

3. CHARMS

I need to buy charms. How many credits are left on my card?

“If you bought spells instead of charms, you could increase the number of credits on you card.”

‘I don’t want spells, I want charms. And really, how much more can spells increase your credit.’

“It is an earn as you buy program.”

“I know how that works. You have to spend so much really to earn anything at all.”

“You have to learn how to buy a large spell.”

“I’m not into that magic thing.”

Quite frankly, I am rather doubtful about magic. It really has a ring worse than the lottery. I know some people who have won for the short term. And they believe their odds. But they have to devote all their time just to maintaining the same level.

I want charms. I need more credits.

There was a time when I was interested in spells. The road to acquiring enough credits seemed formidable. At the same time, I needed charms. So it seemed like the perfect alternative. I knew so many people that were good at spells. I needed to sit down and analyze their method.

The wise believe that magic only works in a dreamworld. Perhaps the wise do not understand the deeper patterns of the universe. I am determined to figure out the regularities that underlie magic. I will discover how to gain more credits.

If there is magic, then it must eventually manifest itself as something tangible. It has to be more than a feeling. Even a belief in winning number sequence for the lottery must be grounded in mathematical consistencies. This in turn can be applied to the physical world.

You hear of twins sharing a mystical link. One is chilled when disaster befalls on the other. What is this union? Are there waves of energy that remain detectable by all if we just learn to use our hidden powers?

These awesome skills at prediction would seem a blessing to our endeavors. Think what it would be like to be one of the first to learn about trends in technology. What if we could determine future behavior of the stock market? The key to such understanding is being able to account for all the actions of those who were already using limited skills of prediction. If we could factor in these meager skills, then we could act with more prescience in the application of our judgement.

The method seems evident. We could begin with a mediocre skill. At each stage of our operation we could include a corrective procedure to help refine our estimation. That would seem to solve our limited talents for computation. Nevertheless, we could be facing a rival who was using an even more sophisticated program than we could imagine. We could be squeezed out. We have to learn how to account for a crafty opponent, how to make him play our game.

“Did you enjoy yourself last night?”

“I did. But I can’t find my wallet.”

“You don’t need your wallet. They already put some more points on your card.”

“I want to see you again.”

“That’s really not going to be possible. I don’t want you developing a crush on me.”

“I already have developed a little bit of a crush.”

“We had some fun. Consider that a reward in itself.”

“Can I call you?”

“It wouldn’t be a good idea.”

I lie on the railroad tracks. This is where I am going to sleep tonight. I will have a measured sleep. The first train is at 6:00 AM.

Risk is a very important part of my life. It is my only way of bringing adventure to my experience. I am clever about it. It is a calculated risk. It is part of my makeup. I can sense the tides turning. I can see the future. I am seldom wrong. There is a day when it will all come apart. Maybe suddenly. That early morning freight train bearing down on me as I sleep. Until that time, I ride the crest of the wave.

Some people think that I am lucky. They don’t chances like I do. They are spectators in their lives. They watch other more successful people circle them year after year. They wonder how do they do it. It creates envy. It creates frustration. That’s how it is.

It is like holding my breath. I have learned how to perceive the slightest variations. I can hear conversations behind closed doors. Families sitting down for a dinner meal are as close as next to me. I may be outside on the sidewalk, but I can hear every word whispered in the dining room even with the windows closed.

I twitch as disaster makes its presence known. It is a sign to adjust and prepare for the worst. I am always ready. Others sleep. I am awake and vigilant..

I guess that I was always affected in this way. Even traffic noise was too much to bear. I could hear a pin drop in a crowded room. I realized that I had a talent, and I worked to focus it. Now, I have attained an expertise.

It is a blessing, but it is also a curse. It hardly takes any effort to eavesdrop. Lovers have tried to sneak around when my back was turned. Rivals have made revealing comments about me. I prepare myself.

At times, I feel hated. While others can console themselves in the knowledge that they have true friends, I know that the reality is different than we are led to believe. Friends smile in my face while they plot my demise behind my back. I try to make the best of such knowledge. But betrayal hurts even if I always can take advantage of the situation.

I don’t want to pry into other people’s business. But, at this point, I just expect to have the edge. I thrive on it, and I know that I couldn’t survive otherwise. I embrace the challenge.

Even if I don’t have access to a revealing moment, I work to create open access for myself. Surprise is one of the benefits that I have come to expect. I don’t want to suggest that I have a negative view of humanity. It’s just that I can’t see things through rose-colored glasses.

When life gets too easy, I search for a new obstacle to overcome. It has made me a little bit of a daredevil. It is as if I am raising the dead. I’m no savior. I live with a devil-make-care attitude. Sometimes fun seems paramount.

Around 5:50, I will feel the rumble on the tracks. I will probably be awake before that. The anticipation will get me going. By the time the first train rolls by, I will already be off hunting up new danger. It is my nature.

There will probably be a time in the future when my skills have dulled. I won’t even see the change coming. All it takes is a bad night. Some distraction. What if I wake up at 5:59. Or

the train is running early.

Unlikely. I sleep soundly tonight. I can't worry about the inevitable. And if I bring my end sooner than later, so be it. I will have to suffer for my mistakes. Until that time, I'm just looking for the next gamble.

My credit card was refused today. I am not sure what is happening. Is this serious?

"I tried to use my credit card earlier today, and they wouldn't take it. I'm trying to find out what was going on.."

"Are you sure that you paid your bill?"

"Yes. I'm sure that I did."

"Yeah. I show your payment on March 15. Maybe there is another reason. I think that there's been some irregularity in your purchases. I have two bill here from gas stations on consecutive days. And they're from different cities."

"They're both suburbs of Atlanta. Your records don't indicate that the two service stations are within three miles of each other."

"I am sorry if that is our error. Everything else seems in order. Is there anything else that we can do for you."

"I don't want this sort of thing happening again."

"It is all for your protection. We are keeping our eyes on your account. You never know about fraud."

"You're a bigger obstacle than the supposed fraud. How much money does fraud take? Less than one percent. And then you have these exorbitant late charges. It's at least triple the offset interest charges. What's the game here?"

"We don't make the rules."

"I understand. But I suffer for the rules."

"Credit comes at a price. Is there anything else that I can do for you today."

"Are you sure that I won't have any problems like this again?"

"Let me make sure."

"I'm patient."

"Sir, we flagged another problem. There is a pattern of irregularity in the account. I think there is some issue about the nature of these purchases."

"Gas, food. What is unusual?"

"I have something else marked on my computer. I think that the card is being frozen until an investigation is complete. It seems that you reported an unauthorized purchase."

"I went to a store, and the computers were down. They took my information on a sales slip. By mistake they included someone else's purchased on my order. When I finally discovered the mistake, it was too late to issue an immediate credit. I sent in a written request, filled out the appropriate forms, and everything was cleared up."

"I don't think that it was. There appears to be another problem. The initial investigation on the fraud revealed that you've been doing this kind of thing over and over again. I think the recent purchases offered confirmation of the suspicions."

"What are you talking about?"

"You have been watched for a while."

“This is supposed to be a free society. I’m under surveillance.”

“Didn’t you read the credit agreement? No one forced you to get a credit card.”

“You can’t survive without credit. How else can you get a car or a home? How many people have the cash in hand. That’s the way the world works.”

“I’m just telling you about the information that we have.”

“Can you straighten this out?”

“You’ll have to call back tomorrow.”

“Can I talk to a supervisor?”

“You’re going to have to call the New Jersey office. They’re closed for the day.”

I don’t feel as if she has been that cooperative. What can I do? I hardly give it a thought for the rest of the day. I just make sure not to use the credit card. The next day I follow up.

“Give me your credit card number.”

“I thought that you already have it. I typed it in when I was prompted.”

“This is for verification purposes.”

I give her my account number.

“We don’t show you in the system.”

“I talked to someone yesterday. She gave me this number to call.”

“She was right to give you this number. But you’re not in the system. Did you change your name? Maybe you took the account out under another name.”

“I never changed my name. I’ve always been the same person.”

“You are not showing up. Give me that account number again. Say each number slowly.”

I repeat the number back to her.

“Maybe you’re in the system under your wife’s name. What’s her name?”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“Are you sure?”

“What?”

“Maybe you have another account with us.”

“This is my only account.”

“I’m still showing nothing. We just took over this office in New Jersey from another credit card company. You could call Florida. They have all the records.”

“I’ll take the Florida number although this is starting to seem like a runaround.”

I don’t have time to spend all day on the phone with Florida. I call a couple of hours later.

“Were you talking to our New Jersey office?”

“Yes, I was.”

“You were supposed to call us right away. We were waiting for the call.”

“I became busy. I hope that is OK with you.”

“It really isn’t OK. Your credit situation is in danger. And you have to have this matter remedied.”

“In danger? They couldn’t even find my records in New Jersey. So you’ve found me.”

“No, we haven’t. At least we can’t give you the full information until you give us your account number.”

I am getting a little perturbed.

“I don’t see anything under that number. You could give me your social security number.”

“I’m giving you every number I have.”

“Are you married? It could be under your wife’s name.”

At this point, I fee things would be a whole lot easier if I did have a wife. I could give them her name and accelerate the search.

“Did your wife call about this earlier. We have a record of your wife calling.”

“You do?”

“Oops, sorry. That was your call earlier today.”

“Do you have a record of me calling yesterday.”

“Was that under the account number that you gave me earlier.”

“Yes, it was.”

“There is no record of that call.”

This is getting more and more ridiculous. I’m not even sure about myself. I don’t have the energy to repeat the whole process.

I feel that I have been in this place before. I can smell her perfume everywhere.

“Is this your wife?”

“It’s more like a bad dream.”

The air almost feels solid. I sense that I am penetrating her perfume.

“Do you think about sex whenever you get into some kind of scrape?”

“I don’t know what I do. I just take it as it comes.”

“Are you looking for an identity?”

“Aren’t we all! You could be the wife of Carol.”

“I don’t think that would work. This is something that I need to work out on my own.”

“Maybe you need some help.”

“Not in that way.”

“That isn’t what I meant. You need a spiritual vision. Some kind of paradise to lead you back to the right path.”

“You aren’t the first to say that. Just leave me to my fantasy for now. I want to have sex with Carol. And then I’ll make sense of who I am.”

I call one last time.

“You’re listed under your wife’s name.”

“That’s good because I don’t have a wife.”

“Carol?”

“Sounds good. I guess my fantasies have been paying off.”

“Fantasies? Have you been paying for those.”

“Not yet.”

“Well if you have, you need to tell us. That could be the source of the irregularities. Those charges are illegal in some states.”

“I haven’t traveled to any of the illegal states.”

“What states have you been in.?”

“A little intoxication. And now I’m coming down. The state of heightened awareness. I

can tell when I'm screwing and when I'm being screwed."

"We don't have those services. If you call Nevada."

"What happens if I call Nevada?"

"There's going to be an extra charge. But they do identity services. Just like in the old days when they were known for quick divorce. You can get a change of identity."

"A name change."

"No, a complete makeover of the self."

"Give me that number!"

"It's a private number."

"How do I get it?"

"You'll have to call New Jersey again."

I do what I have to do.

"We really can't help you. You don't have enough credits. It has to do with your profession. You use writing on sex to make up for your inadequacies as a man and as a writer."

"What am I supposed to do about that? It has to do with my history. A little trauma in my past. A new identity would cure that."

"It's too late for you. But we could hook you up with a partner."

"A wife."

"That's up to you. You have to see what you can do."

"Feed the hungry!"

"What does it take to win the contest for the best fudge at the spring social, or the best chili at the Tex-Mex cook-off? Short of bribing the judges, what is the secret? We all have our favorites. But just one will be good enough to win. It'll take a little mind-reading and a lot of effort to come in first at this year's contest.

You got to know that every other contestant has been mixing and subtracting. All in an effort to come up with the perfect combination of flavors. What does it take to pique the taste buds of the judges. There's a little bit of pleasing and a lot of imagination going in the concoction. Sure a person could study the winners from the past years. But the judges are already sated with those combinations. It's that something new that will do the trick. Just a little craziness to throw everyone off. And then that zing to make it to the next level, enough to make everyone just throw their hat in the ring. This is the sure winner.

We might pretend that it all can be different. We know that it isn't. As long as we agree to play, we are at the mercy of the whims of the people who run the contest. More than the judges themselves, it is the people who give away the prizes who are really in charge. Pleasing them is like trying to make morning sun hold off for another hour. It's never going to happen.

Worse, it's like pleasing the king. You may derive the perfect formula, but just to mess with you, the little devil gives a thumbs down to all your hard work. Why even bother?

There appears to be a suggestion that the winning entry has a real handle on the contest. The winner not only understands the final product, but she also knows how to anticipate the psychology of the judges. In a way, that reading couldn't be farther from the truth. The judges are motivated by their own logic. No one could possibly interfere with the capriciousness of the whole process. There is no real understanding of the best chili or the richest fudge. The game is fixed before you even play. For all the concern of the players, they could set up their own game

with more harmonious ends.”

“What is the source of this little diatribe?”

“I’m just tired of ending up on the short end of the stick.”

“A little sour grapes.”

“Not at all. It’s just that things are rigged, and I really think it’s worth doing something about it.”

“What do you propose?”

“We just have to do what we want. Make our own rules.”

“Anarchy in the kitchen.”

“Wherever. Anywhere is a good place to start.”

“Pour brandy on the chicken, and ignite.”

“Toss some rum on the bananas.”

“There’s no limit to our imagination.”

“We’re in this together.”

“That’s not going to be sufficient.”

“Of course it won’t. We have to make a science out of our revolt. But revolt we must. We can’t take these gross put downs anymore.”

“Power to the people.”

“Something like that. Get the home fires burning!”

“Preheat the ovens to four hundred.”

“Light those pilot lights.”

“I think that you’ve discovered a method.”

“Turn on the stove!”

Our outrageous dinner is followed by another discourse on politics. He wants to help out more than anything else. To act like a guide. I love his contribution, so elegant and precise.

“He hasn’t committed any crime.”

“So he has a right to contemplate such a deed.”

“He has a right to think about something depraved and utterly stupid. But he really has no right at all to satisfy himself.”

“Satisfaction may be his only outlet.”

“But we both agreed the deed is depraved in its nature. It contains elements of degradation and would bring harm to another person.”

“We are simply contemplating such deeds.”

“But you have advanced his need to satisfy himself.”

“I think it’s part of being sequestered by himself on his own property. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I don’t think that I could. Oh, whatever.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re distorting the original intent.”

“If that was our only measure, we’d still be using outhouses.”

“I think that is what we do.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. That sounds degrading.”

“Our starting point!”

“Property!”

“Shit!”

“Exactly!”

“Back to the original intent!”

“Unintended word play!”

“Things you do with words.”

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for all my life.”

“What’s the deal?”

“I’ve just had loads of questions that I wanted to ask you. Questions about the original compact. Questions about property rights. Questions about civil law. About precedent.”

“Fire away!”

“But all that seems like more of a distraction than anything else when compared to the real questions of finding a place to live, landing a steady job.”

“Nothing’s really for certain anymore, as if it ever was.”

“If that isn’t perversity, then what is?”

“We console ourselves with what we can get. What do you expect? To be loved because you were born.”

“That’s a good beginning!”

“You have the opportunity to be loved. But that doesn’t guarantee love.”

“The opportunities all seem to lead to the same place.”

“You just don’t know how to be happy!”

“That’s how depravity results—from the denial of happiness. People then work to achieve states of elation that approximate real happiness. They use their pursuit of solitary pleasures to make up for the collective well being.”

“You are starting to sound like me.”

“You’re the one who’s trying to deny the central premise of freedom, the route to happiness.”

“Do what you will on your own time. Freedom brings obligations with it.”

“We are all prisoners of our desires in one way or another. The purpose of freedom is to help free ourselves from those restrictions.”

“You can’t simply bail people out from disasters of their own making.”

“I really had faith in you that you were different.”

“I’m as different as I can be. You’re just not willing to accept the risk for your own decisions. Your philosophy is motivated by regret.”

“You’re the one who loads the dice before the game begins. Then everyone wrestles in a frantic contest to gain whatever is left.”

“You play with the hand you’re dealt.”

“When enough people realize it’s a racket, there will be hell to pay.”

“By the time, you realize that you’re helpless and bitter.”

“Exactly. How long does the intoxication last?”

“You tell me. You’re the one immersed in hedonism.”

“I favor happiness, not necessarily hedonism.”

“You’ve been arguing for satisfaction without condition. What else can that be but an

absolute pursuit of pleasure.”

“I am all about foresight. That should be obvious.”

“Nothing is obvious here without spelling it out.”

The bounds of pleasure should be quite credibly our ability to touch. The will in itself is pointed towards regret. Such self-doubt may be the very conditions of pleasure in the first place. Even satisfaction of our desires is hardly any guarantee. From the moment that we taste the delights, we are already distracted by new wonders. What are we supposed to do? Taste but not swallow.

“You don’t like me.”

“That’s not it. I like you a lot. I just don’t know how to trust myself.”

This may be the key to the whole project. A heightened view of paradise, a prototype for all that we desire.

“If you liked me, you’d want to stay.”

“I have to work tomorrow. I am really going to be burdened.”

I can feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. One mistake and everything will come apart. My after-dinner discussion really lead me astray.

“Tell me more about this idea of the prototype.”

“I don’t think that it’s an idea that I came up with. It’s like an adult toy. It provides the limits for our desires. It insures that we don’t give in to our more aggressive tendencies.”

“So how does it work.”

“It gets information from what we already desire and transforms it into something new.”

“It sounds like a new form of temptation.”

“You might call it that.”

This theory seems to hinge on the desire for something ideal. That may be the derailing of the social contract. We are all held by this promise. But there is no way that we all can win that contest.

“How do I look?”

“You look great.”

“You know if I really believed that, you wouldn’t have a chance.”

“I told you that you look great.”

“What’s that worthy any more.”

“It meant a lot to you at one time.”

“I had dreams just like you. Now look at how things have turned out. All of you have are dreams. If I still look so good, there’s got to be a guy out there with more prospects than you.”

“What has made you so brutally honest about life?”

“I’ve worked hard to create myself. I want some kind of reward for what I’ve done.”

“Life doesn’t always give us equitable return.”

“I’m not going to wait around to see if you’re right. I need to figure it out on my own.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t have got this far without my help.”

“I thank you for that. Now you have to move out of the way.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll have to knock you down in my forward progress.”

“Maybe it’s not like it seems. You could be the one who’s going backwards.”

“Don’t play games with me!”

In the darkness, I can’t really worry about what I have. I am working with the cards that I have been dealt. There are moments of exquisite pleasure. I wonder what it’s all worth. In the cold morning light, the contrast is stark.

I watch a trail of ants line their way towards the sweets. The path is direct. Their fate is uncertain.

“If you’re going to construct a prototype, you need to build in hope.”

“That is what opportunity is all about.”

“It’s just that it all seems like such an illusion. When you have it, you’ve got it. Even if you don’t know it. But when you fall from grace, that’s it.”

“That is what hard work is all about. You just have to raise yourself up from all the malaise that besets you.”

“You can only do so much.”

“You’re not giving up.”

“Not at all. I love to pretend. We all want to be kissed by Cinderella.”

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m just afraid that it’s way past midnight without a clue.”

“Make your own clues.”

Cindy needs to learn some discipline. She has been given too much latitude in her upbringing. I’m ready to help make up for the deficiencies in her training.

“Cindy, smile for the camera.”

“I’m trying to. I just feel that it is staring at me.”

“You have to work that feeling. Just imagine that every guy wants to give you the world. Milk it, girl.”

“I don’t want to be false.”

“You can never give everyone what they want. Just deal with it.”

“This just seems perverse.”

“The opposite would be worse. You need to protect yourself.”

“But I’m already giving up so much.”

“Think of it as a tease.”

“That’s how I’m thinking about it. It just seems to go nowhere. It continues that same assumption about me.”

“What’s that?”

“That I’m part of a fairy tale. That I’m something to be possessed.”

“You don’t like that vision. Isn’t that how you think about things too?”

“I know how to separate reality from fantasy? Fairy tales don’t pay for rent.”

“But they might help.”

“Is this a discourse on the state and propaganda?”

“Are you taking notes?”

“I haven’t heard anything that provocative. Besides, I don’t have a pen and paper.”

“Write on the body. It will remember.”

“I told you that I don’t have a pen.”

“You dictate to me, and I’ll write on the body with my fingers. If I follow a plan, you

should remember what you need to.”

“It sounds suspiciously like a trail of ants heading for the sweets.”

“I wouldn’t mind tasting your sweets.”

“But the whole deal with the ants is that it’s a trap. It is sweet, but it is also poison.”

“Sounds a little like your delights.”

“Now, it’s getting worse than the pictures. You just want me to be the wanton child so that you can punish me.”

“I thought that was the plan.”

“It may have been part of the original intent, but things have developed so much since then. Language isn’t this fixed thing that can’t adapt for the realities of the situation.”

“We have the original social contract.”

“But it may be flawed. We can revise the original intent to adapt to social changes. After all one never knows about freaks like you. You invite a girl home, and that’s the last that anyone hears about her.”

“What are you accusing me of?”

“Of manipulating the rules to go your way.”

“I’m sure that you’d do the same if you had the chance.”

“And I’m taking the chance. I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“Why don’t you take the chance the other way? You never know what might happen.”

“I know all about your original intent!”