

3. HER WORK

“You’re late again!”

“I wasn’t supposed to be in until twelve.”

“Didn’t you check your schedule? You were supposed to be in at ten this morning.”

Were they playing games with her? She had been on the same schedule for over three months. It was obvious what was going on. They knew that she had been late a couple of times. By changing the schedule, she’d have enough infractions that she could easily be fired on the whim of her employer. She hated to be on tenterhooks each second of the day. The job was bad enough without having to worry if she was going to lose it in the next second. They might as well have just tied her up in the back and tortured her.

For the rest of the morning, she stared out the window. Even as they had her folding clothes, she was lost in the same reverie. The constant downpour meant that there were few customers in that day. It only made her time more impressive. She had decided to take a semester off college. She still held out the hope that she would someday finish her degree.

Back at the apartment, she dealt with her roommate, Grace, and her excuses.

“Grace, don’t you wash the plates before you put them in the dishwasher?”

“Sometimes. That’s what the dishwasher’s for. To wash the plates.”

“Look at this: this dish is all caked over with crud. It’s mostly clean, but the food residue has been burned into the dish. And I have to scrape it off.”

Grace hated to be told things by Emerald. It made Emerald seem superior to her. Grace was still in school. She had just as long as Emerald to go before she finished, but she saw herself as blessed to do great things. Her parents pampered her. As long as her grades were high enough, they sent her money, so she didn’t have to work at a job all that much. So she just took it for granted that she was contributing something important to society even if she was only caught up in the silly games of the college classroom.

Emerald believed that she was in on a deeper secret in life. Even if she was only shifting sweaters from one shelf to another, her actions could influence the fashion decisions of loads of girls who came into her store. The more sweaters that they bought, the more orders to the factory. All those people employed in bringing sweaters to her store. It gave her a sense of real importance.

Emerald’s rationalization for her work started to wear thin the moment that she walked into the store. All these clothes seemed kind of quaint. She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked like a model for this bland lifestyle. Sure, Grace was deluded. But she didn’t have to maintain this facade that she was a valiant missionary to a forlorn people deprived of fashion sense.

Emerald ran her hands along the fabric of one particular garment. It reminded her that she was in touch with something real. Despite her rationalization, she still needed the assurance of the material world. When the store was empty, it was much harder to feel that she was part of something significant. Instead, she felt exiled.

She could feel the seconds turn into milliseconds. She was getting immersed in the divisions of time. What was solid was turning liquid and then evaporating in the air. There was no one to rescue. She was a lone traveler in the emptiness of the cosmos. More than ever, she

recognized the fundamental emptiness of the universe, not in a personal sense, but more in a physical absence.

“There’s this melody that I want you to hear.”

“What’s this about?”

“This will change your life.”

“I don’t need that kind of change. I’m OK.”

Grace was sharing a lesson from one of her classes. Emerald hardly needed this kind of inculcation. She had enough stimulation at work to take her out of her comfort zone. She had thought about transformation of the self a great deal more than Grace. She didn’t want to intimidate Grace. She simply didn’t want to be bothered with some academic mumbo jumbo. Music could change her life. But she was still waiting for the great event. In its place, she became more drawn to the dominance of silence in her experience.

When she was alone in the store, Emerald would turn off the piped-in music. It gave her more of an opportunity to let her mind wander. Sure, it added to the boredom. But if she could get past these moments, her thoughts came up again some deeper truth. For all the good of her journey inside her psyche, she would always return to the vague consolation of her surroundings. She wanted to pretend that she was alien to this world. Try as she might, she could not peel back that last layer that tethered her to the planet Earth. So she went back to folding sweaters and submitting to the regular patterns of her reluctant home.

With so much burden weighing her down, she probably should have sought a more constant entertainment to dull the barrage. Grace’s suggestions about music might have been more welcome if not for the source. She turned up the stereo at home, and imagined herself dancing with some dreamboat. Despite her fashion insights, she hardly felt like a catch. She consoled herself by holding up in the apartment. Maybe she wasn’t meeting anyone new, but she could fend off anyone who wanted to disrupt her pleasant lifestyle.

“Emerald, you have to get out more. You’re not in school. What are you doing?”

She couldn’t imagine herself spending long nights in bars getting drunk. She didn’t want to waste her time. But it wasn’t as if she was writing the *Great American Novel* while at home. She needed something more provocative to take up her time. More than a hobby. More than a pet.

She stared at TV and told herself that she needed to read more. When she was in school, she never had time to do her own reading. Now she felt too paralyzed to pick up a book. She was just afraid that she could never finish anything so she became too afraid to start.

One evening she spent hours tossing wads of paper in the trash can. She’d fill the small basket, then she’d empty and start the game again. She was keeping score with herself and trying to perfect her shot.

For exercise, she walked quite a deal. Even in the pouring rain, she’d take a little jaunt to make her feel more exhilarated. It always did the trick. And she wasn’t a big eater. She ate much healthier meals than Grace. She felt as if Grace was poisoning her body and her mind.

She sat there eating a big salad. This was her reward for doing the right thing. Grace would need a lot more to get her in the groove.

After her meal, she felt pleased with herself. She fell asleep with the thought that was taking charge of things.

“Oh, boy!”

In the morning, her accomplishments were hardly enough to help her deal with a long day at work. She needed a new strategy. What did she need to do to make things different?

“You need a new way of thinking about your world.”

“New how?”

Emerald was discussing abstract art in the Hilton lobby. She wanted her friend Rudi to explain to her how abstraction could have any connection to politics. It seemed as if the two were mutually incompatible.

“It is the artist’s vocation to show how the debilitating experiences at work fragments consciousness. This is how we see the world.”

“Does that mean that the artist desires to recover some kind of lost completeness of the artistic image?”

“That assumes that the image ever exists in an integral form. It always offers a point of view. An angle. Even constructing that angle as part of an overall point of view, a sphere, is still only a partial representation of space. You feel as if you are a part of that image that you see. It may be flat on the canvas without apparent contour. The artist allows you to create depth. His lines orient you to volume. And he invites you to inhabit the space that you create. He takes the empty spaces and encourages you to fill them in.

We may take the artist’s work for granted. There he is at the canvas for hours. He may work intently on a brush stroke. He sees himself as worker in a field loading bags of hay on a truck. The work is constant and exhausting. We only see the result. We come to expect it. We never brush up against the tedium.

The drive to create overwhelms the artist. But he is harnessing all these minor gestures into one great expression. The viewer needs to work to become part of this process. It is as if he reaches inside the canvas and tears along the boundaries to open up the dimensions of the work. You can only put yourself inside when you literally throw yourself inside the relief of the art.”

Rudi lectured Emerald as if she was a student. But she wanted to learn more.

“In some abstraction, the artist works to create this cell. The cell is the basic building block. It is the reference point for everything that takes place on the canvas. In a sense, it is a picture inside the picture. It offers the viewer a reference point.”

“What if I can’t see the cell?”

“You can see something like it. In constructing the complement, you eventually come face to face with the actual thing.”

“The work always reflects this cell.”

“Sometimes. But it is more a mental construct to help you get into the work. Just as the artist clumps together paint, you can control a portion of the framed space. And you note all the lines that intersect this space. Does the artist offer a border to contain what goes on in this space? Or is the intersection without bounds? By asking these questions, you can discover if this template is part of some larger connection in the work.”

“You make me want to take up painting.”

“That would be a great thing. The beginning of the journey is your seeing. Are you willing to see your world in a new way.”

“Suppose that I see the world with this new perspective. Won’t I feel obligated to do a lot

more with my knowledge?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"I can barely manage with working all the time."

Her hours had increased just to keep up with rent. It made it much more difficult when she watched her roommate skate through life. She didn't want to be reminded of the tedium in her life. She recognized how she filled her time with nonsense just so she wouldn't have to change things. The pressure to change would only make her feel worse about her job.

Emerald and Grace become immersed in a movie on DVD.

"Isn't it weird in these movies when there's just too many people getting killed? They don't even leave time for the action to develop."

"The killing doesn't start until a con man has defrauded a bus load of people."

"How does he do that?"

"First, he plays on his good looks and charm."

"Is that sufficient?"

"No, it goes way back to his past. He has a wealth of social skills that he can apply to his present hijinks."

"You may have an entertaining story."

"The hero does have ethics."

"Where does it lead?"

"To a loyalty oath."

"And that is the beginning of the confidence game."

"If you can appeal to someone's heart, you can get away with practically anything."

"Just give them cute cartoon figure to whom they can pledge their loyalties."

"And once you have them in your clutches, keep blowing things up. This only proves that their faith is genuine."

"It all comes down to the family."

"The father is a great con man. And he passes his talent on to his son. But the son has other goals for himself. He is trying to escape his father's legacy. Inevitably, that just makes him good at one thing. So he finally turns to a life of crime."

"Quite a good conflict to base the beginning of the film."

"And he has failed to protect his charge at some point in his distant past. So he is reluctant to include anyone else in his future projects."

"This comes over a pathetic tale. How does he get back his lost honor?"

"He has to pose as a man of means. Something that is not difficult for him since the audience wants to believe that he has a special skill."

"You don't think that I'm going to let you off that easily."

"I punish my victims myself."

"I could admit that I'm sorry."

"That would only make the punishment worse."

"Who gets the money?"

"The person with the bigger smile."

"If you let me smile, I'll take whatever you have to offer."

"You don't hold all the cards."

“But I know things about your past.”

“You really believe this shit.”

“I believe anything that he tells me.”

“Don’t you often have that problem.”

“Only when I need to entertain myself.”

“You came in here for love.”

“And I’m leaving with money. That ought to buy me a billion other fans.”

“Each one gets a little bit of the pie.”

“A good imagination can turn that into pretty much anything.”

“Then everyone gets blown away.”

“Pretty crazy movie.”

“I could do better. The girl cons him out of his money.”

“Does she want to be by herself?”

Emerald fell asleep watching TV.

Emerald’s friend April was just graduating from college. Her parents were going to help her buy her first home. She was getting married to Raymond who had a great job and was a little older than her. They were set for life. April had once worked at the store. She had been the manager. What did April have that Emerald lacked? She didn’t want to think of herself as living off of someone else’s life. She was just waking up to the world. And everything was feeling new to her. She only wished that she didn’t feel like such an outsider in her own life.

Rudi’s lessons started to take hold, but not in the way that he had intended them. She felt weaker and weaker. She had determined to herself that she wasn’t going back to school. She could look for another job. But she could hardly imagine working in a restaurant. Just carrying all those plates would be an invitation to an accident. It wasn’t a big deal to drop a couple of sweaters. Brush them off, and put them back on the shelf.

She was starting to see her life as the brightly colored packages that surrounded gifts. It never mattered what was inside. The surprise was always worth so much more. If she could just freeze that moment before the box was lifted open.

She needed someone to give her a gift. More than ever it was the thought that was important. She wanted someone to be thinking of her when she wasn’t there.

She thought of herself trying to take April’s place. There were so many things going on in the girl’s mind. Emerald worked to fill her brain with something that would break this ceaseless boredom.

What kind of artist was she. Her life was this ridiculous canvas. With the lights on in the store, passers-by could see her displayed. Her predicament brought a smile to their faces. She was a bad comedy!

The other day she watched a cute boy stare inside the store. She thought that he was looking at one of the mannequins. But he was watching her. It freaked her out. She stepped outside briefly.

“Can I help you?”

“I was just looking for someone that I know.”

“She’s on break.”

“No, I thought that she was you.”

“Really,” Emerald smiled. “I’m not.”

“Sorry for bothering you. I better go.”

He ran off. She wanted to leave the store unattended and run after him. She hesitated with the door half open. Then she went back in and straightened out some skirts. After that, she just sulked at the cash register.

Was this how April met her man? He hardly sounded like some street punk staring into store windows. He had no fear to go inside.

Why were some people so full of purpose? Could guys sense that in her? No one wanted to be with someone who they had to hold up all the time. Emerald needed to stand up straighter. She needed to give the impression that she knew what she wanted from life.

Her street boy could be just like her. He could be looking for something meaningful. The lighted window had offered him a vision. She should have left it that way. She ruined it by going outside.

The work day was almost finished. It was almost nine, and she just wanted to go home and crash. Grace had invited her to go to a bar. That would only make her more tired for the next day. Grace never worried about stuff like that. Even if she had a test, she let it slide off her as if nothing was happening.

After work, Emerald had Rudi meet her at a bar near work.

“I want you to explain the connection between abstract art and politics. You talked about it already, but I still need you to make it clearer.”

“In a simple manner, politics reminds you of the sense of discomfort that you feel at work. It traces the origins of that feeling. While you work, you transform your environment. You turn the world into something that offers you great promise. All the while, the circumstances on the job work remind of the restrictions on your activity. As much as you try, you cannot overcome the constraints of limited wages and hours full of loathsome toil. The artist work to capture this sense of ongoing captivity.”

“I love fashion, but I hate selling skirts and blouses.”

“Something like that. But fashion is part of design. The artist looks for a deeper truth. In your toiling, you work to remake the effort. Fashion only glosses over that connection. You are moving closer to gaining control over your environment. You do not simply accept what is given. You have real demands.”

“Like the girls who line up to buy the latest hip clothes.”

“They are caught up in consumerism. They do not remake the world. They accept it as it is.”

“So the artist strikes a blow for the independence of the self from the market.”

“Something like that!”

Emerald wanted to learn more the artist’s method. She imagined that the posters at work could celebrate her unique sense of boredom.

“The artist uses the contradiction in his surroundings to celebrate the significance of form and color in allowing us to forge a new role for ourselves. We are no longer submerged in the deep sea of the office or the shop floor. We are transported to a new space where we our pioneers. Our perceptions are keys to opening ourselves to new kinds of feelings.”

“Happiness and sadness.”

“Beyond that. We get turned on by our alienation. We become artists with our emotions.”

Emerald now imagined herself as part of a giant art happening!

“You cannot expect work to create a sense of belonging. And you should not surrender to the trappings of commercialism. The pulsating beats collide with the visual stimuli. You cannot give in to the seduction. You need to fight the power of the market.”

“That sounds so idealistic.”

“It is much more realistic.”

“Are you telling me to enjoy my pain?”

“Not at all. You just can’t get caught up in the glitz.”

“You continue to motivate the self with a sense of helplessness.”

“Not at all. Art makes you an active part of the process.”

“I still have to work in a shitty place.”

“It gets you thinking about your experience in a different way. You start to change what you can. And you find those things that won’t change without collective action.”

“Everyone at my job wants to spend all their time having fun!”

“Don’t give in. Fun for now is hell later on!”

“Good art has an element of ennui but that can be liberating.”

“You’re getting the hang of things!”

Emerald was going over all the tasks involved in her job. Doing inventory, keeping track of sales, ordering clothes, taking the deliveries, stocking the back room, opening the boxes and putting the clothes on the shelves, putting the clothes on hangars, doing the window displays, putting up the signs for sales, sweeping the store, dusting the shelves, cleaning the walls, cleaning the washroom, greeting the customers, advising them on clothes, selling them clothes, ringing up their purchases, taking back their purchases

She still couldn’t see the art in it all.

“I’m not really into revenge”

“What do you want from life?”

“I want to be a good salesperson.”

“You have to sell people something that they don’t have.”

“Courage. They need the courage to say no.”

“Or they need to learn to say yes to everything. That is why you hate your life.”

“Denial is the gateway to pleasure.”

“That just postpones things too long.”

“Are you really enjoying what you’ve got.”

“I’m having so much fun so don’t ask me too many questions.”

Which model would serve her better: the movies or art? It wasn’t as if Rudi was working with her at the fashion store. He could stand above it all because he thought that he was above it all.

Another lonely night at work tempted her to blare the music. Why wasn’t she more like the other girls who worked here. They would just dance through moments like this.

Emerald was again feeling trapped in her vision of her world.

“We’re going to get along real well.”

“And you’ll get along with my wallet.”

“I need to make a few more sales for my quota for the week.”

“Do you really sell anything here?”

“I sell loads.”

“I can’t tell with your attitude.”

“If I’m nicer to you, will you buy something from me.”

“I’m not sure that you have what I need. I like my clothes a little more daring.”

“You obviously create your personality by buying clothes. I see clothes as a lot more functional. We have loads of wild skirt and tops that go together in a host of ways. They are both practical and fun.”

“I see fun as being something a little more unique.”

“You’re complicating things. That dress makes you look like a knockout. You should consider buying it.”

“You really know how to get under the skin of your clients. Why don’t you come have some drinks with me?”

“I don’t know. It has been a long day.”

“I’m buying. Besides, you look like you could use a fairy godmother.”

“You are quite the Cinderella yourself. Thanks for buying the dress. And I’d love to go out. But I am just a wreck. And I don’t really look good tonight. I’ll take a rain check on that drink, and we can look for hot guys together.”

Who was the one guy that Emerald would never go out with, and how did he make himself irresistible to her?

For all her effort, Emerald understood a strange wrinkle with regards to the Cinderella myth. As much as she hoped, she could not become a Cinderella. Her eager customer and potential friend stepped so easily into the role. She just needed the dress off the rack, and she was suddenly transformed into the *Belle*! It wasn’t as if Emerald needed loads of work. The dress just didn’t respond to her curves with the same *joie de vivre*. But it was more than that. Emerald observed how a character transformation seemed accompany the dress. The girl became no more and no less the image that was right before her eyes. She wasn’t oblivious to her surroundings. But Cinderella believed her own press. The immense sparkle of this radiant woman expressed an inner desire for the same kind of validation. She did not want to exceed her visual presentation.

Rudi’s discussion on art would have been Cinderella’s bane. It would have forced her to abandon her supreme belief in her own loveliness. In turn, the host of admirers who surrounded her would have equally withdrawn their approbation. The equation was so brilliant as to be almost obvious. Cinderella lived on mesmerizing her court. The glass slipper was the ultimate testament to her destiny.

Emerald could do everything that she wanted to aspire after Cinderella’s direction. But her arc was moving in totally the opposite way. Why had she been cast out of this fairy tale paradise even before she expressed her desires to play inside? It wasn’t as if she was flawed by nature. No, her intellect carried too heavy a load to be lighted by a dainty dress or sparkling shoes. No amount of jewelry could crowd out her fundamental disquiet with the wretched game. If Prince Charming was waiting for her, his mission would be inordinately demanding. And a

lesser suitor would shrink before its daunting exigencies.

There was a long way to go before any sort of transformation could prepare Emerald for the world. She was the lonely planet that turned around its sun, but felt little of the warmth that came so frequently to her sisters. Her rescue could not come from some wandering knight. She would have to take fate in her hands. She needed to overthrow the whole regal order.

Emerald realized that her job forced her to play the role of the fairy godmother. She was playing second fiddle to her customers. But the role hardly stopped when she turned out the bright lights. No wonder Rudi had found such eager ears for his theories. How many other girls felt just as alienated by the whole masquerade? The marketers would have you believe none. Girls had been raised to accept the myth. Their brains had been shaped so the loud bells of fashion made them salivate with each change of style. They were the living bellwethers who shifted with the designers' whims.

Few objected since the act of rebellion would be an acceptance of a conformist grey. And no one wanted to be condemned to the perpetual night of her own consciousness. Colorful frocks permitted flights of imagination. And the perceptive buyer could moderate her blue periods with a stylish choice."

Emerald existed in an uncaring limbo. She could give the sought-after advice to a host of confused customers. But her remedies offered Emerald no relief. Her psyche suffered its common cold. Emerald would have to deal with the sniffles as they came.

"No one really gets out of their doldrums. They are all like addicts. Each purchase only encourages them to spend more."

Emerald was trying to convince Jenny, a fellow worker, of the dilemma. Jenny would have none of it.

"My employee discount is the one thing that helps me survive my daily grind."

Emerald smiled. She would have none of it."

"I admit that I do buy clothes when I need them. But I do not live to buy. I have so many other expenses. How do you do it?"

"Another job. Guys who give me loads of presents. And willing parents."

"My parents only want to teach me the value of a dollar. My mother will complement my clothes. But she will never buy me a new outfit. Except of course for my birthday and Christmas."

"You sound like one of those unfortunate souls that I've read about in my textbooks."

"Yeah, we're not all products of wealthy suburbs."

"You're not making fun of me, are you?"

"No, we both are braving the vicissitudes of intown living. And we need to be supportive of each other."

"Do you read a lot? You talk like a book."

"I need to find some way to protect myself."

"I have enough reading in class. I'm not a big reader. But I do like to watch movies. Maybe I have a soft spot for gossip."

"I wish that I could help you more in that way. I guess that I do see a lot. If only I had a little more of an assertive personality, I might be able to cut through all the crap and give you a more honest assessment of what I think about people."

“That’s OK. Just give me the short form.”

“Our manager?”

“What about her?”

“Does she have something going with that new buyer?”

“I thought that he was gay.”

“She’s running her own private escort service with him.”

“She doesn’t pay him.”

“She might as well. Have you ever seen the big smile on her face when he comes in. It makes you wonder what they’ve been doing the night before.”

“Are you sure that they actually see each other?”

“If they don’t, that woman has a rich fantasy life.”

“You are wicked!”

“I’m just afraid that I’m going to end up like her.”

“You’re in school. You can do something else.”

“I was in school. I have no idea if I am ever going back.”

“That alone should be your motivation.”

“I wish that it was that easy.”

“Sign up, and show up.”

Emerald could feel a new adventure calling. But the next day, she had forgotten about the strains of the night before. She really did need Prince Charming to motivate her.

Who were the men in her life? The store surrounded her with girls. Most of her customers were girls. Those who weren’t were buying gifts for their women. The buyer was spoken for even if he wouldn’t admit it. And the rest of the guys at corporate were all fogs. She felt isolated. The more that she stayed at home, the more that she decreased her chances. She remained trapped in her ashen existence. Even poor Cinderella was able to sneak into the ball.

After work, she strode past a bar and looked inside. The girls were much more desperate than her. And the guys looked like derelicts. None could even hold a shoe to Prince Charming.

At home, she wondered why she didn’t have a pet. That would be a defeat; she would be admitting to herself that she was a homebody. She and Grace never got along that well. So she could hardly ally with her to solve the problem. Grace knew some guys from school. But they had the same demeanor as her, and that put off Emerald.

What was she working for? It wasn’t as if she entertained herself that much at home. Her reading habits had even been curtailed after all this time. Oh well!

Emerald needed to plan adventures for herself. She knew girls who tempted the fates. And it wouldn’t hurt her to push the envelope. She knew that she would have trouble losing herself in a crowd. That wasn’t her job. She could find enough guys to offer the entertainment. She could play the attentive audience.

Emerald realized that she had trouble shutting down her brain. She would analyze everyone that walked by her. She would hardly be suitable company at a bar. She could try to follow the witty repartee. But it all seemed to move past her.

What hope did she have if all her instincts blocked her further advancement?

One night she broke her vow. She went in to cosy up with the derelicts. As she walked

in they all turned her way. Soon after she began her assignment, she realized that she had made a big mistake. Despite her disavowal of the runway set, she was too much of a fashion plate make her mark in a place like this. The guys wanted her. But they were put off by her attire. It wasn't as if they weren't attracted to her. They just feared rejection by someone so well put together. They had trouble seeing past her image.

To compensate for her shortcomings, Emerald tried to blend in. One drink was hardly sufficient to join the gang. After a second, she understood that no action was forthcoming. So she became like all the other clientele. She embraced the kiss of hearty liquor. And she slipped into a deep drunk. A caring bartender decided to call her a cab. But it wasn't before poor Emerald believed that she had finally found her Prince.

A walloping headache the next day convinced her that she needed a new strategy. She finally understood why the other workers had that permanent haze in their eyes. She had always been sympathetic with the effects, but she never understood the cause. Now, she recognized that she had been initiated into the sisterhood.

She could blame her isolation from her dream on the false promise of alcohol. She swore that she would not get caught in the same game again. When she passed the friendly bar, she kept walking. She needed some other challenge.

Grace was not home that night. She loved being by herself. Could she ever share her kingdom with another person? Would she ever let a guy disturb this rich tranquility?

At work the next day, the buyer stopped by. He was supposed to take the manager to lunch.

"Where is she?"

"I don't think that she knew that you were coming?"

"How about lunch?"

She looked at him intently, "You'll do!"

He wasn't sure if he had heard her right.