. Her esteem has crashed to pieces within her.

“What?” he asks.

“Do you want to have sex with me?”

“What?”

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“I want two things right now: one is to get out of here and the other is to fuck somebody.”

“Samantha,” says Gordon.

“What?”

“I’m gay.”

“Oh,” Samantha says. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Gordon shrugs. She looks over at him.

“You know, I never thought that you were gay, but now that you say it, I can totally see it.”

Gordon shrugs again. The two of them sit there in silence for a bit.

“So you never even *thought* about what it might be like to have sex with a woman?”

Samantha asks.

“I don’t really think that’s any of your business,” he says.

“Shit,” Samantha says. “I’m sorry.” Distantly, she can hear the YesMen playing.

Whatever that song was about the vein and the pain comes to a crashing conclusion—for a second there’s no music, but that gap gets filled by a light burst of cheers from the crowd—and then the fast succession of hard-edged chords that open “Pope Castration” hit, filling the air of the night, even here in the parking lot, with an inflating mushroom cloud of triumphant, complicated, noise.

“I have to go,” says Samantha. She rises. She stands on her feet.

“Where are you going?” Gordon asks.

“I don’t know.”

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And she goes.

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## 20

The Tin Hopper is full of murk and the phosphorescent waves of sports TV (tonight: motocross racing) and the late-August stink of sweat and hormones. Man-funk. A potent cocktail, best produced by a room packed full of fake-ID-wielding eighteen-year-olds and the collective frathouse of their armpits and groins, this room, here, now. Samantha slams a screwdriver and waits for some of those boys to start looking better to her. No such luck, so far, and she's been here for over an hour. Baseball caps turned backwards and half-beards and the VISA T-shirts that they give you for free when you fill out an application.

She watches motocross racers jump and wobble down steep dirt slopes on the three TVs. She bites down lightly on the rim of her glass, feels the tension of its arc clicking inbetween her teeth. She imagines what it would be like to just bite through it, imagines the explosion of sharp new edges in her mouth, fresh curves, just born into the world, carving wounds in her tongue and lips...

*Easy there, she thinks. Keep control.*

Control. That's why she wants to fuck someone. She wants to fuck someone who's name she doesn't know and who she doesn't care about and she wants to walk out on him and never have to see or deal with him again. She wants the power to walk away from something.

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*Dmitrovitch, that fucker*, she thinks. She scribbles out a wet ring of condensation on the bar with her pointer finger. She resists the urge to pitch her empty glass at the wall. *Fuck him*, she thinks.

So this is what it's come to. This is where her summer ends. She stares at the bar through the bottom of her glass, watches the wood-grain distort. The incomprehensibility of everything. Did she really just try to cajole Gordon—gay Gordon—who she doesn't even really like in the first place—into fucking her? Because of Dmitrovitch? Fuckhead Dmitrovitch? Both of them suck—they're a pair of assholes, they deserve each other—neither of them make her anywhere near as happy as Gregor did—and yet she knows that the next time she sees Dmitrovitch she'll turn back into that same fucking whiner that she's been the last two dozen times she's seen him—

No. No. Wait a second.

She holds up her glass—droplets of gimlet drip out onto her shirt—and she looks at the giant TV through the bottom of it, lets the colors pass into her eye, blurs, fuzzy waves. The image comes apart. There is no motocross there anymore. The breakdown of the illusion.

She wants the power to walk away from something. What she wants and what she doesn't have—what she and her friends all seem, these days, to be lacking—is the power to refuse, the power to say *no*.

She revolves on her stool—keeping the tumbler up to her eye like a squat kaleidoscope—and she looks at the men in the Hopper. They are no more than smears and motion. She feels abruptly sober.

“Another?” says the bartender.

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She swivels. His orthodontic smile reduced to a white gleam in the bottom of the glass.

“No,” she says. “I want to pay my tab.”

#

She’s not too drunk and it’s not too late. Maybe one o’clock? The stoop at the warehouse’s door still radiates some of the day’s warmth into the grassstained ache on which she’s sitting—how late can it be, if this concrete still has some memory of the day baked into it? Sundown was at maybe seven-thirty; the boys began at maybe eight; Dmitrovitch left with Shit & Fucknut at maybe nine; she was at the Hopper until maybe—here her temporal re-enactment begins to deteriorate—eleven? midnight? On foot it must have taken her an hour to clear the University and the concentric circles of its surrounding communities (lots of ugly apartment buildings, lots of fast-food restaurants, lots of not-quite-upscale clothing stores), to find her familiar way into the deserted labyrinth of her town’s old industrial district; to make her way past the warehouses and factories (abandoned when America turned into a superpower of retail services and information; reclaimed only recently as artists’ lofts and dance clubs), to end up on Dmitrovitch’s front stoop, staring into the dense thicket of grasses wilding the empty lot across the street, wishing that she had a cigarette to help pass the time. If it took her an hour to get here from the Hopper then it’s maybe—what?—one o’clock? Can Dmitrovitch really have been hanging out with those Geffen fucks for four hours? What the fuck can they be talking about? Are they having him sign a bunch of forms? Are they laughing it up in their Doubletree suite? Plying him with room service and champagne and—she doesn’t know; she has no idea—adult films downloaded onto the hotel room TV?

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Her eyes clench shut as a giant yawn stretches her face open. Her mind has begun to fog. She knows she probably shouldn't fall asleep outdoors in the middle of the quietest and darkest and least-policed region of town. But she's bored and it's silent and her system is coursing with depressants.

She can stay awake. She knows she can.

Her chin falls forwards as if it were a heavy iron ingot and her sternum a magnet. Her eyes pop open; she shakes her head; sits up straight.

She knows she can stay awake.

#

Next thing she knows Dmitrovitch is standing there, saying "Hey," and prodding her with the toe of his boot.

"Unh," she says, and she reflexively wipes her mouth with the back of her hand as she blinks hard, trying to get her eyes to focus and her mind to begin processing. Where *is* she?

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Dmitrovitch says. "You shouldn't be out here."

It all begins to come back to her. She opens her mouth to speak and that's when she realizes how sore and stiff her body is—what she ends up saying is "Unn."

"You want to come in?" he asks. His keys jangle in his hand.

"No," Samantha croaks. She rubs hard at her eyes with her fists. *Must think*, she thinks.

"No, I don't want to come in, you idiot. I want to break up with you."

The keys stop jangling. "What?" Dmitrovitch says.

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She licks the gummy saliva from the roof of her mouth, performs a labored swallow.

“Ahem,” she says. She’s still trying to get all her parts in working order.

“What did you say?” Dmitrovitch says.

“I said,” she says, “that I’m here because I want to tell you, to your face, that I’m breaking up with you. As of tonight. Right now.”

“What’s this all about, all of a sudden?”

“What’s this all *about!* What’s this all *about!* You *lied* to me.” She’s waking up now, but good.

“How did I *lie* to you?”

“How did you lie to me? You told me you weren’t interested in signing any deal with Geffen.”

“I’m *not* interested in signing any deal with Geffen. I didn’t lie to you; I lied to *them*. I told you I was going to go over there and fuck with them, remember? I let them take me out to dinner. I ordered smoked salmon. Delicious. Those two tools charged it all to Geffen. I let them beg me for a couple of hours to sign with them. Then I said no. Then I let them beg me some more. I ordered a fifty-dollar glass of port. Then I said no again. They made me go back to their hotel and they showed me a bunch of like brochures and forms and stuff. I wouldn’t sign a thing. It was all in the name of fucking with them. I tried to get them to order stuff through room service and that was when it finally dawned on them that I just wanted them to throw away as much money as possible on me without me actually giving them anything in return. Once they

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figured that out, they drove me back here pretty quickly. They were fuming mad; I was satisfied that I'd gummed the cogs enough for one day—what's the big deal?"

"The big *deal!*" Samantha asks. "You dragged those Geffen guys away from the YesMen's show."

Dmitrovitch makes a puzzled face, as though this hadn't occurred to him, or—more probably—as though it had occurred to him, but he can't quite perceive its relevance.

"Samantha," he says, "they weren't going to sign your friends anyway. That wasn't apparent to you?"

"Don't you understand anything? Are you really so stupid that you don't understand anything about live music? You save your *best songs* for *last*. If you can send people *out* on a good note, they're going to remember everything that went *before* as good, too. The YesMen hadn't even gotten a chance to play their *best songs* when the Geffen guys left and *you're* the reason they left."

"This may come as a shock to you, Samantha, but the YesMen are really a pretty mediocre band; there's a thousand other teen angst combos out there just like them—"

"*I know,*" says Samantha. "They're mediocre—*I know!* So *what?* How many times have you turned on the radio and heard bands that are *just mediocre?* *All* the time. *Every* band on the radio is mediocre; *every* band that's insanely popular is mediocre; they *have* to be. Why shouldn't *my friends* benefit from their mediocrity? They're mediocre in a way that a bunch of teenagers who have no taste *really respond to*. Why shouldn't that be *enough* to rescue them from a lifetime of temp-work? I know they're not making music that's as *interesting* as yours, but I'd just about *had*

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those Geffen people in my bait-and-switch. And then you—the bait, the fucking *bait*—show up and deliver yourself right into their hands. I *asked* you to let *me* do the talking and you *said* you *would*. And you *didn't*. So you *lied* to me.”

Dmitrovitch is quiet for a second. “So you really want your friends to sign up with some big corporation that’s just going to get even richer off of them. That’s really what you want.”

“If it were up to me, that’s not what I would want for them, no,” Samantha says. “But they’re my *friends*. My friendship with them comes *before* whatever political differences we might have. They’re my *friends*, I have to want for them what they want for themselves.”

“That’s why there’s no possibility for true dissent anymore,” Dmitrovitch says. He’s still standing next to the door; his keys are still in his hand, poised at the rim of the keyhole; it’s as though he froze into statuary the second Samantha said that she wanted to break up with him. “People are so fixated on this ideal of ‘friendship’ as something that should transcend politics. *Billy’s politics are different from mine, but that’s okay, because we’re ‘friends.’* When you value some sort of snuggly relationship with a person over the beliefs that that person might have, you reduce the possibility of true, passionate organization—”

“Shut up,” Samantha says. “Just, please, shut up.”

“You know I’m right,” says Dmitrovitch. “You want to change the world but you don’t want to have to tell your *friends* that they’re *wrong*.”

“Fuck you,” says Samantha. She stands up. “I don’t like you. In fact, I despise you. Your whole identity is based around throwing out every last thing that normal people rely on to get through life. Friends, content, physical location. Compassion. You throw it all away—every

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last thing that gives normal people meaning to their lives—because none of it fits your stupid theory. What about, you know, *love*? You believe in love? Do you believe, somewhere in that head of yours, that *love* exists as a social force? That it can make people happy? That maybe people who are in a relationship together should feel something *like* it?”

“Normal people are all zombies,” says Dmitrovitch. “And you’re saying—let me just get this down on the record—are you saying that you’re breaking up with me—I don’t even know what that *means*, it’s not like we’re *going out*—are you saying that you’re making this scene because I don’t *love* you enough?”

“No,” says Samantha. “I’m making this scene because you’re mean and a jerk and I don’t want you putting your penis inside me anymore. And all I mean when I talk about love is that sometimes, some people make themselves less of a mean jerk when they allow themselves to start believing in their ability to love another person.”

“Love,” Dmitrovitch says. “Define it. Tell me what we’re talking about here. I won’t have this conversation until you give me a definition of love. Something concrete. I won’t just talk about this abstractly. Tell me what you mean.”

“The fact that you ask,” Samantha says, “tells me everything I need to know.”

She steps off the stoop and into the darkness.

#

She walks back to Laura’s. It’s not a short walk. She hasn’t been there since she left to go to Gregor’s housewarming Thursday evening. It’s probably been thirty-six hours since she last put new food in Adrienne’s bowl or watered Laura’s plants. It’s probably been almost forty-eight

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since she last entered Laura's bathroom (a cozy rectangle, plated with hand-painted terra-cotta tiles), and got to brush her teeth and take a shower. She's dirty. Her armpits stink. And she knows that as a housesitter, she sucks.

But—and this is what Samantha reminds herself, as she walks home, as the dark sky slowly begins paling above her head—Laura didn't want Samantha to live in her house for eight months because she thought Samantha was a good housekeeper. She wanted Samantha to live in her house for eight months because she thought Samantha would use that time to focus on her music.

The streets are empty and they are doused in violet-blue light—this pale light and this silence makes the world look different, and of course everything looks different anyway, in that way that it always does when you're through with something for good and you have to make up, invent, the world in front of you, all new, every minute—and as she makes her way through the lunar-quiet streets this is what she thinks of: the melody. Within her. The same melody from the day at the mall. It rises and unfolds and pops and expands in her mind. She can feel it move through her; it radiates out from the strange ineffable ear produced by that the maze of bouncing sparks that her brain is; its energy splits and forks and divides to travel down the fans of nerves in her neck and shoulders and arms; the music ends up in her fingers, which throb and tap at her hips and begin longing for the strings that they need to turn the vibrations of the nerves into sound, they have begun, they have begun to remember how to turn the noise in the mind into a sequence of invisible forms in the air.

This time, she does not worry. The reason she didn't write music when she was involved with Dmitrovitch wasn't what she'd feared before—that she'd just been using her music to attract

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a guy, and once she had one, she could stop—the reason she didn't write music when she was involved with Dmitrovitch (and this is so obvious now, now that each step she takes along the cracked and buckled pavement means she is one more step further away from him and his warehouse and those hungry hanging faces forever) was that she knew that he didn't care about her as a musician, didn't respect her as a musician, wasn't interested in her as a musician, and, for some reason (an erosion of sense of self caused by postgraduate turmoil? a glitch in her consciousness caused by the power surge of those first two orgasms on the rooftop?) his vision of her as a nonmusician began to influence her vision of herself, to (*yes, she thinks, say it*) *dominate* it. Perhaps, she thinks, as she walks, perhaps she *aspired* to match his vision because it was *easy*, achievable, all she had to do to live up to what he wanted her to be was show up and look pretty and act interested in whatever he talked about and come when he touched her in the right ways. As long as she kept wanting to be that person she could not fail. Wanting to be someone else—someone who would make her guitar, her music, the center of her life, someone who could spite the world's attempts to demolish that self-made center, someone who could resist the frequent, endless intrusions the world attempts on the private spaces necessary for art to happen within—wanting to be that person is hard, and some of the people who try fail, and failure is frightening and damaging and painful, and so sometimes it is easier not to try.

She thinks of Gregor. Gregor is someone whose musical career is a string of failure—he's been barred entry to the YesMen, ejected from the obliterated Now Hiring when the Nameless Relationship ended, blocked from playing by cranky neighbors, denied even silent practice by a

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burned hand, regulated now to a dank basement—and yet he keeps *trying*. And somehow this has begun to make him stronger. She has seen it.

Melody in her head. In her neck, her back, her arms and fingertips. Melody moving in her spine. She begins to wonder what it would be like to play the melody with Gregor there, playing along, with his bass; she begins allowing herself to remember last summer; she remembers him diving his shitty old green Datsun over to her house on nights when Mom and Mom's new boyfriend were out; she remembers him pulling his bass out from the backseat, remembers how the two of them would set up and jam, remembers the way the two of them sounded together and just that feeling that something there was *dicking*.

Love is the science of manufacturing scintillating intersections.

She begins to supply her melody with imagined accompaniment; she can hear the sound of his bass behind it.

It occurs to her that she would like to play with him again. And she's not thinking about it in terms of getting back together with him in a romantic relationship—she's still not sure that that would work *at all*—and she's not thinking of it in terms of how the two of them *complete* one another or any such bullshit—but she knows, or she's beginning to learn, at least, that that *space*, the space that you need to create something, the space that's defended against the shit and money of the world, doesn't need to be a space that you inhabit alone: the myth of the solitary artist is exactly that, a *myth*, just another one of those male bullshit stories dressing itself up in the drag of fact. To keep that space, to defend it, takes a community. A community of people together, she thinks, is what can stand—is the only thing that can stand—against the forces from the outside,

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the Saxes and McLeggs that roam the planet in the name of the David Geffen Company, the Starbucks and the Barnes and Nobles that replicate themselves across America, the Nikes that paste their Swoosh on any surface that's for sale. Those forces are *corporations*. They have *incorporated*. The only response that makes sense is to incorporate back, against them. Not in the name of profit, like Dmitrovitch and his Invisible City, but in the name of something else, something more important: creation.

She walks, and the sun slowly rises, and the city around her begins the long process of coming awake.

#

Mail on the floor. Adrienne crying, hungry and incensed. The answering machine blinking. Cold, two-day-old sludge in the coffeemaker. Samantha sits on the toilet and pisses out the heavy bladderful of unsynthesized remnants from last night's binge at the Hopper. She catches a glimpse of herself in the over-the-sink mirror as she rises and flushes—her face, greasy, as shiny as a hot nickel; her hair, dishtowel-dirty.

*Take a shower*, a part of her demands, but she's already back in the kitchen, quick, heedless, one hand gripping the cordless phone, the other punching away at the not-yet-forgotten string of numbers that means *Gregor*.

Ring. Ring.

"Come on, come on," Samantha says, the phone in that perfect nook between her head and shoulder, her hands busy working the can opener around the rim of a can of food for Adrienne. She pries the lid off, revealing the ghastly portion of diced innards beneath; she forks

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the whole reeking concoction into a bowl and sets it on the floor; Adrienne plows the perfect shape of her head directly into the stew and smacks away; meanwhile the phone keeps ringing.

“Hello?” a groggy-throated Gregor finally says.

“Gregor,” says Samantha. She sets the filthy fork down on the counter. “Am I waking you up?”

“No, no, it’s fine,” says Gregor. “I was awake.”

She checks the clock. “Oh my God, it’s 6:30 in the morning. You were *not* awake. I’m sorry. I can call back later. It’s just that—I’m sort of in a state—”

“What?” says Gregor. “What’s wrong?”

“No,” Samantha says. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Where’d you go last night? We lost track of you. We went to the diner after the Rave went to bed. Your presence was missed.”

“I want to see you,” Samantha says. “I’ve got—I’ve got a song. I want you to hear it.”

For a minute, all Samantha can hear is the faint *twæ* of interference on the line.

“I want to play it with you,” she says. “I want—I need to hear how it sounds with the bass behind it.”

The pause holds for a second more, and then Gregor asks, “What does this mean?”

“It means what it is,” Samantha says. “That’s all. I want that to be enough. Is it?”

“Yeah,” Gregor says. “Yeah, that’s enough. I can come right over.”

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“If you want to go back to sleep—” Samantha says. She knows that he doesn’t. She carries the phone into the living room, walks slowly towards the stereo housing against which her guitar case leans.

“No,” says Gregor. “I want to come over right away. If that’s all right.”

“Yes,” Samantha says. “Come.”

“I’ll be right there,” says Gregor.

He clicks off. She clicks off. She sits on the floor and pulls the guitar case down into her lap, wipes a swath through the dust with the ball of her hand, pops the latches, and opens the case. It is like opening a book; it is precisely the same motion. The right hand holding the object firm from underneath. The left hand grasping the edge and then pulling across the heart.

Inside the case, the wood of the guitar shines, amber, a sunlit pool. She gathers the guitar up, holds it in that familiar way. She is remembering to remember how.

She plucks each string in turn; six notes hang in the air, each one redolent with memory, like the faces of friends.

She hits a chord. It is her first one in months. Its dulcet warmth fills the room, changing the air into something different, something new.

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# 21

Gregor stands there on the front porch tousled and puffy, with his T-shirt half-tucked into his jeans—with his entire self, in short, in a state of disarray—but he still manages to pull off this brilliant, ebullient smile as he says “Somebody here order a present?” and extends a giftwapped rectangle towards Samantha.

“Mother *fucker*,” she says. “Why do *I* deserve a present? I’ve been nothing but a jerk to you for, like, *four months*.”

He waggles the rectangle at her. “That’s enough mea culpaing for one morning,” he says. “Take the gift, already.”

She takes it and lets him in.

“Besides,” he continues. “What makes you think you *don’t* deserve a present? You made *me* a present—a pretty fucking cool present—and the last thing I’d said to you before that was like *fuck you* or something like that. So don’t tell me who does and who doesn’t deserve presents. Plus I used my employee discount.”

“So it *is* a book,” Samantha says.

“Well,” says Gregor, “It’s not a pound of coffee.”

“Too bad,” Samantha says. “We’re just about out here.”

“Next time,” Gregor says.

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Gregor follows her through the kitchen, maneuvering his bass carefully through the room's geometry, and he settles next to her on the sofa. Adrienne scrams herself at the sight of big feet which belong to someone new and strange.

"Should I open it now?" asks Samantha.

Gregor shrugs. "Aren't you going to admire my smashing wrap job first?"

"It's lovely," Samantha says. "Can I open it now?"

"Yes, yes," says Gregor.

Samantha's never been a neat unwrapper. She's always sort of mentally given her eyebrows a sardonic arch when she watches someone divest a gift of its wrappings with a total, alien meticulousness. Samantha just rips in. She wants the gift to appear out of an explosion of torn paper. And so she goes at it.

It *is* a book. It's a book by somebody named Guy Debord. It's called *The Society of the Spectacle*. It's translated from the French. Samantha flips through it for a minute or two.

"This looks difficult, thank God," Samantha says. "I've been going crazy all summer. The most difficult thing I've read has been like the instructions on how to open one of those rolls of instant biscuits."

"I haven't read all of it," Gregor says. "But I think it's about how modern society kind of keeps people tranquilized by entertainment that ever tends towards the more spectacular. I thought it'd make a good gift for the aftermath of the Nike Rave."

"Indeed."

"The guy committed suicide, so he must have known something about something."

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“God, Gregor, thank you so much.”

“Well, I know it’s not a pound of coffee.”

“Coffee might get the body up-and-running, but it doesn’t really do much for the mind.”

“I’ve been figuring *that* out the hard way.”

“Yeah,” says Samantha. “Yeah, me too.”

Samantha looks at the book.

“I can’t believe they were even *selling* this at Barnes and Noble. I went to their Grand Opening. You want to talk about a spectacle?”

“It’s weird,” Gregor says. “They actually sell a lot of political theory books that pretty much totally critique them. There’s a whole wealth of possible assumptions that could explain it. Either they don’t think anyone will buy them—Barnes and Noble doesn’t really lose money on books they don’t sell; they can return most of them to the publisher—and they just want to have them so that they can maintain the *image* of having everything, or they think that people will buy them and not read them, or they think that people will buy them and read them but they’ll have no real effect. Barnes and Noble could sell books that advocate burning Barnes and Nobles to the ground—it wouldn’t matter one iota to them. They get their cut of each one that gets sold.”

“It wouldn’t matter to them until people actually started burning them to the ground.”

“That’s right. All kinds of books calling on people to destroy society can be happily published within a society where they have no effect.”

“No *wonder* this guy committed suicide.”

“That’s no joke.”

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“I think it was Noam Chomsky who said ‘If anything is freely discussed, then it is probably unimportant.’”

“Where’d you hear that one?”

“I don’t know. School somewhere.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Think about that for a moment.”

Gregor appears to be thinking about that for a moment.

“I’m going to quit my job,” he says, finally.

“What?”

“I’m going to quit my job.”

“Since when?”

“Since now. I hate it. You can’t comprehend how rudely people treat you when you’re in the service industry.”

“Oh, yes I can. I took tickets at the art-movie theatre, remember? If you think normal people are rude, you should see the people who pride themselves on being high-class. The fucking rudest people I’ve ever met in my life.”

“They’ve got to have their cappuccino *right away* or it’s like the end of the goddamn world. If I hear one more person say ‘and make it snappy’ *I’m* going to be the one who fucking committs suicide.”

“Uh huh. What are you going to do?”

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“I don’t know yet. Something. Anything. Even temping would be better than coffee jerking.”

“Yikes, I don’t know about that.”

“You still have to deal with self-important assholes, but, uh, a less steady flow of them.”

“Maybe. It seems like trading one dismal life for another.”

“Yeah, you’re right, probably. Who knows? Maybe the YesMen will get signed and we can all move out to L.A. together. They seemed pretty confident at the diner that the show went well.”

Samantha doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t want to tell him what happened with the agents. She’s just not going to tell anyone what happened with the agents.

“What happened to you, anyway? We looked for you but couldn’t find you.”

“Dmitrovitch and I were having a fight,” Samantha says. “I think it’s pretty much over between us.”

“Oh,” Gregor says. “Huh.”

Samantha gets up off the sofa and walks across the room to pick up her guitar.

“I’m sorry,” Gregor says. “I know you wanted it to work out.”

“Eh,” Samantha says. “It wasn’t going to work out; that got to be pretty obvious by the end. It’s fine. I did it. I’m fine.”

“Oh,” Gregor says. “So what are you going to do now?”

Samantha comes back over to the couch, and sits down again, with her guitar in her lap.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Live here until Christmas? After that, I’m fucked.”

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“Yeah,” says Gregor. “I know the feeling.”

Samantha strums a chord on the guitar.

“I don’t know,” says Gregor. “Sometimes I think about just selling everything I own except my bass and my amp and just going out on the road.”

“You mean, like, to see America or whatever?”

Gregor smiles. “Yeah, I guess. See the world before it ends.”

“Ha.”

“You know? Take my bass out and just go around to different cities and play on the street corner? Scrape up enough change to eat and buy a tank of gas and then move on? Spend the summers up north and the winters down south? All I can think of are the hardships. But I don’t know if the hardships of doing that are any worse than the hardships of fucking standing behind a counter all day smiling at people who I don’t like and who just see me as a human toll booth set up between them and their cup of espresso.”

“You should do it,” says Samantha. “The world’s not all the same yet. I don’t think it is. It seems impossible that it is. You should go. We should go. We should do it together.”

Gregor raises his eyebrows at her. “That sounds like something you’d want to do?”

“Yeah,” says Samantha. She plucks out a few notes on the guitar. “Yeah, I mean it. I don’t have any real ties to this town anymore except for you guys.”

“Yeah,” says Gregor. “Yeah, me neither.”

“Nothing’s keeping me here. We *should* go. We know that we play well together.”

“Or we used to,” says Gregor.

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“You’re over here with your bass, aren’t you?”

“Say the word and I’ll play,” he says.

“Promise me,” Samantha says. “Promise me that if you go you’ll take me with you. Can you promise me that?”

Gregor has closed his eyes. Two wrinkles—thinking wrinkles—appear at the bridge of his nose, two tiny vertical furrows. Samantha can see him nodding his head, almost imperceptibly.

“Gregor?” Samantha says.

“Yes,” Gregor says. His eyes are still closed. “Yes, I promise.”

“Besides,” Samantha says, “you *need* my ass. I’m the one who writes all the songs, remember?”

His eyes pop open and he gives the ebullient smile again. “Ah, no!” he says. “I’ve been *writing*”

“What?” Samantha laughs. “You *lying* mother *fucker*.”

“No, no, it’s true,” he says. “What the fuck do you think I *do* down there in the basement all morning? Just practice my fingerings forever, thinking ‘I sure do wish Samantha was here so I could play a song?’”

“You son of a bitch,” Samantha says. “That’s what you made it *sound* like, back in May, when you were so mopey about the band being broken up. You made it sound—you *did*, you *said* it—like you were just sitting around endlessly reviewing the old Now Hiring progressions.”

“Four months is a long time, man.”

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“So what are these songs that you wrote, anyway? Are they like bass instrumentals or something?”

“No, listen,” Gregor says. He’s grinning like crazy. She can tell that he’s been waiting to tell her about this. “They’re *songs*. You know, like with *verses* and a *chorus* and stuff?”

“Who do you have *sing* these songs?”

“*I* sing them.”

“Fucking *liar*.”

“I am not.”

“Since *when* do you sing?”

“Dude, I’ll *prove* it to you,” Gregor says. “Let me go get my amp.”

“Go ahead,” says Samantha.

There commences the normal few minutes of equipment manuverace, the plugging and unplugging of cords—they all used to joke that time spent setting up instruments wasn’t time that was deducted from your total lifespan, as a way to make the hassle of dealing with all the apparatus feel less cumbersome—and soon he’s mostly through it and ready; he twangs the bass strings a few experimental times and the amplifier translates them into room-rattling tones; he changes the shape and volume of these tones by twiddling at the amplifier’s knobs. When he’s done he stands up and holds his bass out in front of him and wiggles his fingers as a final preparation.

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Samantha makes herself comfortable on the couch, shifting in on her side, and she curls there and pulls her guitar into the hollow that she has formed with her body. “What’s this song about, anyway?” she asks.

“I’m a concerned member of today’s younger generation.”

“Oh, I should have guessed.”

“I’m starting.”

His hands move on the bass. His fingers change shape fast on the strings, and the sound they produce is a punk-inspired melody, something all snap and pop and amphetamine throb. There’s a little funk pulsing away in the mix, too, something a twinge sex-musky about some of the clusters of notes—the song makes her want to shake her limbs around in the air frantically but also to move her hips in a slow grind.

“Oh, yeah,” she says.

Gregor bounces his head up and down a bit and cracks a hideous sneer, baring his teeth and gums for her in a grisly display—it’s that old punk trick, lending your message some cachet by making yourself look as ugly as possible. Punk logic dictates that the uglier the singer makes himself look, the more worthwhile whatever he’s saying must be. Samantha busts up at the sight of his face all screwed like that, same as if he were making faces across a crowded classroom when the teacher weren’t looking. Gregor keeps bouncing.

He begins to cycle through the melody a second time and she positions the guitar up against her body and plays some chords that fit the sound he’s making. He drops the sneer and grins at her. And then he closes his eyes and opens his mouth and sings.

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His voice trembles with a certain frightened tenativity, and he's singing a little too much from the throat instead of from the belly, so the force of his words breaks up a little, they crack in the center, but she listens and she smiles, she loves it, she loves this voice coming out of him, the voice is all flaw but it's strangely endearing to hear, in the same way that listening to a young child mangle the syntax of a sentence warms the listener—she stares into his face as it's singing and slowly she can begin to calculate exactly how much she really cares for him, she can feel it like gathered amount of wealth, she feels the vault of her care creak open inside her and the glow thrown off by that amassed care suffuses her, tints her, makes her mood and her life change color, go golden.

The words Gregor is singing are these:

*Once I was a coffee jerk*

*It was bad, cause it was work*

*They paid me barely minimum wage*

*Treated me like a coffee slave*

*So everybody grab your dick*

*Don't be shy, pull out your prick*

*Stick it in those fluids brown*

*I quit my job and blew that town*

*I went out to find America*

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*What I found made me hysterica*

*Starbucks Coffee coast to coast*

*A country of espresso roast*

*So everybody grab your dick*

*Drop your pants and do it quick*

*Put it in your mug and feel the sting*

*Listen now to what I sing*

*I bought myself an electric guitar*

*I became a superstar*

*I relocated to L.A.*

*Where I fuck my coffee every day*

*So everybody grab your dick*

*Your piece, your rod, your candle stick*

*Put it in your coffee like a straw*

*Drink your coffee—it's the law*

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He crashes the song to a conclusion with the familiar “Shave and a Haircut” melodic strand: *plunk-plunka-plunk-plunk—plunk plunk!*—and then he opens his eyes, stands the bass on end, crosses his hands at the bass’s head, and grins some more.

“I call it ‘Star Fucks Coffee,’” he says. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Samantha says. “I think you’re a remarkable young man.”

“Oh, good,” Gregor says. He hurries over to the couch where she’s sitting and he coils up next to her, his shoulder against her calf, his head resting against her thigh.

“Let me hear the one you’ve written,” he says. “I want to hear the one you’ve written.”

“Okay,” she says.

She begins to play it for him. She watches him, watches him close his eyes and listen, with his head there, a comforting weight, against her leg.

The day passes, much in this fashion.

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