

# PART FOUR

# STARBUCKS

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## 22

They draw slowly closer, the four of them each taking one tentative step inwards, towards the site of the blast. Samantha is certain—she feels certain—that the bomb’s done going off; she’s sure—pretty sure—that the *whump* that concussed the ground beneath their feet a few seconds ago was *it*, the conclusion, the terminal moment for this particular bomb. But there’s still a lot of smoke billowing forth from the site, so she can’t really see the bomb, so she can’t really tell if it’s all the way blown up or what. So she’s moving in closer to the site, but slowly, with—she guesses—the level of tenativeness appropriate for dealing with unfamiliar explosives. She thinks of the site using the word *site* because she can’t see through the smoke enough to tell if there’s a *crater* there or a *scorch mark* or what.

“I just wanted to show you that I could do it,” Jason says. “I mean, I told you I could do it.” A cold wind rips his voice. Nobody answers him.

Most of what the bomb did—she thinks the word *did* because she’s sure, pretty sure, that it’s done going off—most of what the bomb did was generate smoke. Foul like *spumes* of it. It’s beginning to thin out now, the biggest plume of it now stretching out and tattering in the air above them, a great gray dissolving cigar, almost indistinguishable against the wet-slate color of the December sky. She’d expected more fire and flames, something more along the lines of one of those Hollywood gasoline explosions.

She'd expected oranges and yellows at the moment of detonation. Instead she got smoke for a good minute or so and then a big *thump*. That *thump* sent a pretty good shockwave through the decimated cornfield, she'll admit that. It didn't knock her off her feet or anything but she felt a definite *force* pass through her, the same way she feels maybe when she's sitting in a car and someone slams the driver's-side door. That was about it. She feels a little bit foolish, now; now that she's certain (almost certain) that the bomb's done going off, she feels foolish about how far away they all stood. They gave the bomb a hundred feet of space and it just pooped out a bunch of smoke and then give them one good vibration as it blew itself out. And they'd been so *scared*. She'd expected to tremble with awe before an angry red cloud of flame.

"I had to make it," says Jason. They all take another step forwards, the dead remnants of the harvested cornfield cracking under their feet. "I knew I could do it. I had to see if it would work."

She has to admit, though, that if you wanted to put a Starbucks seriously out of commission, that thing would do it. The smoke damage alone would probably keep the place closed for weeks; lots of stock would surely be ruined, requiring costly replacement; the shockwave wouldn't rip through the building's walls or anything, but it might shatter or crack some windows that it was set near. Put that thing in a Starbucks and you'd set that Starbucks back, she'd guess, a good ten thousand dollars. Maybe more. If that was what you wanted to do.

"I hate to say it," says Gregor, "But I'm not quite sure why I'm here watching this."

Samantha's prepared to agree—she wants her voice to carry the weight of heavy scold like Gregor's does—but she can't. She knows exactly why she's here, and she's certain that if Gregor

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thought about it he'd know why he's here, too. Sure, when she woke up this morning in the Magic Danish Bed<sup>1</sup> she didn't think that at three in the afternoon she'd be standing out in the cold watching a bomb explode, but when Jason called her up and said "Want to meet me out in the cornfield today? I'm going to be blowing something up," there wasn't anything that she'd characterize as a moment of hesitation before she said "Yeah!" The idea of watching stuff explode—danger, destruction, fire—simply excites her, as it must excite Gregor, if he'd only admit it.

But Gregor doesn't admit it. He said he didn't know why he was here and then he stopped. They all take another step forwards. Samantha's sure, now, that the bomb is done going off. She stops looking at the site long enough to take a sidelong look at Jason. She feels a little guilty, now, in the face of Gregor's flat criticism<sup>2</sup>, about assenting so enthusiastically when Jason asked her if she wanted to watch him blow shit up; she feels a little bit like she's encouraging Jason down a path that's probably not so good for him to be following.

She's not really sure how far down that path he already is. She keeps her eyes obliquely on him as they move in towards the blast site. He's wearing a torn black trenchcoat and a knit hat. He's given up, lately, on both shaving and wearing his contacts, so he's got a sort of furzy scum of

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<sup>1</sup> Now that Christmas has passed, she's begun to count down the remaining days she'll have to wake up in this bed. Today's December 30th, Laura comes back January 3rd. Four days.

<sup>2</sup> *It wasn't exactly a criticism, she thinks, replaying it in her head. No, it was a criticism, she thinks a moment later. You can't call it anything else but a criticism.* The more she thinks that it was a criticism, the more guilty she feels for not being able to criticize Jason herself, although she still thinks that the criticism Gregor has levelled (*it was a criticism, no way around it, she thinks insistently*) reveals more that Gregor isn't exploring whatever secret attraction to destruction he may possess and less any real wrongdoing on Jason's part.

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not-quite-beard adhering to his cheeks and a pair of dinged-up spectacles balanced on his nose. He looks like a sort of damaged intellectual, which she supposes he is, a bit. She worries amorphously about this. No one turns against society harder than a person who only learned late that society wasn't going to make their life all roses.

She should register a criticism. They shouldn't be encouraging Jason. They should be sitting down with him to have a serious talk. On Christmas afternoon, she and Gregor were hanging out in the boring empty space that Christmas afternoon is, surfing apathetically on the postorgasmic blankness that Christmas afternoon has always held for her (Eve feast and morning presents fade into the past more rapidly each year), and he told her what Caccian had told him, which was that the more time had passed without a call from Geffen, the more Jason had begun to lose interest in his classes. As the rumor goes (and Gregor told her that he wasn't exactly sure he understood Caccian correctly on this point), Jason—always a B student in the past—had failed one seminar this semester and taken an Incomplete in another. This semester. His next-to-last. A bad time to start crashing. The last thing, Samantha thinks, *last* thing she should be encouraging is his meddling around with explosives. She should not respond eagerly to the emergence of a destructive light in his eyes. She should not, should not, should not.

But the fact is. When she saw the bomb she wanted to see it blow. The device was fairly compact and simple and carried with it a certain elegance. And the idea that this elegant shell—which really resembled nothing more than a large sleek thermos—contained some kind of wicked firepower that would express itself and destroy itself simultaneously was, well, yes, *exciting* to her. It *resonated*. It had *meaning*.

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The thermos—what it really looked like, actually, was one of those giant push-button thermoses that coffeehouses put out on the counter so you can fill your own cup—was packed with a sort of grey clay at one end. A long fuse poked its head out of the clay. It was as simple as that. She didn't know what it was going to do. Now that it's done she can figure it out retroactively: the inside of the thermos must have contained some kind of high explosive packed within large amounts of some kind of highly flammable material. The lit fuse ignited the flammable stuff, which probably blew the clay top off the thermos, allowing oxygen in, so it could all burn in that fast and smoky way, and when that stuff was almost burned out it must have ignited the explosive inside, sending the door-slam through the ground and reducing the thermos itself to bits.

Sure enough. They're at ground zero now and there's a few pieces of scorched metal and a kind of turret of melted plastic fused to the ground and there's not much else to be seen. No real crater—it's hard to tell for sure—but there's a remarkable amount of ash spread around in a ten-foot radius.

"I think it worked pretty well," says Jason. He prods one of the scorched pieces of metal with his toe.

Samantha coughs. The air is still smoky. Coughs again: fires a noise into her loose fist.

Gregor is standing one step behind her, she can sense him as a kind of gravity behind her left shoulder. She turns her head, hoping for eye contact, hoping to get that instant snap of telepathy that you get from the eyes of someone you know well, someone who, yes, you *love*; she's hoping that she will look Gregor in the eyes for one second and a strategy for what to do about

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Jason will flash between them. She's surprised that it's come to this. That Jason has become someone who has begun to require the question of *what to do about* them. But no matter, there's no shared strategy to be had, because Gregor's not looking at her, he's looking at Jason, and there's a weird expression coming through his profile that's half contempt and half concern, and his lips part, he's about to say something to Jason, he's already decided upon his strategy for what needs to be done, apparently, he decided and didn't need to confirm or corroborate this decision through an instant of telepathic contact with Samantha, and this rankles Samantha so faintly that she's barely aware of it and by the time Gregor finishes speaking she's already forgotten.

What Gregor says is: "This is over now, right?"

"What do you mean?" Jason asks.

"This whole business with the bombs," Gregor says. "I gotta tell you, it doesn't make me feel good. It frankly makes me feel sick. I didn't think you could build a bomb and then you built one. I'm impressed, okay? But I just want this to be over now. I want the whole thing to just come to an end right here."

Jason scratches the scrounge on his face with his fingernails.

"Can you just *please* tell me that you're done with this as a hobby?" Gregor says.

Jason lifts up his glasses and rubs his pointer and middle fingers around on the surface of his closed eye.

"Cause making bombs is one of those *warning-sign* activities like torturing animals," Gregor says.

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“Right, right,” says Jason. “I mean, sure, I’d like to tell you that it all comes to an end right here, but there are certain difficulties that prohibit me from making such a statement at this time.”

“Jason,” says Gregor, his voice as cautious as a hostage negotiator’s. “Listen to me.”

“Part of the problem,” Jason says, “is that there’s a second bomb.”

“What?” Gregor says.

Jason shrugs. “These are *explosives* we’re talking about, man. You can’t just use what you need for the recipe and put the rest in a cabinet like a bag of flour. You pretty much *need* to use it all up at once. I bought the smallest amount that I could and it was enough for two bombs, so I made two bombs.”

“Where’s the other bomb?”

“What do you mean, *where is it?* It’s in the basement at my mom’s house, same place this one was before I lugged it out here. Heh. If Poplar Hills South only *knew*.”

“What are you planning to do with it?” Gregor asks.

Jason’s face goes cross—he’s clearly feeling that the hostage-negotiator solemnity in Gregor’s voice is all out of proportion to the reality of the situation, a total overreaction to (what Jason must see as) the sheer *mundanity* of what they’re literally talking about, which is nothing more than a few pounds of explosive in a giant thermos in a suburban basement—and he says, in a voice nasty with irritated edge, “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll save it for a rainy day or something.”

“What do *you* think we should do with it?” asks Caccian.

“*I* think you should get rid of it,” says Gregor. “I wouldn’t want that thing in *my* house.”

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“I’m not going to get *rid* of it,” Jason says. “As in I’m not going to disassemble it or put it out on the curb for the garbageman. I *might* get rid of it in the way that it’s intended to be gotten rid of, which is to say I might blow it up. You have to admit: that gets rid of it.”

“Are you just going to blow it up in the field?” Gregor asks. “Another pyrotechnic demonstration?”

“I don’t know,” Jason says. “I wasn’t even sure it was going to work. Now that I know it works—now that I know I have one *working bomb*—I find that I have become the proud possessor of a tiny bit of political power.”

“No, you haven’t,” says Gregor.

“Sure I have,” Jason says. “Bombs are something that make sense to the world. They have an ideological mass; they curve social spacetime around them. In the equation of politics, they represent an amount that’s not insignificant; they change the results of the calculations that powerful organizations make about what to do next. In the great narrative of history, they’re a frequently-used noun.”

Nobody seems to know how to respond to this.

“Having a bomb gets you a voice,” Jason says.

This either.

“There’s an ironic thing, though. The ironic thing is that once you use the bomb, you don’t have it anymore. The power you had from that bomb explodes with it. If you only have one bomb, you get exponentially more power if you *don’t* use it than you do if you *do* use it.”

“So you’re not going to use it?” Gregor says, pursuing his theme.

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“No,” Jason says. “I am going to use it. Because you only get the power from having it and not using it if everyone knows you have it and thinks you *might* use it. And if everyone in Poplar Hills South knew that I had it, and thought I might use it, I’d end up in jail.”

“You might end up in jail anyway, before this is all over,” Gregor says.

“So the question is,” Jason says, “I’ve bought myself this voice. I get the chance to say *one thing*. What am I going to say?”

“It better be good,” Caccian says.

“Yeah, I know. You know those people who kill themselves on the evening news? Who like hole up with a semi-automatic rifle until all the cameras and cops are all around? What an opportunity to get some kind of message out there. They get their one big chance to say something. And they all blow it. A chance to say something *incisive* and they just blow it.”

“It gives me the creeps that you’re comparing yourself to people who shoot themselves on the freeway,” Gregor says.

“Comparing myself *favorably*,” Jason says.

“Kill HMOs,” Caccian says.

“Yeah, what was with *that* guy? You’re about to blow your head open and the only message you can think to promote to the world is that you’re dissatisfied with the quality of *health care*?”

Samantha can’t help but laugh at this, inappropriately, she knows; she represses it as best she can into a tiny snort, quiet enough that Gregor can’t hear.

“So I have to make this bomb *count*,” Jason says. “If I use it at all.”

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“Incisive,” says Caccian.

“You’re not going to use it,” says Gregor.

“I get one chance to speak. One chance to say something critical.”

“Blowing something up doesn’t make a critical statement,” says Gregor. “Only saying something critical makes a critical statement. By definition.”

“Tell it to the dead,” says Jason.

“I don’t believe this,” Gregor says. “I don’t even believe that we’re having this conversation.” He holds his palms up to the sky, offering his exasperation up to God.

Samantha’s nose has begun to tickle.

“So the question becomes, where do you strike?” Jason asks. “The systems of power are decentralized now. Capitalism is a network, constantly in flux, so where do you strike it?”

“That’s my whole point,” says Gregor. “Trying to destroy the system through force is like trying to punch a hole in a pool of water. The only way to change anything is to make people think differently about it.”

“Yeah,” says Jason. “I agree.”

“So you’re going to get rid of the bomb?”

“No,” says Jason. “You’re right, though. I need to use it to make people think differently. So I need to make it a poetic gesture. A tangible sort of metaphor. Strike something which has a symbolic weight to it.”

“Starbucks,” says Caccian.

“Yeah,” says Jason. “Starbucks. It’s got to be Starbucks.”

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“Starbucks?” says Gregor.

“Yeah,” says Jason. “It’s the perfect choice. Coffee is the fuel that makes the brave new world go. It’s the drug that makes capitalism happy. Every office in every city has their own pot of drugs warming in the corner, drugs that make the workers good and alert and productive. Drugs that turn the nonproductive parts of a brain into noise and chaos.”

“Strike a Starbucks and you strike at the hypertense heart of the system,” says Caccian.

“Strike a Starbucks and you strike at all the Starbucks,” says Jason. “And there’s a lot of them.”

“Vandalism,” says Gregor.

“We’re against the world becoming all the same,” says Jason.

“The world makes itself over in an ever-diminishing number of ways,” Caccian says.

“Starbucks makes the world all the same,” says Jason.

“They’re a weed that thrives in the wreck of our society,” says Caccian.

“Vandalism,” says Gregor.

“We have to use our voice to speak out,” says Jason. “And now the bomb is the only voice we have.”

Samantha reels her head back and sneezes onto the back of her hand, an explosion of wet sound into the still-smoky air. Gregor turns to look at her.

“Bless you,” he says.

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# 23

It gets dark. Dark in the late afternoon now. It's the angle of inclination, what causes that.

Gregor sweeps the empty Big Gulp cups and crumpled Dorito bags and splintered cassette tape boxes from the passenger seat into the back seat and he gives Samantha a ride home from the blast site. The YesMen stay behind. Samantha watches them through the back windshield, watches them walking through the cornfield, conferring, Jason pointing at the sky, at the emerging stars.

"They're fucking nuts," Gregor says. Fishes a cassette out of the depths of his seat and jams it into the tape deck. Slow sad chords make the space between them melancholy.

The heater blows air on them that smells like dry cleaning chemicals.

When they pull up into Laura's driveway Samantha turns and studies Gregor's shadowed profile. He is staring out the windshield at the gray flakes of snow that drift through the bright oval thrown upon Laura's garage door by the headlights. She wonders what he's thinking about; wonders if his mind is full of smoke, billowing smoke, like her own. She studies his profile and the position of his hands on the steering wheel and she cannot tell if he is troubled or calm. At times like these she is struck hard by the mystery of other people, struck and shaken and perhaps moved by how much she needs to invent just to pretend she understands another human being.

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She wonders how much of her knowledge about Gregor's wants and desires and motives is just fiction that she herself made up. She looks at him, studying, figuring.

He must feel it, her looking, because he turns away from whatever it was he was seeing in that flung halo of light, and he looks back at her.

"Do you want to come inside?" she asks. "For a while?"

A thought flickers through his face. His eyebrows part at the bridge of his nose and rise slightly (as though her words had entered him through his third eye), his go eyes larger and rounder, his expression transforms into one of immense gentleness. But he does not answer.

"I mean," Samantha says. "Just to talk."

"I shouldn't," says Gregor. "I've got this thing tomorrow. The Saleabration."

Samantha breaks the invisible conduit of their eye contact, looks down at the dashboard. "Right," she says.

"I mean," Gregor says. "My songs need to be ready."

"Right, right," Samantha says. She stares at the texture of the dashboard plastic. "Sure. It's no big deal. I was just—I mean, if you were free tonight—I just thought you might like to come in."

Gregor twists the key and kills the engine. The sonorous minors of the indie band in the tape deck stop dead; the heater's hiss fades to nothing. It is just them and the spotlight and the wet snowflakes touching down on the windshield.

They sit for a minute in silence. She looks back up at him, catches him staring at her in the dark. He laughs just a bit, averts his eyes, scratches the back of his neck. She turns to look out

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the passenger side window; she peers at the reflection of herself caught in the dark ellipse of the mirror mounted there.

“So,” she says. “Are you really going to do this thing tomorrow? Quit your job in public?” Her voice hits the window and transforms into fog.

“Yeah,” says Gregor. “I’m calling it my Emancipation Proclamation. Yeah, I really think I am.”

Samantha looks away from her fogged-over reflection and back at him. He’s picking at a spot of torn vinyl on the steering wheel.

“I’m scheduled to work tomorrow, actually,” he says. Grins. “Right at the time this thing is happening at Borders. So if I go I’m probably going to be fired anyway.”

“That’s funny,” Samantha says.

“It’s funny because it’s not funny,” Gregor says.

“That’s the only kind of funny that’s left,” Samantha says.

Gregor exhales a burst of air through his nose, a sort of half-laugh.

“So,” Samantha says. “What are you going to do then?”

“I don’t know,” says Gregor. “I’ve got enough saved up that I could pay my rent for another two months if I didn’t go out, but that’s it.”

“I don’t have anything saved up,” Samantha says. “I’ve got a Discover card.”

“We could just leave, you know.”

“We keep saying that. And then we don’t go.”

“I could sell this shitmobile and buy a van.”

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“Sell everything.”

“Sell all our CDs.”

“Sell everything.”

“All our books.”

“Everything but the instruments.”

“We could do it.”

“Hit the road,” says Samantha.

“We could do it.”

“If you decided you were going to go,” Samantha says, “I’d go with you.”

He looks up from his vinyl-picking project.

“You mean that,” he says.

She swallows. She knows he has not asked a question, but she answers him. The answer is something that he needs to hear. “Yes. Yes, I mean that.”

“You and me,” he says. “Playing guitar for spare change.”

“Huddled together in the van for warmth.”

“Sneaking into dormitories across America to sneak quick showers.”

“Trading songs for sandwiches.”

He eyes her. He’s trying to figure something.

“How come it can’t be,” he asks, “that *you* decide to go and *I* decide to come with you?”

“I’ve got no van,” she says. “No van, no car, no savings. Wysiwyg.”

She spreads her hands open to show him.

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“Why?” she asks. “If I decided to go—if I *could* go—would you come?”

“Yes,” he says.

They look at each other. Something is happening. This is definitely something happening.

“So are we going to go?” she says, and then she laughs. She’s not sure where this laugh comes from. She is watching the possibility of their going take steps towards realness, and it seems almost funny to her, no, not *almost*, it *does* seem funny to her: that sometimes you can get what you want just simply by imagining it into existence like this.

“Maybe,” Gregor says. “Maybe we are. Hey, what happened to your book for fat people?”

Samantha bites her lip. “I don’t know. I lost interest in it somehow. I tried to get started—ahh, I don’t know.”

“It seemed like a good idea to me,” Gregor says.

“Jason thought it was stupid,” Samantha says.

“So?” Gregor says.

“No, I don’t know, what Jason thought didn’t really have anything to do with it. I just started to sit there and write and I just felt fucking *preposterous*.”

“Hm,” says Gregor. “Why do you think that is?”

Samantha shrugs. “I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know anything about diets, really. Or *writing*, for that matter.”

“You write songs,” Gregor says.

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“That’s different.”

“Not that different. See, that’s what we need to be doing, you and I.”

“What?”

“Going out there, promoting that people can do this kind of shit for themselves. Society tells us the same thing over and over: leave it to the experts. Why make your own music when it’s easier to buy the music that a corporation has determined will meet your tastes? Don’t write—just read what we pick out for you to read. Culture promotes itself as this giant fucking fortress that you need to buy your way into. People don’t understand that culture is something that they can create themselves.”

“Culture is just a guy beating out a rhythm on his kitchen table,” says Samantha.

“Exactly. But people sit down at and they think ‘who am I to write something?’ And so they don’t write anything. Or they sit down to write a song and they think ‘I can’t do this.’ It’s because the image of the non-expert artist no longer appears anywhere in our society.”

“You’ve got to come straight from the factory perfect.”

“The idea of an ordinary person creating isn’t promoted, isn’t encouraged. Just plain folks making art.”

“Folk music,” Samantha says. “You play for me. I play for you.”

“A lot of people—ordinary people—feel like if they’re not good enough to get the attention of a corporation, the majors, then they’re no good. The ordinary people see stardom begin to retract and they stop creating. Which leaves you and me with nowhere to turn for our culture except to the corporations.”

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“The way they want it,” Samantha says.

“The indie labels are important,” Gregor says. “People making their own little tapes are so important. It’s important for people to keep on speaking—everyone—and for people to keep listening. You and I need to promote that message.”

“Out on the road,” Samantha says.

“In any way possible,” Gregor says.

“You know,” Samantha says, “I called those Geffen guys, way back when, to give me a listen.”

“No,” says Gregor. “I didn’t know that.”

“It was your damn idea,” she says. “Chalk it up to a moment of weakness. There was a minute there where you’d really talked me into wanting my shot at superstardom.”

“I think it’s okay to want that,” Gregor says, a little quieter now.

“I’d never sign with them now,” Samantha says. “After talking about this? Going out there? Promoting our own messages on our own terms?”

“I don’t know,” says Gregor. “The most important thing is to get the message out there. I don’t think it matters who finances you.”

Samantha frowns. “Come on. After you just talked about how important the minor labels and stuff are?”

“It’s the message that’s important,” says Gregor. “The minor labels are important because they’re the only ones who will promote certain messages. If a major label were open towards promoting those messages—”

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“Nah,” says Samantha. “The message of *you don’t need to buy into this corporate system* doesn’t make sense if it’s coming from *inside* the corporate system. The message gets lost there somehow. Even if you could find a major who was willing to play ball. Which you never would.”

“No,” says Gregor. “I mean, yeah. I mean, it would never happen, you’re right. It would be the corporation signing their own death warrant.”

“Yeah. You’ve got that right.”

“Unless—” Gregor says, and then he breaks off into silence.

“If you’re going to be promoting the do-it-yourself idea, you have to be doing it yourself. Play locally. Go out on the road. You have to be practicing what you preach, I think. Otherwise you’re just a hypocrite.”

“Unless it’s like the Barnes and Noble thing, where they sell the books, even though those books—”

Samantha’s only barely listening. She’s not interested in his clauses and exceptions. All this dredging up of fine points and hypothetical situations only serves to muddy the shine and clarity of the idea’s perfection—go, ditch this nothing town, head out, see someplace else, play guitar on a beach around a bonfire with a jug of wine, fall asleep under the sky at last, with the white noise of surf in the background. She leans across the space of the front seat and leans her head on Gregor’s shoulder.

“Gregor, Gregor,” she whispers. “Sssh.”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Sssh,” she says. “Just tell me,” she says. “Just tell me we can go.”

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“Let’s talk about it.”

“Yes,” she says. “Talking about it is the only way to make it real. Let’s talk.”

“We will,” Gregor says. His neck relaxes; his head leans against hers. “Tomorrow,” he says.

“You promise?” she says.

“Yeah,” Gregor says. “I promise. Are you coming to see me at the Saleabration?”

“Naturally,” Samantha says. Gregor’s hand is resting, palm up, on his thigh. She reaches over, lets her fingers touch his.

“What are you doing after?”

“The boys invited me over to watch the clock count down. Their mom’s in Acapulco.”

“Are you going to go?”

“I think so. Why? Aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. That bomb makes me nervous.”

“Jason’s just fucking around,” Samantha says. “I’m sure of that.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“He seems to believe that whole change-through-violence idea.”

“He’s just trying to prove a point.”

“People who are just trying to win an argument don’t usually build bombs.”

“That’s the only reason *anyone* builds bombs.”

“Blowing something up is the wrong way to change someone’s mind about something.”

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“So,” Samantha says. She nuzzles her head deeper into the pocket between his collarbone and his neck. “So what *does* change someone’s mind about something?”

He squeezes her hand. When he is done she does not let go.

“Not bombs,” he says.

“No,” she says. “Not bombs.”

“You know what I think?”

“No,” says Samantha. “Tell me.”

“I think—I think there’s certain messages that can reach people. I mean, the world’s full of ‘em, right? Everywhere you look: ads, and songs, and books, and the ads that are on the backs of the books, and whatever. Messages.”

He stops, maybe waiting for her to interject; after a decent moment, he goes on.

“And each person walking around out there, there’s these certain things that they’ll respond to. I guess the responses are already in them, certain responses, waiting to be triggered. Anything can trigger those responses, I guess: a chord, a word, an illustration, a certain type of graphic design—. I don’t think it matters so much who produces the content. I don’t know. Maybe it does. All I know is that when people have them triggered, it changes the way they act. I mean usually it’s just like you read a bunch of CD reviews and you buy one CD and not another. Or you read the description on the back of a book, or you read the first line, and you go *yeah* and you buy it or you go *eh* or *nah* and you don’t buy it. You do little things in the moment. You go left instead of right. You have lunch at the yogurt bar instead of at the taco place. But I think everyone out there has a set of responses that’s deeper, too. And if the right message hits you,

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triggers those deeper responses, you'll change. You'll act differently; it'll kind of *ripple out* past the moment. The way you behave will be changed. Forever—maybe in just some minor way, but forever. And that's what makes the world change, is all these people, walking around, slowly beginning to think differently. It's my responsibility, I guess—yeah—it's my *responsibility* to put the messages out there, the messages that I think will change people's behavior in a way that will overall cause the world to get *better*. Better at least in the way that *I* think of better. Yeah. That's my responsibility. And if I'm lucky enough to be able to trigger those deeper responses in people with my songs, then, shit, I've done it; I've changed the world. It might be just in some little way but I've changed the world. And if I don't trigger them, well, at least I'm not doing anything worse than bringing a little more noise into an already noisy world."

The Datsun's gotten cold. Samantha's practically in Gregor's lap to keep warm. Even with her head nestled into his clavicular groove, her teeth are still beginning to chatter. It's a subzero night outside.

"Gregor," she says. "It's cold. Why don't you come in and we'll talk some more?"

"I can't," he says. "I really have to go now."

She kisses him on the cheek as he starts the ignition up again. The whole windshield is fogged over, and he turns the defrosters on it and waits, watching the spotlight door slowly come clear.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Samantha says.

Gregor smiles her a heartbreaking smile.

She gets out of the car and steps into a razoring wind. Pulls her jacket tight around her. Crosses around in front of the car. When she's there she waves goodnight. When she's there she

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squints into the dazzle of headlights, trying, trying, to make him out.

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## 24

She puts her books in a box. The crisp brilliant light of winter pours in through the windows. Adrienne finds the giant polygons of light pooled on the floor and tests them out, stretches her body long in each of them, while Samantha packs. It's the last day of the twentieth century. This is what it looks like: books and clothes and all her belongings parceled up tidily in these boxes scavenged up from Safeway's produce department, from behind the liquor store. And here: her guitar in its case, irregular-shaped, the one thing that doesn't fit. And there: an outside that's too bright to look at and too cold to enter.

The Singer-Songwriter Saleabration is at five. In three days she moves back in with her parents. It's a little after one right now and she's packing her books in a box that says *Tasty Natural Chickens* on it and wondering, idly, whether the world might end.

She puts a library book—two weeks overdue, she remembers now—on top of the pile. Sticking out of it is a folded piece of paper. She tugs the paper out from between the pages and unfolds it in her lap. It's the job application from Saul's.

She folds it back up and sticks it in the front pocket of her overalls.

The 1900s. They're for the history books now. Just to say it, just to think the words—*the 1900s*—makes the years sound already antiquated. What were they, anyway, those hundred years? The assembly line and the hydrogen bomb. Television, computers, rock and roll. Wars,

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she supposes—she missed Vietnam, and she was only a giddy junior high kid when the Gulf conflict looped itself out<sup>3</sup>—but, yeah, she shuffles back through the images she’s received about this century and she sees the images you see, the screeching Hitler and the bodies coming home from Vietnam, and she knows there’s other wars in there too, imageless ones that she just barely knows about, the invisible grapple over Korea and the anachronistic geopolitics of Double-U Double-U One.

And now she’s here to see the end of it all. This dissatisfied girl gets to watch the exhausted century kick back and relax with the long dull novel of ten peaceful, prosperous years.

She thinks it’s an illusion. This boom. The happiness and prosperity. She doesn’t know anyone who it’s happening to, really. All she knows is unhappy people who have maxxed out their credit cards and people unhappy stuck being circuits and switchers in a machine that’s larger than them. She packs up her books on this last day. Nowhere to go except back home to her parents.

*I won’t grow up, I won’t grow up, I won’t grow up.*

She’s been reading about Reagan this past week. This book—the one in her hand—was assigned for a college seminar she took last year (Poli Sci 409: Power and Economic Models). She failed to get through all the way through it then, but now that college is behind her it seems

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<sup>3</sup> She remembers it though, remembers it as an interminable pre-game show, right down to the computer graphics. Only it was a pre-game show that never seemed to lead up to any *game*, it was a pre-game show clasped so tightly to the post-game show that the game itself got squeezed out, distilled down to replays of a few highlights. Even at pre-punk age thirteen, she understood that something was missing there, that the TV was a site of some crucial absence.

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more interesting; now that she's hovering at the verge of actually *entering* the economy, she's a lot more interested in what makes it go. This book suggests that Reagan's whole point was to misdirect the public. The book suggests, in plain old black and white, that he was installed as an emergency measure expressly to keep the public from panicking about the economy, to keep them from realizing that the numbers no longer signified anything concrete, from realizing that money had become an illusion, a collective dream, a fantasy of credit and worth that had expanded to contain the entire country within it. When you realize you're having a beautiful dream you wake up. Reagan was deployed, this book suggests, to keep America asleep. Reagan: a friendly, foggy Dad, distracting Carter's panicky America with the colorful rhetoric of wartime(although there was no war; there was never any *real* war). And the streets slowly filled with homeless people and the mentally ill, and the degrees the colleges pumped out became more and more worthless, and the jobs became worse and worse. And the largest employer in the nation became a temp employment agency. Daydream nation.

If you asked her, she'd tell you that she thinks Bill Clinton is only continuing to preside over this dream nation. Things aren't actually getting any better or easier for anyone—they aren't, she can *see* this—but the numbers say “unparalleled prosperity,” so “unparalleled prosperity” are the words on the lips of everyone in the dream nation.

When you're realizing you're having a beautiful dream you wake up.

She thinks the real nation, the one behind the dream, is a place run mostly by corporations. Insurance companies and chemical multinationals. The multimedia conglomerates, the content providers, and the stores that exist to hammer that content into the public. And the

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coffee joints that help to make it all go. The politicians are no longer in charge; they've all been bought. McDonald's flies its own flag, just beneath the American one. She feels that she's glimpsed the real nation. All of us walk around in it every day but it takes a special effort to see it.

You're having a dream: you wake up.

The key, she thinks, to keeping the dream running is to distract people from the way it works. Flood the primary channels of information with fact. Get the populace worked up over the endless Punch and Judy theater that is all politics is nowadays. Charge them with violence and sexual scandal; drown their dazzled brains in a billion bits of related minutia. Point their heads in a million different directions so they can't think a complex topic through.

Sometimes Samantha feels like those pictures of caffeinated spiders in her old Science book, trying to create something but instead just producing threads that go nowhere, that make no shape. Books help. The real books. A couple thousand paragraphs about the same thing? Sure. Gives her the time and room to focus and think; gets her temporarily out of the dream. But no one reads anymore, right? Isn't that what they keep saying on TV?

You are dreaming.

Entertain people so they don't catch on to what is really happening. Samantha has begun to see this process of misdirection happening everywhere she looks now.

The name of David Geffen's multimedia company is DreamWorks.

Samantha wants to undistract people. She wants Gregor to call her tomorrow and say *let's*

*go.*

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The phone rings. She drops the book on Keynesian economics and Reagan's Cold War into the box that says *Smirnoff Vodka* on its side and she slowly gets up on her feet.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Samantha, happy holidays." It's Laura.

"Happy holidays to you, too. You have a good Christmas?"

"Yeah, and you?"

Samantha shrugs. "Okay."

"I'm in Houston right now," Laura says. "Visiting my folks."

"You finish up in Alaska all right?" Samantha says.

"Yeah, great," Laura says. "I got out of there just in time, though. It was going from bitterly cold to *killer* bitterly cold. How are things there?"

"Everything's great," Samantha says. "I'm just getting packed up today."

"Yeah. It looks like everything's going okay and I'll be back on Monday as planned."

"Okay," Samantha says.

There's a moment of that shapeless awkward telephone silence.

"So," Laura says. "Any New Year's Resolutions?"

"Oh," says Samantha. "No. And yourself?"

"No, not really," says Laura. "There's something just so Catholic about New Year's Resolutions; I can't bear to participate in them."

"I know what you mean," says Samantha.

"So," Laura says. "Samantha. Can I ask you a question?"

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“Sure.”

“What are you planning to do once I get back?”

Samantha closes her eyes.

“I don’t know,” says Samantha. “I still don’t have a job—I’m so far down I can’t even visualize what a job I’d like to do would look like anymore.”

Laura laughs, but it’s gentle; it’s a sort of commiserating laugh. It gets Samantha to open her eyes again. “Well,” Laura says, “there’s always teaching.”

“You really like teaching, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Laura says. “It’s great. You get paid to have an audience of people come listen to you talk about stuff that’s important to you day in and day out? Best job *I* ever had. I can’t imagine wanting to do anything else.”

“You won’t get rich at it.”

“What do I care about rich?”

“Let me ask *you* a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you feel like you change your students’ minds about things?”

“Hmm,” says Laura. “Sometimes. Yeah, I guess so. I know for sure that when I get a student who has ideas that are counter to the mainstream I can encourage them, tell them they’re not the only person in the world who thinks the thoughts that they’re thinking. I feel like I did that with you.”

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The first time Samantha came to Laura's office hours, Laura had lent her a well-thumbed and heavily-marginalia'd copy of Simone DeBeauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Samantha remembers that.

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah, I think you did."

"I think that's important," Laura says. "I think that's *really* important. I mean, there's smart teenage girls out there who kill themselves because they feel like they're the only ones who see things a certain way."

"Sure," says Samantha.

"I don't know if you could actually say I change people's minds as much as I try to keep ideas alive in people."

"What ideas?"

"Mainly the idea that life doesn't have to be the way it is."

"Yeah," says Samantha. "But let me ask you this."

"What?"

"Don't you ever get tired of just affecting one person at a time? Do you ever feel like it's just happening too slowly? Don't you ever wish that you could just change everyone's mind all at once?"

"You mean, do I wish I was the ultimate cultural dictator of the world or something?"

Sure, who doesn't?"

Laura laughs. It's that laugh that Samantha loves. She can hear all the clarity of a thinking mind in that laugh. And Samantha laughs back, a little; it's a smaller laugh; part of her mind is still pursuing the tendril of the point she's trying to make.

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“No,” is what she finally says. “No, not so much the cultural dictator.”

Laura is silent; she waits, encouragingly patient, for Samantha to work her thought out completely.

“I guess what I want to know—what I really want to know—is do you ever feel bad that you’re not famous?”

She feels afraid that Laura’s going to laugh at this question; it sounds absurd as it comes out of her mouth and takes shape in the kitchen. But Laura’s always been receptive to Samantha’s most secret/craziest ideas and questions, she’s always treated them as though they weren’t crazy, and, sure enough, she doesn’t laugh: all Samantha hears through the phone line is a thoughtful *hmm*. She waits for the answer.

“No,” says Laura. “No, I never really wanted to be famous. I mean, I see what you mean—”

“—because,” Samantha says, “if you were famous, then you could write a book or something, and change a whole bunch of people’s minds at once—”

“—right. Right. But there’s something about that that doesn’t feel rewarding to me.”

“What is it?” Samantha says.

A pause for a second. An interval to think in. And then: “Contact.”

“What?” Samantha says.

“Contact,” Laura says. “I like having contact with the people whose lives I’m affecting. I think once you get famous, you lose that sense of contact.”

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An image flashes through Samantha's mind, an image of herself on a corner in a strange new city, playing the guitar, talking to the people who go by. Talking to the people who stop and talk and listen.

"Yeah," Samantha says.

"You know?" Laura says. "I mean, the important texts are out there already."

"*Second Sex*," says Samantha.

"Right," says Laura. "I don't really have anything to say that's so important that it's going to warrant going up on sale against *The Second Sex*." She laughs. "I mean, I really don't! But if a girl comes into my office who's never read it—a girl who has maybe observed, on her own, some of the same observations that book makes—then I've got some really important stuff to talk to that girl about. Or a girl who has read it and wants to talk about the different ways it applies to the world we're in now. Those are the times when I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing."

"You do a good job of it," Samantha says.

"Thanks," says Laura. "Oh, and, hey, listen."

"What?" Samantha says.

"You talked about changing a whole bunch of people's minds all at once?"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing good ever comes from the things that change a lot of minds all at once," Laura says. "When a lot of minds start changing all at once all you ever get is war and upheaval and a lot of dead people. The things that really change the world in a good way take a long time to

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do it. And it all has to do with contact. It's all one friend passes a book on to another. Someone hears a speech that moves them and they write down a phrase they remember in a letter. Someone makes a tape of a few songs that they discovered and they pass it to a friend in the hallway at school."

The other line is beeping.

"That's the way information is supposed to travel," Laura says. "Is that the other line?"

"Yeah," says Samantha. "You want me to shake 'em?"

"Ahh," says Laura, quickly making some calculation in her head, "no. This conversation is costing my folks. I'll talk to you more when I get back, okay?"

"Uh huh," says Samantha.

"Well," says Laura. "See you Monday."

"Yeah," says Samantha. "Bye."

"Bye," says Laura.

Samantha clicks over to the other line.

"Hello?"

"Hello?" comes this voice that she doesn't recognize. It's shaky, this voice, touchily uncertain.

"Yes, hello?" *Telemarketer*, she's thinking, except that lag, that half-second telemarketer lag was missing. There's that gap (which she now listens for) that happens after she first speaks, while the autodialer or computer or whatever-the-fuck feeds the call to the telemarketer, and that gap was not there.

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“Uh, hello, can I—um, is Samantha there?”

Can't be a telemarketer. The telemarketers all ask for Laura. Ms. McMillian. The worst ask for a Mr. or Ms. McMillian. She thinks. She rifles through the index of people who know she's here. Comes up blank on this voice.

“Who is this?”

“It's Gordon.”

Gordon. Yeah, it *is* Gordon, she can tell now, but something in his voice sounds weird. Different. Maybe it's just because this is the first time she's talked to him on the phone? No. Something is definitely different. She hasn't heard that shaky tone in his voice before. A blue spark of anxiety ignites somewhere within her. When things don't go as normal sometimes that means something is wrong.

“Gordon,” Samantha says. “What do you want?”

“It's Dmitrovitch,” Gordon says. “He wants to see you.”

At the mention of the name, the anxious spark heats and reddens inside her, turns angry. Dmitrovitch has his fucking *lackey* call her?

“Is that a fact?” she says. “Well, I don't want to see him.”

“Wait, listen—”

“And tell him that if he really wants to see me, he should call me himself.”

“No,” Gordon says. “You don't understand.”

“What?” Samantha says. “What is there to understand?”

“Dmitrovitch is—he's in the hospital.”

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Samantha opens her mouth. She says nothing. The structure of her anger crumbles inside of her. She feels empty. The word *hospital*—the idea of *hospital*—takes her to a point beyond anxious. Takes her all the way to horror. Not screaming horror but empty horror, numb, the horror that your body and mind respond to by hollowing themselves out, turning themselves into receptacles for more information, the information needed to make sense of the news.

She speaks. It is an effort to speak.

“What,” she says. “What are you talking about?”

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## 25

Samantha despises hospitals, same as anyone. There's a thin froth of brain activity that chats inappropriately on and on about how everyone hates hospitals. *You'd think*, she thinks, her feet following the blue line, *that after all these years they'd finally be able to make hospitals a place where people like to be*. Then she counteracts this thought by thinking that it's not the hospitals themselves that are dreadful, inherently, it's simply that people go there on dreadful business and they get that dreadfulness all mixed up with their response to the architecture and the acoustics. Then she looks up from the winding blue line that the receptionist said would lead her to the Intensive Care Unit and she looks around at the grey walls and the countless doors adorned with cryptic plaques and the carts full of soiled laundry and the periodic banks of vending machines, and she listens to the pings and pages that bounce through the air, and she tries to judge this place objectively, tries to forget that hospitals are basically storage units for human beings in every imaginable sort of pain, tries to forget that somewhere in this place there are swelling red trash bags full of severed arms and breasts and colons, tries to forget that there are probably dead bodies within five hundred yards of her, tries to put all of that aside and just figure out if there's just something about *the way the building is built* that creeps her.

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There's another big part of her that wishes that that her brain would just shut up. But when she puts the plug on the idle yammer she has to think about Dmitrovitch. And that's no good. Still too upsetting.

*You're going to have to think about it soon enough*, she thinks, scoldingly, but this reprimand is buried under a mental landslide of denials, denials that are more impulses than words—so many that to even attempt a transliteration of their essence you'd need to fill a whole page with *nos* and *shut ups* and *ssshs*.

But her brain needs to think about something. She looks back down at the blue line, the blue line that means *follow me to your wounded friend*, and this seems as valid a thing to think on as any, so she thinks on it: her mind prints out a tickertape that goes *blue line, blue line, blue line*.

Dmitrovitch is hurt.

*Blue line, blue line, blue line.*

"We were down at the train tracks," Gordon had said over the phone, half-crying.

*Blue line, blue line, blue line.*

They'd been down at the train tracks. Dmitrovitch had been recording. He'd set his laptop down on the ties to get the something something center channel. Gordon telling the story, hard snuffles breaking through his words.

*Blue-fucking-line, Samantha*, she thinks.

Somebody in this hallway is screaming as though something really bad is happening to them. She figures she must be in the right place.

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She looks up at the numbers on the doors. 270, 272, 274, 276. What the fuck? Dmitrovitch is supposed to be in 275. She stares for a minute at 274's door, and then for another minute at 276's door. She feels a momentary swell of anger rise in her, absurdly, anger at these two stubborn doors, as though they've deliberately chosen to conspire against her.

It wasn't exactly clear from the phone conversation, what happened.

"This train was coming," Gordon had said. And then he'd become impossible to follow, crying too hard to assemble language anymore, his sentences disintegrated into a string of repeated phrases; his mind got stuck on fragments, which he repeated without completion, because completing them, in his own voice, would make them *true*, turn them into unavoidable reality. So, poised there, tipping over the edge of realization, he held back, cried, stammered, repeated broken phrases. *And he wouldn't*, he'd said. *And he wouldn't*— It doesn't matter. Samantha remembers how the story ends anyway. Only last time Dmitrovitch made it out of the way in time.

Someone behind door 276 wails. She looks around and sees a doctor—a man in a white coat, anyway—drinking from a water fountain. She wants to ask him something but she's not sure what. Could you direct me to Room 275? Why are all these people screaming? Isn't there something that you could do about that? Why, for all our quote-unquote *progress*, is a hospital still a place where everyone—wounded and well alike—feels dreadful and sick? She keeps walking.

Why is she even here? She broke up with Dmitrovitch and she did not wish him well when she did. Why should she care what happens to him?

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She gives herself this answer: the world is full of dangerous forces and sometimes those forces converge on individuals, destroying them, wholly or in part. To turn your back on someone who's been destroyed—it doesn't matter whether you like them as a person or not—changes the balance sheet of the world, adds one to the column tabulating the people who turn their backs, subtracts one from the column tabulating the people who don't. It makes the world ever so slightly more a place where it's okay to ignore the destroyed. And that makes the world a bad place to be if it ever becomes your turn to be the target, the point of convergence of those abundant dangerous forces. And Samantha is smart enough to know that it always will, eventually.

The blue line takes her around a corner. There's Gordon, head down, sitting in a chair that he must have dragged out into the hallway. Across his knees lays Dmitrovitch's laptop; across the keyboard his pale hands are folded.

"Gordon," Samantha says.

Gordon yanks his head up and looks at her, red-eyed. She abruptly remembers that the last time she saw him was at the Nike Rave, when she'd asked him to have sex with her.

"I got here as quick as I could," she says.

Gordon gathers the laptop up into his arms so he can stand. He then lays it back down on the chair with extreme care.

"Fuck, Samantha," he says. He stands there, his hand makes a gesture, a kind of *offering out*, he repeats it, repeats it again. He seems to be unable to speak.

"Gordon," Samantha says. "It's okay." She takes a step towards him. She takes him awkwardly into her arms.

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“Fuck,” Gordon says again. His head collapses onto her shoulder and his body shakes with one hard spasm of grief. “So fucking unfair.”

“God, Gordon, I’m sorry.”

She can feel his head nodding.

“Is he okay?” Samantha says. “Can I go in and see him?”

“Yeah,” Gordon mumbles into her shoulder. “He was resting. But he wants to see you. Go ahead. I’ll wait out here.”

He lets go of her and traces the lower rim of each of his eyelids with a finger, erasing the moisture that has gathered there. He fumbles with the laptop on the chair, gathers it up again, and sits down, placing it across the impromptu desk of his calves. Samantha gets a look at it and her gut twists: the screen is dead gray, opaque as a cataract; its perfect smooth glass has cracked, splintered, exploded into a glistening network of crescents and jag-lines.

Gordon catches her looking and he taps the space bar twice. “It’s wrecked,” he says. “It must have flown fifty feet.”

Samantha goes into 275. The blinds are drawn and the lights are off. The room’s only illumination is the TV, mounted high in the corner, flinging hot phosphorescence across the pale walls and the plastic curtain that hides Dmitrovitch. The image that the TV projects into the stillness of the room is this: a chicken, rooting around in a barnyard, accompanied by a man wearing a chicken suit. This is accompanied by the sounds of clucking and a fiddler playing “Turkey In The Straw.” She stares at this image, trying to make it fit in her mind somehow. After two seconds she abandons any hope of this and takes another step into the room.

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“Dmitrovitch?” she says, meekly.

She steps beyond the curtain and that’s where she finds him.

It’s bad. It’s worse than she thought and she’d expected it to be bad. She’d been picturing his legs in casts, swaddled in great white tubes, like in cartoons. This is something different, there’s some kind of *machine* on him—her mouth drops open and a sound comes out, some throat-moan that she didn’t give the order for—on his legs is this machine, a contraption with too many parts to make the comics, a thing too complex to ever be funny. This thing is knobs and sprockets and pins that go right into his flesh and she’s moaning at it, trying to banish it with this low unsummoned noise, but it won’t go away, it’s like a nightmare that you can’t wake up from only worse because she knows it’s not a nightmare, she looks at this thing and his legs all purple and twisted inside it and she wishes it away and wishes it away and wishes it away but it resolutely stays there, on him, like the pile of interlocked steel parts that it is.

“Oh my God,” says Samantha. Here it is, in front of her, the objective reality of his woundedness, time for her to deal, time to reconstruct her mental space, and it’s difficult to do, it hurts, but this here now makes her have to tear up certain structures in her mind in order to make room for this one new truth: his body is broken.

*Pulverized* is the word. She makes herself look through the wavering world at his legs. There must be fifty pins in them. She imagines the bones in her legs and imagines a force moving through them, leaving them in fifty pieces, imagines what the magnitude of that force must have been.

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She makes herself look again. For the first time she sees past the mechanics and the legs and looks at him from the waist up. She can't really see because of the gown but his upper body seems okay. His arms are bandaged in a few spots but they seem intact. His eyes are swollen and bruised, his nose has a bandage over it, and his forehead, from his hairline to his eyebrows, is hidden behind a heavy layer of gauze. His head wounds, which would seem bad on any normal day, seem minor in comparison to his demolished legs.

"Oh, my God," she says again. Eyes closed and balance suddenly off, she reaches out and grabs hold of the metal rod that marks the foot of the bed. The bar rattles in its mounting; she leans on it and the entire bed seems to shake under her weight. Dmitrovitch makes a noise—*un*—and she immediately snaps back, releasing the rod: it rattles back into its static state.

*Sit*, says whatever's been left in charge inside her. She has to open her eyes and figure out which one of the shapes in the room is a chair. None of her processors are running up to speed at the moment; most of the mental energy that fuels them has been diverted, is doing the painful work of reality reconstruction right now. She's lucky, once she finds it, that she lands on the seat and not on the floor.

She drops her head into her palms and plants her elbows down hard on a swiveling tray table. The table wobbles under the force of this bodily impact; some joint on the table's underside issues a high whine of protest at being asked to bear this new burden with so little warning. A hand-sized chunk of plastic gives one tiny hop, nestles against her olecranon, and goes still.

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She can hear the TV talking. Blah blah blah *smudge-free protection for today's active lifestyles. We know you're busy—so our team designed it to go on quick, for when you're on the go.* The voice and the Eurosynth drum rhythm behind it are too loud; they're near the threshold of painful. She opens her eyes, and looks down between her palms at the table; her peripheral vision detects that the thing against the knob of her elbow is the remote. She grabs it and points it at the TV and presses the wide button that she guesses is ON/OFF. Nothing happens.

She pulls the remote close in to her face, squints through her watery field of vision, finds the triangular buttons that do volume and channel, and presses them. Presses them all. Nothing happens. The TV chats happy and loud over her frantic motions.

“Oh, *fuck this!*” she shouts, and throws the remote towards the screen as hard as she can. It's on a tether, though: almost as soon as it leaves her hand its leash jerks tight and it flies back and hits her, glancingly, in the face.

“It's busted,” Dmitrovitch croaks.

She gasps—she didn't know he was even awake—and her hand flies up to her chest, as though she's trying to keep her leaping soul in. Dmitrovitch has opened his swollen eyes a crack. His irises are shards of color afloat in red. He manages the faintest of smirks, in response to something he must see on her face.

“I know,” he says. “These fucking *talk shows.*”

It takes her a minute to figure out that he's still talking about the TV. She wonders how long he's had it blaring down at him, uninterrupted, uninteruptable. She wonders if she couldn't push the nurse call button and get some candystriper in here to just fucking *turn it down?*

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“Dmitrovitch,” she says. “God, I’m sorry.” She doesn’t know what else to say.

He lets his eyes go closed again and makes a sound—*unnh*—not a word so much as a heavy exhale that runs through the vocal cords.

“Are you in a lot of pain?” she asks.

“Unh,” he manages again. She doesn’t know whether this sound means *affirmative* or *negative*. What she wants right now is to try to hold him, to try to reassure him with her presence, but she’s afraid that she might tangle herself somehow in the flimsy tubes attached to his right arm; she’s afraid that she might accidentally knock against the machine that pins the bones of his legs back together; she’s afraid, in short, that if she touched him, she’d plunge him even deeper into whatever agonizing gray dreamworld he must already be deep in.

So she doesn’t touch him. She doesn’t talk to him. She doesn’t do anything. She thinks.

She thinks *My God, how is he paying for this?*

He has no real job. No real job means no health insurance. If he doesn’t have any health insurance, who is paying for all of this? She knows it’s expensive. The drips and the steel hardware are expensive. The stitches in his forehead are expensive. The ambulance ride to the hospital is expensive. Just sleeping in this bed, in this hospital, per night, is expensive. Someone has to foot the bill for these privileges—the bad food, the loud TV—someone has to pay for it all.

She looks at his destroyed legs. How long do they let you stay in the hospital if there’s no insurance to pay for you to lie there and hurt? A week? Maybe two? Less? Forty-eight hours?

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She looks at the apparatus that contains them. They're not going to be able to just slap him with a pair of crutches and a few jacked-up aspirin. She sees at least six months of wheelchairs in his future. She sees physical therapy.

She thinks about the warehouse. Thinks about the things he can no longer use. The three concrete steps that lead up to the door. The mattress that's just set straight on the ground. What happens to you if your ability to live in the place where you live goes inviable in the space of a second? If you haven't made the deals and signed the forms to insure that you'll be all right when it happens?

She thinks about personal debt and medical welfare, all those bureaucratic worlds she's never had to enter into. *There's an entire culture that exists just to save people like him*, she tells herself. *Of course there is. There must be.* Maybe all he needs to do is find the right forms and sign them and someone will come and find a way to finance making him well. All he needs to do, Samantha tells herself, is find the right forms to sign and the culture will save him.

And if that doesn't work, Samantha thinks, will the counterculture help him? The electronic culture, the army of reality creationists, with their solutions to everything? The Net, and its incredible invisible population, the shadowy alliance of hackers and pirates and audio surveyors and people who trade information about how to build smoky bombs? The ones who tell you that if you pretend there's no system then the system can't affect you? Surely they've got an answer. Surely there is some encrypted solution out there somewhere that tells what to do when your legs shatter out from underneath you? Samantha's heard Jason talk about phone phreaks, geeky brainiacs who trade illicit calling card numbers through underground BBS's, who

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apply the rhetoric of liberation to a topic as unlofty as telecommunications—if you go one level deeper do you find insurance phreaks? If you look hard enough, could you find data dealers who traffic in Blue Cross/Blue Shield accounts tagged to fictional identities? And, if not, Samantha wonders, then what’s the point of all their technoanarchist talk? It’ll take a lot of free long-distance calls to recoup the cost of just one night spent in the hospital, wounded.

“It’s okay,” Samantha says. She doesn’t know why she says this, because it is perfectly clear to her that nothing here is okay, that nothing will be okay for Dmitrovitch for a long time. “It’s okay,” she says again. “I’m here,” she says. “It’s okay.”

Dmitrovitch nods his head once, slowly. For a while she sits in the plastic chair and does nothing but cry quietly.

Dmitrovitch seems to fall back asleep. She sits by the side of his bed for maybe an hour, tries to watch Dmitrovitch’s still face instead of the bright cavorting colors of the loud TV. She looks out the window at the sun going down and she knows that the Saleabration’s going to start soon.

After maybe another half an hour Gordon comes back into the room.

“Thanks for watching him,” he says, quietly, so as not to wake Dmitrovitch.

Samantha just nods.

“I’ve been up all night,” he says. “I just caught some sleep on a sofa out in the waiting area. I don’t think I could have done it if I didn’t know you were here. Thanks again.”

Samantha nods again.

“You don’t have to stay here, if you don’t want,” Gordon says.

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“I think—” says Samantha, thinking of the Saleabration, and Gregor, “—I think I’m going to go.”

“I know it’s New Year’s Eve and all,” Gordon says. “The Big One, no less.”

“Yeah,” says Samantha. “But, look, he’s still going to be here tomorrow, right?”

“I don’t see how it could be otherwise,” Gordon says. “He’s got no place to go, really.”

“Okay,” says Samantha. “I’ll come back here tomorrow and give you another shift off.”

“Thanks,” says Gordon. “Tonight I’m just going to stay until they kick me out.”

“Make ‘em drag you kicking and screaming,” Samantha says.

“I will.”

Samantha rises from the plastic chair and heads for the door. Behind her, voices on the television erupt into laughter and cheers. The voices of happy people fragmenting into chaos and hysteria.

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## 26

She staggers into Borders and for a minute she thinks she's in Barnes and Noble. Tragedy has boosted her awareness of every mundane detail surrounding her—the texture of the parking lot's surface, the wrinkly bubbles of air trapped beneath bumper stickers, the smudgy kid-handprints on the glass door leading in, all of these things come at her amplified, the volume of their very existence is turned up loud in a way that she hasn't experienced since the day her dad died—but at the same time a terrible sadness clouds the part of her mind that makes sense of these details. She has lost the ability to make something coherent and sensible out of the flowing *incoming!* of life's data. She's lucky she didn't ride her bike straight into traffic on the way over here. So when she comes in and the details of the place swarm at her (the bright lights, the light music, the crap-hawking midway) she thinks for a moment that there's been some mistake, that in trying to find Gregor—she wants nothing more right now than to find Gregor—her body went, on autopilot, to the wrong corporate bookstore. She thinks she went to the one where he's supposed to be working instead of the one where he's supposed to be playing. The one a half-mile north of the intersection instead of the one a half-mile south.

She almost turns around and heads back out the door but then she sees the posters hanging down from the ceiling. Bob Dylan's face, circa 1968, floating above the massed banks of CDs like a cool Semitic Christ, kinky hair and dark shades, a way-gone Jesus ascending into stellar

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heaven. In the lower right-hand corner the word *Borders* is printed in stately type. And there's another ascende, Joan Baez, held aloft on two invisible monofilament threads. And Lennon, back from the dead, spectacles and all, drifting gently back and forth above the videocassettes, smiling, swaying in the balmy breeze generated by the heating system.

She's looking for the Singer/Songwriter Saleabration and this must be it. Sure enough, now that she's made it past the initial overwhelm of visual information thrust upon her, now that her other senses have begun to contribute their reports to her total understanding of this bright and busy place, she can hear a strain of acoustic guitar drifting towards her from the right. She looks over, tracing the sound of this guitar, looking through the magazine section into the mood-lit region beyond: Cafe Borders.

She heads in that direction, emotionally and physically exhausted, wanting to just find Gregor and get to a sofa or a bed or someplace where she could just collapse down next to him and cry for maybe a good long hour. She heads through the forcefield generated by the magazine section (famous faces, beautiful bodies, shiny appliances, colors and trends); she follows the sound of someone using a guitar to plunk out the piano chords of John Lennon's "Imagine." The roar and slurp of the espresso machine.

The guy playing the Lennon songs has a stringy mop of dirty blond hair and a long reddish face, and he sings Lennon's words with his eyes closed and his ungainly horse of a face all worked up into an expression that, if nothing else, Samantha can at least say is *sincere*.

"You might say I'm a dreamer," the singer croons. His lips seem to slide from side to side. He looks like a camel chewing a handful of dates. "But I'm not the only one."

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She looks around. She sees Jason and Caccian sitting about as far away from the stage as they can be and still be in the Cafe. She studies them for a moment. Something's weird. Caccian is slumped over, all the way over, as in face-down-against-the-table's-surface slumped over. His arms are flung out over the table's far edge. Jason is leaning way back in his seat, staring up at the ceiling, as though the music (*I hope some day you'll join us, goes the singer, and the world can live as one*) has gone through his throat like a bullet. He seems to detect Samantha's gaze on him—he sits up straight, and looks at her. His face goes into a complicated expression that she has no word for. It's sort of a mix between a sort of disgust and a sort of bemusedness. It's the expression someone would wear if they thought they were about to vomit but if they also found something about the imminent act of their vomiting to be darkly funny.

He makes a gun out of his fingers and thumb and presses it against his temple. And then he slowly, deliberately, lowers his thumb. Rolls his eyes back in his head.

Caccian doesn't move.

She doesn't see Gregor anywhere.

She knows something is wrong. She heads to their table, fast. "What is it?" she says. "What's going on?" The singer has begun another verse of "Imagine."

Caccian keeps his face down against the table. Jason leans back in his chair again and goes back to looking at the ceiling. Seeing Jason hold his face perpendicular to his body like that reminds her of something, gives her a kind of déjà vu, she can't place it, she grabs a chair from another table and begins maneuvering it towards the table where the boys are sitting, and then it hits her: Gregor had held his head in that exact same position eight months ago, the night she

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broke up Now Hiring: it is the position that people hold their heads in when they are trying to tilt back tears.

She is pushing her chair under the table where the boys are sitting and the leg of it clangs against something: she bends over to look under the table and sitting there in the shadows is the second bomb, innocuous as a severed head.

Samantha reels back, pulling the chair about a foot away from the table as she does. “What is *that* doing here?” she asks, pointing.

“Well, you know,” says Jason, still staring upwards, not needing to look at the invisible line her finger draws down through the surface of the table. “In today’s crazy world, you never know when high explosives are going to come in handy. This dog-eat-dog culture we live in etcetera etcetera.”

“I could have blown us all the fuck up,” Samantha says, slowly settling in the chair without bothering to pull it any closer to the table. “That would be the *perfect* ending to this fucking day.”

Jason narrows his eyes and purses up his lips, thinking.

“This fucking *century*,” Samantha thinks she hears Caccian’s buried face say.

“Fucking *millennium*,” says Jason. “But no—a little jostling around won’t ignite *this* baby.” He kicks the bomb underneath the table: it wobbles around on its base like a drunk for three precarious seconds before it shudders back into stillness again. Samantha forces her jaw to unclench.

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“Relax,” says Jason. “I’m telling you. You could drop this thing down a flight of stairs and it wouldn’t go off. Trust me.” He hasn’t looked down from the ceiling since he pretended to shoot himself in the head.

Someone guns the espresso machine, drowning out poor neo-psuedo-Lennon for a second.

“Look,” Samantha says, after it quiets down again. “I’ve had a really shitty day. I don’t know why you two are acting so fucking weird—”

“Oh,” says Jason, “*she’s* had a shitty day.” He nods, as well as anyone can nod with their head thrown back like that.

“—but the *last* thing I need right now is to sit here and worry about you blowing us all the fuck up.” She looks up at Lennon and grimaces. “The last thing I need is to be here *at all*, actually,” she says. “I want to go home. Where’s Gregor?”

“Tell her,” says Jason.

“I don’t want to tell her; you tell her.”

“Tell me *what?*” Samantha says. “I’m not playing games here. What the *fuck* is going on?”

Caccian looks up from between his splayed arms. “Listen,” he says.

“I’m listening. You guys are really freaking me out.”

“I’ve got to tell you something and you’re not going to like it.”

“Just blurt it out and get it over with.”

“Gregor’s gone,” Caccian says.

“What do you mean, *gone?*”

“He means he’s not here,” Jason says.

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“No shit, Price, I can *see* he’s not here. Where *is* he?”

Jason looks down at Caccian. Caccian looks up at Jason.

“He’s in Taos,” they both say simultaneously.

“What?” Samantha says. “What do you mean, *he’s in Taos?* What the fuck is in Taos?”

The second she asks, she remembers. “Oh, no,” she says.

The boys both nod.

“The New Millennium,” Jason says.

“Those fuckers were here,” Samantha says. “Those Geffen fuckers. Weren’t they?”

The boys both nod.

“He’s probably not in Taos *yet*,” Jason says.

“He just left,” Caccian says.

“Probably ten minutes ago,” Jason says.

“He told us,” Caccian says, “to tell you that he’ll call you when he gets back.”

“Wait,” says Samantha. “Wait, wait, wait.” It feels like her head is coming open.

“What happened? Tell me what happened.”

“Tell her,” Jason says.

#

And so Caccian tells her what they know, which is not much. The narrative goes like this: they came, Jason got himself a cup of coffee, they sat down. Gregor played through his set, wearing his green Barnes and Noble apron; he threw aside the Nick Drake setlist he’d promised to play and played his own songs, as planned; he generated a palpable vibe of discomfort in the

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audience with his bad language and inappropriate content (a discomfort particularly noticeable, Jason adds, in Borders' Director of Promotions, who spent Gregor's whole set squirming in his seat) but no one stopped him or turned off the mike; they all just sat there for twenty minutes and basically let Gregor shock and dismay them. In a halting, quiet voice, Caccian tells her how hilarious he and Jason thought the whole thing was. How they'd been barely suppressing their mirth.

"If there's one thing I love," says Jason, "it's watching middle-class ex-hippies writhe."

And then the thing was done, and no one except Jason and Caccian had clapped, but no one got up and attacked Gregor with umbrellas either, and he took off his apron and threw it onto the floor, and leaned into the mike one final time and said "fuck capitalism" to the cringing audience and that was when the suits fell upon him.

Two guys. The fat guy/thin guy setup. Gregor had been smiling out into the harsh and unreceptive light of the Café and suddenly his head was flanked by the heads of these two guys. With clipboards. And they took him over to a table and Jason and Caccian could see them talking to him, explaining things by making shapes in the air with their hands, sliding pieces of paper across the tabletop. And Jason and Caccian both wanted to know what was going on over there but neither one of them wanted to get up and go over because they both kind of knew.

And what they knew next was Gregor coming over to their table, excited and flustered, barely able to put a sentence together, and he'd said "Guess what, guess what? I think I just got signed," and before the boys had had a chance to respond, he'd said "They want to fly me out to this festival," and he'd maybe had just enough time to see despair streak the faces of his friends

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before the tall guy with the goatee had come up behind him and touched him on the shoulder and said “Come on, Gregor, if you want to go we’ve got to get to the airport now. You can talk to your friends when you get back.” And this guy with the goatee had looked at the YesMen and they could see the recognition in his eyes and that was when they knew for sure who he was, a whole system of recognition lit up between them, and they knew that he knew who they were, and they knew that none of it, nothing of it, would be acknowledged.

And Gregor had said “Tell Samantha I’ll talk to her when I get back.”

And the girl who was doing the Joni Mitchell set got up there and did the Joni Mitchell set and the audience applauded.

The boys don’t know anything more than that.

They don’t know, for instance, that one year ago Sax & McLeggs were in a chilly Los Angeles conference room being told that they were being sent to a somewhere-in-America state, a state that was not California or New York, and that they were to spend one year, the final year of the twentieth century, going around that state, living in neat and artificial beige suites, eating at pricey restaurants that would all seem somehow identical, paying for their existence with an expense account so vast and galactic that it might as well be bottomless, engaging in no mission more lofty than listening to local bands, familiarizing themselves with the scene, and, eventually, signing four acts not to collectively exceed twelve people.

To this, Johnny Sax and L. McLeggs said *yes*. That’s the only real thing A&R men are empowered to do.

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They blew most of their allotment early, back in February, signing an entire six-man Dixie-style swing band. By May they'd signed a folk-acoustic-punk two-grrl duo and a three-man outfit toying who, in some of their better songs, were beginning to toy with barbershop-quartet arrangements. Sax and McLeggs struggled over the decision of whether to sign the barbershoppers for days. They were reluctant to back themselves into the position of needing to sign a solo artist, but on the other hand they thought that barbershop style was about due for a rebirth, and they thought that this band which pumped the old arrangements up with some rock-and-roll sex-surliness, and infused them with some watered-down hip-hop rhythm, could spearhead that revival. Sax and McLeggs kicked themselves for signing all of the minor players of the Dixie band, they regretted not encouraging the three core members to fire off the trumpeter and the two trombonists, to replace them later with sessionmen. For weeks after they'd signed the barbershoppers, they longed for another slot to open up, they hoped desperately that the frontgrrl of the folk-punk act, the sexier one, would break up with her lover and bandmate (the drummer, all wiry arms and tattoos and no tits) giving everyone involved an opportunity to rewrite the contract, to open up another slot. But then they heard about DJ Blackmarket, and that hadn't turned into the headache that it eventually would, the pain-in-the-ass of having to deal with these nobody people and getting dragged around to see all these nothing bands just to even get *close* to the guy, so they thought, at the time, that he'd be perfect, that he was the one person they needed.

The whole reason Sax and McLeggs were at Borders at 4:30 in the afternoon on New Year's Eve in the first place was because they hadn't signed their fourth act yet. They hadn't

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found the one guy or girl who they could fit in their slot. Jason and Caccian don't know that the agents only came to this dreadful Borders thing because they didn't have to be in Taos until 10 that night and they thought maybe they could find at least one person that they could sucker who wasn't totally awful. At least this Borders thing is one step up from open mike, Sax & McLeggs told each other as they packed their suitcases for the trip back to LA for the last time. All we need to do, they told each other, is find one person who's somewhat good-looking and can play a guitar and we can sign them and show up to Taos saying that we did what we were supposed to do, and we can keep our jobs. The Company can always get rid of them later. And so they were darkly pleased when this young gangly kid appeared to them basically out of nowhere, with these songs that were not just competent but were also kind of funny and kind of sharp and were angry about silly stuff like *coffee shops*, for Christ's sake, angry about silly stuff but not in a way that was silly, angry in a way that seemed to them to be genuine, angry in a way that seemed like *real anger*. And it's real anger that makes controversy, and controversy, as the adage of course goes, sells. And so they looked across the table at each other, each of them with the glint and excitement in their eyes that meant both *now this— this we could sell* and *I can't believe our motherfucking luck*. Jason and Caccian have no way of knowing about that, that look, even though both of them have, in the past, imagined being the ones that would some day inspire it.

There are things, too, that Sax and McLeggs don't know. They were told what they were supposed to do and they did it. They knew that Geffen was doing this New Millennium thing, two hundred new artists and all that, and they could see that the 200 echoed the Millennium's 2000, and they thought that was that. It never occurred to them that the two

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hundred might have been derived by any other method. They knew that they were supposed to sign four acts from this state, and they thought it was just because word on this state was good or something, but they never thought that two hundred divided by four is fifty, as in the number of states in America; it never occurred to them that every state had its own pair of people looking for four lucky bands. It never occurred to them to be glad that they weren't the poor pair of fucks sent up to Alaska.

But even if they had known that Geffen was casting its net wide over the country, they still would probably never have intuited the full depth of the strategy, they might have arched their eyebrows over the idea that the Company would really want four bands from like Idaho badly enough to be willing to pay two guys to spend a year up there, but they would probably have laughed about it and shrugged it off and said *hey if those executives want to throw away their money ha ha* and dug back into their expense account dinners feeling a little bit more knowing.

Except executives don't throw away money. The whole point of executives is to control money, to keep it coming back into the company. Sax and McLeggs spent a whole year on what each of them secretly thought was a fool's errand, and neither of them knew that they were actually participating in a nationwide demographic study worked out by a dozen Promotions executives who inhabited a suite of paneled offices the floor above the the floor that housed the offices of the A&R men.

The Promotions guys, a team, all men, one black guy thrown on for flavor, all of them pushing fifty, most a little salt-and-peppery at the temples, practitioners of racquetball and golf, guys who lived in expensive homes in the Hills with home theater systems and metal chairs

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designed by visionaries, maybe there's a matted and framed replica of an old sixties concert poster hanging somewhere, a Hendrix with his head bursting into Aztec flames, yellow and green, just a reminder, a way for these guys to keep in touch with their roots, with the reason they got into this business in the first place. Guys who spend their days drinking mineral water and debating things over a long mahogany table. Most of them had been talking about local scenes since the Seattle thing in the early Nineties, trying to figure out a way to beat the odds in the future, to be on top of those things, to get a handle on the maddening unknowability of people once and for all. It had cost the Company millions to buy Nirvana off of SubPop. They talked about this for ten years in the whispering air conditioned room and finally came up with this plan, the Millennium Plan, so perfectly controlled that it's practically the god-damn scientific method.

This is what they figured: when you don't know where the next hit is going to come from, but you've got money, you just sign people from everywhere. The first effect is that nearly every metropolitan area in America gets some of their local faves picked up, which has a bonus, makes scenefollowers across America feel a kind of gratitude towards Geffen, makes them all feel like Geffen is the home team. But the Plan really begins when you put all these acts at square one at the same time, and you promote each of them all with scrupulously equal energy and zeal, you graph the sales out on a chart of America, you make sense of the money flooding in with a system of dots and lines of various colors and thicknesses, and slowly all the mystery of the pop music tastes of America becomes clear. The graphs tell you which regions are buying and from where. They tell you which regions sell records well within their own boundaries, which regions sell their records well to other regions, which regions don't sell anything. It might cost a lot of money to

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set the experiment up, but in the end it will make more money than it cost. That's good business. You develop the appropriate strategy once you have bought access to the facts.

*You develop the appropriate strategy once you have bought access to the facts* are the exact final words with which the head of Promotions concluded his discussion of the Millennium Plan to David Geffen, the-man-himself, on May 12, 1998. And David Geffen rose from his chair and put his hand on his chin and looked out his window at the expensive manicured jungle of Beverly Hills and thought about it and later that day he used a pen that cost \$400 to sign the papers that would make it begin to happen, that would set into motion a plan which would eventually trickle through the layers of hierarchy, a plan that would send A&R men like Johnny Sax and L. McLeggs out into the grid, that would eventually begin to affect young people, that would make use of young musicians in every state of the Union—black kids who'd taught themselves to scratch; lesbian couples who wrote love songs because they wanted some that didn't say *him* in them; stoned wunderkinds writing weird hip-hop verses on shopping bags and cardboard found in the street; white kids hanging out in Hispanic ghettos and learning old instruments, old rhythms; bearded dreadlocked guys crashed out in ski resort towns, who sleep on the floor wrapped up in dirty Army-flannel blankets, who wake up in the afternoon, fix a cup of coffee, and pound the drums until their armpits reek of death; and lastly, one meek and skinny guy, heartbroken, a guy who figured out how to sing so he could pour the anger about his shitty life into songs about societal destruction—David Geffen takes one second to make the mark of his signature and this plan activates, the Millennium Plan, which will eventually take the passion and craft of all these

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young people and make it utilitarian, set it all laboring towards one common singular goal. The goal of accumulating wealth. Of earning.

It is a glorious May morning and the streets of LA are choked with haze and David Geffen completes the last sawtooths of his signature; and he sets something into motion that will leave three kids sitting around a table in a bookstore cafe on New Year's Eve in 1999 with nothing but their despair and a homemade bomb, but he has no way of knowing this. And on that same day Samantha and Gregor are in the basement of the YesMen's house in Poplar Hills South, meeting for the first time, tuning up together and preparing to jam with each other for the first time; they are on the verge of setting into motion the chain of events which will eventually create Now Hiring, and they do not know that at the same moment, miles west, forces which will eventually affect them deeply are being signed into motion. They will never be provided with an awareness of the cause of the things which will affect them the deepest.

That's the way hierarchies work.

#

The boys finish telling her what they know. Samantha feels like her head is coming open. She investigates her internal landscape, looking for some interior level where this news is welcome. Trying to find the point within her where she feels the joy that Gregor must have felt. She knows she won't find it. She's sitting here on the verge of hyperventilation, her hands trembling, her skull ringing with the hard pulse of blood. She thinks there's a very real possibility that she might throw up. When your body is having this sort of reaction you can pretty much call off the search for the one scintilla of the brain that might feel quietly pleased.

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Gregor once told her that he loved her unconditionally, and that meant he wanted for her whatever was going to make her happiest.

“Let’s go,” Jason says.

Caccian nods and gets up.

“Come on,” Jason says to Samantha. He picks up the bomb and lugs it out of the Café.

They move through the store, towards the glass doors that lead to the dark outside.

Jason’s in the lead, and he’s hauling a fifty-pound explosive device against his right hip, he’s all canted over to the left to compensate for the load, and he’s cursing under his breath, and no one in the store except Caccian and Samantha acts like they even see him.

“I don’t know,” Samantha manages, as they push out into the windswept parking lot. “I don’t feel like partying tonight.”

“Fuck the party,” Jason says. He sets the bomb down so he can sort through his keys. He finds the one that fits into the van’s battered door, slides the door back. “Get in,” he says to Caccian.

Caccian disappears into the van. Jason loads the bomb in after him.

“Well, if it’s *fuck the party*, then where are we going?”

“Starbucks,” Jason says.

“Oh,” says Samantha. “I don’t know.” She feels too fragile inside tonight to disagree with anything. Every *no* is diluted down to an *I don’t know*.

“Samantha,” says Jason. “Get your bike. Get in the van. We’re going.”

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It seems that Jason has taken on the responsibility of knowing *for* her. And she finds herself here, weary at the end of a day of shit, and it seems to her at this moment that she wants this, that she wants nothing more than to accept the decisions someone else has made for her. She finds herself too tired to do anything but agree.

She gets her bike. She gets in the van. And they go to Starbucks with a bomb.

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# 27

They drive to the newest Starbucks in town, the one just east of the University, that's moved in right next to the store that sells images of the school mascot printed on a thousand different items<sup>4</sup>.

"Fuck," says Jason, as he parks the van and kills the ignition. "I thought they'd be closed."

The Starbucks is clearly not closed. They look in through its windows and they see light and people.

"I mean, it's New Year's Eve," Jason says.

The warm brown space of its interior is, in fact, close to packed.

"You'd think," Jason says, "that they'd give people the night off."

"Do you mean the employees or the public?" Samantha says.

"Both," says Jason. He shoulders the door open and steps out into the cold.

"Where are you going?" Samantha asks.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Swoosh is there, too, they park across the street from this store and Samantha looks out the van's back window and into the store's front window and sees them everywhere, tiny little Swooshes, a vast surplus of them, the icons of a religion practiced by mascots.

Jason slides open the side door, allowing an icy wind to spiral through the van's remaining pocket of warm air; he grabs the bomb and pulls it out of the back. Caccian climbs out after him.

"Hey, wait a second," Samantha says. Jason slams the side door on her. She pops the passenger side door and hops out, hurrying around the van's perimeter to get to them.

"You can't set off that bomb in a place full of people," Samantha says.

Jason turns around to grin at her. The wind is blowing his greasy hair all whichway. "It's my bomb," he says. "I can do whatever I want with it."

"I'm just barely with you on this as it is," Samantha says. "I don't want people getting hurt."

"Relax," he says. "I'm not going to do anything stupid."

#

Inside the Starbucks it is warm and aromatic; the people at the tables are happy and they laugh at one another's jokes; there's a certain interplay between the indirect lighting and the wood-grain browns that permeates the place with a vibe of subtle antiquity that reminds Samantha of an old study; she half-expects to look around a column or a corner and discover a massive globe or a towering stack of books topped with a human skull. But of course there are no books here, no globe; a Starbucks is a study distilled of all knowledge.

She tries to visualize the place as all brown and green polygons, to see it as a building made of bits and light, to see it as a building that *stands for* a bulding.

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She is amazed that you can bring a bomb into a place like this and the overall mood will change not one iota. The people go on chuckling and smiling, even when Jason heaves his bomb up and plants it right down in the center of the table. Nobody even looks twice.

The three of them sit down.

“Now what?” Samantha asks.

“Now,” Jason says, “we wait. For the right moment.”

They wait. Light jazz versions of Christmas carols drift above their table. Samantha looks up at the baristas busy at the counter, and she looks down at the table, and then she looks up at the counter again, and it occurs to her that a Starbucks is basically a fast-food restaurant in disguise; a fast-food restaurant that supplies, in abundance, the illusion of class, and thus transforms itself into a place where people on the threshold of adulthood actually want to go to hang out.

Jason slaps his palms against the tabletop.

“Does anybody want anything?” he says. “As long as we’re here.”

“I’m broke,” says Samantha.

“I’ll spot you,” says Jason.

He gets up and comes back a minute or two later with three cups of coffee clutched awkwardly in his hands.

“Thanks,” says Samantha, even though she didn’t really want any coffee in the first place.

Caccian looks down at the steaming mug that Jason puts down in front of him.

“I don’t—” he begins.

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Jason gives him a *don't even start with me* look and he stops talking. They all sit there, in a loose ring around the bomb, and they each blow on their coffee and take a sip.

"I checked the hours while I was up," Jason says. "This place closes at eleven. What time is it now?"

Caccian looks away from his coffee mug and fishes a bandless watch from his coat pocket. "Seven forty-five," he says.

"Shit," says Jason.

They each take another sip of coffee. Around them the people chat. The bomb sits in the middle of the table, a thing no one sees, looming over their mugs, fuse pointing towards Heaven.

Samantha rolls the coffee over her tongue until it's cool enough to swallow and she thinks of Gregor. *Gregor's gone, he's gone*, she thinks. She tries to think about it in another way. *He's coming back, she tells herself. He'll play at Taos and then he'll come back. And maybe we can pick up where we left off.*

She knows that this fantasy is untrue. She guesses that the David Geffen Company will want him out in LA, so he can record in the studios that they're familiar with, work with the company producers, be close to where it all happens. Where the deals are made and the papers are signed. And even if not, even if they're not going to physically ship him out of this town, even if he won't be gone *literally*, the fact that he took the deal, entered into a system of requirements and responsibilities that must be fulfilled, means that he will not sell everything he owns and vanish into America with her. He has sold out that dream in the name of fame and success (different words, Samantha thinks, for the same thing—*money*), and that means that he *is* gone to

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her, even if not physically or literally, he is gone to her, she thinks, in the important ways, the ways which are deeper than location.

It *does* make her want to blow something up. It makes her want to find some symbol and explode it. She takes another sip from her cup.

Jason tilts his head back and drains the last drops from his mug.

“Caccian,” he says.

Caccian looks over at him.

“Here’s the keys. Go out and start up the van.”

Caccian takes the keys and goes.

“What’s up?” Samantha asks.

“I’m sick of waiting,” Jason says. “The time has come to strike.”

“But you can’t—”

He pushes the bomb across the table to her.

“Take this,” he says.

“What? *I* don’t want it.”

“Just bring it out to the van when it’s time for us to split,” he says.

“What are you doing?” Samantha asks, but Jason’s already gotten up from the table and is walking towards the doors.

“Jason!” she hisses, loud and severe enough that some of the people at the surrounding tables look over, detecting that thing that’s always interesting: a public conflict between a man and a woman. They eye her with one good second of naked interest before they realize that they’re

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staring; they look away but then continue to throw these little sidelong glances her way, hoping to see a living entertaining example of Emotional Woman. Nobody looks at the bomb.

“What are you doing?” she says, reduced now to throwing stage-whispers.

He turns around, and puts his finger to his lips. *Sssh*

She stands up.

Jason has reached the front door, and he spreads his feet apart and raises his hands in the air.

“Attention, please,” he says. “Everyone? If I could just have your attention for a moment?”

The faces turn to look at him. Some only turn for a second and then look away again, back down to the mugs pressed warm in their hands, back to the faces of their lovers and companions. The same people who all cocked their heads in her direction a second ago, tuning in on the conflicted tonality of her voice, begin withholding their attention the second it’s been directly requested. Because to request attention in a public place—to stand there waving your arms yelling *look at me*—seems insane. And the way most of these people deal with something insane is to not pay attention to it at all. To not see it. To deny its very existence.

The bomb that sits on the table might as well be a fucking French Press.

“I represent a faction of young people,” Jason is saying to the people who are trying not to hear him, “who have had enough. We’ve had enough of corporate power. We’ve had enough of seeing identical fast food places and convenience stores and coffee shops appear in every city

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and every town. We've had enough of working at temp agencies and bookstores only to feed our wages back into a national corporate system that makes the rich that much richer."

Samantha may be the only one watching these ravings, and Jason looks insane even to her. He's practically foaming at the mouth.

"We're going to dedicate this new century—this new millennium—to making things harder for the corporate powers. To costing them at least as much as they take from us. And we begin tonight. Are you with me?"

The normal mutter of dialogue. The clunk of ceramic against tabletops.

"I didn't think so. You're a bunch of motherfucking tools."

"Hey," says the guy working behind the counter. "Maybe you should just calm down."

"*Calm down*, the caffeine pimp says."

"Hey."

"Well, no, I won't fucking *calm down*," says Jason. "I begin tonight!"

Next to the front door is one of those machines, like a gumball machine, the kind where you put a quarter in a slot and crank it away, and a gumball moves through the mechanical guts and rolls out through a metal trap door. Only instead of gumballs this one contains dozens of plastic capsules, each enclosing some cheap toy or prize. Jason seizes this machine, pulls it out of its position.

"I begin by liberating this—fucking,"—he doesn't know what to call it—"prize dispensing unit!"

"Hey," says the clerk. "You can't take that."

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“Oh, no?” says Jason.

“No!” says the clerk. “That belongs to the Muscular Dystrophy Association.”

“Well,” says Jason. “I’d imagine that Starbucks is going to have some explaining to do.”

“But—” says the clerk.

“Samantha, come on!” Jason shouts, and he backs out the door, dragging the prize machine clankingly after him.

Samantha takes two quick steps towards the door and then she freezes in place for a second, remembering the bomb. *Leave it*, says the part of her mind that she recognizes as the rational part. But something else in her must not agree, because she finds herself turning around, leaning over the table, and gathering the bomb up to her chest.

*Why am I doing this?* she’s thinking, as she’s running through the crowded space of the coffee shop, with a bomb hugged against her. Perhaps she’s afraid that if she left it behind, Jason would make them come back to this place to get it; perhaps she’s still just automatically doing what she’s been told; perhaps—she thinks this last option, the one deepest and most hidden within her, as she hurries out through the door, as her feet *slap slap* against the pavement doused in the diffuse green glow cast by the sign that says Starbucks Coffee—perhaps, after today, she has begun to think that Jason might be right, that they need this bomb to do the work that needs to be done. That they need this bomb, and many, many more.

Jason lurches towards the running van, and the base of the Muscular Dystrophy prize-dispensing machine gets caught up between his feet with each stride, causing him to advance down

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the sidewalk in a sort of perpetual cursing stumble. Samantha's right behind him. Caccian's leaning out the window, looking at the machine with a what-the-fuck-is-*tha?* look on his face.

The Starbucks clerk is at the door, behind them, shouting: "Hey, what are you doing? Don't take that."

But its too late. The machine and the bomb have already been flung into the back of the van. And the van pulls out and Samantha watches through the back window as the Starbucks disappears, behind them, into the night.

#

"We should have blown the place up," says Jason. He flips the machine's prize-dispensing flap back with an idle finger.

"Next time," says Caccian. He passes Samantha the joint.

"You can always go back," says Samantha. She puts the joint between her lips and draws on it, crossing her eyes slightly to watch the cherry glow in the brisk air. They're sitting in a tight circle on the rooftop deck, the deck that the Prices had put in just before their divorce. It's cold up here. She nestles deeper into her coat.

"No," says Jason. He leans over and takes the joint from her. "No, I chickened out. I'll just chicken out again next time."

He sucks on the joint and stares out into the blue night that hangs above his neighborhood.

"You didn't chicken out," says Samantha. She prods at the prize machine with her booted foot. "You hit them."

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“It’s not exactly what I’d envisioned,” says Jason.

“It’s something,” says Caccian.

“It’s small, but it’s a start,” says Samantha.

“Maybe,” says Jason.

He hands the joint out to Caccian, but Caccian waves it off.

“Samantha?” says Jason, proffering the joint to her.

“No,” says Samantha. “I think I’m good.”

Jason nods, and he leans back to where the bomb is, stubs the hot joint-end out on the bomb’s clay stopper. Then he gets up, breaking their circle, and he walks to the deck’s edge, and stands there, looking out at the lights and rooftops of Poplar Hills South.

“All these fuckers,” he says. “All these rich fuckers.”

Samantha feels that there’s not much more to add to that.

“I’m not one of them,” Jason says.

“You’ll be one of them in the end,” Samantha says.

“Nope,” Jason says. “My time with them is finished. Fuck them.”

He lights a match and flicks it out over the railing. It winks out. He lights another one and flings it into the air; it, too, extinguishes almost immediately in the wind. Samantha stays where she is, in her stoned silence.

“I look out there,” Jason says, “and all I see now are adversaries.”

He turns away and walks back towards them, cuts through the center of the circle, and lifts the machine up from where it lies prone.

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“I’ve figured something out,” he says.

Samantha watches him.

“Every kid in the upper-middle class faces a test,” he says to her. These words steam in the cold air. “They test you, you know, to see if you’re worthy of claiming your inheritance. That’s what school is, you know. It’s a process to figure out if you’re willing to put up with the same bullshit that your parents put up with and their parents before them, the same lies about America.”

She thinks of the afternoons she spent in Laura McMillan’s office and she wants to say *no*.

“And if you agree, if you agree to swallow all that shit, they let you live in the same box that your parents lived in. And if you disagree—if you refuse it—then you fail the test, and they kick you out. They drop you down a level.”

He hauls the machine over to the skylight that looks down two floors into the living room.

“It took me a long time to figure it out,” Jason says, “But now I know. I’m a failure.”

He raises the machine over his head, holds it there for a beat, and throws it down at the skylight. When the machine hits the panels of glass, the strangely elegant arc of its descent is interrupted for only the slightest moment; it pauses, as if faintly engaged in reflection, and then it goes through the glass, almost silently, a swimmer executing a perfect dive through a thin skin of ice. A moment later there is noise, of course, the *wham* of the plummeting machine contacting with something in the living room, the brittle rainsound of two dozen jagged planes of glass glancing against things and exploding.

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“Bombs away,” Jason says.

Samantha jumps up, startled, and she runs over to the skylight, to take a look down through the weird angular centerless hole that now goes through it. Down below, she sees the machine, bashed open: its fragile glass globe struck the coffeetable’s hard corner and detonated. The living room is a shining wreckage of glass and prizes.

“Jackpot,” says Samantha, feeling more stoned by the minute.

Jason just stands there, looking down. She wants to cheer him up but she doesn’t know what to say. Maybe, she thinks, she’ll go down to the living room and gather some of those toys. They could probably all use a little entertainment.

She pats Jason on the back and, not saying a word, she staggers across the deck to the door that leads inside. She makes her careful way down a dim stairwell and exits onto the second floor. Takes a minute’s pitstop at the bathroom, pisses in the dark. Wanders on down the main staircase to the first floor and heads for the living room.

Glass crunches under her feet as she enters.

The living room’s all set up for practice, as it always is when Mom and the boyfriend are away. Cables and instruments and amps have all been dragged out of the basement and set up on every flat surface. The Octopads are by the fireplace; Caccian’s guitar lays across the wine-colored armchair. Samantha’s glad to see it, all this equipment; it’s reassuring to her, if she ignores the tiny shards of powdered glass that now spangle the instruments dangerously. It feels like some kind of center.

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She draws her arms around herself, realizing, for the first time, that it's cold in here. She looks up at the high skylight, hoping to maybe see Jason's face staring down, but all she sees is the darkness of a starless winter.

She sighs in this scatter of cheap prizes. All she wants at this moment is a toy, something simple that she can play with to keep her mind off of the disasters of this day. She thinks of Gregor, at this moment on a plane, headed for New Mexico, further away from her with each passing second. She thinks of Dmitrovitch.

She grabs up the broken prize machine, lifts it, and turns it upside-down. The last few plastic baubles dump to the floor, along with a long metal pin, some piece that once held something together inside this machine. One loose and useless piece. She lets go of the machine—it crashes casually to the floor—and she picks up the pin, holding it tight in her hand. She pushes through the capsules with her toe, surveying the prizes within with an intense marijuana concentration. Temporary tattoos. A bracelet of plastic beads. Play money.

She wants a toy, God damn it.

Finally she spots a green plastic top and she crouches down to retrieve it.

She is working at prying the capsule open—hard because she's still holding the metal pin in her right hand—when she catches a blur of motion out of her right eye.

She whips her head around.

There is a splintering crash as the bomb hits the surface of the coffeetable. The bomb bounces back into the air, whirls, a spiral of smoke emitting from the top, and it hits the ground

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and rolls, coming to rest by the wine-colored armchair. Black fumes begin billowing out from behind the chair.

Samantha quick gets to her feet.

“Hey!” she shouts, up at the skylight. There is no face there.

“Hey!” she shouts again. “I’m down here!” But she can already barely see the skylight. Smoke which has crawled up the wall—leaving greasy black trails behind it—has already begun to bottleneck in a dense cloud at the jagged hole above her.

She draws in a breath to try shouting a third time, but this time she begins coughing, and she notices how quickly the air in here is getting hazy. A severe reality of her situation—she’s standing in a room filling with smoke—hits her. She coughs hard and looks squintingly up at the ceiling, at the heavy cloud which is lowering towards her, and that’s when the second severe reality—she’s standing a few feet away from a lit bomb—hits her.

A plan of action, clear as anything, illuminates through the mossy marijuana fuzz in her mind: *stay low and get out of here as fast as you can.*

She crouches and speeds forward, out of the living room, into the main hallway, staying below the tendrils of smoke that have begun to creep beneath the doorway’s header, and she thinks for the briefest micro-increment of a second about trying to head back up to the roof. Then she decides that staying inside a house filling with smoke for even one more minute is a bad idea, so she breaks left, sprints for the front door, and emerges onto the front lawn.

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She hurries down to the street, and from that far back she can get a view of the whole house; she watches the gray column rising from the rooftop, and she can see Jason pacing back and forth at the deck's edge, waving his arms against the sky and shouting.

“Give it up,” she can hear him shout out into the neighborhood. “All of you! Take your fucking money and give it to the failures!”

At the conclusion of that sentence, the bomb goes off.

She can feel that concussive *thud* rip through the ground. She watches the bay window that looks into the living room slouch out onto the lawn, in a hundred pieces. She watches smoke pour forth from this new wound.

“Fuck you!” she hears Jason screaming. “Give it up for the failures!”

She can already hear sirens.

Her brain continues to issue commands of escape, and there is no part of her strong enough to dare suggest anything to the contrary. Thank God the van is still unlocked. She pulls out her bike and gets on it, she tries to get stable, and she rides, with the noise of approaching police rising wailingly behind her, amplified by pot-paranoia, amplified by her human grief. The shriek of her life shattering behind her, the cold static of the December wind, the thump of her pulsing blood: all honed into a singular sensory ache, the painful awareness that you awaken into when you realize the crucial ways in which you, too, have failed.

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## 28

All Samantha wants right now is to go home. But there is no place which is *home* for her tonight. She doesn't want to go to Laura's; she is shaking and sad right now and she doesn't want to be alone—a lonely and empty and silent place is no home worth a shit. But she doesn't want to go to her childhood home, either, not yet, not tonight; she doesn't want to show up on Mom's doorstep, beaten and slouched. She doesn't want to be the girl who lowers her defeated head into her mother's sympathetic lap—portrait of the daughter as a young loser—she doesn't want to be the recipient of the cup of chamomile that her mother would surely offer as warm reassurance. She doesn't want to be that girl, the one who runs back to Mommy when things go awry. Besides, her mother would ask gentle questions—*what's wrong hon?*—and she wouldn't want to remain silent (or, worse, just cry) but she can't even begin to explain the complex system of forces which have generated this grief in her. Not tonight.

The wind licks tears of frustration out of her eyes.

Gregor is gone; his apartment will be locked and dark. And she doesn't know what's happening at the YesMen's place, but of course she can't go back there.

She goes to the hospital.

It's the middle of the night; visiting hours must be over; she realizes this before she locks up her bike. But there is nowhere else she wants to go. If they won't let her see Dmitrovitch,

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she'll find some chair in the lobby and sleep on it. At least there will be light and noise all through the night there, and the constant mutter of people: right now that all seems comforting, right now all she wants is the assurance that if she goes to sleep she won't wake up in the darkness, alone. Right now the hospital seems as good a home as any.

The automatic doors hiss back and she stumbles into the antiseptic brilliance beyond.

She finds herself, unexpectedly, in the middle of a party.

The reception area is full of balloons, yellow, red, orange, each printed with the number 2000; the receptionists are wearing conical hats and sharing a bottle of champagne with the night shift janitors; periodically everyone erupts into terrified shrieks of laughter. Some drunken scoundrel has seized control of the PA system and is using it to broadcast commands like "Party down!" and "Get funky!"

Samantha takes a minute to try to take it all in.

There are monitors set up all around the reception area, each one broadcasting the same images: an announcer, swarming crowds, a thousand upturned faces, one brilliant spangled globe. And a clock counting down. 11:45.

Dance music—featuring a modulated Africanoid voice chanting "Shake your butt and sweat it out / shake your butt and sweat it out" over and over again—is playing from: somewhere. It could be coming from the monitors or someone could have brought in a radio or it could be playing over the PA system.

Someone in a hospital gown twirls in the center of the room; they do a passable fox-trot with an IV unit for about thirty seconds before they hit the edge of a planter full of ferns and go

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crashing drunkenly down into it. Samantha can't tell if the person is a patient or a hospital staffer in costume.

She sees a doctor making out with someone in the corner.

The person who's been babbling over the loudspeaker is saying "Ladies and gentlemen, I would just like to announce that I am really fucking high right now."

It's the kind of office party you would only have if you were certain that the world was going to end.

Nobody pays Samantha the slightest bit of attention—she's just another face in the throng, and everyone's attention is on the countdown monitors anyway. She keeps her head down, finds the bar where all the colored lines start and follows the blue one down into the ICU.

It's quieter down here: the deeper into the hospital she goes, the more the clamor of the party—drum beats and human chatter—recedes. The only person she encounters is a lone black janitor, an old man, putting new liners in the waste cans set into the walls, and he does not talk to her; the only sound that comes from him at all is the diffuse whisper made when he sticks his hand inside the new liners, the *hiss* of the filmy plastic letting go of itself. By the time she reaches 275, she is nearly immersed in silence. The only thing she can hear is faint TV babble through the door.

She lets herself in. The room is dark except for the flickering television light, which is broadcasting the same thing that the monitors in the lobby were: the Countdown to 2000. She can see Dmitrovitch, and, as before, the sight makes her shudder: his legs are still fused with this piece of expensive technology, this machine, so real that there is no hope of arguing with it. She

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sits down at his bedside and looks into his troubled sleeping face. Then she looks up at the TV for a few minutes.

She watches a montage of crowd scenes from around the world: New York, LA, London, Paris, Cairo. They are all the same. A surge of bodies, pressing against one another, reaching: Samantha cannot imagine what they might think they are striving towards.

*Fuck this*, she thinks. She looks away from the TV. She won't look at it. She won't watch this, the final spectacle of this century. She stares down at the tray table.

She remembers that she has a top. She reaches into the pocket of her overalls and digs out all the junk in there: a linty ballpoint pen, the metal rod from the gumball machine, the top. A piece of paper folded into nine squares.

She spins the top, watches the spirals its point traces on the tray table's surface; she spins it again when it falls over; she spins it against the pen's edge to see how an immovable straight edge might change the spin; she spins it again and taps its edges with the pen's tip, trying to steer it. She concentrates on the top, remembers how to make such a thing entertain her. This last free thing at the end of the earth, one dynamic geometric shape. She spins it again and again; watches the glow of the TV play on its surface, watches how when she gets a really good spin on it the thing seems not to be moving at all. She admires the perfection of this balanced thing in stillness.

Dmitrovitch's hand reaches out and grips the edge of the table. She gives a little involuntary yelp of fear—watching him emerge from the territory of stasis, watching his unconscious body execute a sudden motion, is like watching a dead body come back to life. Of course Dmitrovitch isn't dead. But she realizes that she doesn't think of him as quite alive either.

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This makes her sorry that she cried out; she's revealed something sad about the way she feels about him now. Dmitrovitch lets out a heavy sigh and she's afraid that the sigh is a response to her shock; she thinks he might find her fear tedious, and this makes her feel embarrassed and ashamed for one terrible second.

Then his fingers move to the metal rod and he makes another sigh, and she hears it, this time, as a half-groan of effort, and she realizes the truth: he's sighing because it hurts for him to move his body. And this relieves her in a way, and then she feels shame at her relief.

"You brought me something," he says. His voice is dry and hoarse; his words emerge ravaged from his throat. His fingers close upon the rod and he drags it back towards him, into his lap.

"I suppose," she says, puzzled. "If you want it."

He nods.

"It's all I'll have left," he murmurs. He lifts the rod from his lap and strikes the apparatus on his legs lightly with it. It makes one tiny *tink* of percussive sound. He uses the rod to strike a different bar on the apparatus. *Tink*

She tries to read his face in the darkness. His swollen eyes are open a crack and she can see that they are looking at the television. The cheerful announcer stationed there concludes a phrase and Dmitrovitch taps a beat in the space where he pauses for breath.

She listens. He begins playing a rhythm by tapping the rod against the different bars installed in his legs. It's slow at first, but once he figures out which bars produce which tones—and that happens quickly—he picks up the speed. He brings it up to match the excited tempo of

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the announcer's end-of-century dispatch. After only a minute he's fully synchronized with the image; he begins intuiting the moods and energies flowing forth and matching them with tricky rhythms. Samantha watches him perform this duet with the TV; watches him anticipate the crests in the announcer's pitch, watches him tap out these crests the split-second before they happen, so that what he plays seems prescient. After a while it begins to seem like the TV is following his lead, like he's controlling what unfolds there with the beats that he chooses.

Samantha hears this and she can remember why she wanted things to work out for so long, even after they'd fallen to ruin: if you strip away Dmitrovitch's computers and his techno-utopianism and his hokey bullshit about making a new world and his self-made neo-capitalism, if you stripped all of that away you'd still find a musician. You'd still find a man who likes the way sounds fit together, and who desires nothing more, really, than to put them together in ways that please a listener.

She listens to him play this rhythm—he's playing for her; maybe for the first time ever he is playing for her—and she sets her top going in a perfect spin, and she knows that in the ultimate end these things, in this dim hospital room, are insignificant—unable to inspire the yearn and thrust of the ten thousand bodies that she sees on the screen; unable, even, to capture the attention of one single culture-peddling corporation—but, in their own small and unimportant ways, these things make her happy.

Eventually Dmitrovitch loses his grip on the rod and it bounces, clatteringly, off the machine, landing on his chest.

“Oh,” says Samantha, reaching for it. “Here.”

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“No,” says Dmitrovitch. “It’s okay. Leave it.”

“I liked hearing you play,” she says.

She can make out a shrug of his shoulders.

“The Blackmarket project is finished,” he says.

“No,” says Samantha.

“I’m going to have to sell my computers,” he says.

“Maybe not,” says Samantha.

He shrugs again.

Now it is just them, silent with one another, with only the sounds of televised frenzy between them. Samantha looks up at the TV. She can’t stop herself. There is one minute left.

“You know,” Dmitrovitch says, in a broken and faltering voice, “I’ve been thinking a lot since I’ve been in here. It’s one thing I’ve had time to do. Is think.”

She is watching the TV and thinking of Gregor, in Taos. Wondering what the next hundred years will do to his name. Then she looks away, not wanting to watch this.

“I’ve been thinking,” Dmitrovitch says, “about the system you always used to talk about. And the first day I was in here I began to hate it in the way that you always did. I was just in a rage. How could this happen, I asked myself. This thing, so unfair.”

She unfolds the application for Saul’s and stares into its field of blanks and boxes.

“And then,” he says, “then I remembered something that I’d read in the Unabomber Manifesto. The Unabomber talks about people who hate—call it the system or the Establishment or America or whatever you want to call it. America. He talks about people who

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hate America.” She picks up the pen and picks the fuzz off of the inky ball at its end. She gets it started in the margin, drawing curlicues.

“And he says that the people who hate America don’t hate it because it’s evil or unfair or corrupt but they hate it because it’s successful. Most people nowadays don’t have the capacity to become successful. And so when they see something successful it becomes an object to hate. Because it’s a reminder, you know. Of the thing that they themselves are not.”

Samantha prints her name in careful letters in the blank provided for it. *Samantha J. Faraday*. And she gets to the blanks for Address and Phone Number and she pauses for a moment, and considers.

“It must be true,” Dmitrovitch says. “Because I never hated it until now.”

The voices of the crowd are beginning to gather into a final climax. The roar of a million people counting down. Ten. Nine. Eight.

“Truly,” Samantha says, “truly we are not yet stars.”

She turns, and looks back at the television, and the world explodes into cheers as all the numbers roll over into zeros.

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## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The following recordings were in heavy rotation  
during the drafting of this novel:

Aphex Twin, *Selected Ambient Works, Vol. II*

John Cage, *In A Landscape*.

Miles Davis, *Get Up With It*.

Brian Eno, *Music For Airports*.

Bill Laswell, *Panthalassa: The Music of Miles Davis 1969-1974*.

DJ Shadow, *Endtroducing..*

Nicky Skopelitis, *Ekstasis*.

DJ Spooky, *Necropolis: The Dialogic Project*.

Tortoise, *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*.

We, *As Is*.

Yo La Tengo, *I Can Hear The Heart Beating As One*.