

EA ZONE

I became lost in an electromagnetic biosphere. Despite my resistance, I felt myself sucked into the zone. It was a clever ruse on their part. The authorities realized that they could divert me. My taste for the image would engulf me

–Where did you get my number?

–I dialed it accidentally and got your answering machine. I realized the mistake and I remembered your number. I liked your voice message. You have such a sexy voice

I wondered what was going on.

–Do I know you.?

–My name is Anne.

I was sure that I didn't know her.

–I've seen you around all the time.

I listened.

–I've left you messages before. But you never answered me before. Thanksgiving, I was waiting for you. I had dinner prepared and everything.

This seemed extreme. But I also felt flattered and intrigued. I was going through a bad streak. Just a sign.

I'd blown up one of her photographs that I saw in a magazine. It stared at me as I pulsed in and out of a state of awareness.

–I don't know what you see in her.

Bileti laughed at my adulation.

–Does she remind you of someone that you know?

He didn't grasp it.

–You don't know. Just look at her.

–You talk as if you know her in person.

–I do.

I was having trouble maintaining that balance. My dreams were talking to me. And things that I saw around me became part of those dreams. There was no longer a strict waking state for me. I was consistently entranced.

A few numbers off and the code would change. She wouldn't be the same person. Who was devising this?

–I feel that there's something built into the photos. It just hits me. As if someone understands my physiology in a deep way. And they're trying to reprogram me.

–Reprogram. It's not like you're a fucking machine.

–I know that something is going on. Can't you help me figure it out?

–There's nothing to figure out. You like how she looks.

–No. I feel that there's something else going on.

He didn't get it. No matter how I explained. Here I was now being drawn in by just the thing that I was talking about. It hit me.

What were the numbers? What were her numbers? A name. A combination of letters. Changing the code. Speaking the name with more confidence. The sigh. The hard utterance. It

wasn't even making sense to me. I kept talking to someone as I drifted in and out. No longer the memory of the conversation that I had earlier that day. I now had a new friend to listen to me more sympathetically.

–It's not the word. It's the breath that powers it. To take out the letters. Just keep the spirit that makes it work.

He listened.

–Do you know what I'm talking about. I really do need your help.

–How can I help you?

–Help me figure out the invariance. What causes the effect.

All this was being said while I was literally too helpless to move. For the moment, I also felt like I was being read back the deep program. The combination of letters and numbers that were motivating all these effects. What was written in the picture. I wanted to reach for a pen. I went over the sequence again and again. A password to a secret bank account. I was sure that memory would compensate for my weakened physical state. The password became a pattern. A familiar geometry. I wouldn't forget this time.

–What do you want?

It wasn't my new friend talking to me. It was her.

–I want you to explain the secret.

–There's nothing to explain. You're just part of it, and that's all.

–What do these words mean?

–You don't grasp it because you really believe that there's something else. That there are real idols and false idols. They're all idols. What makes it real is our reaction to it.

–That's what I've been saying. You're caught in this illusion.

–No. You don't get it. You still believe your reality is on firm ground. And these ghosts are just floating around it. Work, your job is just another collective illusion. It's on no firmer footing.

–What are you telling me?

I'm glad that you've tried to contact me. I wish that it really meant a difference. I wish that you had half of what he had. His perfection. All hollowed out and waiting for me to fill him in. That's what I look for. In a man. That image. It makes me feel like an artist. Now I just want to close my eyes and not think about it.

I want you to think about it for me. About what you want. What you want to be. You can't be half of what he was to me. You have sweet talk. You have a brilliant mind. But you can't get close enough to destroy me the way that he did. That's what I loved about him. What every girl could see. That he could eat them alive. And he would if he got the chance. I hope that is what he is doing right now. Vomiting on his own supper.

When I first saw him, he looked right through me. Just like you're trying to do now. But he had the power. He knew it. There was no hesitation. I could feel him skinning me alive. And I loved every moment. I wanted him to walk up to me. I knew that he would walk up to me. I could feel the shiver as he approached me. That tingle went all through my body. I felt like I

was meeting a celebrity. I could say a thing. I went mute. Just twisted myself into a ball.

He touched me. I melted. From that moment, he could have anything that he wanted. He did. He took anything that he could get. He broke me down to nothing. I loved it. I loved just waiting for him to come home. I loved the look that other girls gave him. The jealous stares from guys. All of it turned me on. I got lost in that marvel. All the looks, his twisting shapes. He was my paradise. My god! I swallowed up all that perfection. I got so lost inside of him that I could never find my way out.

And very girl wanted to take that away from me. And I wanted to bring every one of them down to her size. Nothing. I had a man. And he took me!

And there were those times that I just needed to get away from him. To run away as far as the world would take me just to get myself back. And he always pulled me back. He could feel me pull away. He knew how independent that I felt but he always pulled me back. And I felt myself slip deeper and deeper down. And I used his body to support me. It never seemed enough.

Sometimes I would create these incidents just to get him jealous. Rub my body against some guy that I met in a bar. In front of him. Grind to the music. He didn't let it bother him. Took it in stride. It was me being me.

But if he even turned his head to look at a girl, he wouldn't hear the end of it. I'd scream about it all night long. Even after we made love. I'd still whisper dirty thoughts about it. How he pissed me off!

He ignored it. Let it all roll off of him. He were so strong. I hated him for that. I was always jealous. Always wondering what the hell he was up to. I knew it was nothing. I told myself that it was nothing. But I could let it go. How could all my suspicions be wrong?

I hated myself for being like that. For being so tied up in a guy like that. I wanted to just say fuck it. Leave me now and forever. But I was so engrossed by him. He took away my every minute. When he came home, I couldn't control myself. I just wanted him inside me. I felt him all around me. I could see him even when I closed my eyes.

I'd be in a restaurant. I'd get up to go to the bathroom. As I approached our table I could see him looking at another girl. Just staring. They often stared back. They'd leave their numbers. But this only made me more vulnerable. I'd find stuff in his jacket,

–Why are you going through my things?

–I wanted to clean it.

–It's leather, babe. I've got to take it in to be cleaned.

I'd scream some more. I'd throw things at him. I'd pretend that didn't even notice him. Down deep, I was getting even worse. Falling deeper and deeper.

I knew that he was a dick. That if it wasn't me it would be some other girl. It had been that way in the past and it would continue to be that way. He just threw that shit all around. That was his way. I loved him. But I don't think that he could care about anyone in the world. I loved his self-sufficiency. That he depended on no one. I felt that he needed me. I wanted him to need me the way that I needed him. I felt that he didn't. But I wanted to pretend. And his glorious kisses made me feel that way. When he was inside me, I felt that the world was going to end. I wanted him to hold me tighter. And that iron grip was destroying me. Leaving me nothing for myself.

I thought that if I acted like him it might make me feel better. I knew that I had what he had and more. Sometimes I'd make these guys do everything for me. When he went away from town, I went wild. I tried to. I thought that he was cheating on me so he should have his just desserts.

Once I felt like that, it gave me the licence to feel like that all the time. I couldn't let go. We were both playing the same game. I got some guy to take me to Vegas. I was walking around in my underwear performing for him when I thought that I better get out of there. I walked into the hallway with my clothes in my hand. Almost naked through the hall just so I could get back my sanity.

I blamed myself all the way on the plane ride back. What had I turned into? When I got back, I let him touch me everywhere. It just blew my mind. And we acted like nothing happened. We—he didn't know the half of it. But I just wondered about my own ignorance.

How far was I going to go? Was I going to make compromises with my body? Give parts of it to them, but reserve the very heart for my man. What would stop me? Would I kiss? Or was that too intimate. Let them touch me, but I would never touch them. Of just the opposite. Let them penetrate me from behind. Give oral sex. Or just quit this stupid behavior.

If I was going to act it out, I needed an excuse. Get drunk. Get really fucked up and blame it on what I was doing. The drink. The intoxication. My infatuation. It wasn't me. None of it was me.

The more that I was getting into all of it, the more that I was getting into him, the more I was losing myself. I wished that I could just be celibate. Give it all up. I tried. Lord knows I tried. I felt miserable. I just wanted someone to love me for who I was. Some man with heart. But how could I know if I didn't test them. I got to know every one. And I got to know none of them.

Hell, I didn't even know the man that I was with. He didn't know me. All the nights that I spent alone when I could have been out having fun. All the fantasies that I wasted on him. I had nothing left. I pretended that I could cheat. But I was never good at any of it.

I'd ride down Paradise Boulevard at a hundred miles an hour just wanting to get back to who I was.

When he held me, I felt that the love was real. That was all that was real. It made all the lost time into something treasured. I had gold. I was no fool!

When I got angry, I tried to dispel my ghosts. Tried to shake myself back to sanity. It didn't seem like it was good enough. I learned to be such a great fuck. I knew that I was good. But I entered a zone that would make most men come just by smelling my perfume. You could tell by the way that I tiptoed from cloud to cloud.

Or the way that I prowled a room like a leopard read to pounce. Men fainted in my path. Was this all that I needed for revenge? Did this make me feel puffed up enough?

I still felt miserable! I'd let him know and it made me feel worse. He made me feel rotten inside. But we had sex, and I'd forget about it.

I thought that he could no longer be tender. His tenderness that I used to feel. Those gentle caresses. I felt all those were gone. But I could still pretend. Pretend because that's all that it had ever been. He let his experience fool me. I filled in for what he could not. I made him whole. But he never did the same for me—NEVER!

He tried to make me weak.

And now you want to do the same. You can't be half the man that he was. He'd be hard now just by looking. Can you say the same?

–What are you doing?

–I'm trying to kiss you. That's what you want. That's why you motion to me like that.

–Quit that! If you keep playing like that, I'm going to have to quit.

–You seemed to be enjoying yourself up to now

–I need to meet you. Somewhere. Anywhere.

–I can do whatever you want. But it's not going to be free.

–I think that I've been through that before.

–Can you afford it?

–It depends on how long you hang me on.

–I keep you hanging as long as you think that there is something that you're going to get.

–How do you do that?

–You know that I have something that you want.

–How do you know?

–Watch me shake my body. You can feel yourself shaking inside me.

–We've been through this before.

–I've always given you what you wanted.

–What about you?

–You offer me the means to get what I want.

–How? What?

–Money—whatever you say it is...

–My fantasy really is enough with you.

–But if you give me a little, I can make you a lot more.

–Am I going to hire you out?

If I could just figure out what's going on, maybe I could control it. Maybe it would stop.

–I need you to hurt someone for me.

–I'm not like that at all!

–You'll do anything that I want you to do.

–That's supposed to be my line.

–Are you confessing?

–To what?

–To being one sick fuck.

–I'll confess if you give me a place to confess.

–Like a bed.

–Like a church. What can you offer me?

–The only thing that one person can give another.

–Immortality.

–No, just the opposite. I am the your beginning and your end. Stay with me and you become closer to your end.

I took her picture from the TV. Locked my camera in and got the picture printed. Blown up. And I put it up in front of my bed. I could not adore her. She was too much for me! I could only serve her. Her deviant whims.

–I'm only deviant because that's how you want me to be. That's how you are inside.

She was present with me. But not really there.

–It takes more commitment to make me appear. More money. You know what that is. You get it by working. Or working for me. Can you work for me?

–Do I have to drive you around.

–I can get around very well on my own.

–You say that you love me. But do you mean that ironically. Are you trying to get me to show up? Love is worth a lot. But not as much as you think. Even your life only has a finite value. I can give you just enough to keep you alive for short time. But if you're terminal, you're on your own. And the antidote won't keep you up and running for long.

I met her at a Laundromat. She wanted to take me back to her place to see her art. All that I could look at were her hands. I found her entrancing. I stared at her hands.

–I can't paint. I can't really do anything except keep my clothes clean. I bought this canvas. I stretched it out to paint. I couldn't. I put it over in the corner.

She jumped.

–What are you staring at? My hands? Do you know what these hands can do. They can strangle you.

I smiled.

–I am serious.

How did I end up here?

–She sent you to meet me.

–You were supposed to have a meeting in a laundry.

–I was supposed to meet a girl.

–Was this a dating service?

–No. A girl I know told me that I would meet someone.

–Like a fortune teller.

–More like a muse.

–Is she real, your muse?

–As real as you. At least, I think that she is.

–So are you disappointed. There is no art.

–You could be my art.

–I could sit for you in a chair. How long do you want me to sit?

–I don't know. An hour.

–Are you good at what you do?

–At watching you?

–Is that what you do?

–I’m trying to.

I tried to memorize my face.

–You never told me your name. You just told me that you were an artist.

–But I have no art to show.

–You have shown me what every artist shows her audience. Her spirit.

–And these artists get paid?

–I thought that their models get paid first.

–I could be a good model.

–That’s why I’m looking at you.

–Do you want me to keep still?

–I’ll do whatever you want me to do. Do you like to drink alone?

–I don’t really drink.

–I could get you something. I hate to drink alone. It’s like masturbation.

–What?

–I don’t like that desolate moment after pleasure if you can’t share it with someone else.

–I think that I am just the opposite. When I reach the paradise, I want to enter it alone.

–But you really need someone else to guide you to prop you up.

–They never arrive at the same paradise.

–They?

–It’s just a manner of speaking.

–Do you want to come with me to Toronto?

–I hardly know you.

–But you followed me up the stairs.

–What could I do in Toronto that I can’t do here?

–You could touch me. You could do more than just look at me. You could touch me.

–Does that mean that you’re going to let me touch you’re here? While we’re together in this room.

–I didn’t say that. I just meant that I’d like you to come to Toronto. It would be different. I could start anew. We both could.

–What would we live on?

–I could get a job in a laundromat. We could live on tuna fish sandwiches.

–I don’t like tuna. Not from the can anyway.

–A snob.

We both smiled.

–You have a great smile.

–I wanted to say that.

We smiled again. I looked in her eyes. She turned away.

–You should never assume.

–Assume what.

–That a girl wants to be looked at in that way.

–What way? You said that you’d be my model.

- You've seen enough already. You have to go.
- You said that I could touch you.
- That was in Toronto.
- I could go to Toronto with you?
- I was just saying that.
- No, I want to go with you.
- It was a game.
- What do you mean?
- That girl told me to say all these things.
- What girl?
- The girl that you were talking about. The one that you thought told me to meet you.
- She told you to meet me?
- Yeah.
- But she told me that it was going to be in a hotel bar.
- It was in a laundromat.
- You're making this up.
- No, it's really how it happened.
- You're just repeating what I told you earlier.
- About the girl? She told me. She also said that I wouldn't have to keep you very long.

And now you have to go.

- But I want to stay. For myself. For you.
- It doesn't work.
- What about your painting?
- I told you. Look for yourself. I can't paint. I can't do anything but lead guys to this room.
- Do you get paid to do that? Do you work for her.
- I'm just telling you a story. So you'll understand better. I wanted you to like me. And now you do. That's all I wanted. Now I want you to leave.
- That's not fair.
- That's all you want with your paradise. You don't want to really talk to me, do you?
- I do. Let's talk.
- We've talked. You did what you needed to do. I did too. Now you need to leave.
- Does someone take care of you?
- I don't need someone to take care of me. I'm OK on my own. I was OK until you came along.
- So you do like me. You like me too.
- You could be anyone. Anyone who sits in that seat. Anyone who listens to my silly stories.
- They are your stories.
- No, they're really your stories. Stories that will make you like me. She told me what to say.
- So maybe I should meet her.
- I never did.

- How did she tell you if you never met her.
- She phoned me.
- Do you just do what people tell you on the phone.
- It was a job.
- Did she pay by check. Do you have her address.
- I got an envelope with cash inside.
- Before you did the job.
- She said that she'd strangle me.
- That's why you did the job.
- She said that if I took the money that I better do the job.
- She threatened you.
- We were both laughing.
- It wasn't a real threat.
- It could have been if I let her.
- That doesn't make sense.
- I needed the money.
- Do you have the money?
- I owed a man some money. I gave it to him.

He had stretched the canvas in his room with the idea that he would paint her. The canvas lay in the corner. He already had her picture. He had the picture blown up until it covered a wall.

This was like nothing that he had ever seen.

- I feel like you're talking to me. There's something in your picture. A code. A hidden message. Something that you've left for me.
- I don't like drivel. People who just talk on and on.
- What do you want me to do?
- I want you to tell me what you want. What do you want?
- If I told you then you'd tell me that I couldn't have it.
- I'm not going to play seduction with you. I 'm not going to let you wear me down.
- Someone's got a hold of my message machine and they're changing my intro message.
- Whatever are you talking about?

-I was waiting for you to come back. I had the table set for dinner. We were going to eat together. I knew what I wanted to say to you. I had even printed a script of things that I wanted you to say to me.

- That's crazy.
- Crazy. But now that I know who you are, I can avoid you.
- You don't sound like you want to get away.
- I do. You've ignored me. I gave you everything in my world.
- I never asked for any of this.

–I know what you look like.

She did know. At least she thought she knew. Just like I thought that she was the person in the photo above my bed.

–It is you?

–Of course it is. Lie back and relax and I can take care of you.

Bileti became more adamant.

–You first wanted to meet her. Now she meets you and she’s a psycho. How did all this get started?

–It had nothing to do with her. It was something that I wanted. It was my problem.

–Where did you get the photo? How do you know that it’s even her?

–It’s her on the TV show.

–That’s not her. She’s just an actor. The girl on the other end of the phone—she’s something else.

–I’m sure that it’s the same girl.

–And she’s going to call you out of the blue. Some girl on TV, just calling one of her fans.

–It could happen.

–Wishful thinking.

It all happened in that motel over there. Officer, I saw this car pull out. It was so hot. You could see the steam surround the car. And this guy just gets out of the car. And I can’t see inside. I saw nothing. Then this other car pulls alongside.

–Where were you?

–I was in that diner over there. Having a piece of pie. I could see it all.

–I gave too much of myself away.

She wasn’t making too much sense. She asked me to get another drink.

–What do you want?

–A martini.

She smiled through her tears.

–I barely got out of there with my life.

–Go back. How did this all begin?

–I was working at burger place and living at home. Just finishing high school. I stayed out all night with this guy and when I got home, my father hit the roof. He said all these nasty things to me. Told me that I couldn’t go out at night. That I’d have to be home right after work.

-- This is our house and we have rules.

I didn’t need their rules. Never again. I got a bus to Vegas. I was eighteen. Got a job in a casino. Waiting tables. It was rough. I could barely afford an apartment. I had to take a bus to work or get a ride.

At the casino, all these guys would hit on me. They promised me the world. It made me

smile. I never thought of myself as that kind of girl. I still was pretty naive. I went up to one guy's room. It was late. A long day. We had some drinks. Things got a little loose. He kissed me a few times. Nothing meant anything.

–Do you want to get down, baby?

I laughed. I didn't think that people said such stupid things.

–Down. Like down the elevator.

He tried rubbing his body against me. I pushed him away.

–You're no fun. You get me worked up, and now you act like this.

He was sort of cute. But he was starting to act nasty.

–I can give you money.

I looked at him with a stare. I wasn't a prostitute. I took my things and slammed the door behind me.

After that, I felt different about myself. Felt that there was always a price on my head. Maybe I had always been like that. I told one of the security guys about it. He started to take a liking to me. I thought he was so kind.

We eventually lived together. At first, it was just to cut down expenses. Then I started sleeping with him. It wasn't like I planned any of it. Sometimes it made me feel dirty. Once we were together, he started to get all jealous. His jealousy just pissed me off. I couldn't take it. I felt that I had to justify his suspicions.

I started hanging out with customers at the casino. Just for him to see.

–We have an arrangement. We live together. That's it.

I didn't mean it that way. But I was tired of being intimidated. One night I did stay out. I was drinking. We went back to the customers room. He offered me some coke. I was already pretty hammered.

–It'll help you stay awake. Help you drink a little more.

We both laughed.

I woke up the next day in his bed. I wonder what had happened. I pretty well knew.

–You're a fucking whore.

–I told you not to depend on me.

–I thought that you were different. All you girls turn out the same.

I did feel dirty. I wanted to move out. But I felt that I couldn't. One of the other girls let me stay at her place until it all blew over. I went back to the apartment on a day that I knew that he was working. He had changed the locks. I couldn't get hold of the landlord, so I broke in through a window. Just piled my stuff into my friend's car and took off.

He confronted me at work as I got off.

–Tricky stuff, bitch. I could have you arrested for doing something like that.

–You could. You really could. But I know that you won't. I could tell them about your guns.

He developed a really ugly look.

–I could kill you. Take you out to the desert, and no one would find you.

I thought that was all legend. Mob legend. I moved to leave and he grabbed my arm. He wouldn't let go so I slapped him. Hard. But not as hard as he hit me. He knocked me down.

There the two of us were. Screaming at each other and fighting inside the casino. He

was suspended. I should have had him arrested. I quit my job. I didn't want to be around him anymore.

I felt really depressed. And the drinking and the coke seemed to be enough to lift my spirits. I knew that I'd feel like shit the next day. I just hated the tumble. And I now felt tied to the something just so I wouldn't have to face that valley of doom.

–You're a really pretty girl.

I smiled. I melted. I could never tell if I really wanted any of this or was just going along for the ride. I hated the excuses. But they were me. There was nothing that I could do to change things. This was what I had become.

I always thought of myself as a simple girl. Religious. Really conservative. But I had always felt this hollow inside. And I felt that I could finally fill it. I took pride in how I looked. I could finally be rewarded for it. One guy let me stay at his place for six months. I didn't have to work. He bought me stuff. Gave me money. We traveled. He even let me go places on my own. But after a while it became too much. I just left in the middle of the night. Just took the clothes that I had brought with me.

–Did you see that girl jump out of that car? There was all this screaming. And screeching tires. And then some shots rang out.

I watched it all from my seat in the restaurant. I saw her come in with a suitcase. I tried to imagine her story.

–I came her to get away from drugs and I all that. There was this man. I took his money.

There was this story about throwing all his stuff on the bed. The drugs. The sacks of drugs. There was another girl. They both took the stuff and ran. The one girl went to New York. But she got caught. The guy was going to kill her, and she just jumped out of the car. He shot at her. But he freaked out when he saw all these witnesses everywhere. He just drove off.

–Did you see that shit?

I thought that I had. Maybe I just turned my head when it all went down. Heard someone else tell the story.

Let me tell you how I heard it went down. She was down on her luck. Really needed cash bad. She got a job with family as a live-in. Did a bit of everything. Helped the kids. Cleaned the place. Drove them around, picked up friends from the airport—a whole mess of things. She got used to the life style but not the work. I think it hurt her to see so much around her, and the fact that she was getting so little.

The husband and wife were part of the country club set—all this showing off with their expensive jewels. So the husband buys the wife this tiara. It was set with Georgia rubies and South African diamonds—the devil's work. He didn't trust anyone, not a bank, not a secured vault, no one. So he kept the tiara locked in a safe in the house.

Our favorite little girl knew all this. She had seen the wife in the tiara. She looked admiringly at the sparkle that was enhanced by the multi-faceted hallway chandelier. She knew that one day that crown would sit on the head of a true princess.

It seemed absurd that she would want to take the place of her mistress. She hated the man. She needed other devices to score her jewels.

The answer might at first seem obvious. How do you get them to take the jewels out of the safe?

–Or she could hire a jewel thief.

–Or she could learn to crack the safe.

It's not that easy to crack a safe. Even if she did, she would be the prime suspect. As part of her plan, she would need a replacement tiara. But how do you replace something without knowing its dimensions. She would need to get into the safe not once but twice.

Her mere wishing could not open the lock. She sat in the living room of the deserted house just imagining what the tiara would look like on her. But under the circumstances, she could do nothing. Even if she made it up to the safe, she had no way of opening. Moreover, if she messed with the combination too many times, she would trip the alarm.

The family had some painting done. And the painter left some paint and old rags in the yard. She kept telling them that the stuff was a fire hazard. But they preferred to ignore her. Sure enough a fire started. The husband rushed up to the safe to get his most precious tiara. It didn't take long to have the fire put out. It only damaged the porch slightly. Everything went back to normal. The tiara ended up in its cherished resting place.

All this was to her advantage. She had put one of those little devices on the safe that permits people to record the combination. And she had two opportunities for it to work. She was overjoyed. All she had to do was to retrieve her catch.

The tiara couldn't stay missing for long. Neither could she. The owner valued his possession. But his attachment was not so great that he had to look at it every minute of the day. It flattered his vanity. But he could let it be for a couple of days. For days the safe remained empty. She relied on the fact that they were away. But even if they came back, she felt it unlikely that they would reopen the safe.

The safe stayed closed while a craftsman meticulously prepared the duplicate. It would be an expense. But no where near as much as she hoped to recover from selling the actual prize itself.

She was suspicious of her accomplice. She had the tiara appraised to make sure that there had been no switch in the process of duplication. The reproduction was flawless. It was even copied a small dent in the original. The costume jewels had none of the brightness of the original. And the gild did not have the same sparkle. But she still lost herself in the glow. This was testimony to the master crafting.

In the switch, she started to apprentice a new craft. She learned how to work the jeweler's eye. She observed the elegance of the facets. She embraced a nature that was too detailed for the unaided eye to see. This gave the tiara even more value for her. It was not simply tangible. It was the portal to another mode of existence.

She put the tiara on. She wished that she didn't have to give it up. But she needed to replace the copy in the safe. All the while, she could feel a net draw its confinement around her.

She wanted to escape from the world of money. She herself was equally lost in the glitter. How had she been pushed into this worship ?

She had found room in the industrial district. There was a nasty smell of tar in the room. She didn't want to spend more time than she had to in there. She found a place to hide the tiara. She cut away a board behind the heater. It left just enough of a hollow to wedge the tiara inside.

She wandered around until she found a bar to her liking. Not too much of a dive. But not somewhere hopping with people. She did her work on some vodka martinis. All night some guy gave her that stare. You want to come home with me, and I'll love you forever. She didn't. There was really no forever for him, and definitely none for her. She felt like she had no worries. She wouldn't have to go back to her job. She had given notice. And they'd find the tiara in there. So they wouldn't suspect anything.

–You really think that I'm that stupid.

–How did you find me?

–I won't turn you into the police. But you will have to give me back my tiara.

–I don't have it. I just have the amount that I got for it/

She gave him the money.

–There's more.

–I needed a quick sale. I didn't get what I expected.

–OK, here's my deal. Just get me the money by the end of the year. And I won't turn you in/ I know where to find you.

–How can I ever hope to pay on a servant's salary?

–Maybe you should have thought of that when you took the jewels.

Why didn't she just give them back the tiara? She had been saving that money. She took the tiara from its hiding place. She fingered it. She placed it on her head.

She found her fence in a yarn warehouse.

–Girl, have you looked at this thing closely.

–I've looked at every facet through the jeweler's eye.

–When you first got it.

–Yeah.

–This is a fake.

–What?

–You've been hoodwinked.

–How could this have happened?

–Somebody switched the tiaras.

She thought to herself that she was the only one that made the switch. She was positive that even in her hotel room, no one had tampered with the crown. At first, she thought that her accomplice had done the deed. But she had inspected the original. Even the copy. It made no sense that the tiara had been switched before she stole it from the safe.

–I got rid of the original long ago.

–My money that I gave you.

–What are you going to say? That you stole a copy.

–I inspected the facets.

–That you did.

–*My accomplice.*

–*He had the real tiara. That's what you were looking at.*

–*I thought that you got rid of it.*

–*He was fencing it for me. And he convinced you to steal a copy by showing you the real thing.*

–*What was the point.*

–*To get you to give me the money.*

His story seemed to unravel before me. All this nonsense about double tiaras and switches. About a multi-millionaire extorting a household servant. It seemed ridiculous.

That is how it really happened.

His story was all mixed up. But something hit me while he was telling it. A name, a sequence of words, a syllable... It was that code again. Something that flashed before me. That went passed consciousness and stimulated the brain in all its purity.

–*More of your science fiction.*

I'd been spending days going through photographs that I had taken of my nightly excursions. I was looking for a picture of her. I was sure that I had seen her out. Maybe I had. Maybe I wanted to see her out. I arranged the photographs in clusters to mark the groups in which I associated these faces. Friends surrounded friends and worked their way to other social circles.

The photos gave me a sense of control. Like I was telling them what to do. Putting them into these orbits that governed all their behaviors.

–*I want to move to New York.*

If I could have recorded the conversations. Kept more of a record of my adventures. Only a few scrap that I now hold on to. To bring it all to life. Maybe change the life that makes it all twirl around.

Even as I arrange these galaxies, I find that I am getting drawn into the spin. I reach deeper and deeper into the universe for a sense of stability. But I am losing myself in these images.

To get the story right. Sure there was this tiara. He had bought it for her. It so impressed her. She gave her life to him. But she caught him kissing this literary agent. He claimed that they were cousins. Some cousins!

She seemed to let him be. He took her on for an excursion on his yacht in that hope that it might calm her down. In a fit of anger, she through the tiara overboard. She pushed him. She swung in the hair to hit him. She wanted to hurt him badly. But he let her have her way.

When they got to shore, her anger had subsided somewhat. He was a little miffed at the loss of the tiara. She was an expensive date. It had all been his own fault. It would only get more complicated.

She really didn't want to let go of the glamor. A yacht. A tiara. Things that she only dreamed of. She couldn't imagine working in store all her life. And her studies didn't really

hold her interest.

Years later, he bought her new tiara. She had given him enough time to make up for the loss of the first crown. And now her reign seemed more secure. When she tried it on, she felt enthralled. It was almost as if she had never thrown away the first.

–That seems more like a fairy tale.

–That’s how it happened.

–Not how I hear it. It’s all about her borrowing the tiara. And losing it. So she had to delay giving it back. The story is a series of clever incidents whereby she avoids her benefactors until she raises the money. There are even adventures when she gives herself for an insane amount of money. She betrays her character. But she has given her word that she would get the tiara back.

>>And then it turns out that the tiara is fake. After she has replaced it with an authentic one. She learns the tiara is fake.

–So she takes back the one that she has obtained through her tribulations.

–No. She learns that the tiara is fake years later. That is the irony.

–What happens to the owner?

–I think that he is arrested or killed or something gruesome.

–Like getting eaten up by his pet terrier.

–That’s another story.

A code, a sequence of words, a syllable. Something to influence me.

She threw an explosive liquid at them. They jumped.

–Time’s running out. I need someone to punch my ticket.

All day just like this.

It gets larger in his hand. Like a flower blooming.

–I want to hang out with you.

–We are hanging out.

–You know what I mean.

–What makes you so special?

–I’ll buy you a house.

–Just like that.

–We can live in it together.

–What if the house burns down?

–I can get you another.

–Now you’re becoming a real estate magnate.

–Not a bad career.

–Speculating on other people’s needs. The need for shelter. For protection.

–That’s what love is.

–If you can't get it up, I'll just get myself off.
 She reached over for the vibrator on the desk. Then she rubbed it inside and out of her.
 –I just wanted to get fucked, not deal with your shit.
 –It's been a long night.
 –Next time I'll know.

–What do you like to do to yourself?
 –I was thinking of putting a couch by that wall.
 –A leather couch.
 –What do you like to have done to you?
 She blushed.

She came back in mid morning after a crazy night. Her makeup was running and there were tears in her eyes. What have you done to yourself

–Are you watching her dance?
 –Of course I am. She looks like she's getting fucked from behind.
 –Is that getting you off?

–I want you to tell me some things about yourself. What makes you happy?
 –You mean what turns me on.
 –I can't be that frank. Not with someone that I hardly know.
 –But that's how you want to know me.
 –Is that a question?
 –I'm not like you. I don't ask questions. I tell people what I want. They give it to me, or I move on.
 –That sort of thing works.
 –It works when I need it to work.
 –Do you have leather couch at home?
 –What kind of question is that?
 –It's a logical question.
 –What are you after?
 –I thought that you were going to buy a leather couch.

–Here's a paper towel. You can wipe that shit off your hands.

I followed her from the library. Already I could feel the blood rush to my head. I felt all funny inside. I had wanted to say something and I hadn't had my chance. Now I felt comfortable enough to approach her. But it was weird since I was in a car.

I held my penis in my hands.

She looked at me for a while. I looked up and she looked away. I made some motion as

if to approach her. She smiled. I looked around. There was no one else in our section of the library. She was wearing shorts, cut offs—very short. I was concentrating on her.

There was a long pause. My paralysis. She got up to leave. I got up too. I just wanted to get out of there.

She headed out the door. I headed in the opposite direction. I get to my car. I am flushed with excitement. Embarrassment.

I rolled the big car along the street. It seemed to take on a life of its own almost to the point of glancing off opposite curbs as it careened along the street.

—I can't stop it.

It followed her from the library. From the lit to the unlit area towards the residences. I stayed along her path. She hardly saw me.

—Do you need a ride?

Why are you doing this to me?

She scurried away and kept her head down.

—No, I don't.

I felt myself slipping down a giant hole. Just being twisted around the whole morass. I can't stop.

Upside down, penis in my hand.

—What do you have in the car.

I'm trying to save face. Wipe the stains from my pants.

—Here take a towel.

I could feel myself inside her. We were moving together.

—What are you doing?

—I can't stop myself.

If the machine goes off, we're all going to die. It's our life support.

—How are we connected.

—By radio waves—we're like those radio controlled cars.

I laugh.

I make it back home. A sense of shame. I'm covered with cuts from my fall.

—You've got to quit this shit. You're going to get caught.

—I'm not doing anything.

—That's your point of view.

—Do you know what's going on in this town?

—Huh?

—Teen sacrifice.

—I'm going to find that machine.

- Like you found that girl. You're still doing damage to yourself.
- What are you talking about?
- I can see the cuts.

I was flipping through a fashion mag. One of the pictures struck me. Her picture. I knew who she was. I ripped out the page and then got the scissors and cut out the picture. I put it on the wall.

- Do you like my picture?
 - How did you get my number?
 - You cut my picture out of the magazine. You know that I meant that picture for you.
- Do you like my yellow tights?
- You're not wearing yellow tights.
 - Maybe they put in the wrong picture.
 - Are you sure that you have the right person.
 - I know that you cut out my picture and put it on your wall.
- She laughed.
- Do you want to meet?**

I didn't want to meet. I wanted my problem to disappear.

He could do amazing things with numbers. He had the world at his disposal. It was all getting bigger in his hands. He was part of it. Making imagination into reality. A bridge over an endless river. A hydroelectric plant in a silent land. He could give life where there was none. He was taken aback by the very powers that he had unleashed. Even his admiration only set off a series of more wonders. Skyscrapers that were intimate with the heavens. Exquisite restaurants. He could do it all. He could make the machine turn. A sequence would unlock the puzzle. Move armies of men. Marshal great dynamos. He was transcendent. He could fly.

This superman was late for an appointment. Late for his own life. As the world seemed to follow him, seemed to have difficulty catching up to him, he was outpaced by his own visions.

-I can offer you happiness. I can offer you something permanent.

-But you can't offer yourself. All you can do is protect that brain. Your master computer. You don't know how to take a risk with your life.

-I don't need to risk. I can figure out any system. Break down what is risky.

-You still haven't mastered the human heart.

She found him incredibly cold. He admired her iciness. But it was not real. It was her mask to protect her heart from him.

She bent over so that she was closer to him. Her lips beckoned to him. Even as she spoke, her attraction for him increased. She wore a vintage yellow suit with a lily pinned to the suit.

He looked in her eyes and felt a hypnotic power. She seemed to feel the same power, He reached for her hand. She smiled again and then pulled back.

-You're just trying to break me down. Like one of your machines. There's more to me

than numbers and equations.

–I want us to be together.

There was a freshness in her breath. She gave off an air of fresh spring. Of new flowers. Of eternal hope.

–I can't be with you. Not now. My love is promised to another.

He didn't know what she was talking about. Who was this other?

She stood up abruptly and glided over to the window. It was as if she saw something that he had nothing to do with.

She sent him home. He felt forlorn. He thought that he had pierced the world to its core. That no mysteries remained for him. But this mystery was worse than he had ever encountered. He tried to follow the path that he had just taken. The downward spiral. Tried to unwind its twist like the extensions of a great highway.

–All you can do is destroy. Nature has a purpose, a direction. You try to thwart that direction. Deform the mighty rivers. Break down the majestic peaks. You try to remake the world in your image. You are a freak.

Her words echoed in him. His utter sense of helplessness. She was a current too impetuous for him to over come. He needed to find something solid. He needed to just hold on.

Now he knew the meaning of her perplex. This was love. The love that he was feeling for her. The love that she felt for him but feared its surrender. She did not want her heart to become deformed like one of his projects. She did not feel like a code that he could just break down.

His world now seemed turned upside down. Here was a new problem with numbers that he had not anticipated. How could he ever find a solution. He wanted to see her again. Now.

He looked at the clock. It was already 4 AM. He was frightened by these new echoes of the soul that swirled around him. He felt incredibly alone.

He needed a drink. There wasn't much in the house. He found some wine. A little seemed to quiet him down. The whole body helped him to pass out.

He was groggy the next morning. He heard the phone ring around 11AM. He couldn't move. He didn't want to do anything.

–What time is it?

She agreed to meet him for dinner.

–Where have you been? I've been calling you all morning.

–I didn't think that you wanted to spend any more time with me.

–I never said the least thing.

–I thought that you had dodged my invitation.

–I never heard an invitation. Is there one open?

–Dinner.

–You're asking me if I'm busy?

–That's a strange way of putting it.

–Would you prefer that I put up a fight.

–I'll agree to meet you.

–I almost feel like the consolation prize.

At dinner he gave way to her frivolity. He could remember what they were even talking

about.

–So you have a future.

He smiled.

–I hope that you can pay for this dinner.

After the humor, he felt a little hurt by her pointed remark.

–You know that I really don't like to mention such things. It's just that I assume that things will get better between us.

He still could say a thing and let her talk on.

–I wish that I could consider your proposal. But really, sometimes you just seem like a e a fucking machine.

Under the circumstances her words seemed severe.

–I'd find an old TV or a tape recorder. Then I'd take it to the pawn shop. I'd trade them for records and take them to SWAP MEET and trade them for cash. I'd buy cough medicine with the cash. Something to help me sleep. I could always get straight exchange for the records. At the pawn shop, they would never give me much money. I'd take my money and buy coke and chips.

–Where did you find the TV's?

–In people's trash. That was the hard part—looking for the TV's. Sometimes the guy in the pawnshop would be real dick about it. I never ate food from the garbage. I'd never go that far. But I would take clothes from the trash. They used to throw out all this cool stuff. People would come in to buy clothes for their kids. But they'd leave the suits. There were too many suits.

>>A few times, I put on a long coat and I'd steal stuff from the stores. I'd walk out with a few bottles.

>>One day they brought me to the office and threatened to call the cops. I told them that I was going to pay for the cough medicine. I hadn't even left the store. Fortunately, I had the money so they had to let me go. I was lucky.

We'd get the suits and combine them with these really wild shirts. A classic tie and we had our look. They all thought that we had money. We were living out of dumpsters. Just hanging on. But we had pride. We had a look. We knew how to dress. They couldn't break us down.

I pointed her finger to a place on the page. Do you feel that?

–I think so. I'm going to have to go home and figure it out on my own.

–She found it. She found what she was looking for.

–Did she really? And have you found it too.

–You always try to create doubt where there is none.

–Today, I feel doubt.

–And tomorrow?

–Only the confidence that remains.

They were together on the restaurant balcony. They shared a drink. It was a clear night. The moonlight spoke of a coming chill.

–Hold me close.

He pulled her close as if this was the most natural thing of his life.

–You know that I'm not ready for any of this. I'm just going along wherever the champagne takes me.

The bubbles tickled her nose, and she laughed.

–I want to love you.

–You want to make love to me?

–More than that.

–Sometimes you need to say what you want.

He tried to kiss her, and she pushed him away. She walked over to the edge of the balcony by herself.

–Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I just jumped. My life would be so much better.

Her words just seemed foolish to him.

–Are you taunting me now?

–This has nothing to do with you. I don't feel like myself. When I'm with you. I don't know.

–It's just the champagne talking. Come back to my arms.

She moved closer to him again. His warmth beckoned her. But she didn't want to give in. The spell made its way over her. It frosted the night for her.

–Kiss me now.

Her impetuosity shocked him.

–What are you making me do? You just make me seem silly.

Her words echoed for him as he pulled her even closer. The kiss overcame them both.

His heart sailed in the moonlight. Even the stars were like pinpricks enlightening him to his new state. He wanted his body to melt with hers. For a moment, he just felt like her prisoner. Then he let himself give in.

He wished the night could speak for the trouble between them. In her enigmatic way, she said so little, and this made it difficult for him to have any influence over her.

–This is never going to amount to much. I could never really trust you.

Her last kiss seemed brittle. Their love making was now warmed over. No encouragement from the night air.

–Do you like to drink in the morning?

–Why do you ask such a question?

–If you've had a particularly bad night, do you ever like to reverse night and day?

He didn't know to what he was referring.

–The one thing that I really want about drink is that it give you the infinite sense to deny. That is what I like best about it. You never really have to let go of your heart. That's a woman's ultimate defense.

We can do whatever we please with her. We could make her into a boy if we wanted to.

Sometimes the stars don't assure us. They only confirm how far how deep is our disbelief.

–I've got to go.

–Do you want me to call you?

–I'll just see you later.

–Should I call?

–Yes. No. I don't know. I'll find you. I just have go. It's not that I feel anything bad towards you. This is just too much. I don't want to think about it that much.

–Think about what?

–I just don't feel like myself.

–I think that has always been my fear. That I will stay melancholic as long as we stay together.

She hated to leave him with the burden for her damaged psyche. One kiss and she could forget all her troubles. She didn't want to think about her heart in such casual terms. But that seemed the only way to not drown in her feelings.

She wished that he didn't make her feel so strange about herself. If everything was just so simple.

–I am depressed.

She had a glass of wine before bed. It could quiet her down. If he would just go away, she could find someone else to take up her time. Men weren't supposed to be so complex. Most weren't. This wasn't love. This was some sort of torture. She couldn't take all the pressure on her. There was a good sort of caring. That just leaves you all warm inside. And this other sort of worry. Like a buzzing inside the head. A noise that floated constantly around her. Put him out of her life and all this would disappear.

The wine didn't seem like enough. She wanted to forget. She needed romance. A warm breeze. Waters to roll over her. That invigoration.

–I think that I will always blame you for your success. I will always want more. And it will never be enough. Our love is destroying both of us.

Then it is love.

–I don't know what it is. But it surely isn't me. None of this is me.

Her accusations cut so close to home. What could he do?

If only the world would react like one of his machines. His frustrations were so great.

–Maybe you just built the wrong kind of machine.

He saw himself struggling with pliers and a screw driver.

–Is this what I need to do?

–If that's what it takes to break the cycle.

He thought that it would be better to get away. Just a few weeks. He felt that if he was gone for any more time, that she would forget about him. That something else would strike her fancy.

–You never really took me seriously.

–Would you let me?

–I didn't want you to just go. Isn't that what you wanted from the beginning.

–I'm beginning to forget what I wanted.

She got up from her seat at the restaurant. This was to be there going away dinner. He watched her walk over to some friends at the bar. He saw her kiss one of the men. Then he looked away. He didn't want to make it seem that he was spying on her. He just stared out the window.

–Sorry, that I took so long in the bathroom.

There was a sense of relief in her return. Almost as if their short parting had been for good.

–Is something bothering you?

Her understatement might have disturbed him. He didn't seem to care.

–No, nothing. I just don't feel that hungry. I think that I need another drink.

With that drink, he became something that had nothing to do with her. More than her, he just wanted to possess her. All the dreams and promises that he made seemed just dead to him.

The summer day seemed to scream at him from outside. He wanted to rush outside in the heat and get lost in the sweat.

The waitress smiled at him as she came over to take their order. He had been too long in reverie.

–I'll have the same.

The same what?

The waitress seemed new to the city. She was still lost in that dream. That thing that she wouldn't let die. He wanted to hear her story. That freshness that would roll off her tongue. Something else other than just this. The same what.

Anything to slide a fork through. Something that he could barely swallow.

He built a whole story about her glances. She must have thought him evil for continuing to ignore his friend for her attention.

–I'm just hedging my bets.

–You men are all scum.

–And if you go out and don't get all the attention in the world.

–I do get all the attention in the world.

–I'd like to...

–You can't afford me.

–You're the one working in a restaurant.

Hadn't he had that conversation before. He knew how to push people to the brink. To make them embrace that head-rushing precipice.

–I want you to drop me off.

–you don't want dessert.

–No, not really. I think it's better that we tried to keep our memories intact.

She smiled.

That smile of springtime that was now losing some of its luster in the oppressive summer. Her passion would burn. But only as it burned him up.

On his return, she was much more interlocutor.

–I've been to see someone.

–A doctor.

–A psychiatrist. I couldn't sleep. You've become my disease.

–That's flattering.

–I just can't take it.

–I thought that you had friends.

–I've been locked up in my room while you've been away.

Had the diagnosis been correct?

He felt mortified by her revelations. What had he done to sent her world in a tailspin.

–I look in a mirror, and I seem to come apart in a thousand pieces.

He needed to get a drink. To get out somewhere. His trip had been a total disaster.

–She didn't tell you the mirror story.

–What are you talking about?

–Don't tell me that you were engaged to the poor thing.

–There's not really much that I can tell you.

–If you can...

–What do you know?

–For a second, I thought that you wanted to hit me.

–Only that she's been stepping out on this poor guy. Some engineer or something. She is a fun girl if you know what I mean. But to give you life to her.

–What do you mean stepping out?

–He thinks that they're engaged. He feels mortified about her psychological state or some such thing. On the other hand, she is into a good dalliance now and then. She speaks about herself like a proper race horse. You don't have the horse run at the tracks and you might as well just put the thing out to pasture.

–That's just an expression.

–No, I've seen her around town with my own eyes. I even wanted to give her a ride.

He felt insulted by the arrogance of his interlocutor. He wanted to hit someone.

–You look like you've seen a ghost. I don't mean to be so vulgar. But get a couple of drinks in her, and you won't believe what she says. You'd shoot your wad just listening to her coos.

He wanted to leave. He didn't want to seem like a downtrodden puppy. He stayed at the bar and kept drinking.

–Maybe, I'm losing my touch.

He sat at the bar and shared his sins with his fellow reprobate.

He wished that he could just leave town forthwith. But he had murderous business to

attend.

He convinced himself to undo the program. He had to stop it all before it happened again. He couldn't let the machine do to someone else what it had done to him.

–I don't think that I could ever get over what you did to me.

–I never did anything to you. We spent some time together. We had fun. You must think that there's something more to me.

–I thought this was special.

–It was. I cherished every minute with you.

–And the other minutes that you were with someone else.

–That's not something that I feel guilty about. It was my time. Not yours. For a while I thought that being with you would make me pure. Make me perfect again. I don't think that there is any such a thing. Not at all. You just have to make due with what you have.

–You're scum.

–I need a drink. And I don't need you talking like that to me.

–What else can I say?

–I gave so much of my life to you, so much.

–Well, you never gave enough. It was all work. All this distance.

–That wasn't distance. That was just what I had to do to succeed.

–but it had nothing to do with me.

–I never tried to exclude you.

–What about what I needed for myself?

–I thought that you didn't want to work. At least, you hated what you did.

–You never understood.

–You wanted to be rescued. You just wanted your knight to show up sooner. I needed to take time to make my way.

–That was time without me.

–Do you think that some other guy would be different?

–They've given me their nights.

She hurt him deep. She knew how that comment would fell him low. He was flustered. He spilled his drink and quickly ordered another.

–You are drinking more than usual.

–I thought that I wasn't part of your life.

–I don't want any of this to be abrupt. I'd like to be friends.

–How can we? How can we at all?