

IV, 5. THE GREAT MAN

It was another of those crowded weekend nights. I had forced my way through the packed line at the entryway. It was such a struggle to get in. In fact, that was most of the drama since once inside everything was a little boring. I couldn't stand the music. All this top 40 rubbish. A mass of bodies surged on the dance floor like a single force. I felt this impenetrable wall separated me from everyone else. I couldn't very well ask anybody if they were having a good time.

–I love it!

There was no way that I could jump in the middle of things and enjoy myself. Some good songs, and a different mood, the place would have been a real joy. Lucky's had been somewhat appealing tonight. I had danced much of the night. I was hoping for that bounce to make the night a real find. This was a letdown. It was more like a sardine factory where they just pushed everyone into the can and sealed it up.

I observed from behind the wall. A lone soul trying to reach out to another desperate navigator and help her find her way. Two girls danced together just to the left of me. They had just been to the mall and were bedecked in frills and flounces. They were none the wiser to the psychological experiment being conducted at Restless. Another tall girl entertained her friends. Her dance was physically exerting. But she only needed a beat to stimulate her to action. I saw a few friends who made due with what they were given.

–You're expecting too much.

–I might as well be at a club in Buckhead.

–You'd hate it there worse.

–I'm trying to have an open mind. But this doesn't even fit the standard format. They might as well play the radio and be done with it.

–The club can't survive without catering to the crowd.

–What are people going to do? Leave if he plays good music.

–Maybe they won't be able to dance if they don't recognize the songs.

Monica was too accepting. It wasn't as if the DJ really cared for what we thought. It was the same thing a few years ago where the quality of the music was a little better.

–New Wave is dead and gone.

–I know that better than anyone else. But there are loads of good songs that you could play that would make the night better.

–They don't fit my map.

And they didn't. He embraced a simplistic balance. He pumped the bass to shake the room. In Chicago or Toronto or London, there may have been another beat shaking the floor. We were in that inevitable time warp.

–You know that you can't rescue anyone here. It's like taking a fish out water. This is just the surface of an overall contentment with the status quo. It's the big car, the house in the suburbs, and the sparkling diamond.

–It wasn't always this bad.

–Admit it. Restless has always been about an upwardly mobile clientele. They have always been inspired by a boutique culture. This is not made for the artists.

I watched everyone surrendering themselves to the beat. They were putting aside the chains of their workaday world. For a few hours, they were entertaining a life away from strict rules and life plans etched in stone. I didn't want to give up. I really believed that there might be someone who was waiting to walk through the next door. I just needed them to help me open it.

–It's not just that no one understands what you're talking about. You have nowhere else to go. You're waiting for them to come to you. But if you ventured out into their world, it would be more of the same. Sort of the mundane vision that you see mapped out in shop windows. Buy in silence.

–I hear that they play this music at Rich's in the juniors department.

–Suit up and come to work!

All this time, Monica had been dancing with her friends at the corner of the floor. I guess she was getting in to the excitement of the night. I wasn't going to have any part of it.

–You could make it different.

–Who are you?

–Your guardian angel.

–What?

–Don't worry about it! Talk to me.

I submitted. If the music wasn't going to end on a good note, maybe I could eke a good conversation and call it even.

–How could I make it different?

–You could change the odds.

Anthea had done her best to take over the story. Granted her interruptions seemed to give more authority to Jay. And she was in the process of wresting the tale from Crucial. But events proved too big for her. She never had the authority to capture the panorama of experience. She still knew things that gave her point of view privilege. It is the role of the committed writer to pierce the veil of individual points of view to offer a universality to the story.

–Are you going to do this without me?

–No, I've been saving this for you.

–You're not pressuring me, are you?

–If we're going to do this, then we will do this together.

–We do have to be honest.

Ned lay down in the middle of the floor.

The Count wondered what he was expected to do.

–What do you need me to do?

–You know why I need you. To make me feel young.

–You are young. You have loads of life ahead of you.

–How could you ever know what ever went on?

–I had a friend who had 5,00 lovers. He wrote the names of all of them in a book.

–I'm sure that many of them were anonymous. What did he write in the book. Man with big dick. Boy with nice ass.

–You're mocking me.

–Where is your friend?
 –He died of AIDS. Just recently.

–You know that the only thing that only makes any difference for you is how you're going to be remembered. And the only ones who really remember you at all are you lovers. So it just comes down to this!

–I know that there's more to it. It's about the myth that you create for everyone. The sense of adventure.

–You said it yourself. It's a myth.

–It's more than that. It's how you express your hidden desires. Those that you don't share with the world. So you search for a secret society where you can all participate in this magic.

–The only real magic is naked on this bed.

–Why does everything come down to one thing?

–That's how we play.

–You know that this can't last. And there is something else.

–I can just leave now.

–I want you here.

–For what. So you can abuse me.

–You're the one who's taunting me.

–Let's say that I go on with your belief. I'd still think that I'd have to close the deal with a little bed trick.

–You're getting me into your game. And I don't play as loose as you do.

–That's one way to look at it.

–What would you call it?

–If it just ended now, they'd call me a hero, and you'd be remembered as a scoundrel.

–It's going to end that way no matter what. So I'm just going to hang on as it is.

–You're just out for yourself anyway.

–You pretend that you have some kind of moral purpose. Like you're a Knight of the Roundtable.

–How does it go: Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them?

–Let's just say that you're pretty good at thrusting.

–Is that meant as a complement?

–There's really no other way to take it.

–I will take it. I just want to be remembered for being great.

–Great men attempt great things.

–Am I great in bed?

–Let's just say that when you are in bed, you are in bed, and that is great.

–Are you teasing me?

–Not at all. We have fun together. A lot of fun. But take it for what it is.

- I think to be truly great, you have to die in a memorable way.
- Is death something great, an all powerful force?
- If you can somehow trick death, then you are really great.
- Is that what we are doing?
- We are taking risks to have fun. And that makes the fun even greater. You know that there are only two ways to go. It will take you. Or you will give in to it.
- Come again!
- it’s not enough to live. You have to live at the edge. You have to bring death right up to you so that you can feel it.
- That sounds suicidal.
- That’s only a defeatist’s way of seeing things. It’s not like we want to die. We want to get over death.
- Sometimes I don’t feel that great. I don’t know what’s happening.
- You’ve been to the doctor.
- And he’s told me things. But I still don’t know what’s happening. Sometimes I think that I could just go anytime.
- Are you trying to hasten things.
- I’m trying to be myself. But I’m not sure who that is.
- You’ve never talked like that before.
- You’ve never talked like that either.
- I’m getting you ready for greatness.
- If there’s greatness to be had, I should have already had it.
- Did you have it?
- A good time?
- No greatness.
- That’s how it started out. I wanted people to know me. Not just as I was. But in a state of becoming.
- Becoming?
- Becoming more than I was. I had a plan. I had dreams. I had determination.
- Was that enough?
- I wanted to be noticed?
- Was that all?
- I needed a reason to be notice.
- You’re pretty, but you’re not all that.
- The Count paused and demurred.
- It’s not as if I lacked for something. Although I never felt that imposing when I looked at myself in the mirror.
- That’s when you take stock

- Do you think that anyone is interested in our story?
- They are now! You take the risks.
- What risks?
- You could die. People could lose interest. But people still care about you.

- I want them to notice.
- They do. They are waiting to see what you are going to do next. You are no pretender.
- If they all could understand what you are doing now!
- I’m trying to understand.
- We are making a shrine to the body. We are living our dreams. We are trying to pack the most pleasure into the smallest period of time.
- That’s not natural.
- It’s supernatural. It’s divine.
- We can’t get immortality. We are just mortgaging our future to a more intense present.
- So be it. Enjoy it while you can. That is the foundation of eternity.
- Whatever you say.
- It’s more than that. You have to live it, live all of it, live it all the way!
- It sounds like a commercial for karma.
- It’s our reality.
- No one can feel your paradise.
- We’re doing a pretty good job sharing.
- That is going to have to end.
- What are you saying?
- That you’re sapping my strength and not really giving back anything.
- What more could I give you?
- Who are you anyway? Some nobody who is trying to live off my fame.
- You didn’t say that when I was inside you.
- You’re a good fuck. But you’re still a nobody.
- I’ve helped you to see things about yourself.
- It’s all the drugs. I want to get off the drugs. I need to get off the drugs.
- And then what? You’ll see naked reality for what it is. You never liked that. You always wanted more. Now you can get it.
- We spend all our days locked in here. I want to get out. I want to be something more.
- I’m offering you poetry.
- You’re offering sex disguised as something more.
- You said that the sex was your road to greatness.
- The sex isn’t even that good.
- That’s bull shit. Where are you going to find someone who can keep it as hard as I can.
- Is this all that this is? Some kind of sex marathon. If that’s all, just kills me now.
- I don’t understand.
- I think that the fucking is already killing me.
- You’re not one of those guys.
- It only takes one.
- This is all a lie. We’ve been having fun, and now you’re trying to throw gasoline on the fire.
- I’m just trying to get free. And I think that you’re a burden.
- You’re just coming down. You’re always a little bitch when you’re coming down.
- I’m just getting some clarity in my life.

–More fog for more fog.

–You can't say that.

–I did say that. You need to leave.

–This is the only place that I can go. This is the only place that I feel real.

–None of this is real. We're just pumped up on shit.

–It's not like that. Don't let them get over on you. You have to use the coaster.

–I'm doing fine.

–You're only reference point is your last hit. It's always been the same, and you know it.

This is who you have always been. You're like an eagle taking flight. Spread those wings!

–I'm not that fucked up.

–You're still a tight ass.

–I keep doing what you tell me. I am getting nowhere. I can't be someone who I'm not. I'll never be you. You'll never be me. It's that simple.

–Admit it. When we're together, there's nothing as good. Nothing is better. It's that simple.

–Why don't you just let me go?

–Because you won't let me go!

–When I started hanging with cool people, I never knew that I would end up like this.

–Huh?

–The end!

–This is not the end. We're going to leave here, we'll get all dressed up. We'll put on makeup and wigs. They won't even recognize how fabulous we have become.

–We're going to end it right here. It's so obvious. You know it, and I know it. We're here for a reason. We've got enough shit to do us forever. And we will find forever, and that will be it.

–You make us sound pretty limited in our aspirations.

–I don't want to think that way. But it's all coming down to this big bit of nothing.

–But you want to be great. Greater than this.

–I'm not sure about that. I thought that this was going to be great.

–You're slipping down. Don't slip down.

–If I'm going up next time, I want to go all the way.

–Not the end?

–The best. And after the best, can there be better than best?

–There can, there can!

–Bull shit.

The Count stood up. His lover tried to hug him. He pushed him away and went to sit in the couch on the other side of the room.

–A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse.

They both laughed.

–Some tight ass. My kingdom for some tight ass.

–You can't redeem yourself that easily.

–I just want to get back into your good graces.

–You just want to get back into my bed.

- Whatever you say, my Lord.
- You’re getting formal with me again. You are desperate for a fuck.
- You’re the one who needs some great thrusting if you are to become great.
- We are again descending into vulgarity

- It’s not like you can pose before the bed and have me adore you.
- You are cruel.
- We’re playing a wicked game.
- That doesn’t mean that you have to make it worse.
- You expect too much, way too much.
- So what. That’s who I am. If I demand a lot from you, I’m demanding a lot from myself.
- You’re not my commander.
- I’m just trying to explain myself. Which is really more than you have done.
- I really have nothing to explain. I think that’s your problem. You don’t even know that you’re doing. You have such a casual tone. But you use emotional blackmail on me. You’re expecting things that I can’t give you.
- Quit playing the psychologist. If I don’t say something out loud, then don’t put words in my mouth.
- I don’t have to. You just ooze with this obsequiousness.
- What does that mean?
- It means your attitude says everything. You don’t have to put it into words.
- If you’re so smart, how come you’re just scraping by. You’re practically a street person.
- I take life as it comes.
- You’re crazy.
- See! You’re getting judgmental on me again.
- You’re pretty well doing the same.
- I’m not one of your apprentices. I know you have hundreds. That’s why I like staying in. I can’t deal with your fucking entourage.
- Are you ashamed to be seen with me?
- I really feel that it’s the other way around. I go out with you, and I just get lost in a crowd.
- So I’ve agreed to stay in with you.
- It sounds like a death sentence.
- Maybe it is. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.
- What?
- That death is my last hand to play.
- But you can only play it once.
- It’s great to go out with a bang.
- Such dramatics are fatal.
- If it’s what I need to do to make my point.
- There is no point. You’re dead. That’s it.
- But I’m going to die someday. I might as well use it to my advantage.

- There is no advantage. There's no you to take the advantage.
- The reputation stays intact. It's brilliant. I'll be viewed as a martyr.
- You don't really believe that.
- Of course, I don't.
- If they heard you now, they'd think that you'd want to die. And if you did die by accident, they'd spend all their time making a big deal of it as if it was fated.
- Isn't it?
- That's silly. You should play games like that.
- But I want to really feel things. I hate being bored. I hate wasting my time.
- If you die, you're out of time.
- It's a great last statement.
- You want to live.
- Are you fucking with me again? Saying the opposite so that I will embrace death.
- I'm not saying anything. I'm not going along with any of these crazy ideas of yours.
- I want to be with you.
- You're smothering me, just like you're smothering yourself.
- I'm coming down. And I am not dealing well with the silence.
- I told you about the dangers of partying too much.
- I have to do what I have to do!
- I don't want to be a witness to your destruction.
- You are my destruction.

- Are we going to stay like this forever?
- We'll run out of money first.
- When was the last time that you were at work
- I took some time off. I'll go back
- Really?
- I do like it too much like this. Living my own hell.
- What is hell to you?
- People like you.
- Seriously?
- You are my worst nightmare.

- Just leave!
- This is my place.
- Then I'll just leave.
- You can't do that. We're locked in here together.
- I can break a window, get out through the porch.
- That isn't what I mean.
- What are you saying?
- That we're locked in here together. We're facing down a version of ourselves.
- Is this theater of the absurd?
- It's what happens when you push so far out. When you want something more.

- Explain. You’re going too philosophical on me.
- What we want the most is the very thing that frightens us. We’re afraid of our own shadows.
- I’m not a child.
- But it’s the same thing. Growing up is putting away those childhood fears, grappling with the world to make something. And when that doesn’t work, you have to go back to square one.
- You mean it didn’t work out.
- Sure, it did in its own way. In that sense, this is the next step.
- What about what you’ve left behind?
- This is my work. You know what I’m saying.
- I really don’t.
- I sought glamour. A way of remaking myself. And the more that I enhanced my image, the more notice that people took. So I really got in touch with people that I saw. But it was also an escape. We all accepted the same illusion.
- Now we’re peeling away the layers, getting back to the naked truth.
- Something like that.
- So what you did was a waste.
- I had to do what I did to understand something.
- But it made you a shallow person.
- It gave depth to my personality. It gave me a purpose. And here I am right now.
- You’re making excuses.
- For what.
- You paraded around in these silly costumes like a peacock. All this strutting.
- It was more like a symphony. I sought a triumphant gesture, something to lift me out of my everyday existence. And it worked!
- How?
- I charmed my friends. We all loved our shiny tinsel world.
- And it’s coming to an end.
- It’s moving on to something bigger and brighter.
- Because it was never something real to begin with.
- We all believed it. Somewhere in space, a higher being looks down at us and thinks the same thing about our governments, our buildings, our accomplishments. That they are all just trappings. But they are real to us.
- You’re getting to the heart of the matter. Until you cast off those outer vestments, it’s all just a sham.
- What’s real? Getting fucked up.
- You like what I bring you.
- It adds a gloss to everything that has gone before. It makes me feel great. But it is not the greatness itself.
- So you were great because you got people to wear silly costumes and prance around like royalty.
- I got them to see another side of themselves. I showed them the magic in their lives. I

offered them a beginning to something fantastic.

–And it all comes down to this.

–Whatever you say.

–If it was so great, why don't your friends treat me better.

–Maybe you don't give them a chance. You don't understand what they strive for.

–They just want drugs. They're all hungry bastards. And their hunger just eats them up from the inside.

–There's more to it than that.

–Like what?

–Clothes were always my Bible. Like a diary. I could write down exactly how I felt. A new outfit would make me feel better. It would suggest all these new possibilities. When people stared, it was as if they were reading my book. It was so gratifying.

–More vanity.

–Glamour is transcendence.

–That's nonsense.

–It's my way of getting outside of myself. Of letting my dreams become part of my waking reality.

–It's letting the dream world propagate and take over everything.

–That's what drugs are.

–They're both the same. You deal in one world, and I deal in another.

–But now you've given yourself over to my world.

–And I want to get out.

–You can't because it's even more gratifying to your petty existence than fashion. For once you can really touch the heavens.

–How long will that last? We're already arguing about it. If it's so great, why doesn't it last.

–You are coming down.

–I'm facing reality.

–How can you ever face reality. You have nothing to compare your experience with.

–I have my childhood. I have my time in school. I know people. I've seen things.

–Do you even know your own isolation?

–More games.

–Really! How long have you ever been alone.

–I'm always alone!

–Even now?

–I'm always alone. No one really understands me. They try. We try together. And we have moments. But I really am quite alone.

–That's why you dress up the way that you do. To make yourself more of a freak in relation to the rest of the world.

–The rest of the world loves what I do. If they can't, they'd love to do the same.

–You're some kind of martyr suffering for the sins of the world.

–I wouldn't go that far.

–But you feel empty. And you take that feeling for a badge of honor. That's why you try

to look so weird!

–It’s the other way around. I just want someone else to care the way I do.

–You’re begging!

–No, I’m inviting.

–You’re are pleading

–I am enticing.

–Every night you go out desperate. And every night you go home more desperate than before.

–I used to feel that way. I don’t anymore. Look at us. We’re together. I have this affection for you.

–You won’t say love.

–It’s too soon. There’s all this other stuff wrapped up with it now. I just need to clear my head.

–It’s more like an addiction. That’s it.

–No that’s not it. I’m too needy right now to really see things with reasonably.

–It sounds like you’re being tricked.

–I do feel that I’m in a maze.

–And you’re looking for the guy who put you in here.

–I guess that I knew that it would all end like this. All the misery would just build up to this point. And I would feel it like the trap that it is.

–You feel that way now.

–Not now, right now. But I have felt that way over time.

–So what happened?

–I’ve been playing along.

–A new costume, a new way of thinking.

–It was never that simple.

–But you’ve made progress. And now you’ve hit a wall

–Not quite!

–So you keep coming back to the same place.

–You don’t really understand what is happening.

–So you pull back.

–Despair.

–I never said that!

–You don’t have to. That’s how you’re seeing it.

–This is all going to end.

–What?

–This game of ours.

–Really!

–Aren’t you sick of me?

–I think that our fun is just beginning.

–You see light at the end of the tunnel.

–I think that we both do. That was what got us together in the first place.

–I just need some mercy!

- I can't offer your forgiveness.
- I never said you could. But we could make some kind of pact. Figure out a way to cast off this malaise.
- There's only one way that we've ever been able to do that!
- So you admit that it is working.
- It has. But we're hitting our own impasse.
- You're not suggesting that we're torturing each other.
- I only hope that we aren't spinning in circles.
- Enjoy things as they come. You can't ask for too much.
- I don't want to live like this anymore.
- Things will improve if you give it some time.
- Do we have that much time?
- If you ask for it all at once, you'll get your nightmare.
- Then that's how I'll take it.
- Come back to bed.
- I'm tired of you. I was thinking of asking you to leave.
- You want me to take all my things with me.
- Everything except the things that I let you use.
- I'm not a thief.
- Who are you really?
- I'm everything that you want.
- You're going to have to show me. You're going to have to give me something to prove it.
- You're being too reductive. You can't hold love in your hand.
- I already said that this isn't love.
- What is it?
- A convenience. A rest stop to give me some comfort in my final days.
- Again the dramatics.
- I need to work myself up if I'm really going to feel any better.
- Pain is not really a release from anything.
- That isn't how you first described. You told me that the more that I felt things, that the more real that it could be. My emptiness was my key to the other side. I want you finally to prove that to me.
- You can only take so much reality.
- I want to see how much I can take it.
- You can't fight your destiny.
- I can sure put a load of obstacles in its way.
- Good luck!
- I need more than luck
- You need redemption. You're not going to get that.
- If I want it enough.
- Where is that going to put me?
- You're going to need your own out.

When he found the Count's body, he wanted to make sure that he nothing more to do with this. He didn't even want to go out the door. He'd lock the door before he left, and he'd chain it from the inside. That way it would look as if the Count had done it all to himself.

No matter what, Ned was going to be blamed for what happened. But he needed to do everything that he could to distance himself from the finale. He gathered all his stuff together. He did what he could to clean up. He opened the window with the broken latch and crawled through it.

THE GREAT MAN

The Imperial Set were not going to go down without a fight. Their very existence depended on the impression that they left. And they refused to retreat. If they could not change the demand, then they needed to manipulate the supply. If they could not get closer to death, they needed to bring death closer to them. Hence began a wave of experimentation to tempt the limits of mortality. New drugs. New potencies. Their culture lacked the headlong rush into a valid intensity. So they needed to find a supplement to give them just that boost to match the aspirations of the reigning soundtrack.

Gloria had already replaced the former elegance of the Set with her band of Titans. She. For the time being, this crew held on to a belief of an approaching *PARADISE*. Gloria had always maintained a loose connection with the Imperial Set. Even as she helped forge a new identity of the club scene, she was also propping up what remained of the Set. She realized how they had elaborated the tenets of Atlanta nightlife. We couldn't let them go.

Both Gloria and the rest of the Set were prone to the same temptations. She just wanted to embody the new culture.

ANTHEA SPEAKS

There weren't a lot of people at Restless. The place had a somber feel. I was at a table in the back. Anthea approached me.

–We need to talk.

I wondered if she had ever said anything to me in the past. She did say anything particular about his death. But I knew that was the theme. And for the next few nights we engaged in these wild conversations. I really felt on the verge of some kind of breakthrough.

–I registered to go to college. I had a whole course of study planned for myself. I was going to get a degree in English Lit. I went to class. I kept a journal. I read all the time. Not just stuff for class. I had a book under my arm all the time.

>> My grades were good. I was going places. I was in my second year, things just took a turn for the worse. I was spending more time out at night. I couldn't go to class. I was too zoned in the morning. I knew that I needed to snap out of it. But my life just seemed like the next step in the artist's education. Somehow I was able to make it through the school year. Then I knew that I had to quit. I could have stayed in New Jersey. My parents were going to force me to get a job. If I was going to get a job, I decided that I'd rather live in somewhere warmer. So I

moved to Atlanta.

>>That was that. I thought about going back. Maybe get a job at a newspaper after it's all over. I still have dreams. This is just a temporary place for me. Like a transit point to the next stage of my life.

>>I just don't know what is the next stage.

–So what's your back up plan.

–I can't see working in a restaurant. Maybe dealing drugs will give me more time to do my writing.

>>When you're in school, there's this security system that seems to hold it all in place. If something fails, you can just put the system into action, and everything rights itself up. But then you get released. It's like being sent out of prison. You no longer have a life.

>>When I was in school, I had all this time. My parents paid for everything. When I left school, things got weirder. I started wandering in a worse way.

>>Whenever I felt that I had the chance to get back to my old self, I embraced the opportunity. I still read books. And I keep a journal.

–You're looking for other lost souls like yourself.

–I hope that I don't seem that lost.

We both smiled.

–I know that you write too. I always wanted to talk to you. We just never took the time. I hate the fact that this is such a bad turn. But there is no perfect time.

I wanted to say something more to encourage her. I imagined being at her place and listening to her read her journal.

–I get ideas everyday. We probably copy down the same stuff. I guess neither of us own the ideas.

I thought about working with her.

–We could write together.

–That would be great. Sort of a dialogue.

–In a way, we're starting the writing just by talking.

–Only neither of us is copying it down,

–I've got a pretty good memory.

I felt that I had an ally in my search. I knew how different we were. But over time, I felt that we could bridge that gap. We could break down all those barriers that kept us apart. When I wasn't with her, I really missed our conversations. I needed to come up with a clever approach to make things work. I pretended that we were in school together. We had an assignment coming up, and we would have to collaborate extra hard to make the project succeed.

The next night added to my sense of excitement. I had a clear reason to come here. Things didn't seem like a waste.

–You want to talk.

–Yeah.

–Let me get a drink. You want one?

–I'm OK.

She joined me at the table.

–You thought about what we said last night.

–I was up the rest of the morning thinking about it. I made notes in my journal. It seemed like forever. I even thought about what we were going to talk about tonight.

Maybe I could get her away from her bad influences.

–I don't want to make more of this than it is, she cautioned me.

>>I've got my own life. And I don't want to give it up. Maybe I can change a thing here or there. That's all.

–So what have you been thinking about?

–Nothing too important.

I wanted her to go on about it all as if she was conducting a lecture.

–I once thought about putting together a sex memoir. Nothing too detailed. I wasn't going to write about dick size or whatever. I wanted to chronicle my search for a higher state of stimulation.

–So what happened with that idea.

–I think that I want to keep on doing that. I just need more experience.

She smiled.

–I'm kidding.

–So are you going to keep a sex journal.

–I already wrote about things in my regular journal. But it was all this surface stuff. I worried about the guys that I was with. I was afraid that they were with other girls. But it wasn't as if I wanted any of them to stay with me.

–You weren't looking for anything permanent?

–I didn't mind something regular. I just didn't want a guy who wanted me to settle down and leave my life behind. I needed excitement. I didn't want to give up on that part of myself.

–Isn't growing up all part of letting go.

–I'm not looking to get married. I don't want some guy trying to tame me. If it happens, it's going to happen so far in the future and that person isn't me. Not yet, anyway.

–You have a great smile.

–I'm not blushing, am I?

–No.

I looked in her eyes, and then I looked away.

–I don't think that I could ever have sex with a guy who really understood.

–Of course not.

–I guess that's why I need to change my life.

–Really.

–I'm just accepting things as they are,

–Yeah!

–I just have to swear off the physical thing for a while. But that's what I always tell myself anyway. It's like passing out in some guy's bed after partying. And when you wake up, he's lying next to you. So you just let him slip inside of you. When I've got a guy inside me like that, it's such a powerful feeling. I'm so much more than myself.

–Do you tell the guys how you feel.

–I never could tell them. It would give them a complex. It would make them feel that

they were so much more than they were.

–What if they knew?

–I think that would destroy me.

I wanted to know her that way!

–I didn't come her to talk about sex.

–No, I agree. But that could be tonight's lesson.

–There's really nothing to learn. All these girls that come here are just about flattery and vague promises.

I needed for her to explain more.

–You never really believe that a guy is going to buy you a house if you sleep with him.

But there is this barter system that you work out. And if you redeem all your chips, you eventually get a house.

–Weird?

–Even if you sleep with a bad guy, he has to be the right kind of bad guy. Like the kind that you've seen on TV. Or some guy in a band with a motorcycle.

>>That's never been my style, but I can understand. Sex is this incomplete communication. You want it to be more. Someday you have that hope of it all coming back. But it is what it is.

I start laughing.

–What's so funny?

–I just have this image of a girl who gets upset when she can't get the house that she wants. She starts yelling. I fucked you for this shit.

We both break out in hilarious laughter.

–Maybe it isn't all that funny.

–No, it is!

–I guess that's how loneliness works. We come to believe that the acknowledgment from other people makes us immune from its effects.

–That sounds like a mouthful. Is that something that you've been thinking about.

–I want to make sense of things that happen. That's why were out here together. We're trying to get beyond that feeling of emptiness. I think that's made me weak in the past. I don't want to feel that way.

–What do you mean?

–I think you know exactly what I'm talking about. I've given too much of myself to people who really don't care a thing about what I want. They really don't like me that much.

–Does that make you weak?

–I'm not strong enough to resist the pull of the moment. I hate to be alone.

–We all do.

–It's more than that. It's this feeling that wells up inside of me. My private monster. I let it lead me around.

–We all have those.

–Mine is special. I've fed it for so long that I really have no control.

–You're exaggerating.

–I’m not going to go home with any guy who winks at me. But if I feel that he has a little more. IF he has that magic, I’m totally helpless.

–Really.

–I know that I try to make it work in just the opposite way. I am the pursuer. And I try to pick off these guys as if I’m on the hunt. Down deep, I’m just this pussy cat. And I’m ready to be domesticated by the first friendly face.

–It’s not like that.

–Oh, it is. I let guys do the work. That charm thing. It elevates them above the level of a street hustler. But I fall for the same shit every time.

–And you want to stop it.

–I can and I do. That’s the side of me that’s really bad. No one can keep up with me in that state except the really incorrigible types.

–That sounds confusing.

–Not if you knew me. There are so many temptations here. I think that is what is driving all us down. Making us crazy. There was a time when we all had more noble ambitions. Not any more. Everything has become worse than desperate.

–How bad is it?

–You know what I’m talking about.

–What can you do?

–I can sit at this table and not do a thing. I can tell myself that this is a new beginning. But sometimes that only makes me want it more.

–What have you figured out?

–This is my real education. I’ve opened my eyes to my own concupiscence. There is nothing that can hold me down.

–What about the old you? I thought that you wanted to be a writer.

–I still do. But it’s hard when the real power is so much greater than anything that you could ever put down on the page.

–That sounds like a line from a horror movie.

–This is beyond horror.

We were becoming distracted. If she was facing such odds, there was little that we could do.

–I know that I’ve been exaggerating things a little. It always becomes like that when I talk about it. It’s just that there are so many temptations around here. I’m not that easy. But things are too easy here.

–Explain how this is the real education.

–In school there is always this balance in presenting ideas. Like it’s a journey up a flight of stairs. You learn something, and you take a step up. In fact, the journey is a little more perilous. It’s more like hanging on the edge of a cliff. And the fall is the self. So you really need to balance even though there’s a temptation to jump.

–You keep talking about temptation.

–That’s how it is. Things are out of control. And you’re on this roller coaster.

–You could jump off.

–But that’s the thrill. You want to go up. You know it’s fucked up, but you want to go

up.

–You have expectations that things are going to change.

–I don't know if I have the patience to change. I think that I could make lots of money if I get even deeper in the game. And I love the free time. But I know that it's all going to blow up in my face.

–What's the alternative?

–Work as a waitress. Save my money. Go back to school.

–And?

–That's too difficult. It's like an alcoholic trying to kick. One slip, and you're back where you started.

–So you're not going to take the safe path.

–None of it is safe. I just wished that I had finished college. I'd have a good job now, and I wouldn't have to worry about this shit.

–Good job? Maybe you'd still be working as a waitress.

–No, I would have gone into banking.

–I thought you were studying English.

–I would have got a job in a bank. Got into investments. I would have had a clearer plan for my life.

–You still might have ended up here. There is that call of the wild.

–Are you making fun of me?

–How serious do you want this to be?

–I told you that I was just being dramatic. It's not as crazy as I think. I could be like some of these girls. They have two job. I think that some of the girls at Lucky's are like that. You know that I hate that place. It's only good for picking up guys.

–Sometimes the music is good there.

–Sometimes it isn't.

–It's a chance to get out of this place.

–Restless has always been about so much more. There's real risk here. Lucky's is preppie kids on vacation.

–And sometimes a vacation is needed.

–Ha ha!

It was clear that she wasn't going to succumb to the morass that surrounded her. But she wasn't averse to taking a dip now and then. She needed to renew her confidence. Since she had opened herself so thoroughly that last night, she needed to make it clear that she wasn't ready to raise the white flag. In our next meeting, she wanted things to be much more jovial.

–Seen any movies lately.

–I don't go to the theater much. I watch a lot of stuff on the VCR. Rentals and that. Stuff that I tape on TV.

–I've got some ideas for screenplays. Nothing too substantial.

–I wish that I could put something together. I'm just more drawn to music.

–Music videos.

–Maybe. We did a little movie while I was in college. An artist friend of mine helped. I'd like to do more. We try to use visuals for our shows.

–I take photographs. It’s a hobby. I see it as a complement to my interest in writing. Photo-journalism and all that.

–Your eye is a camera. What do you see?

I needed her to see beyond peep show confidential.

–I see a guy trying to look up a girl’s skirt.

–You’re the only girl in here. And you’re wearing slacks.

–It was theoretical.

–Go beyond the obvious.

–It’s all obvious. School girls and perverts. I’m not going to take pictures of frogs on lily pads.

–What about buildings?

–How inspiring!

–Architecture has changed in Midtown in the last two years.

–And so have school girls and perverts.

–You’re making a joke!

–Life’s not all serious.

I liked her smile. Maybe we wouldn’t get into anything too important tonight. The last night had been quite profound. It was good to take a rest.

–I like your peep show metaphor. I think that is what photography is all about. What do we want to show? What do we want to hide?

–Some things are invisible to begin with.

–Those make the best photos.

–Ghosts and the like.

–No, the mind. That is the true spirit.

–You are haunted by your thoughts.

–You knew that when we first sat down.

–Where do we go from here?

We weren’t going to explore pin-up darlings. That wasn’t her style. She liked to show off. But there was a darker purpose to her game.

There’s that things about shadows in the a photo. They delimit the possible. They show the self reaching out for something of substance. There is a duality in the photograph that reproduces something very real in the experience of the artist.

–Did you learn that in art appreciation?

–No, I learned it by observing. That’s why some people are afraid of photographs. They reveal too much.

–Reveal, hide, what are you talking about?

–A couple is posed for a wedding photo. That is obvious. There’s joy between them. If there’s a secret, the photographer does everything that he can to gloss over it. But you get the girl by herself, and you’ve got a wild little Philly on your hands. You realize that she wants nothing to do with pomp and circumstance. She’s after the fun.

–So she marries a fun guy.

–She marries an upstanding guy. But she wants to have some fun on the side.

–Lust is the secret.

–The secret is desire. Something much more pernicious. She has one goal in mind. To turn her lion into a mouse. And if she has any magic left in her bag of tricks, she tosses the gold dust the first chance that she gets.

–I’m awed already.

–She subdues her hubby, but she still wants fun.

–So she strays from her marital bliss. Hardly a new story.

–No, this is about so much more.

–Like what?

–I’m getting to that.

I had a feeling that we were heading back to pinups and peep shows.

–We’re not back at bondage.

–Nothing kinky. Nothing sexual. More a dance of the veils.

–Didn’t that end in a beheading.

–That could be the source of the gentleman’s disquiet.

–What?

–A castration complex. Bad dreams.

–So what!

–The good photographer traps her between the shadows. He gets her to speak with her eyes, with her body. It’s not about sex. It’s all about her desire for power. Her need to dominate. Her persistence to get her way.

–I like the story already. Is there a sequel. Does she have an accomplice.

–Her own boredom.

–She gets a job.

–She has a job already. She just feels that her options are limited. She always wanted so much more.

–What did she want?

–She wanted to be the restless soul.

–So she takes a chance.

–Not an affair. I told you that this wasn’t a sex story. Besides, you were the one who was complaining about the peep show.

–But if she’s not an artist, what is she? How can she find herself if she doesn’t expose herself.

–Are you calling her a stripper?

–I’m just observing the pornographic angle. She reveals herself only by showing herself. And what she reveals is seductive.

–Maybe she is tired of parading around. She values her solitude.

–Like you?

–Maybe.

–So what about the new you?

–I need some entertainment. I’m tired of trying to stimulate yourself.

–Are you saying this for my benefit?

–You want to see me in the opposite way. As the wayward school girl. You want me back in the classroom.

–I’m just here to listen.

–OK, I’ll admit it. I came to you for just that reason. I wanted to relive the classroom. We could talk about serious things, and I could feel challenged again. Maybe it could motivate me. I’d read a book. See a good movies for a change. I could go back to school.

–Is it working?

–What?

–The plan.

–It might if I could keep doing this. But you’re not going to follow me around. I’m not even asking you to do that.

–What is your goal?

–Really no goal. I just want that warm feeling in my heart.

–I wish that I could offer you something more.

–You could. But there’s a risk. You’d have to admit to being as desperate as I am.

–Maybe I am.

–You’ve played it safe from the beginning. I confess. I was doing a peep show. And you had your camera pointed my way.

–Wow!

–Do you like what you see?

–I didn’t know that I was supposed to react in that way. Maybe I’m doing the peep show. You’ve been taking my pictures all along. What have you seen?

–Are you sure that you want to open yourself up in that way?

–I thought that was automatic. That’s what you’re telling me.

–I’m telling you that was what I always hated about education. I felt that I was supposed to reveal something about myself. But my teachers had nothing that profound to reveal to me. They knew things. They had their formulas and their methods. But there was nothing human about it.

I believed that we were getting somewhere.

–You are good!

–What do you mean?

–All this talk about revelation. You’ve hooked me in.

–Now you’re making no sense.

–But you are! You’re the school girl for my peep show.

–Quit teasing me!

–You’re the one who’s teasing me. You’ve been playing the part of the school girl all along.

–If I have, it’s been unintentional.

From that point on, we exchanged small talk. We laughed at the people who came into the bar. We told jokes, and we promised to meet the next night.

My greatest fear was that the weekend would overwhelm the momentum of our conversations. We were already approaching an understanding. But it couldn’t go much farther without some deeper change. Where did she want this to go?

She abruptly switched the topic.

–You know how dreams have this flow. Just like movies. You’re dozing off, and

suddenly this story takes off on its own.

–Really!

–Except experience is different. There are these gaps when times just seems to stop. The only thing that helps you get through it is just the sheer desire to survive.

>>I guess that is what scares me the most. The boredom. The nothingness. No enjoyment. Just hanging on. Like waiting in line. Except that there's no line. Just the wait without ever having any sense of a reward.

She made this face to try to express how she felt. And she felt it with her whole body.

–What can you do?

–I'm trying to see the flow in everything. But it's hard. Some moments I just come back to that eternity of nothing. My friends have it worse than me. They don't even know how to settle down.

We both sat next to her sharing that sense of absurdity. But neither of us could break the dominance of the feeling. She had another analogy.

–You know that feeling that you get when you've lost something. And you spend days just looking for it. It fills you with this agony. Then you find what you're looking for. And the agony is still there. It's not as strong. But it continues to strike a chord.

I smiled at her. I hoped that I could touch her with a primal sense of sympathy. I wondered if it was enough for either of us.

She tried to turn out thoughts to happy things. She went to the bar to get a drink. Then she came back and danced around the table.

–I feel as if there's something that holds it all together. Like a glue. Or maybe a flowing river.

Her mysticism seemed charming, but too little too late.

–You have to give me my sense of hopefulness. I haven't been at school for that long. I don't want to give up. It is important to persevere.

If she could have escaped the terms of Restless, perhaps her vision could have offered her a strong foundation. But it all played into that same sense of lethargy that characterized this place.

–I don't want to be the one to sound the death knell. If positive thoughts are called for, I can contribute my share.

–It is important to be a realist.

We both sat there for a few minutes with nothing to say. She broke the silence.

–Are you writing a book?

–I have an idea. But I just make notes. It's amazing talking to you. There are loads of things that I always wanted to ask you.

Anthea had always desired to be the center of the action at Restless. Even if she couldn't command everyone's attention, she did talk a good game. And the more people that she convinced, the more her view of things seemed the correct view.

–One day there's going to be an observer who sees things completely different than you. What are you going to do about that?

–I'll listen to what he has to say. Then I'll tell him that he's wrong.

–You can't sleep your way to certainty.

–Strictly, I’m not trying to do that.

–But you might as well be.

–There’s more than flattery at work here. I already went over the effects of flattery. I’m lobbying for something far different.

–It’s just not about convincing people. Or even about convincing yourself. You can go along with how things are going or decide to change them.

–I do want to change. And I will change. I want to be like you. And I’ve tried for the past few days. I’m just not as good at it as I was. I wish that I had stayed in school.

–Nobody is going to love you to an understanding. You have to take chance on your own.

–I know and I will.

Her pleading just wasn’t going to cut it. I wasn’t her jailer. I could break the iron bars. I wanted to say something about the Count. He had surrounded himself with adoring sycophants. And that still wasn’t enough. But there was no moral to be drawn from his life. That was why she came to me in the first place. She wanted my reassurances. What the hell.

–Granted, if you had people hanging off your every word, it would give you the confidence that you need. But you’d also feel this pressure to say the right thing. That would make the damage worse. In some ways, you can walk away. The history doesn’t have to follow you.

She preferred to live a cursed life. This added to her sense of charm.

–I can’t be the ingenue on this scene. Things have progressed way beyond that. I’d love to be the evangelist. But we’re too damned for that. I’m not even a good prophet of doom.

–So you’ll tell everyone to get fucked up and leave it like that.

–I want to make a difference. These people wouldn’t even read my story if I shared it with them. And I can’t very well tell them that their lives are meaningless.

–If you’re going to lie, lie well!

–I want them to love me.

–They all well in good time.

It was a Thursday night. And with that, Anthea was gone.

The death of the Count had put everyone in a spin. Most of all Anthea. As long as he was there, she was a breath away from power. He demanded nothing from her, and she accepted the challenge well.

We tried to share the same concerns. I hated to pretend. And it wasn’t going to happen. I cherished her counsel. And in a certain nostalgic way, I felt that we could see things on the same wavelength. But in another sense, she missed the fine print. So I left her to the headlines.

By end of the weekend, there would be some new scandal. Sure it was all about the demise of the Imperial Set. Anthea could add another twist to it all.

When I first saw her at the Cube years back, I hadn’t realize how utterly essential she was to the action. She was the one and only chronicler. She understood the limitations of that task. As she got closer to the center, she burned with the same fire. Much of her testimony was in shorthand. And she came to forget her own abbreviations.

I wish that Anthea had told me more. That was her wish. Each time subsequently that we met, she started off with such a desire. But it always degenerated in the same way. No

progress. No story. And there were even moments when a trace of affection electrified her presence, but she was never around long enough to make the point obvious.

CLAY RECOVERS

Clay struggled with his sense of Southern inheritance. His curse was spiritual. But money slipped through his fingers. And he was prone to catastrophe. He tried to avoid the need to have his father bail him out of another scrape. Fate often intervened contrary to his favor. His prep school education made him self-indulgent. At the same time, it rounded off the edges and added a distant charm to his idiosyncracies. He was attuned to girls from finishing schools who perfected their manners reading Jane Austen. However, his wayward eye made him unable to commit to these helpless creatures. Thus, he had been exiled to Atlanta.

–I feel that we’re imprisoned here.

–In Atlanta?

–No, at Restless.

Clay did have a point.

–We could just leave.

–But we’d take the quest with us.

His belief made him more susceptible to drug use. The rumor was the stuff that he sold was pure shit. Perhaps, he kept the best for himself. Or such low-grade quality gave him just enough of a buzz to hang around all night hoping for rescue.

–She is going to walk in.

–I’ve been waiting for that all night. It’s way past two. Nothing is going to happen tonight. We have to be happy with what we have.

Clay and I tried to define rules for our game. If it was a weekend night, we’d be off on separate quests. But here we were trying to define the very essence of Restless.

–It’s not like she’s going to be a girl who only comes out on weekends.

I think that we were trying to capture the same desperation that kept us both in the center of this pure nothingness.

–No, she’s going to be just like us. Bored and ignored.

–If she’s that ignored, we probably wouldn’t find her appealing.

–So she avoids crowds and never finds the guy that she wants. And she just happens to wake up at one in the morning and decides that she needs a drink. Of course, she doesn’t have to worry about money.

–That girl wouldn’t be hanging here anyway.

–She’d be at The Urge or Happy Endings.

–Somewhere in Buckhead. Maybe Cabaret Rousseau.

–No such a place.

–Work with me!

–I’m trying. I’m already falling for this idea of yours. The girl with the long curly tresses.

–Tess of the d’Urbevilles.

–Or the hound of the Baskervilles.

We both laughed.

–You’re right, Crucial. No one else is going to come in here tonight.

We both tried to console each other for the slim pickings. Maybe I could make the best of things. I saw Razor, the Assistant Manager.

–You promised that I could do a couple of shows here before the end of the year. I could use a little cash.

–The crowds have been down here. I think it’s just the aftermath of things that have happened. It may pick up after the new year. But we’ve got a few down months.

I looked around, and Clay had already left.

The next night it was just as dead, but Clay seemed a little more lively.

–If a girl comes in tonight I promise you that I can get to leave with me.

–How?

–I’ll tell her that I’m the heir to the family fortune. And I’ve been exiled to Atlanta for my rude manners. The only thing that can possibly save me is a little love from the right girl.

–You’re telling me that kind of shit works.

–It works every time!

–I’d hate to be the girl that falls for that line.

–It’s not a line. Then I tell them that I’ve got a video camera, and we can create a little action of our own.

–That really is a line!

–With a hook. Darling, I don’t want to sleep with you. I just want you to make love to the camera. And you know that the camera never gets tired. It just keeps firing away until the battery dies.

–Nice ending.

–There’s always recharging. Or a power back. That goes until the lights out in all the city.

–You are a sick fuck.

–Girls like to put on a show.

–And what do you do with the tapes.

–I save them. I even got two girls to spray whipping cream over their naked bodes and lick it off drop by drop.

–Wow!

–So is it a bet?

–What?

–That I can get the next girl to come in here to go home with me.

–What?

–I’m challenging.

–This could be for your detriment. Maybe that girl really isn’t a girl.

–Quit playing with me.

–What would you do?

–I didn’t say that I was going to sleep with the girl. I just have to get her to leave with me.

–You just pump her with coke, and she’ll do whatever you like anyway.

–It doesn't always work like that. Besides, I really am looking for a friend.

–Maybe you should head to a church social.

–I was at enough of those in Mississippi.

–I don't think that kind of girl is going to come through these doors. This is more like a den of sin. If you're looking for a black widow, you've come to the right place.

I imagined him spraying the whipping cream on one of the lunatics that awaited him.

–Come on, girls. Put on a show.

–We don't get paid. We don't work.

–I'm going to crack the whip.

I couldn't imagine him getting his tongue around the whipped cream. For all it was worth, he didn't get to test out his theory. No innocent subject, no willing victim.

–This ought to be a lesson to you.

–How?

–Just come here with smaller expectations.

–What?

–Maybe you could get one of these guys to put on a dress.

–You know I could do that. But then he'd probably want things from me.

Was that the key to Clay. He was game for any kind of stimulation.

–I'm more of an artist. I even studied photography.

–Of course, you did.

–My father agreed to start a magazine for me. But I fucked around too much. And I got sent away! I still want to do the magazine. He owns a newspaper.

It was hard to believe that there was anything that held us together. But there we were waiting together for the moment of a lifetime. He wanted to take bets on his hopes for success. Down deep, he knew that he would end up sabotaging anything of worth.

He was ready to make the same tired pitch in the hopes that a newcomer might get taken in by his lines. He could really sweeten the deal.

–That's not going to work.

–What are you saying to me?

–You want to be rescued from this hell hole. And you're ready to make promises that you can't keep.

–I've got to play the odds.

–People are not a roulette wheel.

–If there is risk, then there is return.

–Is that a gospel song from back home?

He smiled.

–Crucial, why are you such a dick?

–Just telling it the way that it is.

–I'm glad that I can trust you for something.

–You can trust me for pretty much everything.

He claimed that he could remember every detail of every night that he was out. I wondered about his mental state. But if I was to take him seriously, I understood that he could rely on his memory in any subsequent legal troubles.

–So what’s the difference between the mint julep that you’re hoping to find and the girls that you lure into your mischievous games.

–I think that an honest girl would refuse my request.

–And she would get the fortune.

–If I could keep around her long enough.

–You would tempt her.

–That’s part of the process.

–What if she refuses? Don’t tell me that you’re going to hang around her on those restless nights of summer.

–If she has the charms that I have made the subject of my search.

He was really trying to humor me.

–Crucial, you’re expecting a saint.

–A true saint is going to take her vocation seriously. She is going to venture to the den of sin.

–The lions will gobble her up before she make it through the door.

The story was getting thick.

–We both know that the only girl who is going to come through that door knows the rules. She realizes that it’s all about the score. And that score is already weighing heavily on her conscience.

–What are you telling me?

–That the angels of the nightlife will avoid this place like a plague.

–You were telling me about the saints.

–I may hope for a saint. And I believe. But I am a scientist. And she will never pass though that door.

I could tell that our logic was circular. For him, it was the intoxicants. For me, it was the fatigue.

–I guess that we both have our excuses.

We ended up back at my apartment.

–There’s not much here.

–I’m not ready to go to sleep.

He walked me back to my place.

–Can I come in?

We both walked over to my apartment

–Do you want to come in for a while?

We reviewed the night.

–It wasn’t really a failure.

He agreed with me. Then he opened the foil package. He scooped up a little coke in his nail and gave himself a boost. Then he looked out the window again.

–What are you looking at?

–I never know who’s followed us back. Are you sure that you don’t want any?

–No, I’m OK.

He was uneasy.

–You can sit down.

He sat on the radiator. He talked in a constant mumble.

–I can get you a real chair.

–This is great. I’m closer to the window.

Clay loved to talk about himself. But tonight he was too high to say much of anything.

The last gasp of the night hung just outside the window. Clay’s paranoia helped him stretch out those last few moments.

–I guess that I’ve got to get out of here.

He really had nowhere to go.

–I guess that we’re fishing without bait.

Clay and I were back on the beat.

–Tonight doesn’t seem much better than last night.

–We make it through tonight, and it’s Wednesday . Then the action starts in full force.

Clay felt the pull of gravity much stronger than most. That was why he needed to let himself float off into space. His misery overwhelmingly needed company.

–I’m just looking for some companions on my journey.

–By the time that someone gets that close to you, they’re already damaged.

–You’re not trying to embarrass me are you.

–I’m saying it to you now, not while you’re in the middle of a big score.

–You are sounding a little confrontational.

–This isn’t a competition.

–But if she comes in, we’re both going to try to impress her.

–You just do what you have to. And I’ll watch.

–Is that some kind of secret strategy?

–I’m not trying to convert anyone. I’m just here for the entertainment.

–You’re not here on the search.

–Maybe we’re looking for two different things.

–We’re both waiting to get rescued.

–Good call.

I was still scrambling for money. I saw Charley.

–You promised that you’d find me some shows. I could use a little more cash.

–The owner is a little tight right now. We’ll get to you in a while.

–When?

I knew that there was an audience for my music.

–Charley didn’t come through.

–He has his own business interests.

–What are you saying?

–He uses this place as his home base. That’s why I don’t get much business here. We’re sort of in the same predicament for a while.

–What does that mean?

–We are both in need of rescue more than ever.

–What do we do about it?

–We wait!

–And after that.

–We do what we’ve come here to do.

For the time being, he had no ability to use his special resources. He was stripped down to his naked desire.

We both waited into the emptiness of this Tuesday night. Things just became more desolate.

–No one more is going to come in here tonight.

It was the same old story. We weren’t even waiting for anything real. We had reached the next stage. We knew that nothing was going to happen. And we ended up in the same situation again and again.

–Clay, you’re getting off on your misery more than on your entertainment.

–I just need some distraction.

His suffering was becoming his new narcotic. It allowed him to sustain his pleasure.

–What’s the point. Crucial?

–You just want to remain in the spotlight.

Clay was taking a needed rest from his bizarre pursuits. When he would return to his evil ways, it would be with a vengeance.

–I can’t be cured. My parents tried.

–Do these girls really let you get away with all the things that you do with them?

–Sometimes they have no idea.

–Really.

–It’s all about teasing them into taken further risks.

I didn’t have to ask how he did that.

–What else?

–Sometimes I get women to appear on film.

–Do they know that they are being filmed?

–Not all the time.

–That could get you arrested.

–Where are you going with this?

–Just be careful. Some of those girls have well-to-do fathers. It’s one thing to sell drugs . But this really could get you into trouble.

That almost seemed to encourage him. He thought that he was immune.

I let the weekend take its toll. We went our separate ways. In many respects, I felt absolved from any of the mischief that might drive him while I was away.

When we returned together on Monday, our conversation became more intense than before.

–The camera is rolling. I can get girls to do pretty much anything.

–I thought that you admitted that the camera was generally hidden.

–But there is always a camera rolling. These girls are only looking for a script. They just have to feel that they are part of the story. Then things just progress on their own.

–You let them touch you when you are filming.

–I mostly get them to do things with each other. Then I just watch the tapes on my own. I do have one girl. And she’ll only get naked if there’s a tape of another girl that she can watch.

–Does she let you film her?

–She’s the one who knows everything. She got me started. She’s a stripper. She’s an exhibitionist. There is nothing that she won’t try. Really sick stuff. Inanimate objects and all that.

I didn’t want to pursue this much further. I didn’t want to be an accessory to his crimes.

–Shirley gets girls to come over. And they take care of the rest. Sometimes I bring the camera out. Other times I hide it.

>>It has become a lot worse. Now I have a mirror. One of those two-way mirrors like the police. And I’ll be behind the mirror. And Shirley brings girls back to my place. Only they don’t know that I’m there. And Shirley gets them to do some really revealing stuff. Right in front of the camera.

>>Of course, it does get really crazy when I bring the camera out. It gets pretty kinky. Shirley loves pain. It’s an artistic thing for her. We’ve had a couple of girls who threatened to go to the cops just based on things that Shirley’s done. But mostly it’s just full on frontal nudity for the camera. Girl girl stuff.

–It gives you a sense of power.

–More than that. I get a kick out of watching.

All the while that he was telling me this, he was looking at himself in the mirror at Restless. But it wasn’t a vain look. It was more mistrustful as if he mistrusted himself.

One night I was at Lucky’s, I was called over to the table by Clay.

–There is someone that I want you to meet.

He gave me the impression that they were long time lovers.

–This is Linda.

She was so much the opposite of the girls that he had been with. Not simply too clean for his video hijinks, she looked almost innocent.

–Have you had sex with her?

–She’s a good friend.

He offered a completely different image for her. He was his family’s favorite son. There were no drugs. No womanizing. No blue movies. It was all above board.

–Linda studies English Literature.

I could imagine the two of them discussing *Joseph Andrews* on a rainy night.

–Does she speak?

He left me alone with her.

–How do you know Clay?

–From here. I met him at Lucky’s.

I wanted to ask Linda if he had met her at a debutante ball.

–He told me that you’re a writer.

–I want to be a writer. I just observe and take notes. I’m going to collect it all one day. I’m just trying to develop the right ideas to help me organize it all.

–You’re writing a novel.

–Yeah.

–Based on the people that you meet at night.

—Sort of. I do take liberties.

–Can I be in it?

–Do you associate with people of questionable moral character?

She smiled.

Linda was afraid to venture far from home. Her parents had created a very safe world for her. She had no idea what really went on at Lucky's.

–I've got a friend. Di. She comes here all the time. She tells me stories.

–What kind of stories?

–Drug parties. Sex with multiple partners. Bisexuality. All that stuff.

–So it's like seeing a soap opera, only it's live.

–Something like that.

–And you've come down here for a little action.

–Heavens no!

–You've been with a man before.

–Do I have a lover?

It seemed as if she had a crush on Clay. I didn't want to do anything to dissuade her. On the other hand, there was little that could be more detrimental than such a pursuit.

–I once was with this man in Boston. And for a weekend, we gave each other everything that we have. But after that, there wasn't much of anything. I want to meet a good man. Someone who is going to help me through my worst times.

She had a drink with her. I just couldn't imagine her diving into one of Clay's drug parties. He needed her to reassure himself that he hadn't fallen all the way. But we both knew that he was drifting around the lower reaches of Hell.

That same night, he was working on another girl downstairs. He kept coming up and sitting with us for a while. I could tell that he more wired than ever.

I winked at him.

–Whatever you do, don't go to jail.

I felt as if I was encouraging him. For the moment, we became one entity. While I was the more sedate one, the devil was downstairs plotting some dirty deed.

–I just have to get her to go along.

I figured that he had kissed Linda. And she believed that there was more to come. She could have held on to that dream for a year. Maybe more. He could still feed her with stories of his plans to go straight.

When I slid downstairs, I saw him walking away from a blonde in a colorful party dress. I didn't want to approach her. But I was trying to size her up. She seemed pretty trashed.

We crossed paths on the front stairwell.

–I'm going to leave soon. Make sure that Linda gets home safely

He had already said good by to her.

–Clay told me that he had some business to take care of in the morning. He told me that he'd walk me out to the car. But I wanted to stay a little longer. It's not often that I get out like this. I want to relish the time that I have. I'll have to come with Di sometime.

–Great!

She still had no idea about Clay's business. I felt obligated to stay by the table. She was pleasant. I wished that I could step back into such a world. I didn't feel damned like Clay. But I was no longer a naive believer like her. On the other hand, that was what they shared. They both

were trying to avoid that focused gaze of a parent.

–One time I was driving to Washington. I got on the highway, and I was cruising along. Before I knew it, I was at the Florida border. I had gone all that way and not realize that I was going south not north.

–Wow!

–I have a photographic memory, but sometimes I’m just so dense about real world matters.

What would her photographs have told her about Clay? All the while he was coaxing his new friend into a outlandish scenario. It didn’t take much for him to get her out of her clothes.

–Are you going to get undressed?

–Not yet honey.

He wanted her to become part of his fantasy. He had trouble communicating all the details.

–I don’t want to get tied up.

–I’m making a movie.

–A movie. I want to be a in a movie.

And she did. She gave him a puzzled look.

–I don’t have any clothes.

–You won’t need clothes for this movie.

She lay down on the examination chair that he usually used for his victims.

–You’re not going to hurt me.

–A little pain is a lot of pleasure.

She smiled her weird smile.

–I don’t feel as if I’m alive here. I’m dead.

–Here have some of this!

He was giving her more drugs to steel her will.

This is going to hurt a little.

–Why are you wearing that mask?

It was all part of the game. If the tape fell in the wrong hands, no one would know it was him.

He thought that her screams were all part of the game. It was the passion.

–I think that you’re hurting me.

–It’s good for you.

–But it doesn’t feel good.

–Have some more!

He kept prying her with drugs.

By the end of the night, she could have used some medical attention. Clay had pushed too far. He was scrambling to save his own skin.

–I could give you money. Don’t tell anyone!

–I’m not a fucking whore.

–I don’t mean that. I mean lots of money.

He was thinking thousands and thousands. The camera had given him licence. He just got carried away.

–I’m not really a bad person.

–I didn’t say that you were.

Would she even remember who he was? He hoped that she was really fucked up. He’d keep the tape, and she’d just wonder what happened.

Fortunately for him. Clay got her back to her place. He cleaned her up and got her ready for bed. She had no idea what had gone on.

She slept for a very long time. If he had been there, he might have thought that she had gone into a coma. She just needed time to recover. And her body was letting her forget.

When she finally awoke, there were bruises all over her body. Cuts and burn marks. Her insides felt tender.

–What happened to me? What made you do such a thing?

There was no one there to answer for what had happened.

–I did it because I could get away with it. There are people who make history. People who do real things. Like my family. And then there are people like you who barely exist. You’re props for our show.

–You are a monster.

–I’m everyman. I have desires just like everyone else. I don’t hold back. I don’t let my inhibitions tell me what to do. You wanted me to treat you that way. You thought you were some perfect little Polly. I showed you up for the dirty girl that you are. And I punished you for your misdeeds.

–Look what you did to me. This is inhuman.

Clay reacted violently to my portrayal.

–I never did those things to that girl. She got drunk at my place. I nursed her when she got sick. And I took her home. I know that you want to write this sick story about me. You’re trying to make up for things that you can’t do yourself. I gave you Linda. I bet you didn’t even kiss her.

–I saw the tape.

–What tape?

–The tape that you made.

–It was makeup. Stage makeup to make it look as if she was hurt.

I didn’t want to believe him.

–You’re not trying to blackmail me.

I was sure what I saw. And I knew Clay.

The next weekend I saw the girl, Erin.

–Hi, I’m a friend of Clay’s.

–Oh no. He didn’t tell you how I got sick at his place. It was an utter mess.

–Are you OK.

–Yeah. He cleaned me up and got me home.

–You didn’t wake up with bruises and cuts all over your body.

–I did have one bruise. That was from when I fell on the edge of my bed. I told you that I was drunk.

–He didn’t make a sex movie with you.

–Are you some kind of pervert?

–I just wondered.
 She shook off my question.
 –He was the perfect gentleman. Just don't tell anyone that I was with im. My fiance is coming over her right now.
 I found Clay upstairs.
 –You were checking up on me.
 –How much did you pay her?
 –I didn't have to pay her a thing. There was nothing to cover up.
 –The tape?
 –It was with another girl.
 –You did give her money.
 He gave me a sinister smile.
 –If I was going to pay her, I would have exacted a lot more demanding price.
 –You are such a sick fuck.
 –I'm just like you. But I have the power. And I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with you.
 Linda called me on Sunday.
 –Did you see Clay out?
 –Yes, I did.
 –I talked to him on Thursday.
 –He's never asked you to make a movie.
 –What are you talking about?
 –No kind of bondage film.
 –Is that in a book that you're reading?

THE DEATH SET

–I really have no idea what you are doing anymore.
 –What are you telling me?
 –You used to have some kind of purpose. Now there is none, none at all.
 –I'm working again. I have a band. I'm doing a solo music project.
 –I'm glad that you're contributing something.
 –Why are you so cynical?
 –You're drifting in this search that is going to offer you foreseeable benefit. Let's say that you find the mysterious woman that you describe to Clay, what difference does it make.
 –I think that I'm searching for something more substantial than Clay.
 –Maybe at the beginning. But you've focused all your energies on this eternal image. You've already gambled in the past. And what has been the result.
 –It wasn't a gamble. I was a storyteller. And I found the subject matter for a good story.
 –The story is that different from a peeping tom. You watch this girl, everything that she does. Then you make up this story about her. In your story, you're somehow involved in the whole thing. But you're not.
 –That isn't what happened. KÉ was just one character among others.

At least the Imperial Set had their Count. He represented everything about their life style. Was KÉ ever a fan of your band.

–Her friend liked us for a while.

–How long ago was that?

–Over a year ago. But we have new fans. And people care for our songs.

–Do they really? Can they even sing a lyric? The glory days are done.

–The search is on.

–The weave. It's a high school gossip circle. That's the best that you can do. You and Brenda get in a corner and try to exchange juicy bits with each other. Or Alea drifts through the club trying to create a sensation for her latest shocker. Where is your story?

–I don't know.

–If Monica really became your lover, how would that justify that search which gets you out to Restless every night?

–Maybe we share more in common than we think. Maybe that's what the story is about.

–I've been trying to tell you that in relation to the Imperial Set all along. They watch *The Hunger* in the hopes that it justifies some mystery in their exchange of sex partners. It gives them reason when they have none. In fact, they are drifting more aimlessly than ever.

–That story is coming to an end.

–Now you've discovered the real vampires. Who are you kidding? This obsession with death has simply replaced any interest that you once had in politics or art.

–That's not so. It more like a way of being that pushes experience to its limit. In a sense, it is beyond experience and beyond art. It is more a transformation of being. It's a new way of perception.

–You're just giving dreams more credibility than they really have. And you're looking for marginal types who can't tell the difference.

–Maybe new souls who have pushed beyond the limit. Who have broken the barrier between consciousness and the dream state.

–To what effect?

–That they can see a reality beyond their everyday experience.

–You can do that by reading or watching television. It's just another level to the voyeur's delight.

–It's not like that. The images appear to the individual without the mediation of television or books. It's more like visions.

–But a vision is no more than a recollection of a previous experience. Even imaginary images bring back features of previously lived events.

–It's a stage beyond lucid dreaming. It's stepping into the dream as if it really is the actual experience. The dream now ties all experience together as it points to a world behind that of everyday appearance.

–You've been hanging out with friends who've done too much acid.

The conversation trailed off. The next thing that I knew I was in Sara's bedroom

Paul walked in on me.

–What are you doing in here?

- She told me that I could explore.
- Is this a real human skull?
- I think that she stole it from a graveyard.
- This place is haunted.
- If it wasn't, now it is.

We were throwing around the word *haunted*. But here it really meant something.

- She's not a member of a cult.
- She's her own cult.
- I heard that Sara's a witch.
- I know that she casts spells.

There's a story that a bunch of punks accosted her one night. And she said something to them, and they all just ran away.

- There's something more going on this place.
- I thought that you were going to play tonight.
- We are. I'm just a little nervous.

I set up the mic and the keyboards. The drum machine was in place. The room started to shake with the beat.

I struggled through the words for “The Longest Night”. “Death's Shadow” seemed a little more confident. By the time that I played “Lunar Eclipse” everyone was getting into the swing of things.

- Your stuff is really good.
- Thanks.
- I'm managing a band. Saturn Rain
- I've heard of them.

I recalled Kevin's stories of animal sacrifice in a graveyard. I was much closer to the center of this secret society. And, for the time being, I actually believed that I was on to something. Maybe...

Paul needed a ride.

- Debbie's pretty cool.
- Yeah, I guess so.
- Do you really think that there's anything to this mumbo jumbo?
- I thought that you were taken in by it all.
- I think it's kids playing a horror movie game. And to what end?

I listened to Paul's scepticism. I was too far along in my search to stop it now.

–What's the alternative? To run back to Restless. At least, these people believe in a power that has nothing to do with drugs and acting like celebrities.

–They have their own hierarchy. In some ways, it's a lot worse. The kids are a lot younger. It just takes one of them with a strong will, and he can manipulate the rest. They're impressionable. I think it's pretty easy to manipulate them.

–How?

–The same way that they do it at Restless. A little drugs. Sex too. These kids are trying to escape the influence of their parents. They believe in any stimulus as the basis for some darker power. Something to draw them out of their safe world. And it's not just a taste. They are after

total immersion.

–You’re saying it’s a cult.

–I think it’s pretty obvious what we’re dealing with.

I realized that he was probably right on the money. But how else could you escape the cultish conditioning of these suburban propaganda factories. Paul was more insistent.

–They’re doing the same thing that their parents have done to them. It fits the literal definition of brainwashing. They take the kids and give them personality substances. Then they reinforce the pleasure centers with these associative feelings. The mind control is linked up to the pleasurable stimulation. You take a confused kid. He just wants something to hold on to.

Paul was charting my course in much the same way. My confusion was self-induced. But the cult was appealing to me because of my own curiosity. I wanted an answer even if it was complex and wrapped in mumbo jumbo.

I wanted to get Paul talking about the Dream School. He wanted none of it.

–You really are a little desperate.

–Let’s just say that there is something to it. I don’t want to be left out.

–You really are sounding like a high school kid. Just take acid, and be done with it.

–This is not about losing control. It’s gaining a perspective in this region that remains a mystery.

–It remains a mystery because there’s not much that’s being accomplished. It’s all just suggestion. Pretense.

–I like how it sounds.

–Of course you do. Drugs without the aftereffects. Acid trips without having to pay for them.

–There is no cost. It’s a foundation.

–That’s what I just said.

–I have to try it for myself.

I believed that it was all tied together: the Dream School and their secret community. I was never going to submit to the hallucinogens. So I might as well go the other way. Find the supernatural force that explained the dreams, that told me why there were these apparitions in the fires.

She was in the middle of it all. She danced with a crazy intensity. I would move close to her and pick up on her beat. The two of us would shake.

I loved the action. I gave myself completely.

–Mesmer had passed out. The ordeal had proven too great for him.

I listened to the lecturer at the Dream School.

–They tried to revive him to no avail. It was as if he was dead. Try as they may, they could do nothing to awaken him. If he had a secret, he had taken it with him to the grave. The group wondered if they had been too intense in developing their routine. Sure, it was important to train the psyche. And the only way to do that was to alter the normal functioning of the body. But they had gone way too far. They had destroyed the delicate balance of biology.

>>That was their fear. Mesmer’s dream of a dream school seemed to be baseless. The group was ready to dismantle the project. Mesmer himself was in a coma. He was transferred to a private hospital.

>>The only female member of the team refused to give up hope. It had been a few days. But she was convinced that this was all part of the procedure. She continued to visit him. She read to him. She told him stories. Her monologue became his only lifeline to the outside world.

>>A rumble here and there from the bed was enough to convince her that something was going on. But he still did not wake up. The nurses tried to convince her that there was nothing unusual in Mesmer's case. He was like all coma patients. They show signs of waking up. But nothing materializes.

–This is not the same. He has only been away for less than a week.

>>She believed that it was only a journey from which he would return. She had already been used to sitting by his bedside to monitor his dreams. This was just a prolonged night. She was ready when he needed her.

>>The other researchers dispersed. For them, it was the end. The project had failed. Greta believed that it was the man himself, Mesmer, who carried all the results of their painstaking work with him.

>>When the money ran out for his hospital care, she brought him to stay with her. Most people believed that the man had died. That rumor quickly circulated.

>>He was still being fed intravenously. And she was able to care for his other needs. She knew that he could be revived.

>>It was near the second week that the rumbles became more prolonged. He would mutter these incoherent phrases as if he was speaking an unknown language. She tried to notate his speech. Even under analysis, she had trouble making sense of it all.

>>It took a couple of days before he started to show other signs of awareness. He was still weak. When he finally, emerged from the coma, he appeared refreshed. He wanted to stand up, but he was still unable.

>>It took a couple of more weeks before he acquired the full use of all his senses. In that time, he gained the strength that he had lost.

–I don't want you telling anyone what has happened.

–What about your plans for the Dream School.

–I have to put aside those plans for now. I have discovered something greater than anything known in the annals of science. It is a passageway to the other side. If I make these results public, there will be a great clamor to put me away. This goes against everything that we have been taught.

–But it is still science.

–It is more than that. That is the basis of my fear.

>>More than ever, Mesmer felt that it was his duty to hide what he had discovered.

The Dream School lecture had been provocative. It was a welcome relief from the pressures of Restless. I felt that I was dealing with something substantial.

–You believe that story about Mesmer. He had nothing to do with a scientific project.

–How do you know?

–He was some kind of charlatan. He was trying to create the illusion that he had secret powers. It was nothing more than a carnival act.

He took the drill.

–Don't wake him up.

–He looks to be in pain.

–It’s not time.

–If we don’t wake him up, he may suffer a heart attack.

–That’s the least of our concerns. We need the formula.

–Let the man die, and you’ll get nothing.

They gathered around the bed as his body seemed to be in a seizure.

–It’s all part of the enhanced dream state.

–What did you give him?

–Nothing. It’s all an effect of the pre-sleep training.

–He looks terrible.

–It’s just how he looks. You really have nothing to worry about.

–You’re being entirely too passive about this.

–If we wake him up now, he’ll be angry. All his work would have been in vain.

–What kind of formula is he going to discover? And how do you know that he will remember it?

–We have to wake him when he stops shaking.

–But how do you know that is the right time?

–Trust me on this!

His trust became paramount. If the others were going to let the experiment proceed, he must go along with this. He had heard Mesmer propose his matter-anti-matter conversion formula. He suggested that the brain could act like a reactor for the process. It seemed like gibberish. But if there was such a formula, this was the only way to find out what it is.

When the convulsive activity stopped, the lead researcher shook Mesmer awake. At that point, he was ready to write. And write he did. Everyone gathered around him,.

–Give the man space. He needs to have enough light to see the paper.

He continued to fill the page with mathematical calculations. After this flurry of activity, he fell to the bed. He was still awake but in a trance.

–You can’t wake up.

They started to pour over the data.

–It makes no sense. Maybe he can explain his notation.

Proposal and counter-proposal were attempted to make sense of the formulas. There seemed to be nothing of reason contained therein.

–I think that we have failed. If he can offer no clue with regards to what he has written, then this is just nonsense.

–Maybe there’s a code. We could try to decrypt the puzzle.

–There is a consistency to the symbols.

–It’s not as if he is writing a story. If these were just letters, we could compare it to actual words. It would follow the letter distribution of a natural language. English or French. But this is a mathematical abstraction. There is really no way to follow what any of this means short of him telling us himself. And the way that he is now, he is no help. Even when he is himself again, he may be offer no help. And all this work will have been in vain.

–I told you this was going to go nowhere.

–You can’t say that for sure.

–OK, let me try.

Over time, Mesmer came back to normal, as normal as he ever could be. The writing made no sense to him. More than his colleagues, he tried every method to decipher his own calculations.

One day he was looking at a book on Egypt and he had a revelation. He went back to the notebook with his notes inside. It all made sense. As it did, he realized that he would have to dismiss his team. They were not ready to share what he had discovered. He made it seem as if his own frustration had led to the failure of the project. In fact, it had succeeded behind his wildest dreams. But he dared not share any of this with the rest of the team. This was his alone.

The secret was more precious than life itself. It was a portal to an after-life. A place that existed parallel to our everyday experience. But it was also our ultimate destination.

Mesmer clearly understood the instructions that he had left himself. He would have to put into practice the method that he had outlined. He rewrote the description of the path in more familiar notation. He even had a code that he established so that the development could be understood by anyone else who learned the notation.

On the first night, he worked out a program to prepare himself to cross over. He even had an alarm rigged to make sure that he would not remain in the visionary state too long. The overall procedure took about six hours. When he was revived, he made notes about what he had seen. He was overcome with the beauty of the experience. He also recognized that he could exercise control over the visions. He could even wake himself up without the alarm.

As a precaution, he continued to set the alarm. As he lay down, he knew that there was an escape route.

The journeys were full of wonderful revelations. But he did not want to stop the process. He knew that there were risks. When he was awake, he longed for the return. And he did everything that he could to get back to the only world where he truly felt at home. Nevertheless, his body served as the conduit for the journey. And if he became too weak, he would be lost in a nether world between life and death, never able to cross over.

Mesmer became over-confident. He stopped setting the alarm. Fortunately, he would always return after the allotted time. So it went. He was at the top of his game.

The visions became lovelier and lovelier. He often wondered if he needed to come back. At such moments, he again understood how the body was his vehicle that transported him from one place to another. Shut down that mechanism, and the visions would come to an end.

Contrary to this view, Mesmer proposed a dream state that was permanent. He did everything that he could to reach this state. He spent a full day developing his formulas to explain a passing over that was maintained from the supernatural realm.

–I am sure of this!

This time, there was no reason at all to set the alarm. He stretched himself on the bed. He engaged the mind in all the preparation that was so familiar to his past excursions. And he just let go!

His entryway into the visions came so much faster than it had in the past.

–Wonderful, wonderful, he said to himself.

–Not so fast!

–Who are you?

–Who do you think that I am? You’re such a fool to think that you were doing this on his own.

He had become imprisoned by his rival. And he was not able to escape. In fact his calculations had erred. He was preparing himself for the inevitable melt-down.

They found him on the bed. He had died in his sleep. The notes were still on the desk. They looked through them. Even though the legend was quite clear, they could not make sense of what he had written. This time, their own stubbornness prevented them from entertaining his ideas.

–What is this?

Dawn handed me a piece of silver jewelry.

–It’s a dream charm. Take it, and you will have the same dreams that I have.

–You’re kidding!

–No, it really works.

–You’re not a member of the Dream School.

–They’re magicians. This really works.

I believed her. I wanted to try.

That night I had the strangest dream. We were all at The Cube. It was narrow just like The Cube. But something was different. It was more like a church with windows. Everyone from past was there. The Imperial Set were out in force. Even the Count was in the middle of a crowd.

I felt as if I was in the midst of a reunion. I went up to talk to KÉ. I had never done this before. Before I could reach her, I was approached by someone who I didn’t recognize.

–Do you know why you’re here?

–What are you talking about?

–The world is going to end.

I rushed out in the hope of finding a pay phone. I called WD.

–You have nothing to worry about.

–The world is going to end.

–My world has already ended.

When I woke up, I remembered every detail of the dream. I wrote it down. When I saw Dawn that night, I told her the dream story.

–I had the same dream.

–How could you? You don’t even know the people in the dream You were never at The Cube.

–I know. That was the weird part.

–Really strange. Who was that guy who came up to talk to me?

–He’s the originator of dream travel. That’s Mesmer.

–What? I thought that you told me that Dream School is nonsense.

–It is. But he has been trapped in his dreams. And now he tries to wreak havoc on everyone else’s dreams.

–That seems just crazy.

–Have you ever had deep dreams? So complex that you can’t remember all of them.

–Sure?

–Put this on. It’s a dream talisman. It will help you remember the whole story.

I was prepared for a continuation of last night’s dream. Instead, I was taken to a very different place. Mesmer was passed out before me.

–Should I awaken him?

–If you want to know the formula.

–The formula was his idea.

–It will be valuable for you.

She spoke like Dawn. But she looked like KÉ. This was too weird.

–I need to get some instruments to help you.

–Are you going to cut him open?

–No, you are.

–I don’t play doctor.

–You don’t want the man to die, do you?

–What can I do?

–You’ve been trained. You know the answers.

While I waited for her to return, I started to look over his notes. So this was the real reason that I was here. I kept going over the same formulas in my mind. I hoped that my method could indeed help me.

In the next scene, I was at a café. I recognized some of the faces from school. People who I had wanted to approach but never said anything too.

–You’ve got to see this stuff. Maybe you could help.

–What is that shit?

–It’s the Mesmer notes.

–Are you kidding?

–I heard about that stuff in psychology class. That is really neat shit.

–I thought that it was all nonsense.

–You have to work with it. Make sense of it. You have to apply it.

As I was walking out, the head of the Dream School blocked my path.

–You’ve been missing class.

–I’ve been busy. I’ve had things on my mind.

–You’ve got the Mesmer notes!

–Who told you?

–Dawn. She’s one of us.

I saw Dawn in the street. I rushed after her.

–Why have you been talking to the Dream School?

–I haven’t. Who told you that?

–The director.

–He’s an asshole. You do have the Mesmer notes.

–Who told you?

–I thought that you did.

–I talked to you before I was in his lab.

–In his lab? He’s dead.

–I made contact.

–I told you that you weren't supposed to make contact with the dead.

–The Count was in my dream the other day.

–But you never talked to him.

–I didn't talk to Mesmer.

–I memorized his notes.

I went over the patterns and shapes. I needed to write it all down when I woke up.

When I finally woke up, I was having trouble remembering any of the dream. I had an appointment at noon, and there was little time. I grabbed the talisman, and everything began to fall into place. I wrote and wrote. I could even make sense of Mesmer's symbols.

I saw Dawn at Restless that night.

–Did you have the same dream.

–Only the part where I saw you.

–Are you working for The Dream School.

–Of course not. You met Mesmer.

–I have all his notes.

–You have crossed over the other side.

–That's nonsense.

She looked so attractive in her short blue skirt.

–Dawn, I really like you.

–It's your dreams talking.

–What about us?

–I like girls.

–You were with Guy.

–Not anymore.

–Why?

–We need to talk about your dreams. If you don't watch out, you're going to die in your sleep.

–You're being overly dramatic.

–I know what I'm talking about. I've seen it happen before.

–Friends dying in dreams.

–Not exactly. Just bad experiences.

–It's not drugs.

–It's worse. It's the body's chemistry. There's nothing preventing overdose. No refusal point.

–It just won't happen.

–That's what Mesmer said.

–That's just a silly story.

I saw Paul later that day.

–She's blowing shit. She's one of them.

–What?

–She's a spy for the Death Set. They know that you're on to them. She's trying to block your way.

–What about the Dream School?

- That stuff is even more silly.
- This is all getting really desperate.
- It’s a game.
- What about the human sacrifice.
- Just a rumor that they made up to make themselves seem even more ominous.
- You were the one who was interested in this stuff.
- I was. But not anymore. I have more important things to occupy my time.
- Maybe I was getting closer to the Death Set than I knew. Debbie had been so sympathetic. She could tell me more.
- I held on to the talisman. It helped me explore the dream world. And I made more notes on the Mesmer’s book.
- At least, you have something to distract you.
- What do you mean?
- I was worried that you were going to getting caught up with Monica and her friends.
- Taylor introduced me to Dawn.
- They’re all lunatics.
- Since the death of the Count, it’s all changed,.
- He was playing with fire. Don’t go down the same path.
- I’m a good boy.
- This Mesmer stuff is even more powerful.
- I hear that Saturn’s Rain is going to play a gig on Saturday. Want to come?
- I’ve thought about it.
- We can learn the truth about this human sacrifice.
- What truth? If they do it, that makes them fascists. Imprisoning slaves and what not.
- Maybe the victims go willingly.
- What kind of will is that? Weak willed.
- We want the music to be intense.
- But not psychopathic.
- There’s a fine line.
- But you’re crossing it if you think that human sacrifice is cool.
- I’m not saying that it’s cool. Even self-mutilation is nuts. But there is something appealing in pushing the body to its limits.
- I’ve said that all along. But look at the Count. A lot of good that did him.
- I’m losing my grip. What am I supposed to do next?
- Do how?
- For the art. I need to satisfy the fans.
- You could hang yourself.
- Seriously!
- I was serious. If you think that human sacrifice is OK, then just hang yourself.
- I wasn’t saying that.
- The Death Set isn’t a game.
- No, it isn’t. It’s art pushed to the next level.
- And how is it political.

- The mainstream won't allow the artist to be himself. So he has to find new way to express his difference.
- It shouldn't just be a freak show.
- But we are freaks!

THE WEAVE UNWOVEN: TAYLOR, MONICA, AND AMBER

Taylor was like so many of Gloria's other treasures. He captured the rhythms of the dispossessed street kid with so much dexterity. The rhymes rolled off his tongue as if he was born to raise hell. And he did his best to rock the house with his new verities. Sure his best lines were lifted from other street-hardened hustlers. And often he seemed better suited for the runway than the mean streets. But he was a breath fresh air. A little bit poet, a dash of troubadour. The streak of blonde in his dark hair made him seem like a punk. He wore an army jacket and walked with a casual swagger.

They all rode up in her convertible. Gloria's heir of the moment and Taylor. Despite his obvious talents, Taylor soon learned that he had too much competition to get by on his looks. He started off doing odd-jobs. Some claimed that he was stealing from people who'd give him a place to stay. But he tried to follow the straight and narrow. While others around him were giving in to more vivid temptations, he limited himself to a few beers and a puff now and then. He was down, but nowhere near out.

As he applied himself, he lost a little of that boyish glow. And he seemed more and more like those around him. Since they shared the same fate, they threw their fortunes together. He found a job washing dishes. And he became roommates with Monica and Amber. He was younger than both. They took him on as a project. Like a pet, the little puppy could watch the place.

He'd go off on his own jaunts. But he was more settled down than most of the folks at Restless. He'd show up now and again. However, he was not part of the churning mass that favored the club scene. When he was out, he seemed like a veteran of a faraway journey. He spent a lot of spare time alone in the apartment playing music.

Amber and Monica took pity on him. Since they worked him so hard at the restaurant, they backed off on his chores around the apartment. For them, work was not so arduous. So it was the perfect compromise. They'd keep the place in order, and he'd be the resident watchdog.

I'd see Amber and Monica at Restless.

–Where's Taylor?

–He's in for the night.

Or he'd be working. He was not going to be a casualty of Atlanta nightlife. He never took his image as seriously as others did.

Amber tried to maintain a little mystery of her own. She never felt quite comfortable in the choppy seas of the scene. She'd always be wading on the edge of the great ocean. And we'd exchange words about what we were both observing.

–Do you really have to drown to know how bad it feels?

–I think that it’s enough just to hold your breath for a minute or so.

–Is that an initiation?

I just smiled back. Amber and I were never going to sit around and dissect the club scene. She had got her taste very quickly. And she welcomed the entertainment now and then. I liked having her at Restless. She helped me keep my bearings. Sitting with her, I felt the warmth of her presence.

–I’m just visiting.

–I won’t tell anyone.

–We both laughed.

Monica always seemed like the hostess at a garden party. She knew that this garden was full of weeds. She was doing her best to keep things looking right. At times she seemed too gregarious and too eager for the downtrodden bunch at Restless. She didn’t show up at Lucky’s that much anymore. If she went there, it was an appearance. She reflected the initial backlash against Lucky’s. It had been progressing for most of the year. Lucky’s was too crowded. And it was no longer magic. Restless was what it was. Since it was often deserted early on a weekday, it was the logical place for her to hold court. There wasn’t much of a kingdom to rule at these times. Since she lived so close, the club was almost an extension of her living room.

–We’ll have coffee and dessert, then we’ll head over to Lucky’s.

–We’re going to redo that scene. This time I’ll ask you out for sushi. And I’ll lay out my stock portfolio for you over a vintage Beaujolais. Then I’ll ask you the question.

–What question is that?

–Can I see your cards?

–Is that your question?

–It could be.

–What about your cards?

–I’m not going to show them until I know I have a sure thing.

–Is this what it’s all about? You’re testing me!

–We’re all testing each other.

–We’re not talking about all? We’re talking about you and me.

–It’s more like a spider’s web. What you do and say with Taylor and Amber affects what you do and say with Steffie. What you do and say with Jason. What you do and say with the door guy at Restless.

–That’s an easy out on your part. You really never have to answer for anything that you do and say to me because your actions are floating through this noosphere of interconnection.

–I’m not saying that. That’s why I’m not promising anything. I’m not even asking for anything from you. We’re just talking.

–But we’re taking the time to talk. And that means something. It means that it’s important.

–I admit that. And if you need me to come over to the apartment and fix something, or if you need a ride to the store, or if you need a good listener, I can do all those things.

–Don’t put yourself out!

–It’s not like that.

–I'm glad.

–You're the one who's keeping me at a distance. Like there's a whole private life that's going on that I don't see.

–What is that? A cue for me to reveal more about myself. What do you want to know? Do you want to see my bedroom? Do you want me to show you my high school year book. Do you want me to do a reading from my journal.

–I never knew you keep a journal.

–You do keep a journal?

–No.

–What?

–It was just an analogy.

–So you're testing me.

–You talked about cards on the table. I'm not going to tell you everything about myself just so that you'll use it against me.

–That sounds a little paranoid.

–Talking about yourself is a big deal. Really opening the book. That's more intimate than sex.

–But it's also keeping you in the cocoon of your childhood. Like each detail is a bigger revelation. And then there's that bit, that super story that explains it all.

–Maybe it does work that way. There's things that I want. And then there were things that were forced on me. That explains who I am.

–So there is a secret.

–Not really.

–The what. Do you feel used by it all?

–What are you talking about?

–A little damaged.

–This is just a transit stop for me. A chance for me to make up my mind what I really want. And when I do that, I can just get back in my car and head to Gwinnett county where the Marta train just doesn't go. And I can close the chapter and get on with my life.

–So you're the one who's testing us. You're the one who's covering her cards.

–I'm open. And if something happens, that's great. But I'm not holding my breath.

–So you are protecting something.

–Not a particular something. There's no scene in the back of the barn with the football players.

–But there is something.

–Loads of somethings.

–And a little shame to go along with that.

–I never said that.

–But why waste your time with Restless? It's the Land of Forgetting!

–Because I want to avoid this kind of nonsense. This idea that you think it's a game. Everyone in high school thought that they knew your business.

–You know that it's just the same at Restless. In many ways it's a lot worse.

–How?

–In high school, there is a reference point. Maybe the star football player will go onto a scholarship at Georgia. Or the popular girls can realize their dreams with their own homes. And there are the classes which give you some kind of foundation for college.

–But high school was all about reputation.

–Only on the surface. Here there is nothing else but image.

–Are you trying to flatter me somehow?

–I don't know. You were the one who was talking about taking a ride back to the suburbs.

–I was telling you that option was open. I don't have to sit in the courtyard and Of Restless and cry about some dumping me.

–Did that happen?

–Shut up. Now you're teasing me.

–Isn't heartache the only result of it all.

–Just the opposite. You make a scene. Have a couple of drinks. Then you find some other guy to take you home.

–Is that what you do?

–I do as much. I get a guy to wink at me. Maybe buy me a few drinks. Then I give him the wrong phone number and head on home.

–So you're ready for work on Monday morning.

–Something like that. There's really no mystery so quit trying to make one.

–I'm just surveying the possibilities.

–By feeding off of someone else's past.

–I'm observing why people are doing things here.

–You're one of those people.

–And so are you?

–Are you trying to start something?

She laughed to throw me off the trail. I loved playing. But I was hardly ready to reveal anything on my part. I was playing just as coyly as she was. I could imagine her playing a part. And I did find her attractive. But not enough to get me off of my search.

She knew something was up. And she realized that there was really something brutal behind it all. There was a region where this was all about breaking hearts. It was the initiation to the next stage. A preparation for something much darker. At that point, there would be no ride back to Gwinnett County. And Monica knew that. That was why she played along the way that she did. She wanted a guy who looked outward from this mess, not one who brought her closer to the hell.

She stretched out her legs, her cheerleader legs. She was inviting me to enter that story. And for a moment or two, I jumped on to the ride.

–Give me your hand.

I gave her my hand. And we were high school sweethearts in the bleachers at Gwinnett Central.

–You know what this means. We're going to have to go make out in my car. And things get carried away. You are ready for all that.

–If you are.

–This has to be forever.

–If that’s what forever is to be.

I thought that there was no forever at Restless. Just now. She was helping me escape.

–This does mean a proposal.

–What?

–We’re going to settle down. You’re going to get a real job. We’ll buy a house.

I was falling asleep in our conjugal bed. And as I did, there were these lovely scenes of Monica. At Lucky’s her dancing. A night on the town. A candlelight dinner. It was all making sense.

–You’re not trying to brainwash me, are you?

–I’m only letting you think what you’ve thought all along.

–I don’t understand.

–I dated the quarterback. He had plans. I’m just letting you play that role.

Like paper dolls. I was being cut out of one scene and fitted into another.

–I didn’t know that you had so many tricks up your sleeve.

–You told me to play all the cards.

–Isn’t there a bed trick here?

–Ay, there is. But you have to sign the pledge.

–What pledge?

–The pledge of selflessness!

–Is this a sex thing.

–It’s all sex things. But it’s also a life thing. Are you ready for that?

–To regress.

–To progress. To get on the merry-go-round. I’ll pull up my skirt. And you can be my merry-go-round.

–I’m don’t think that I’m the one.

–Just do the routine, and it will all make sense.

–I’m doing the routine in my mind. It’s all starting to make sense.

–Are you going to play your hand?

–I’m not sure that I can.

–You better be quick. You have a lot of catching up to do. You have to make up for lost time.

–I have another path. My own path.

–With the death kids. They’re going to slash your throat in some alleyway. They just want to drain your body of all it’s blood.

–I’m not even sure if I’m the right bloodline for them.

–You are for me! Life doesn’t make sense until you’re actually in it. You have to plan for the future. But you can’t plan how you’re going to feel in the future. That’s the fun of it all.

–Restless has always been about getting rid of the long-range view. Just pushing into the darkness.

–And you know how that’s a dead end. Some girl makes out with you in a corner, and you’re ready to play house with her.

–I don’t think that I’m like that.

–Ok, you find a boy. Boy, girl. It all comes down to the same thing. It's not as if you're going to sprout wings and fly out of here.

–I do have plans for something more.

–See you have plans too.

I never made plans like this with Monica. Things had been flashing back and forth. And the depth was being filled in with a story that wasn't mine. This wasn't a Paradise Lost.

–Sometimes it seems so much safer at home when the battle lines aren't drawn.

Monica stretched out her legs on the bench.

–My cheerleader legs. Give me your hand.

I didn't take it to mean anything more than it was. Maybe this might progress. But not for now. Time was passing very slowly.

–I hate being patronized.

–I know. But that's not what's happening here.

–I'm just not your little pet roaming around the apartment.

Time was passing slowly. Very slowly. I knew it was best that I kept my mouth shut.

–This isn't going to mean anything more. Not unless you want it. Do you want a kiss?

–What did you just say?

–I haven't said a word for five minutes.

–I guess that I'm hearing things.

–Just like a dream.

We started talking about dreams. And it got me thinking about the Dream School again. I could feel myself slipping in and out of alternative scenarios with her. When it came down to it, I could tell the difference between the dreams and my actual experience.

I reviewed the events in the hope of being entirely clear about what had happened. Admittedly, my imagination was clouding things. I was sure that I had never said anything to Monica about settling down. I hadn't even tried to kiss her.

I knew how the nostalgia could roll right over me just as I had seen a Midwestern storm rapidly darken a clear sky. In that scene, we'd be the only ones in the bar.

–We keep ending up in the same place. I know that we're both trying to avoid it. But you are kind of cute. Endearing.

>>I never thought about you that way before. Not all the way through that way. And now I see it.

–*Is it love?*

–*Not yet. Just this warm feeling all over.*

–*That is love.*

–*Many a person has made that mistake.*

I felt as if she was a witch messing with me. I looked in her eyes. She had that power.

–Are you a good witch or a bad witch?

–There are no good witches. We're all out for ourselves. After all, a girl has to protect herself.

I could feel that storm rolling over me. My body was burning.

–I think that I have a fever.

–Taylor had a fever. We nursed him back to health.

–I can imagine that.

And I did. But not in the way that she meant. Double mischief, double trouble.

–*He’s not like you. He’s not going to ask for our souls.*

–*Aren’t you all soul catchers?*

–*You only give if you can get back!*

–I probably should go home.

–A little rest will do you good.

I thought of her resting next to me. But it didn’t seem like my thought. The idea just came over me. And I related to its effects.

Back in my own bed, the supposed fever dissipated quickly. I had no idea what I had been thinking. If I was supposed to act in a certain way, what was that.

–You’re not going to turn me into a pig?

–What are you saying?

–I think that it’s the fever talking.

What if wasn’t my imagination.

–I’m not really a witch. I’m just bewitching.

I didn’t like this story.

–We’re going to announce our engagement!

–I thought that I was gay.

–That’s not going to matter. It’s not like I’m going to have sex with you.

Rather than waltzing to Strauss or dancing to “The Tennessee Waltz”, it was more likely that we were bopping to New Order or Salt n’ Peppa. And the phrase *yo, baby pop* seemed to roll like sugar from her lips. Swept up in a wave of nostalgia, I wanted to bend down and kiss her. The dark red lipstick made her lips seem even more inviting. I was that close to surrender. All the while she was entertaining me.

–No, silly boy, that’s not how I feel!

I never gave her the chance to deny me. I just let my imagination run wild and allowed it come to its own resolution. I kept trying to run the story in my mind and shape it towards the proper end. I was lying in the bed and watching her prance around the room. But I still had my doubts. Just as the kiss was about to occur, I jumped up into a state of brutal wakefulness.

I could never do anything like this.

I knew how a long crazy night just intoxicates the soul. Proximity to her rich perfume might just be the trick to send me over the edge. I needed utter sobriety. I had managed to avoid alcohol. But these swirling waters were more treacherous. I needed to practice breathing exercises.

For the time being, she was my proof against stark nothingness. I felt that we were together even if we had not shared any actual intimacy. And when I heard someone talk of me as Monica’s boy, that only made me feel more cherished. Maybe that magical day would come sooner than I thought. The cold of fall and winter became sufficient challenge against such idle fancy. But a warm Atlanta spring would be enough to melt my resistance. I would have to come to a conclusion before then.

I realized that our attachment to this moment was based on our ability to flash forward and then flash back. And in that return to forever, we made everything seem so much more dramatic. If we did that same game with time over and over again, it would fill volumes. It would be a literature that spoke to an unavoidable destiny. It would be our portal to our own immortality. And if we accepted the inevitable welcome home, then every kiss would seem more potent than the last until we both crossed over into never neverland.

I wanted her to read the book back to me page by page. I just couldn't imagine it starting in the same place that she did. This was all about constant study. Mythic characters that could supplant the rogues that surrounded us. Greater roles that were available to those who clashed with their meager fate.

The screen would always go bland before the screen kiss. And I wanted to pretend that was just a glitch. When the picture came back on, Monica and I were sharing the same time, the same life. However, I was the one who was dealing with my own amnesia.

–Sometimes, you just have to accept things.

My blind spot seemed more severe.

–I don't want to accept anything.

I went off to dance.

–I feel helpless.

Even if everything went in reverse time, we could never break it down to the root. There weren't enough details to hold it all together.

–Where did it all begin?

–It began in your mind.

That was my fear. The promise only seemed like a fairy tale.

–I'm not that crazy.

Even if I regressed her back to a past experience, there would be nothing to incriminate her.

–I can't be someone that I'm not. None of these girls can.

–We have to deal with what we have or we have nothing

This was too much was too much flash forwarding.

–Why are you raising these theological questions?

–Would you bet for A NIGHT for your soul?

–Anything else.

–Your parents, that is why...

–Long ago I abandoned the idea that I was going to be rescued by some sweet guy. I decided that I just needed a guy who was going to give me a sweet time.

–Isn't sweet a relative thing, less bitter than your last?

–This place gives me the chance to be an artist even if I'm not one.

There's a story of gangster. Someone like Monica trying to be his gun moll.

–I could use my body to help out. I wouldn't mind. It would give a clearer purpose for my action.

–What?

–I'd get close to his rival. The one who's working with the police.

Monica led me into the scene. I just listened to the different voices.

–I can't tell if you're working with us, or are you really taken by him.

–I like to have a good time. You can't blame a girl for trying to enjoy herself.

–What does that mean?

–I let him get me drunk. And I kiss him now and then. That's all.

–I know what you're like after a few drinks.

Benny appointed himself to be her protector.

–I've had to pull you off of guys before.

–If you want to break up, that's great for me. Until then, I'll do what I need to keep you afloat.

–The only way that you're getting out of this is in a pine box.

–Oh, you're sending me off in style.

She was trying to be as hard as nails. She knew Benny was an ass-hole. So why did she stay with him. He had money. He was looking out for her. And she could pass her time working as star in her own movie.

–I'm a show girl.

–So put on a show for me.

–I'll put on a show for you, but that's where it stops.

She'd been living her whole life walking this line.

–My brother-in-law is coming into town. I need you to show him a good time.

–Get one of the other girls. I'll help you bring down Sammy. But I'm not going to service your relative.

–I'm in a bind. I need you to help out.

–I'm not what you think.

–There's money, and you've got to play to pay.

–I'm not in it for that.

–I give you clothes. I give you money. I let you party all the time. And there's one thing you're good at. You have to learn to give back

Monica tried another scenario.

–Could you ever be that girl?

–Let's just say that if I got paid to give guys a good time that I'd always get an extra tip for my time?

–You're not mocking me?

–You wanted to hear the story.

–I wanted to get behind the closed doors.

–We all do. But there's nothing behind there.

–So...

–There are no miracles. You're not going to turn water into wine.

–I wouldn't mind a little intervention.

–And when I turn the lights out, I want to make sure that all the rats are out of my room.

–Explain!

–I'm trying. You just don't want to listen. I know you have big dreams. But you're no saint. You have to tell people what you want. Otherwise, you'll always be alone.

–I still don't follow!

–You’re a great guy. Maybe a star, but you’re no savior.

–What would I have to do to reach that level?

–I don’t know. Sacrifice the golden calf.

–I’m a vegetarian.

–You could get someone else to do the job for you.

I laughed.

I wanted that sense of completion. My test, the night as my reward.

–I’ll promise you everything.

–A good dance!

The talk of the dance, flashback as flashforward.

–Keep talking!

–It’s the same dream.

–Tell me about it!

–The talking cure.

–I don’t need help.

Once Monica heard about my battle with the Sphinx, she wanted to get in on the game!

–I’m ready to answer the heiress question.

–What is the heiress question?

–Clay tells me that he is the heir to a family fortune. If I sleep with Clay, what are the odds that I will be the heir to the family fortune?

–The problem assumes that Clay is telling the truth.

–No, it doesn’t. That’s part of the test question. You have to calculate the odds if he is telling the truth with all the other available factors.

–Does that include if he is good in bed?

–That may prove to be a detriment. If he thinks that he is good, he may decide that he can maximize his choice.

–Then the question seems to be what kind of card you are.

–I’m a pretty good card.

–For the long run or the short?

–Certainly the short, and probably the long.

–How would you know?

–I’ve turned over enough cards.

–Wouldn’t that make you less of a catch?

–Not if I’m a good player.

–You’re still assuming a lot. How do you play?

–Either way I win. If I play, I stay in practice until the real heir comes along. I also develop my faculties to detect a real heir from a fake.

–Is that the kind of practice that you need?

–Now it is!

–How *did* you play?

–I lost.

–He wasn’t an heir.

–He may have been an heir, but I am no heiress. Enough said.

- Did you get what you wanted?
- I should have asked for a lot more. Enough said!
She had more to teach me.
- Then there is the amended heiress question: if I continue to sleep with claimants to the family fortunes, will one of them make me an heiress?
- The game seems to encourage bed-hopping!
- I think that I'm getting better. I had one candidate who promised me that he was straight and single.
- No doubt straight accounted for his claim to the fortune even if there wasn't one.
- He agreed to give me a sufficiently large diamond as a down payment on any future income.
- Wow! Where's the diamond?
- I don't think that I was with him long enough.
- This seems like a long drawn out process. I have my own method.
- What is that?
- It's called the high school question. If you are you able to answer the question, that will guarantee you success in college.
- Success how? Graduation? A job? Friends?
- More like a challenge to the intellect. That other stuff comes too.
- What does that have to do with the heiress question?
- More like a revision. If you sleep with the supposed heir, that diminishes the chance that he actually will include you in his inheritance.
- So I won't become an heiress.
- Not likely. But if he's not actually the heir to the fortune, that will increase the likelihood that he will want to bed me forthwith.
- I suppose.
- Suppose so.
- The what is that *suppose* supposed to mean.
- It could be a question of advanced probability.
- The celebrity question.
- If you sleep with the celebrity, are you about to achieve your own celebrity.
- More like the goddess question. If you sleep with a goddess are you likely to be granted immortality.
- Only conditional immortality.
- Meaning?
- If you violate the terms of the agreement, you lose your immortality.
- This is fascinating. What if you were interested in immortality all along. Is there a chance to achieve immortality without physical contact between you and the materialized spirit.
- Transubstantiation does not appear to be a prerequisite to establishing a spiritual bond with the goddess. But the ritualistic path may be long and arduous in itself. Better to bed the goddess.
- What if bedding is not her chosen form of social congress?
- If not to bed, then to wed?

- That seems like some kind of evil trick.
- I think that we are getting the hang of things. The goddess achieves her status by bedding. But if you bed the supposed goddess, you will not receive a reciprocal form of celebrity. More like a notoriety.
- Bringing down the goddess.
- The knave’s turn.
- So it seem as if the high school question is intimately related to the heiress question.
- What difference does it make?
- You’ll never be able to answer the high school question if you answer affirmatively to the heiress question.
- In the amended heiress question, that difference makes all the difference. If you answer the high school question, then follow it that the heiress question is false.
- What would Cinderella say to that?
- She’d have to resort to the celebrity question. And that would make all the difference.
- We have three characters. The lover. The heir. And the goddess!
- Wonderful. Why is the heir not the lover.
- Because this is a good story. Maybe yours. You want the goddess, but she is pledge to the heir.
- Silly choice.
- Exactly!
- I went over the rules
- It’s like the Dating Game. You have the goddess and two imposters. Only you don’t know which is the imposter. And you ask the dates questions so that you can figure out the goddess. But there is one other stipulation. The goddess still wants the heir, just like Cinderella wanted the prince.
- This is going to be really tricky.
- Yes, it is. Go to it. And I’ll play the part of the goddess.
- You mean that you’re Cinderella.
- Yes. One more problem. You can’t ask the high school question because college isn’t going to show you the way.
- We could restate the heiress problem.
- Now the heir is dealing in mystery. Maybe a little danger. The heiress admires his recklessness.
- It sounded as we were returning to Clay and his flirtation with criminality.

WORK

- The last time that I was in the same situation, I turned my car around the moment that I hit the river. But this time I really needed the money. I was going to stick it out.
- Delivery’s the only way that you’re going to do it.
 - Really?
 - I’ve got a job at the Flaming Pepperoni. They need drivers.
- I listened to Dutch. He played drums for us. He knew how desperate I was.

–We’ll get some shows soon. I see the light.

I listened to his logic. Anything seemed better than the way that things were going.

A delivery drivers lives in his own world. Nothing touches him. The moment that he escapes the store, he is on automatic. I felt the vibe.

I’d turn on the radio and settle back. I was jammin’ hip hop and letting the bass tremble. I pounded on the beat with my left foot.

Occasionally I’d push it. Sure it was in town, but I was on the highway of love, and I wanted to feel that energy. I knew the thrill of racing another driver back to the shop. At the Pep, there were only a few of us. So there was never anyone to race back. But it was the same feeling. To have finished a run and head back for more.

Once I stepped back in the store, there was a little bit of regret. I wanted to be sent out right away. I didn’t want to wait inside. Worse, if there were no deliveries, I was on dishwashing duty.

I couldn’t stand the restaurant. It was nice and all. And they were building a bar. But I just felt confined. The dishwasher station was cramped. And it seemed as if no one ever cleaned the sink.

I got the cleaner and just reached into the dank. What a shit hole. This was a food establishment. I breathed easier once it was sanitized around me.

If things were good, I get in a conversation about music. When I started there Willy was also working. He hung out at Restless.

–I used to play in a band. I knew Immanuel when he was a kid. He played too. He was in The Liberation. That’s where he met all those girls.

He told me about crazy shows. Once he started a story, he wouldn’t quit. They were trying to turn Willy into a waiter. But there weren’t getting a lot of customers.

When Dutch was on the kitchen, it seemed a little more serious. But he gave me some good deliveries. And he never rode me hard.

–They’ve got me in charge.

Willy was taking deliveries. It was almost like a party. Willy would load up on beer. Dutch would dip in now and then. Hell, it was a regular party. If this was work, what the hell.

Ramon was the owner. He was only there part of the time. He thought that it was a privilege that he was paying me at all. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I got way more at my last delivery job.

–This job builds character.

I spoke under my breath:

–If you don’t drum up some business, the only thing that you’re building here is a pine box.

Case shut!

I felt as if I needed a drink like Dutch just to get by. But Willy cheered me up.

–Ramon’s not such a bad guy. He lets us take a glass when things go slow.

I didn’t want to destroy the party. But when Ramon was on, I loved to be on the road. He’d always try to find us extra work. It drove me crazy. I was here to deliver, not to paint his damn store.

Some days, I never had to get in the car. This was easy. I’d just walk the delivery over.

–Make sure you get that order of hot peppers.

I piled them in the bag with the pizza. I checked the drinks. They were always forgetting to include them on the order. I just ran across the street.

–I’ve got your pizza.

This was the moment that it was my world. I put a smile on my face as he opened the door.

I held my breath as they got the money. This was what made it all worth while. I was getting paid for the delivery and I didn’t have to take the car out. A good tip, and it would really be a deal.

The smile lasted only a little while after they closed the door. We lived off the tips so if they stiffed it, it really added up. There were only so many deliveries in a night. It was hard to catch up.

I tossed the delivery bag on the pile, and went back to the dishwashing station.

–We don’t have any dishes for a while. You can chill out.

Willy was on another one of his stories. His band had once played with some skinhead band. One of the guys knocked his bass off the stand. He just laughed. There was nothing that Willy could do without getting in a crazy fight.

He claimed that he had once seen the Sex Pistols play.

–I saw them when they were in Atlanta. They were in this bus. And they just showed up to play on this flatbed. All these kids were there. It was totally crazy.

–Sure, Willy. How old were you? Eight.

–I was young. But I saw them. On Old Dixie Highway. It was a secret show.

–That never happened.

–Sure it did.

Pill was a friend of Will’s. Pill played bass in Heathen’s Chapel.

–That used to be my old band. Then Nathan joined as a singer. And they added Pill.

I remember delivering pizza to Nathan. I felt as if I delivering to Mick Jagger. The kid ran upstairs to get his money. He was in this newly decorated loft space. It had looked like a garage apartment that had been extended to take in the full space.

–This is really cool!

–The hell it is.

I wasn’t sure what Nathan had been doing in there. But he was a little dazed.

Willy brought me up to date.

–Heathen’s Chapel is playing downtown. We’re going to go see them.

–Classy!

I took another delivery out. Heathen’s Chapel were riding that wave. And I was only dreaming about it. Dutch promised me that he was going to get things going. We needed someone to play drums. We were drifting crazy.

I looked at the deliveries. One of them was way south. Out of the delivery area. This was Ramon’s doing. He’d always take deliveries that were far away. Sometimes he’d beg me to take it. But it wasn’t worth my time. At that rate, I had trouble making two deliveries in an hour.

–I pay you a salary.

He was daft. I lived off tips. It was that simple.

When I got to the second house, I loved the feeling of being inside. He had decorated the apartment as if it was a castle. Sumptuous carpets. Bookcases lined with old volumes. Tapestry on the walls. And oil painting mounted in frames. This was classy.

I wanted to sit down and have some pizza with him. Anything not to go back to Ramon.

–Let me get you a tip.

I wanted more than a tip. I needed a new life. I could roll up in a corner with one of those books. It would really take my life off the mundane.

–I can get you a beer.

–No, I’m driving.

My mind wandered as I looked around the place.

When I got back to the restaurant, I was lucky, there were more deliveries. I piled them in the car and took off.

At the first place, I got stiffed. As I walked away, I was yelling obscenities. I made sure that he didn’t hear a thing.

The second house was going to make up for it, really make up for it. But I had to wait in the bedroom while he found his money. He had a goddam condom dispenser next to the bed. Hundreds of them. He was ready.

–I’m going to find it.

–Take your time. I’m in no hurry.

–I’ll make this up to you.

I wasn’t about getting too friendly. He looked over to the bed.

–You want to get high.

–I don’t smoke.

–It will be fun.

–No thanks. I really should go.

–Wait. Let me just light one.

–I really am in a hurry.

–I know.

He had an extra five ready to give me, then he pulled it back.

–I’ve been a little bitch with you. Here’s ten.

–Thanks so much.

–Are you sure that there’s nothing that I can get you.

–I do have to go!

The ten made it all worth it. I was ahead of the curve. This was going to end as a good night.

In the car, I thought about the shenanigans that went on in that room. I don’t think that he was making a play for me. He was lonely. He wanted company.

A lot of people loved the idea of the delivery guy in their homes. It gave them the idea that something was happening. They weren’t by themselves anymore. It was a pizza party.

When I got home, I matched the deliveries to a list that I had made. It was easy to drop a bill or make a mistake in change. It was so much worse than working inside since I had to be so many places.

Tonight everything worked out perfectly.

At Restless, I forgot about the job. I just let go. That day was passed. My present was completely separate from the hubbub. I was away from the car. I was away from the pizza.

The next night all that I was thinking about is tips. I was counting dollars and cents in my head.

I started off with a single. I called that even. They could have rounded off. But I took it. It was a good start.

I smiled extra hard for the next customer. I pulled away with a couple plus change. It was going my way.

I was afraid that I was going to get stiffed on my next run. But the dollars were still flowing. Life was good

I held my breath while she found her purse. I held my breath. I looked her in the eye. Bingo. On a roll.

I remembered the cokes at the last minute. It payed off. He payed big. I fingered the bills. Magic.

Next one down and it kept flowing. I had the touch.

It looked scary. He didn't want to cough it up. But he went for it.

The next group collected the money together. This could have been tricky. I got what I needed.

I went over my tip list. I was in the sweet spot. I made extra careful that I didn't lose anything.

The was of bills was feeling thick in my pocket. I was ready to play!

I could feel the gamble. With each door opening, it was a risk. I was putting it all up against the fact that I could increase my tally. Zoom!

Money, money, money. Every second I was in the dough!

I sped away from the store. Zing, zing, zing. Put 'em up and I could knocke 'em down.

It was automatic. They loved me. I loved them.

The night was getting long. I couldn't stop. Hands out!

–Here's your pizza. Nice and hot!

–The drinks.

–Got 'em

–This is for you.

–Thanks.

FOR ME, FOR ME, FOR ME.

I was lost for a second. Got over it. Headed for home.

I was going to make it. I jumped up and down. The numbers were in. Bam, bam, bam.

–What do I have to do for a tip?

Just a few more to end the night. I hung on hoping for that last killer run. Three pies. Drinks.

I ran to the door. The time of truth.

They went back to get the money. Suspense.

I saw the opening. I took the shot. Nothing but net.

A winning night. Ramon counted the money that I owe him. I had really raked in the cash. I was leaving with more than a hundred.

I counted the bills over and over. I held on tight. I didn't want to let go of it. I promised myself that I would spend nothing at Restless. Victory.

–At work, guys tell me all the time that I'm beautiful, and I smile back. I hustle for tips. Carrying the trays is back breaking. I feel it at the end of the night.

>>When I come here, I unwind. I feel like an actress. In the back of my mind, I pretend that I'm going to be discovered. That I'm going to do a movie.

–Have you taken acting lessons?

–I think that I'm too self-conscious.

For tonight I was her audience. She brought a certain poignancy to my night at work. She was ready to walk a wider stage and perform for a larger audience. She just needed to figure out what role suited her best.

When she walked over the bar, she held her head high. She seemed to float in the air as she walked. Her heels clicked on the concrete floor.

–I just want the lights turned in my direction.

I loved her confidence. When she danced, she swirled around on the floor. She knew how hard it would be to break out of the confines of her life. That was her story.

–I've never been much for reading. I wanted to go to college. I may go some day. But I can't apply myself. I'm too excited about life.

If she could take breath and step back. But she didn't really want to recharge. She wanted to plunge full force into the current.

–I'm not a spectator.

–Sometimes you have to see yourself to really focus your act.

–I know who I am. I see what I'm doing everyday. There's more to it than that.

She took a sip from her drink. Every gesture of hers seemed planned.

–I just don't want my dream to destroy. Sometimes I just feel too vulnerable to guys. I get carried away.

She was using her talk with me as a temporary rescue. She was telling me too much for it truly to involve. That way she could keep me at the proper distance.

–I love it here. Especially on the weekday.

–Why do you really come here?

–The guys are different. They give me the attention that I need. A lot of them are gay. And they feed my fantasy about myself. I need to feel that I am larger than life. That way I can project the self that really makes me feel comfortable. That is why I am so drawn to acting. I am sure that I have talent. I really could captivate the screen. And I love to entertain.

–Has anyone taken any picture of you?

–Sure. I don't quite have a portfolio or anything. But there are some good things. I'd love you to see what I've got.

Was she inviting me over to see her photos?

–I'd love to see them.

–I'll get your number, and we'll find the time.

She pursed her lips, then she smiled at me. Then she blew me a kiss and giggled.

–I think that you are my number one fan.

I wished that I could reward her for her performance. I wanted to go along with the

fantasy.

–I try to give you what you deserve.

–That is why I appreciate your friendship.

She got another drink so she wouldn't have to think about another day of work.

The evening at delivery was particularly trying. I started off with a clear route to my destination. When I arrived, I found out that the number was wrong. I went up and down trying to find the right house.

–Maybe it's Tuxedo Circle and not Tuxedo Road.

I road back to the circle, but it had a different name. I studied the box to make sure that the name was right.

There were no phones around. This was deep in residential. Going back to a pay phone was the same as returning to the store. I was puzzled. Anywhere else and I would have had options.

Panic began to set in. I had delayed in leaving. I couldn't make up for my initial error. Now all that was being compounded.

This had happened before. I found myself in a place that had nothing to do with delivery, nothing to do with pizza. I wanted to explore. I could feel my anxiety getting worse. This was to be expected.

At first, I tried to deal with my disquiet as if it was a question of survival. I was out here with one goal, to get the pizza to the house. I needed to unravel my options. Just to go to a phone.

Tonight was different, very different. I was peeling away another layer of my reality. This was the intersection with dreams. I couldn't be delivering a pizza. Not anymore.

I don't deliver pizzas. I'm not making tips. I'm sitting here writing about this past experience. This has nothing to do with what I do now.

I am looking at a sheet of tips from a night on the road. And this fifth address has got me in a quandary. This is the point where I feel paralysis about trying to recall the situation. I am hesitant to write about it.

I am not the writer looking back on the experience. I am the character who has stepped out of his situation. I am looking at a computer screen as the story unfolds. Word to phrase to sentence.

For me, this is the paradise that was promised. It has now come to fruition. I have the words to express that dilemma on Tuxedo Road. I know that Tuxedo Road continues south of Blackland. And I may have forgotten that fact when I was delivering that night. So it required me to step away from the event to see the geography in full.

There is more than that. If in the past time, the driver realizes his mistake and is now rushing to get to the house, I am no longer that driver. I am watching him as he heads to the door. When he gets the tip, I will feel no sense of elation. I will no longer identify with his relief. I won't feel happy. I am not even thinking about him anymore.

I am writing a story. The story began with a delivery driver. I was that driver. Now I am writing a story. It is my story. It is no longer about a driver.

I have discovered that sought-after passageway.

There is no need to go to Restless. There is no need to hang out at a bar waiting for

something to happen. I have made it happen.

If I am the writer, do I have his knowledge plus mine. If I get up from this seat, will I be able to find the kitchen? Do I know this neighborhood? Am I even in Atlanta anymore? Where can I go and be recognized.

I can't imagine going back to the Flaming Pepperoni. It probably isn't even there. I may not even have any money.

–The weirdest thing happened to me at work.

–Weird things happen to me all the time.

–I had this delivery. I couldn't find it. And I totally panicked. I spun on my own panic, over and over again. Then I just disappeared. Totally!

–Yeah, that's happened to me.

–The next thing that I knew I was sitting at a desk, and I was writing my own story.

–We all do that!

–No, really. I was no longer even here. Not here at all. I had migrated to a different place. Do you know what that's like?

She didn't seem to understand. It had nothing to do with her starring role. It was totally the opposite. I had been transported into the unknown.

–I want to sleep with someone tonight. I need to have sex. It's good for me. It balances me.

I wondered why she was telling me this.

–More than coming to this place, it makes me feel like a star. I'm good at it. Guys tell me that. I guess that's why I can't stay with any of them that long. I have to search out more fans.

–Wow!

–I'm not sure why I'm telling you this. That feeling that you were talking about, sort of coming out of your body. That happens to me when I'm having sex. The guys never feel the same thing. I don't let on how deep I am in my own paradise.

I continued to listen.

–I wish that they could understand. Maybe that's why I move on. I don't want to let them in.

I wanted to be a part of it. Everything was coming together.

–It's not like I can really explain. I don't think that I could write about it.

She gave me a strange look. I felt as if I was being picked out.

–I wish that this was your story too. You're so nice. Really nice. You listen really well. I think that really frightens me. We could never sleep together. I'd feel as if you'd have something on me. Like you'd know my secret.

–Are you really going to go off with someone tonight?

–I told you that I was.

–This is all hypothetical.

–No. It's real. That guy over there. We talked. He bought me my last drink.

–But he's been watching us sitting together.

–I told him that I didn't think of you that way. Besides, are you really interested in me. I'm really boring.

She was turning on the charm. I wanted to reach out to her.

–I’ll tell you about it next time that I see you.

–Don’t you feel as if you’re sapping your energy. Wasting it all on a haphazard encounter.

–He’s going to give me what I want.

–How do you know?

–He’s a dirty guy. Just the way that he rubbed against me. I could feel it.

I watched them head out together.

The next night, we were slammed. Orders everywhere, in and out of the area.

–Ramon, we can’t keep taking orders out of the area.

–I need to make my money.

–It’s not efficient. It’s better to work our customers and make them happy. If we go outside of the delivery area, no one is happy. Everyone gets their pies late. It helps on the short term. But it cuts into business. Next time, they’ll call someone who can get them a pizza in a half an hour.

–We need the extra time to really bake our pies.

I knew that wasn’t true. My pizzas were in hot bags. But I could feel them losing that crisp freshness as I drove along. Maybe my customers were all so trashed that it didn’t make a difference.

I was getting tips, but everything went so slow. And outside the area, I was having trouble finding the addresses. I actually stopped with a map for ten minutes. Then I picked up the pace.

–It’s not working, Ramon.

As the orders piled up, he actually turned down a couple that were so far away. Some were actually much closer to the other store. I felt that he had understood my reasoning.

She wasn’t out that night. The next night I met Willy, Adele, and his sister. Adele and Willy were something of an item. From the moment that I saw her, I felt that she had star quality.

–Ramon’s going to hire Adele.

We were going to see Heathen’s Chapel.

–I’m so excited.

His sister was still in high school. It was a treat just to get out. Pill rode with us. She sat next to him and couldn’t help staring.

They played in an old hotel on Cone Street. The sound echoed in the hall.

Nathan was his usual dramatic self. Like a snake, he glided across the stage. Pill stood in the back and looked cool. Kelly made eyes at him all the time.

After the show, Kelly and Pill were in a corner kissing on each other. Willy and I were talking about the show. Dutch was supposed to come, but he had something else going on.

–Are you going to play again?

–Soon. We’ve got some shows lined up on Spring St. We just have to resolve the drummer situation.

–I thought that Dutch was going to play with you.

–He was. But he still hasn’t got his drum kit out of hock.

–I know a drummer.

–That would be cool. The drummer in Heathen’s Chapel is good.

–The whole band is great. I wish that I could have kept on. I wasn’t of that level.

–It’s fun doing something.

–If you ever need a bass player, I’m your man.

–I’ll keep that in mind.

Adele had been talking to Nathan.

–He told me that I should start a band. How about it Willy.

–He just wants to get in your pants.

–Not everybody’s like you.

Willy and Adele seemed to stick together like glue. In the car they were making out in the back. Kelly stayed back to hang out with Nathan.

–Where are you going?

–I’m heading to Restless.

–We want to come.

Adele was insistent.

–Just drop us off at my place.

She lived in Midtown. I dropped her and Willy off, and headed for the club.

Ramon actually hired Adele to work as a waitress. It was great having her around. When we weren’t busy, Ramon had all these odd jobs for us to do. I didn’t mind working in the kitchen, but I wasn’t hired to help refurbish the restaurant. But working with Adele and Willy made it fun.

Willy had already become a buddy of mine. So it was hard getting pissed off at him. But on the days that Adele was off, he’d tell me about all these girls at school that he was trying to get to. He was studying art. He thought all of this was part of his experience.

Occasionally, Adele and Willy would get in fights. She’d come to me with stories. I’d always encourage them to get back together. If I hadn’t said things, they probably would have split up.

Ramon and Adele had a falling out about a month after she was working there. She said that the tips weren’t enough. She also asked for more hours.

–I can always get another job.

–It’s not going to be as friendly as here.

–They’re not going to make me paint the walls and other such shit.

She agreed to stay a little longer.

–If I go back to school, my parent are going to give me some money.

She was from a well-to-do suburban family who sent her to Catholic school. Now she was rebelling. She was trying to accommodate herself to her role on the stage. She could do it better than anyone. A few acting lessons, and her name would one day be in lights.

The more that Willy got out of line, the more that Adele would sashay through the restaurant. She had enough charm for a thousand girls, and she had white hot fire. There was no stopping her. Willy couldn’t contain her. And he was being such a fuck up.

After she left the restaurant, their days together were numbered.

–I fucked Edie last night. She was a cool one. It’s all sex by numbers with her. A little

kissing. She goes down on you. A little heave ho. Then she really turns it on. And that's it.

–You seem to know here pretty well.

–We got together a few times when I was with Adele.

–You are a dick!

–A boy's got to have fun.

–You should have stayed with Adele.

–She left me.

–You treated her like shit.

–She liked that. She told me that she wanted a more dangerous guy. I think that her and Nathan got together.

–No way. You're just telling yourself that so you can get off the hook.

–I'm telling it like it is!

I knew for a fact that Adele had never been with Nathan. Even though she teased Willy, she loved him. And he had really hurt her.

The next time that we were slammed, Ramon was back to his old ways.

–I told you that I wasn't going to take anymore orders out of the area. I'll take this one. But this is the last.

–I pay you well. Why are you complaining?

I knew that I'd be making more at Pizza Hut or the new place that opened on Roswell Road.

I got in the car and accepted the duty.

When I got back to the shop, we were up to the ceiling in orders. Since I had been away so long, things really backed up. Ramon couldn't be told. I rushed the orders to the car.

My customers started to complain. The tips were down. When I got back some of the order were over an hour old.

–Just make sure that you don't take anymore orders outside the area.

I explained to the customers why things were so late. They were all glad to get the pizzas.

–We like the Pep the best.

–Great!

I wish that the complement was for me. Ramon was lucky. He got good dough from the company.

When I arrived back, I saw an address that I didn't recognize. When I looked it up, I found that it wasn't in the area.

–I am not taking this pizza.

–You want to keep your job.

–You agreed to no orders out of the area.

–Take it, or you're fired.

–I'll be back to pick up my check.

I walked out on a busy Friday. Then next Monday, I was hired at the new place Value Pizza. Good riddance, Flaming Pepperoni!

My only regret was that Willy had been such a dick to Adele. I loved hanging out with them all. I never heard anyone talk of her separate from him. It was always Willy and Adele. So

it was probably a good thing that she had escaped. Now everyone knew who she was so it wasn't a total loss.

I saw her at the grocery store on day.

–I'm learning how to cut hair. They've got me working at the salon until I get my license. It's going to work out. I'm also going to do some modeling.

–It's great that things are working out!

–Really, they are.

–We'll have to hang out sometime. You know where to find me.

Willy and I continued to hang out at Restless. There was a whole new crew with him, and I got to know all of them.

As I continued to deliver pizzas, I would get just as lost as ever. That was all part of the game. I had committed myself to setting a foundation for my life. If this was to be it for now, that was OK.

I was sitting on the patio of Restless trying to forget it all!

LUCKY'S: WILLOW AND FRIENDS

The music invited listeners to a new community. It challenged the American institutions of family, church, school, work, and government. It spoke a different social order, one actually based on freedom. It was militant in its stance and jubilant in its vision. It offered hope to the desperate. And it made desperation a pose so that its exponents might make their condition an argument for a changed world.

They battled for places to live. They scraped around for resources to keep themselves alive. They dressed in hand me downs. They created a do it yourself culture. They made their own music. They recorded it themselves. They exchanged tapes with each other. They created fanzines. They told their to all who would listen.

This was the beginning of a transformation. It was an economy based on sharing, not hoarding. It was truly the right of the citizen that were asserted!

To be successful, the new explorers needed a home base from where they could stage their cultural revolution. They'd squat in abandoned buildings. They'd huddle together in their mini-utopias. They'd find a line where they could scam electricity. They rigged a hose for running water. They were now living in the twentieth century. But they welcomed a more prosperous future.

They believed their meager efforts would be the first step in trying to challenge the gluttony of the American war machine. They were aghast at American intervention in Central America. They worked to expose imperial adventurism throughout the world.

Their high-sounding dreams were a bridge to beneficial effects in the immediate environment. They worked to become active in the community. They collected garbage. They tried to help homeless adults. They provided room for runaways. They wanted to do their part to make it happen.

In Atlanta, the idealism kept them together. Even if they couldn't do big thing, they could try. Being away from the cruelty of the world made their place a comfort.

She had left her home because she found the ways of her parents too rigid. They hadn't

been inordinately strict. In fact, they blessed her journey downtown. They were a little afraid for decision. But they weren't going to stand in her way.

Her imposing Mohawk hair cut frightened away anyone who tried to harass her. And that was usually enough. And they accepted her into their home. She welcomed the equality of the group. It was something that she was not used to. For most of the time, there was no conflict. Everyone pitched in to maintain the orderliness of the place.

–I never wanted to have sex with anyone there. I was trying to get away to that kind of life. One of the guys had a crush on me. He was always gentle. But there was another guy, Brent, and he was jealous of my friend.

>>He became mean:

–If you're going to have sex with him, you have to have sex with all of us.

She continued her story:

–I told him that I was having sex with anyone. I was there for the community. He was always angry. He drank a lot. I think that he took a lot of speed. The next time that he cornered me he was with a couple of his friends. The group had wanted to throw them out of the house. But they had become aggressive so everyone back off.

>>This time they had their chance to get back at everyone. They held me down and forced themselves on me. Every one of them. As they pushed me down, I could feel a nail in my back

–Don't tell anyone what we are doing or we will kill you.

After that she stopped talking. She stayed, but she kept to herself. Her assailants eventually left. But she still felt uncomfortable. Finally, she just left.

–I couldn't take it anymore. Everything that I had fought for seemed without a purpose. I couldn't stay there anymore.

>>I rushed home. My parents took me back. After about a year, I went to work in my father's office. I still missed my place. I wish that it hadn't have happened the way that it did. They stole my soul.

Willow never felt comfortable amidst the fashion crowd of Lucky's. Although she could hold her own against any of the other girls, it just wasn't her style. She could take the catty attitudes of some of the more aggressive girls.

On a Tuesday night, Restless wouldn't have that much of interest. So I'd start out at Lucky's. Willow would be at a table with DJ and Gisele. I spent most of my time talking to Willow. Gisele would spend most of her time just listening. Willow did everything that she could to include her friend. Gisele preferred to sit quietly with a drink.

When Willow hopped up to dance, I felt the pressure to speak to Gisele.

While DJ was the only one dancing, Gisele sat complacently in her seat. I felt that I didn't have much to say to her. I did try. But she wasn't all that home in Lucky's. Willow told me that she was already spoken for. He never went out. And they'd hang out on the weekends. But he had to work nights so this gave her the chance to get out. It was just that she wasn't ready to strut her stuff.

–I think that she's afraid if she draws too much attention that she might get tired of Bennet. It's not like he's that captivating. So she consoles herself by sitting in her chair and listening to the music.

Her presence was a total contrast to the party-goers of Restless. Sure Lucky's got pretty crazy on Friday and Saturday. But on a Tuesday night, Gisele could hold court as if she was at home in her garden.

–Doesn't the alcohol get her excited?

–Not really. Sometimes she's just drinking coke. So that's not even an issue.

At times, I felt that if I talked to her that I might crack her glass doll composure. I'd wait obediently by the table in the hope that Willow would return forthwith.

Gisele had loads of natural charm. Too much for the denizens of sin. I wondered what it was like to live like her totally untested. She had committed to a life before she ever had a chance to fly.

–You can't really assume things about her.

–I'm not saying that I do. But sometimes experience has a way of upsetting out assumptions.

–She's had her share of heartache.

–That's not the only way to expand your perspective.

–She reads and goes to movies.

I imagine her curled up with a romance novel.

–You are a little judgmental. After all, you give all these other girls a chance. Just look at her. She's a classic beauty.

She seemed almost perfect. Maybe too perfect. It wasn't up to me to dirty her aprons. She lived a different sort of existence. The drama in her life was already so momentous that everything that followed was a welcome respite.

–She's not the daughter of a serial killer.

–Nothing like that. But what do we all want anyway. We want to be happy.

–I could never imagine her hanging out at Gotham with you.

–I don't go to Gotham anymore.

–I hardly do either. But you know what I mean.

–She never needed that out and out rebellion. It's enough of a challenge to her everyday life to come her on the weekdays and have a drink.

Why had Willow settled for this. Sure, her life wasn't the same as Gisele. But she had accepted such a staid world.

I realized that the trauma of the warehouse had been too much to get over. It was worse than shocking. She had to return to a place that was more serene. Otherwise, the violence would eat away at her.

I realized that it was all about Willow. I had built up this image of her. The punk queen. She had given definition to this image. The guys at Gotham all knew this. And a few guys were envious that she occupied such a premier spot. She really questioned all their beliefs about punk culture. She had become a celebrity. She had upset their negativity. And they wanted to crush that.

I had never known what had happened. The glory days of Gotham faded. I couldn't hang on in the same way. Maybe I too had succumbed to the glamor of The Cube. Those early days with Courtenay had been a certain thrill. Except for Willow, there were only an occasional girl at Gotham who had that daring. Restless spoke of a continual magic. It suggested that the night

could whisk you away to a longed-for paradise. And the sumptuousness of Lucky's really did make it seem as if we were in movieland.

I guess that was also the basis for my disenchantment. I wanted to be the revolutionary. But I also wanted celebrity. And that was the error of Lucky's. It recognized that it could gain authenticity by keeping us freaks along for the ride. It was the show that the tourists demanded on the weekends. We were all ready to perform on cue.

Willow didn't have to worry about that game. She had tried the rebellion. And it rebelled against her. So she didn't risk getting caught like us.

—Sometimes I just extend my hair the way that I used to do it. I could do it if I really wanted to. But there's no point. I don't want to be one of the weird. I'm happy just being myself.

There was no challenge for her

—What keep you going>?

—You have to know.

—What?

—Isn't it the same for you? You come here to see someone.

—Like whom?

—A guy. And I hope that he will notice me. But he has all the girls around him. And what do I have?

—You're real.

And what did I have? I couldn't burst her bubble in the hopes that I would be the one that she came to see. She had already told me why I came her. I couldn't tell her the story of KÉ. This was her moment. I came to see her. And she came to see Red. I accepted that. I didn't want to become him. I didn't want her to look my way.

The two of us kept showing up on the weekdays. And we knew that we'd keep this conversation going. And on the weekends, I'd throw myself into the action. And she would watch him. It was that simple.

Red was a doorman. And he only worked Thursday through Saturday. So he was the subject of conversation on his off nights. He wasn't into the music that much. He wasn't up on the intrigue. He just had long hair and a joyous face. He was a suitable guide for the suburban girls who snuck into the club in the hope of sampling the scary city. But he was just as much a part of the suburbs as they were. He never had the conflict that had brought Willow downtown.

She liked him for his simplicity. Henceforth, she wanted things simple. Who could blame her? She was purer of heart than any of the girls who circled Red. But he was never going to pry himself away from his satellites. He believed that he was in the center of the action. And that was my ultimate disappointment. It made perfect sense that the girls with the big hair-dos found delight in Red. But Willow's attraction was a little disconcerting. I didn't even try to do a thing about that.

Part of me realized that she was doing this all for my benefit. She remembered those days when we were both at Gotham. And if I was watching her, she was watching me. And I our gazes never coincided. But we still shared something deep. When I left, I took that question with me. If I fell for Willow, I could never bring the question up again. I had moved to the next logical place in the journey. She had stopped that search. She was lovely. More than lovely.

But her appeal seemed even greater as long as she directed her attention towards Red. That gave her a real story. And it made my longing more wondrous. To turn inward would end the passion of the moment. I loved the glorious uncertainty of it all. So I waited at Lucky's for that special angel. And she helped me along in my quest. I embraced the tragedy of the moment because that made it seem more poetic. That was the song of the moment.

I hate to think that I had missed an opportunity. Willow as much as told me there was none. Just as I admired her in her spotlight, she encouraged me in my investigation. We both stayed entertained by Lucky's

DJ danced through it all. She seemed like one of the gang. Maybe a little too much eye makeup. It always seemed splotched. That gave her a magic from afar. On the weekdays, her presence added to the effect that something was actually going on. She wanted to push it all to the limit. She made up for Willow's carefulness. In DJ and Gisele, Willow marked the two sides of herself. The other girls never thought of themselves that way. But they served their queen well.

DJ never was able to take her rebellion to its apex. So she languished in a vague anarchy. She compensated by trying to be shocking. I was pretty sure that she had already gone home with Red. This was probably on a night that Willow was not around. DJ was anything but discreet. But she did want to protect Willow from that ultimate realization about Red. He was there to take advantage of the situation. He wasn't the sort to turn down an appealing girl. So it all seemed quite obvious.

One only had to look at Red to see that he represented everything counter to Willow's image. She didn't need DJ's example to convince. In some ways it was terrible that she would never get the ultimate corroboration. It was almost as if Willow had been absent that day just for that reason. Ultimately DJ served no other purpose but to break the hearts of the more naive girls. It was strange that those very girls took her into their confidence.

DJ was definitively Willow's demon. For her, the last vestiges of punk were her way to act out her worst excesses. Often, there was no pretense of her part. If she wanted something, she would just take it. She lived in an eternal now. Even a promise was just a bunch of words uttered in the heat of the moment.

Her dance style was a strange mix of someone in the throes of death and an exotic dancer. If not for her jerky motions, it might have seemed rather seductive. But the ultimate appeal of a seduction means that the final stage seems more exciting than the first. She seemed lost in the whole process as if she was seducing herself.

Only a newcomer would really get taken in by her act. But she recognized each step as a further development in her overall persona. When she was done, there would be no technique absent from her arsenal. Even when she seemed grossly outmatched, she would find a way to get what she wanted.

—One day, I'll get paid for just being myself.

—Like a lab rat?

—No, as an actress. Can't you tell how talented I am?

I didn't want to deny her dream. But I couldn't imagine what movies could actually make use of her talent.

—Sometimes when I have sex, I can feel the lights blaring on my body. I feel so warm

inside.

–Have you actually made blue movies?

–No, silly. But I am good. I’ve learned how to do what I have to do.

She used the sleek curves of her body to her advantage.

DJ lived hand to mouth. When she couldn’t find a place to stay, she’d turn to her friends for help. Willow might have intervened on her behalf. But she was living at home. It was up to Gisele to take care of her now. But Gisele’s patience was being worn thin.

–If I can get a guy to hep me out, I don’t mind a little trade-off.

If she was on the street, what did she have to trade? She was working. How could she manage to get to work if she didn’t have a proper residence.

–Eventually, I’ll find the right guy. We’ll help out each other.

At this point, there were so many willing to help out, that she didn’t know where to stop. She could pick and choose her allies.

When she was up close, her eye make up seemed even more overdone. There were no contours whatsoever. There was something disheveled about her whole personality. Her style was a direct affront to Willow’s impeccable neatness.

The devil just let go!

DJ was proof negative against all my theories and manifestos. It wasn’t as if she was here just to have fun. Fun was just such work. This alley cat knew that she would land on her feet. For each trick that she performed, she believed that she had displayed such ingenuity that this truly separated from the less fortunate than her. She felt that she had a cause. But there was nothing idealistic about her struggle. Even if she had big plans, she saw it all as a right that was prepared by the day to day performances out at night. She didn’t need an audience to make her feel that her fans owed her a living. If she saw someone else doing the same thing, she’d call them delusional.

In many ways, she was just dirty! And she embraced this perverseness. She loved raw pleasure. Some of it was memorable. Most of it was fleeting. She took it for what it was. There was no restraint on her desires. She was totally subject to her appetites. Worse than that, she could never satisfy her hunger. Although it all seemed so physical, it played itself out in a fragmented and abstract fashion. When guys were devoted to her, she kept them at a distance. And her only lifeline was what they could give her. She wouldn’t hesitate to break a promise or betray a commitment if gratification lay in her immediate vicinity.

–I’m not cheating anyone but myself. All bets are off. Besides, he know that it doesn’t mean anything except sex. And that’s not been very good.

Thus, she challenged her lovers to the impossible. She would pick and choose on the basis of their fundamental frailty. And she would conveniently dump them when their weaknesses became a hindrance.

–If you can’t give me what I need, I can find someone else who will.

–No one can give you what you need.

If her actions were more circumspect, it would appear that she was trading up. On the other hand, when immediate satisfaction was the order of the day, nothing could slow her down, even the realization that was destroying her own plans. Occasionally, she would try to be cautious since she realized that calamity was just down the road. But there was very little

planning at these moments.

If Willow had sought out community, she resolved herself to this loose confederation. There was no longer a hope for a loftier purpose. DJ had replaced that vision. If she challenged the rules of society, it was because she wanted to do whatever whenever it pleased. There was nothing dynamic in her approach. She wasn't a powerful force churning with excess energy. Nothing was accumulated, nothing was saved.

She knew how to play dirty! The suburban girls still had the last vestiges of their moral world to uphold. They used their charms like a full wallet to spend at a sale. But DJ had her conniving ways to apply against these grand dames. And nothing could hold her back. Against the brutal insistence of her sexuality, the dainty queens only suffered humiliation. She'd nail a score in the bathroom to draw him off the scent of another girl. And once he got a taste, he'd want to commit to the whole package. Even if it wasn't going to mean another night, her only goal was to get ride out of this place. And she knew tricks that worked every time.

Sex was the banner of her revolution. Although it was really quite conventional in its intent, she appeared so shocking that suburban norms were quite upset. If she needed to make a quick exit, she had all the skill to complete the transaction. If she felt particularly wronged, she wouldn't hesitate to dip into his pocket. After all, these johns had more than enough to go around. She deserved something extra for her troubles.

Willow's tranquility only gave free rein to the storm of DJ. Willow would never be around when it really came down. So she pleaded innocence amidst the storm. And Gisele was proof enough that these impulses could be resisted. But was her Bennet all that.

What made Lucky's so pervasive was the return visit. Everyone learned that sleepwalk shuffle so that they never had to make contact with their worst mistakes. Still a latecomer, DJ loved being in the middle of all the rigamarole.

–I know how to take care of myself.

–You seem to be having loads of fun when no one is here.

–It's all about freedom. That's all that I've ever wanted.

At this point, could Willow's story show any sign of progress. She pretended that she wanted Red. But she needed more than forgetting. She needed purification. And he seemed barely to understand the meaning of regret.

–You can't hate yourself for something that you never did.

DJ tried to pump her with advice. If she really listened to DJ, she would be up for grabs every night.

–I don't look down on what you do. I just can't act that casual.

–I'm serious down deep. I just can't find any guys that are right. So I just have fun when I can. You need to have some fun.

Even in love, all these boys seemed so hard. That's why she could live in this fantasy about Red.

–Do you ever come out just for one person?

–And I end up leaving with another. In the time since I last saw that first guy, he's had a whole history. He's got other fish to fry and so do I.

–There's never any thought about what happened the last time that you were here.

–Of course. I think about some guy that I want to get with. And then I see him the next

night out, and I make my move.

–I'd find that wrong.

–It may be wrong for you. But it's the most fun for me.

DJ wasn't a very good teacher for Willow. And Willow could hardly provide counsel for DJ. When new guys came in, they would both look them over. For Willow, it would be new types who hadn't given in to all the games. For DJ, it would be new guys to convert over to her side. The more the merrier. It just made her unstoppable.

–I go out, and I feel way more than I am. I feel like a goddess. It feels almost infinite. The guys that I want at this moment. The guys that want me that I don't know about. The new guys who are going to come in here and take me away. It doesn't stop.

–I'm feeling sick just hearing about it.

–You have to dive in the water.

–I want someone who cares for me now and maybe a year from now.

–It doesn't happen like that. There are too many distractions. You just have to take what you can when you can. The only thing that you can rely on is the music.

She sang along with the music so that she could feel that she was part of something. This was greater than anything that she ever felt with punk. The music said that she was special. She liked this fairy-tale connection.

She'd be dancing on the weekend, and she'd draw a crowd. She'd wait for them all to approach. When she felt that love tingle, she knew that she had the one.

–Guys realized something with punk. They could get girls to do what they wanted. So they didn't have to put up with the shit. So why should we?

–I always thought that there was more to it.

–There is. But all that happens at night.

–What about a true friend. Maybe a life together.

–If a guy can get a super-witch, why would he be satisfied with one of us. We have to take what we can when we can. We have to learn what to do to make a guy feel good. And we have to teach guys how to make us feel good.

–It doesn't sound like a school. It's more like training animals.

–That's who we are. There's nothing better than slopping around in some dirty nasty sex. Save your platitudes for Sunday school. This is real.

–I don't want it now. I never wanted it then.

–If the world's going to end now, we have to be a little fatalistic. Sometimes I want the guy to take me from behind. Spontaneous so I don't see a thing! That's ideal!

–That sounds gross.

–It sounds good. Like a hearty meal. Just give it to me.

DJ spoke the way of constant stimulation.

–I never want it to stop except when I'm asleep.

That was the key to her dancing. She was always wound up. She didn't want to release. She wanted it all to pull tighter.

–Bang! Bang!

–What?

–Tell me about a guy that you like, and it will only get me more excited.

–How can you be trusted?

–I can't. Unless you understand my drives, and you account for them.

She was like a monster that coveted certain death.

There was even less of a place from me in DJ's world.

In a contrary to fact intervention, the usually silent Gisele engages me in dialogue.

–Willow is never going to say it, but someone has to defend DJ. You create this negative image of her to justify your own feeling of superiority. Down deep, you're probably upset that she won't sleep with you.

–That has nothing to do with it.

You have no understanding of her situation. Guys around here are pricks.

–But she treats sex as it's just picking up a burger.

–We all have needs.

If you satisfy yourself in that way, you have no grasp of anything else. You don't recognize how to enjoy life.

–Without someone to love, life is empty.

–Being part of a community means way more than that.

–Not everyone's an artist. Immediate acknowledgment is important if you want to establish anything long term.

–For DJ, it's all now. And it's going to stay like that because the pressure for stimulation just becomes greater and greater.

–We all hunger.

–If we're lucky, we don't spend all day thinking about how we get out next meal.

–We get a job, and someone else worries about that for us.

–That view of society makes it sound just as desperate.

–How would you have it be different?

–It is important to appreciate the creative search.

–She does. She feels it in her body. She works it out with guys. How is that different than you?

–I like to believe that I have a serious purpose.

–Being a voyeur. Staring at people. Getting into their business. Spreading gossip. You collect girls yourself. You just maintain a comfortable distance so no one can touch you. You act uninvolved. You're like a killer who soaks the life from his victims.

–That is such an exaggeration. I leave here and I don't think about it much again.

–Why do you make all these notes? You're in it deeper than we are. I've got a life. I'm going to get married. You're still waiting for that special girl to walk in. Until then, you can't even deal with the girls that you do meet here. You give so little of yourself. And you want us all to confess our dark secrets to you. In DJ's case, she tries to avoid your interrogation. So you make up things based on what you see. It's a real scandal.

Gisele's hesitation to throw herself into the heat was the same sort of hunger as DJ's. She preferred to admit that her emotions were different. But her lover broke her down in just the same way. She could turn her emotions on and off to suit him. But she never took a chance so she didn't know how things really felt.

–That's bull shit. You don't know my history.

–So you're exploring art in Italy.

–We aren't all born rich. We can't all go to college. There are other ways to learn.

Gisele had come to recognize the power of her own desire. But she couldn't break it down into anything manageable. It was all or nothing. Since DJ couldn't get the all, she made due with nothing. It was all pretty much the same.

–Or maybe I make do with everything.

DJ had her own philosophy. It wasn't just the enjoyment of the moment.

–If I never come down, I get closer to an even greater pleasure.

It was all about waiting for something to happen. She just wanted it to be a big event.

–Maybe it just passes you by because you're too distracted by other things. You see the little volcanoes. But the big one just slips out of your view.

–I think that I've seen my share of exploding volcanoes.

–Then you're missing the exploding stars.

–That's my story.

In what world, could she make anything more of her scenes. Who would pay her to perform for an audience if it wasn't for sex.

–I could be a porn star!

–Could you? They really have to have sex.

–No big deal. I could do it once and take the money.

–You'd have to do it loads of times for the money. In really bad movies with terrible conditions. And you'd be just the same. You'd be waiting for that big pay off.

–I could do something a little less ambitious. Somehow I could get paid for sex.

–Is that how you want it to be?

–I'm not going to do it for guys that I don't like. I'll let them watch, but they're not going to touch me.

–If the imagination is primed, they don't have to touch you. They can get to know your soul.

–They don't know the inside.

–The inside that makes you tick like a clock.

In a sense, DJ was mocking me. Everything that she did was the opposite of my search. There was never any hesitation on her part. She was proof against any higher purpose. Any and all guys were game. And she knew how to make it happen every time. No girl was safe with her guy. That was just enough of a motivation. She knew how guys really liked it. As their prom queens tried to keep it prim and proper, DJ could get really nasty. She exploited the rawness of desire. For her, there was no stopping for any pretense. It was the pure hunger of the animal. She pushed and pushed and pushed until there wasn't an ounce of will left. Even at the point, she pushed further because she knew that it was all about admitting that there was nothing else. She knew that the proper girls couldn't last this understanding. They would always pull back before giving themselves completely. They'd just get drunk. Or let the guy do it to them. But they couldn't follow through to that place where nothing else mattered. At that point, they would risk total abandonment. If they couldn't take it to that same point all the time, he'd end up going elsewhere. So they'd hide behind flowers and stuffed animals, all these fake expressions of caring. When there was only one thing that he wanted.

–You’ve done a pretty good job of explaining her philosophy. She sounds like the whore of Babylon.

–I think that she would be proud with the portrayal.

–Are you proud with it?

–I’m not even proud thinking that way. If you push yourself that hard, it exhausts all your other resources.

–Are you really afraid that it just makes you more capable. She has a real story to tell. You’re the imposter.

–What is she going to say? That it’s great to get fucked up and just fuck. How profound!

–All your art, all your philosophy is just a giant fuck. It’s a way to keep women in line. And she’s resisting that. You can’t own her.

–But she can’t even own herself.

–You talk about a new society, but you’re more possessive than anyone. It’s all about the gratification of the self. You do that by your judgements about others. That is how you get off.

Getting off—it was all about breaking the complex into this simple moment—this immediacy.

DJ didn’t want to let go of the narrative. She felt the urgency of her task. Willow had lost the trail so she no longer deserved the same degree of attention.

–If you keep your life focused on stimulation and arousal, that’s all your going to get.

–I’m not ready to be lectured.

Sex was a recreation for her.

–It’s how I get my exercise. That’s why I’m in such good shape.

Indeed, she had programmed herself like a machine. She was waiting for someone to flip the switch.

–I love my life.

Did she really? Or was she lost on her carousel?

Indeed, it was all about the little thing. But she couldn’t see any of that. It was all or nothing.

–This one guy took some pictures of me the other night. He said that I could do some modeling.

–So did you sleep with him.

–That’s not the point.

–It is the point.

–I don’t need two dads.

–You never told me about yourself.

–You’re not getting soft on me. I’ve got a guy for tonight.

–I don’t think that we’re made for each other.

–Keep thinking that way. You don’t really have enough money for me.

–I never thought that it was about that.

–You want to play Daddy. That requires some cash.

Willow had her own version.

–Nothing phases the girl. The worst part of all is when she tries to get in your head. As if you’ve done something wrong. She doesn’t know what it’s like to say no. But it’s not as if she’s

protecting all that much. That's why she needs Gisele and me. We help her hold it together.

DJ kept hoping for the big payoff. Then she could pretend that we totally self-made.

–Where the hell are you? I need you here right now

–Who the hell do you think that you are talking to?

–Who are you with.

There were voices in the background.

On Wednesday night, Willow wasn't there with her friends.

–You're in a band!

Her name was Isis. She seemed like an exotic princess. I wanted her more than anything, but she was with a guy that night. She was with her friend Ruby. Ruby smiled at me.

This is not Isis's story!

We talked about music for a while. Isis and Ronny snuck into one of the private room. They were gone a long while. Ruby gave me those eyes. The next thing that I knew I was kissing her. Kisses like chocolates, all rich. I wanted to believe.

–You're no different than DJ

–It's not like that at all.

Each kiss seemed to be an adventure in its own way. The room spun around. And I moved along with it. I held her in my arms

–I like to know a guy before I go home with him. I want to be respected. Not like one of these frou-frou girls that we see around here.

I laughed at her joke.

She wasn't out on Thursday. There were a few people that I knew at Lucky's. I stayed until one then I headed over to Restless.

I thought about seeing Ruby again. She promised to be there on Friday.

On Friday, I arrived a little late. The crowd was slow to show up. When I finally found Ruby she was in the corner by the upstairs bar. She was kissing Damien. That was enough of a let down for me.

–You should have listened to DJ. Nothing lasts around here. Just enjoy what you get.

SUZI SHINES

–DJ has no sense what is going on.

Suzi wanted to distinguish her vision from that of Lucky's resident mistress of the dark.

–She's like the queen of trash. It's not about the sex. Not really. It's all about the drama.

She was telling me this as she cuddled some new boy.

–So what's he going to be in three months. Begging in little Five Points for money.

–He look cute.

–Of course he does. Can he stand on his head? Can he sit on his hind legs and catch food in his teeth.

The drama wouldn't last with this guy.

Tere was something almost boyish in her look. Maybe Moreau paling around from *Jules and Jim*. The ultimate waif! All the wonder of a child star. So full of precocity. Legally an adult, she seemed to provoke a slew of male fantasies.

–Every guy wants to rescue me from the ugly world.

She played the peaks and valley of her own emotions the same way that she played her paramours. And it always seem as if she was just escaping the clutches of an abusive parent.

–My life is not a Dickens novel.

–But it could be.

–I’ve been in control of things for the last five years.

If that’s what she called it.

–I’m not stealing purses. I’m not begging for money.

How did she keep herself together?

–I’ve got ways.

If she ever really got ahead, it seemed as if there was someone there to take it all from her.

There was a time that she and Taylor seemed like twins. He seemed like the perfect foil for her. Surprisingly, Suzi saw right through him.

–There is no way that we’d ever be together. He takes himself too seriously. He thinks he’s some kind of hip hop master.

Perhaps, her wisdom was based on an actual experience.

–Where’s that guy that you were with.

–I got tired of him. I think that I took your advice.

–Advice how?

–I imagined him homeless on Moreland Avenue. I couldn’t get that picture out of my head. I don’t think that he had a cent to his name.

–It’s not good to feel unhappy.

We left it at that for now.

–I’m going to go dance. Do you want to come?

–I’m going to look for June.

Suzi had her own stories about the North Avenue house. Everyone there had a sense of self-importance. Their pretense made Taylor seem like a soft touch.

–Claude was the worst. He imitated Immanuel to a T.

–So you fell for it.

–Immanuel was always such a card. He was playing these mental games. Too much of a social critic ever to be a guru.

There was something missing in the story. I knew that I would find out.

When I came back upstairs, Suzi and DJ were at a table.

–What were you doing with her?

–We’re becoming friends.

–Oh, really.

–I think that we need to work together

The two girls spent the night comparing lists. It seemed as if they were working as a team each following the same sequence.

–I never knew that you were with him too.

Suzi thought about her original thoughts about DJ. Maybe she wasn’t such an evil princess after all. If it seemed like they were working as a team, they could truly combine their

talents.

DJ was still a little hesitant.

–I don't think that I'm ready for this.

–We could be jumping thing. We'll just wait.

It was uncanny how things progressed between the two of them. Suzi realized that she was messing with fate if she really through her lot in with DJ. Sure they ended up with the same guys, but it was sort of at the opposite ends of the curve. Suzi made it while things were still looking up. Of course, that didn't mean that guys were any nicer to her.

Maybe he'd ingratiate himself to her by giving the ultimate in service

--I'll do anything for you

She'd do anything for the boy under the pretense that he'd cherish her forever.

–That was never me. I'm not going to suck some guy off just so he'll like me.

But you had to wonder about the give and take that got her into her present predicament.

–My bigger weakness was making up things in my mind.

She admitted her failing. Her imagination never stopped. The puzzle wound its way around a more substantial fall.

–I'm only human. And he does look cute.

Under the infrared light of her desire, every oddball warmed up into a leading man.

–I'm not the one popping those flashbulbs.

–I never saw Hollywood calling.

If they hadn't made the call yet, she could always get him down to wardrobe for a make-over. And he'd fit the suitable dream of the moment.

–It's not just me. Any other girl would feel the same way.

–He looks like he sliced up his parents.

–That's kind of charming. Look at the twinkle in his eye.

–Suzi, aren't you afraid that you're next?

The drama could become a lot fiercer.

–You're going to have to impress me quite a bit more if I'm going to take you in.

He was quite demanding. And she really did feel the need to humiliate herself quite a bit if he was going to go her way.

Suzi wasn't all that good at mastering the mechanics of these romantic struggles. But she seemed to have her own recipe for getting what she wanted.

–A girl can't jump into this sort of thing if she isn't going to get a little respect.

Her list of demands was always subject to revision since her imaginary compensations were often far more extensive than her actual rewards. All in all there was a certain amazement how the terms of endearment could so easily be transformed into the most devilish of insults.

–Did you get him to respect you?

–Let's just say that I still respect myself. And I did have fun.

–Can you give me a straight answer?

–I get what I want. I know how to ask for what I want.

–Do you even have to ask?

–Not really. Not with a dirty guy.

It was always back the same thing.

–Does that make you a nasty girl?

–Not really. I've always thought that I had a heart of gold.

She did indeed look the part. If that's how things started out that night, she wasn't going to give up on the harmony of the universe.

–Sometimes when he's with him, I feel like I'm in a different place.

Suzi was offering her theory of the cosmos.

–I am sure that there is some invisible alien demon who has come down here to just to do the evil deed with the women of earth.

–What are you talking about?

This was more than entering a different dimension when she was having sex. She really believe that some entity was making its way into the private world of earth's women.

–I have felt it. It's turning me into some kind of sex machine. That's why I think that DJ is the way that she is. She's been taken over completely. There is only one thing on her mind. That's why she doesn't know how to be with one guy for very long. He can never give her what the alien does.

I wanted to laugh. Suzi was serious about all of this.

–You've made contacts with aliens.

–Like that movie. It's not just me. This thing is affecting a lot of women.

What could I add to this tale?

–I haven't told you the half of it.

What if Suzi related to me every moment of her sexual subjugation? What insight would I get into her philosophy?

For now, she dropped the story of the alien and went about her business. If she could interest an earth boy in her attributes, she could keep the alien at bay.

It was remarkable to recognize the supernatural element to her journey. It added to her sense of mystery. Sill, she seemed rather helpless against these forces.

–It's not just that they have a power over me. Sometimes it's just a matter of brute strength.

The alien force seemed to be a lot more menacing than I had imagined.

–Is this something new for you?

–I think that's how I got so fucked up in the first place.

It wasn't an emotional trauma or bad drugs. She had met her hidden pursuer much earlier in her life.

–I could always tell that something was there.

The demon force became greater.

Suzi's face was still my inspiration. Her smile made it seem as if there was more going on than there actually was. I needed her to offer me that promise. She made my next step all the more obvious.

–Do you really think that I could be in a movie?

She knew the answer to her own question. I had been teasing her. And she took the bait.

–I haven't seen anyone around calling!

–All we'd need is a camera. June can get a camera.

–June?

–You know June! He works at Lucky’s in the movie theater.

–You mean Claude.

–No, June.

RIP had just made his gender-bender classic, and the pressure was on me. I took my motivation from his efforts.

–We need a script.

I could do the music. Very dramatic songs.

–It could be about this girl. And her parents try to imprison her in an asylum. To make her do what they want. Like in those ads on TV.

–What ads?

–Does your daughter take drugs? We can make her well again.

Suzi arranged a meeting for me with June.

–I like your concept.

–It’s actually Suzi’s idea.

–And you’re going to write it.

–Yeah!

–I can borrow a camera from school.

Suzi loved the fact that he was involved.

–He’s going to make me a star. And then he’ll fall in love with me.

–He doesn’t love you now.

–He acts as if he does. But he won’t say it. He say that God won’t let him say it.

–I didn’t know that the Lord had pledged him to silence on that matter. Maybe we could put that in the script.

–Don’t be silly.

–How else can we get him to admit the error of his ways?

–You can’t make fun of him in the movie.

–We are now.

–You are.

Later that night, Suzi seemed in a strange mood.

–Is it the alien?

–I think that it’s June. He was with another girl.

But before the night was over Suzi and June were making out in the theater. The confusion had passed.

–I can’t keep up with you.

–I just get depressed when he’s not with me.

–That’s not good.

–You don’t know what it’s like.

–I’ve tried to get you to tell me.

–I’ve tried. But you have to feel it for yourself.

June and I met again. We had a rough script. We got together with Suzi for some test shots.

–This is going to look really good.

We found a couple of other actors. After a week or so, we had some preliminary scenes.

–This looks really good.

I needed to do more work on the script. One day turned into a whole week. I wanted to get going. But I waited for June to approach me again. Since I hadn't seen him, I assumed that he was with her.

DJ walked over to me at Lucky's.

–Have you seen Suzi?

It had been over two week now, and none of us had seen her.

–I think that she went away.

I got a call from Suzi a week later.

–We need to make the movie.

–What? Where have you been? Have you and June been hiding?

–I was inside!

She was taking the movie too seriously.

–I was in an asylum. It was just crazy. I have stuff for the script. We need to meet.

They had taken her away. Things were spinning out of control.

–June and I had a fight. A bad fight. And I caught him with that other girl again. He said that nothing had happened. But I knew that he had been kissing her. Then he went off on me.

I listened to her story.

–Suzi, you can't even keep a job. You're trying to live with me. It's not going to wok.

–You said that you'd never been with a girl like me. That it was special. We were meant to be together.

–I know that I said it. But then I realized that you were such a fuck up.

His insults piled up. He was making up for his own inadequacies. He always wanted to have the charm of Immanuel. Really, he was not artist. He just knew how to copy the ideas of others and pretend that they were his own. If he moved on to another girl, he could further enhance his reputation. He could keep believing that he was a Fellini.

Suzi couldn't take it. He had unloaded completely. He had used her. And he had been totally heartless.

–I took some pills. Maybe too many pills. They were my mother's. They had to take me to the hospital. When they fixed me up, I got sent to this clinic. That didn't last for long.

>>They told me that I was a threat to myself. They kept me sedate. They watched me all the time. They tried to program me.

–You left.

–They couldn't keep me against my will any longer. Sure I had tried to kill myself. And that allowed them to keep me in. But beyond that, I was on my own. So I walked out.

This was a real horror story. We needed to use her material in the new script. Of course, we'd need a new camera person. And we'd need a camera.

–Link has a camera.

I wonder how she knew that. But we called him up, and we had a camera.

–The first thing that they did when I was confined was to have me remove all my jewelry.

They were afraid that I might use it to harm myself.

It hardly made any sense to her.

–I can't kill myself with an earring.

–How many earrings did you have in one ear? It's part and parcel of a self-destructive attitude about yourself. You are expressing a desire to mutilate yourself. We can't have that!

–If you had a daughter, would you even let her pierce her ears?

–I have a sixteen year old. And I made sure that she wasn't going to pierce her ears until she's eighteen. It's a perversion. Especially that nose ring. That's usually a sign of confusions in sexual identity. It's just that sort of the thing can aggravate existing instability of the psyche.

–I love my nose ring.

–It will only bring back your feelings of depression.

–It's in my nose not in my brain.

Dr. Warner Miner became more extreme.

–I don't want you wearing those clothes. You're going to have to burn them

–These are my clothes. They are who I am.

–They say that you are dour. If you want to end your depression, you have to wear bright colors.

–You're not going to give me something for how I feel.

–We are giving you something. Those are the pills that you take every morning. But we need to shift your personality ground.

She just stared at him.

–You can't listen to that music. It makes you lethargic. You just mope around all day. If I listened to that sort of thing, I'd be unhappy.

–So you are happy?

–Yeah!

–And you want me to be just like you.

–Not exactly.

–My music is a personal thing.

–It's not contributing to good feelings about yourself.

–Of course not. Do you really like music?

–Yeah. Symphonies. And marching bands. Church music.

Not only was she questioning his medical skills, she wondered about his own sanity.

–You sound like a boring guy. Does anyone really love you?

–I earn a good living. I have a family. I take care of them.

–You get paid for this.

She thought that Dr. Minor resembled a bad con artist. She looked at herself in a mirror.

–You're going to have to change your hair.

–What's wrong with my hair?

–You look like a skunk. You're a young girl. You need to look more presentable. Your hair has to be just one color.

–What difference does that make?

–If you have a bad image of yourself, it's going to make it harder for you to get better.

–I don't feel that bad. You've just given me these drugs that make me feel worse.

Under sedation, Suzi had difficulty distinguishing between her dreams and her reality.

–I'm going to have you see another doctor.

–What about?

–He can help you better explore the roots of your problem.

–I don't have a problem. My only problem is that I can't get out of this place.

Casey seemed to have a resemblance to her old nemesis Guy.

–Suzi, I just have a few questions for you, then we'll let you get back to your room.

–OK! I do want to get back to my room.

Suzi was more ready than ever to resist the influences of Dr. Casey.

–I want to work with regression therapy. I think that your troubles go back to a time when you were much younger. We're going to take you back to that time.

–How?

–A combination of suggestion and drugs.

–Hypnotism.

–Something like that! We don't really believe in hypnotism, per se.

–Why do you need the drugs?

–To help you to relax.

–I can relax if I want to. I just don't want to be here.

–That's why we need the drugs.

–Why don't you just hold me down?

–We could try that!

–What do you mean that?

–I'm going to need to tie you up.

–Tie me up?

–There are things that we need to find out that may be too upsetting to you.

–This seems crazy.

–If you resist my instructions, then I'll bring in someone to help you out.

–Someone to tie me down.

She did all that she could to escape Casey's clutches, but his plans were much more extensive than he initially indicated. She tried to block it out of her mind.

–He didn't just hold me down. It was way worse than that.

–I told you it was like Guy. He started doing things to me. He was pretending that this was what happened when I was a kid.

–Did it happen?

–What happen?

–Those things when you were a kid.

–He did look a lot like Guy.

–Who?

–Dr. Casey.

–Guy did these things to you.

–I never said that!

–What then?

–I can't remember. It was like the alien force, Just touching me. I could feel it from the

inside even thought there was nothing there.

–But Dr. Casey was doing this.

–He knew how to touch. How to make me feel bad by making me feel good.

I wondered what went on while she was in there. Did the mischief stop with the staff.

What about the inmates of the asylum.

–They were running the place. It was like Guy and his gang with their suburban followers.

She described the scene vividly to me.

–Why are you treating me like this?

–This is how I was treated when I was a kid.

–All they did was poke and grope around on you.

–This is way worse!

–How?

–You know how bad it was in your case. And now you’re doing it intentionally to someone else.

–I get a real jolt watching you squirm in that chair.

–You’ve got me all naked for everyone to see. This is disgusting.

I woke up with bodies crawling all over me. Everyone ran from one room to another like rats. Everyone from Restless was here.

–We’re all a little bit crazy.

In one room a bunch of them were rubbing on each other.

–It’s all the way in the next room.

I felt this uncontrollable urge to join in.

–We’re all nuts so we never feel bad about it.

–The doctors let this go on.

–They’re running it. It’s some kind of bizarre therapy.

–It’s worse than that.

–It’s not so bad. How different is it than Restless?

–At least, people who go there pretend that there is something better.

–They’ll just give head on the upstairs bar. Or do something perverse in the DJ booth.

–How do you know?

–I’m more than a doctor. I’m one of you all.

This all seemed so natural that I couldn’t figure out if I was even wearing clothes.

–You have nothing on.

–Where are my clothes?

–If you find your clothes, we’ll let you leave.

There were people in the halls incoherently screaming. They were talking to themselves. Everyone was trying to touch me.

–I just want to get out of here forever.

–You’re not really stable enough to make it out there by yourself.

I popped up.

–You’re not going to leave me here by myself.

–There’s nothing wrong with me.

It was Halloween. Debbie had decorated the place to look like a hospital. All the workers were dressed in hospital whites. It was this strange mix of horror and medicine.

–It’s a Halloween asylum.

–Those skirts are short.

–Aren’t they cute?

–I guess!

–What’s wrong?

–I know you need hospital beds to complete your theme. But you didn’t have to tie me in.

–It’s for you own good.

–What are you afraid that I’m going to do?

–You’re a risk to yourself.

–Quit kidding, and let me go.

Everything was going crazy. The crowd were running around from upstairs to down and back again.

–Someone’s going to fall down those stairs.

The moment that I got out of there, I heard a great noise coming from the stairwell.

–What is going on?

Debbie suddenly rushed down the stairs ahead of me.

Vida and the door guy were wrestling at the door.

–She helped me decorate this place, and you won’t even let her in.

–She doesn’t have an ID.

–I can vouch for her.

–I’m the door man. She’s not getting in.

–I’m going to tell the assistant manager.

–Tell her. No one is going to cross me.

Vince had pushed her to the floor. Debbie rushed over to hold him back before he could to kick her.

–You should be in jail

–She’s underage.

–That’s no excuse to be an asshole.

Vince was relying on the fact that his lover, Brill, was the upstairs DJ.

–He’s not going to get away with it.

It was ruining the Halloween vibe.

–What are you going to do if management doesn’t back you up?

–From this point on, we’ll boycott this place.

–And where will you go?

–Little Five, or we’ll just stay home.

Most of the crowd was oblivious to what was going on. Vince was trying to stand his ground.

–I’m just leaving. I’ll talk to Kitty on Monday. She’ll resolve this.

At least, I escaped from the confines of the asylum. Or so I thought.

– Vince is never going to back down.

–There are other things to do.

I couldn't imagine abandoning Lucky's, but the best days were clearly behind us.

Suzi was staring at me from across the table.

–I can't tell what year it is anymore.

–I'm confused.

–That Halloween story happens next year.

–No, it doesn't. It occurred right after you got out of the treatment center.

I was losing track of the actual year. Too long in the asylum. Too much time with the Dream School.

Suzi disappeared for a couple of weeks. I tried to track her down to no avail. Then she called me one night.

–I have to get my stuff.

–What's going on?

–I'm going crazy.

–Tell me.

–I'm at a place off Briarcliff and North Druid Hills. I'll give you the address.

I met her at the apartment. There was an artificial lake there. We were watching the ducks together.

–I met Frankie at Restless. I don't know what I saw in him. He was a total freak. I hung around him. But I wouldn't have sex with him. Then he tied me up, and he wanted to kill me.

>>He went out to his job. I escaped. Then I called you. Let's get my clothes, and we can leave.

The apartment seemed like a psycho-killer's place.

–He's a real trip.

Outside the place, there was some kidding hanging around.

–I need to tell you my sister's story. That crazy guy killed her.

–Frankie?

–Theodor.

–What?

–You heard the story. He got fucked up. And he was playing Russian roulette, and he shot her.

There was the strangest aura in this place. And now I was hearing this other story come at me from out of nowhere.

–Let's get out of here.

Suzi was urging me to get out of there.

–I was just hearing his story.

–That kid is a freak.

–He's just a little slow.

–He told me about his sister's death.

–I need you to get me out of here.

–Where are you going?

–Desi told me that I could stay at her place. I don't want anyone to find out about what is going on. Don't tell anyone.

Suzi ended up with an even stranger crew. Martin's lover had been killed in a robbery.
 –All he talks about is how he's going to kill someone in revenge. He has this gun, and he points it at his friends. Then he screams all this racist shit.
 –And you're hanging out with him.
 –I like this one guy Edwin.
 –The kid with the gun is going to turn it on you if you don't watch it.
 –He keeps telling me that I remind him of Miranda.

NEIL MAKES VICTORIA

I was talking to Neil, the new assistant manager of Restless.
 –Are we ever going to get a show here again?
 –Maybe on Halloween.
 –Halloween is long gone.
 –I'll do what I can.
 Neil had other things on his mind.
 –I knows how to know how to get what I want
 He was involved in a discussion with Victoria.
 –I'm not about to humiliate myself for some guy.
 –What does that mean?
 –The only thing that I'm going to degrade myself for is money.
 –Victoria is meant to be a celebrity.
 –Explain it to me
 Neil had a plan. He was going to take advantage of her natural talent. He had a wonderful publicity pack that he had built for her.
 –I did this kind of thing in Florida.
 –Wow!
 She thought about it.
 –The only thing that really makes me happy is to embrace what really makes me happy.
 –You're going around in a circle.
 –If I really wanted to hang out with a man, then I'd just do something stupid like break that circle.
 –You were the one who expressed to me your willingness to degrade yourself for money.
 –Neil, can you really make me happy?
 –I can only do for you what you want me to do.
 –I don't think that you will ever make me all that excited.
 –Meaning what?
 –Meaning that I can never make you that excited.
 –I can make you a lot of money.
 –And you think that I'm going to believe your bull shit.
 –It's better than waiting around for nothing to happen.
 –You know that girls are always so much more committed than guys. You always know what you're getting.

- And you love to live with risk. You have no idea who I’ve been talking to on the phone.
- Just because you risk a lot is not assurance that you’re going to get anything back in return.
- If your opponent risks a great deal to match your bet, then you can get back at least twice as much as you risked.
- That’s asking quite a bit. And you still have no assurances that you’re going to win.
- You don’t look like you’re used to losing.
- That’s the whole point. I know what *I’m* risking. I’m not going to throw it away on just anything.
- But if I can promise you a sure thing.
- I am the sure thing. I don’t fall for flattery. I can always get a girl as good if not better.
- Are there better?
- Let’s just say different. I like to get beyond myself.
- So it’s not all mutual admiration.
- I think that I’m grounded in reality.
- The music business has no sure things. But I can promise you more than that.
- Tell me when we see cash!
- You can see a name. And you can see a contract. Cash will follow.
- Then you think that I’ll sleep with you. I told you from the beginning that I don’t like to get with guys.
- All the better than. You have nothing to venture, and everything to gain.
- I’m still into this for my pleasure.
- And if you want more pleasure, there has to be some risk involved.
- So when do you think that is going to start.
- I need a little motivation.
- Don’t you have enough already.
- To look but not to touch.
- It’s all pretty much the same in your world.
- And what world is that?
- The green world.
- There is an artistry involved.
- Quit pretending. I am the artist here.
- I know that. But I can make your art better.
- Are you telling me that I could use some advice?
- You’re great for Lucky’s. But if you think that act is going to make it in the big world, they’ll chew you up and spit you out.
- Thanks for being so concerned.
- You could use someone to lick your wounds.
- I’ve got someone to do that already.
- I can do that and more.
- Who said that I need any more?
- If you’re satisfied playing Lucky’s, then tell me to go.
- You can go!

- Really!
- I’m not going to fuck you so that I can succeed.
- I said nothing about that.
- Then what are you saying?
- I’m advising you what you have to be willing to give up if you want to make it in this business.
- You’re telling me to sacrifice.
- I’m telling you what you need to do.
- I’ve heard those lines before. I’m usually left pretty high and dry in the whole thing.
- You want satisfaction.
- I want more.
- Then you have to work at it. Are you willing to do that?
- Why should I? I’ve already worked to get to this point.
- Are you kidding?
- I’ve got a record.
- Not yet.
- So you will make me a star.
- I thought that you already were a star. You just needed the world to acknowledge that.
- I’ll go along with that.
- But you’re still not satisfied.
- You told me as much.
- What are you willing to offer in return?
- Real money!
- Your money.
- Whatever you need. Do you need my money? Do you need my friends.
- What do I have to do to get your friends?
- Be good.
- I could get friends of my own.
- It would take time. And by that time, it might be too late.
- I don’t need more heartache. If I see what makes me happy, I go and get it. I know how to get satisfaction.
- You’re showing your timidity again.
- You’re trying to change me into something that I’m not.
- And what is that?
- I don’t think that I could ever really love a man.
- You know that you can’t love a woman. You just love yourself too much.
- You are a dickhead.
- You need me telling that to you. It gives you a deeper sense of purpose.
- You just want to convert the world. You’re not even a prophet. If you were better, you might be a charlatan.
- I know what I’m selling.
- So what!
- You have work to get done.

–Doing what?

–Really learning how to sing. Writing new and better songs.

–What are you doing about it?

–I wish that I could make it happen myself. But I’ve got you a vocal coach. And I’ve got people ready to come to see you when you’re ready.

–I feel ready now.

–You’re not even ready to make love to me.

–You are a cocky bastard.

–But for once in your life, you are coming face to face with that gap in your personality.

And I am showing you the only way to fill it.

–Your prick.

–You can say that. But this is all about something much deeper than that.

–Like what?

–Commitment to your art. You have no idea what commitment is. That is why you date these fragile girls.

–It’s not really dating.

–What do you call it?

–We spend time together. We share things. I don’t need a man telling me about love.

–But you want me to tell you.

–Tell me what?

His routine made her seem as if she was on the right path. He was very casual with her. He knew that she would eventually come around. In a sense, he was a little cocky. That was all part of the gamble. She was ready to gamble.

When Neil was working at Restless, he tried to appear a whole lot more professional. He acted as if he was submitting to a regimen. It wasn’t due to lack of passion. He was just saving that side of himself for his work with Victoria. The more work that he did for her, the more that he felt he was getting close to her. And she allowed him that seduction. It made her feel more worthy of musical success.

Ultimately, he did very little to shape her for the industry. He didn’t realize what was going on. He was just as enthralled with her magic that he felt ultimately that he could work his way into her heart.

All this would be contingent on her achieving more success. She wasn’t going to be any more successful further with his attitude. He was just as afraid as she was of risk. So they both avoided the necessary steps to direct them to real professionalism.

Their growing attachment played perfectly to the developing business partnership. She tried to maintain herself as prim as ever.

–I don’t want anyone to see me as some kind of fool.

–You are human.

–Not in that way.

She hated to lose control in this way. At times, her love-making achieved a rawness to which she was unaccustomed. She was losing her grip on that certainty that she always craved. She didn’t want to become like these little girls that she saw buzzing around Lucky’s. She didn’t mind being a model for them. But she wanted none of their insecurities. Her makeup reminded

everyone of the distance that she craved.

Neil saw that other face. He understood the fatigue. And he realized how close she was to those girls that she avoided. He was so good at helping her airbrush her image.

I went over to visit him at the house. He was doing everything that he could to make himself look busy. He had exhausted every contact that he had. She was going to LA for a showcase. There were record people coming to town.

He had her records spread around the living room. Both of them knew that time was running out. And he would have to do what he could while they both believed the illusion.

–I think that you wanted me more than my success.

–I’ve opened you up to something about yourself that you’ve never seen before.

–And I hate that.

They both apologized for sharing that glimpse of themselves to me. But it was more than obvious.

–Once she realizes what she has, she’ll dump me. But you know that she still won’t get what she needs. Because she’s so good at getting what she wants in the moment.

She really was having difficulty escaping her Southern origins.

–I’m not really a Southern girl. My mother is from California. And my dad is from Europe.

Was she making up things as she went along?

–I’m really here to drive you crazy. That’s why I sing. To drive you to madness.

Neil smiled.

–Are you trying to get a rise out of me?

–I have no idea what I am trying to do.

–So...

–I just don’t have the words to express how I feel I guess if I did I’d be a better song writer. What such about this little thing that we have here is that there is very little that you can say about it.

–You could write love songs.

–That would be a lie. You want me to lie.

–I want what you want. I want you to make money. You’re great in your own way. But everyone says the same thing. You’re too remote. That icy cold blonde. It’s seductive. But you’re going to have to bring a whole lot more to the table if you have any hope of selling records.

–That’s why I hooked up with you in the first place. I just feel that you’ve made me a hell of a lot more icy.

–It’s part of the image. But you still can’t cry in public.

–You know that I can give you tears.

–On cue like a trained seal

–I can act.

–Ths would be a whole lot better if there was just a little something that could kick this into gear.

–Real or artificial.

–Even if it was artificial, if it just felt real.

–I’m not ready to go down that road.

What was actually behind her transformation from a austere songstress into an out and out celebrity. She seemed to move with more energy. And there was an emotional openness that she had never expressed before. Her fans took the new material as if there was a real change. In a fuller sense, she was only expanding her ability to imitate other artists. It did nothing to establish Atlanta as a source of creative originality. And she did little to demonstrate that she could crossover to a larger audience.

Victoria’s belief in herself took massive strides. This gave the impression that there had been some real change in her personality, that she had come to a deeper understanding of self. If Neil had an influence on her, this was the clearest effect. But it was based on her profoundly exaggerating her attitude without only a minimal change in her actual ability. As the strain began to show, it became obvious that she was not up to the task. Neil’s infatuation had obscured him from seeing her limitations. Evidently, this was at the forefront of his seduction.

If she was going to leave him, she would be moving on to bigger things. He had fostered her own illusions. And he made her think that others shared these same illusions. She was the next big thing. All she had to do was step out of her shell.

In fact, she ignored any real progress that she made. She drifted in her sleepwalk. Her art simply reflected this somnambulance.

–I could have done this on my own.

He cradled a copy of her record.

–Maybe you could have. But you didn’t.

–You know what they’re telling me in LA.

–No.

–To ditch you.

I tried not to get taken into the flap between them. She had always valued my counsel. I had stayed out of things and simply offered friendly advice. I had also become the audience for all of Neil’s orchestrations. I said nothing. But in my presence, he started to admit his eventual end in this matter.

–I’m going to have to leave town.

–You’ve got your job at Restless. It’s really no time to check out. You’re having a great time here.

–But this is all falling apart.

–Not really. Victoria’s about to do what she always wanted. She’s moving to LA. She’s throwing herself head first into her career. You’ve given her that head start. Anything else is really beyond your ability. She’s not about to change. That could be good. Someday she may wake up for what it’s worth. And that will be the end of the story.

I couldn’t admit to him what was the other side of the coin. I had been saying it to myself all along. In rounding her edges, he had committed himself to another conquest. He had watched her on stage and believed his fantasy. And this lesbian artist had abandoned principle to buy into his vision. She may have recovered her integrity in breaking with him. In some ways, it confirmed a suspicion. Victoria was always a solitary person. And her sexuality was ultimately a pose to help her accommodate to various situations. The fire that burned inside her was for recognition by others. Since she feared failure so much, she always chose a safe path.

–What are you talking about?

–Huh?

–You never said this kind of shit to me. Sexuality, insecurity, safety. Are you becoming a puppet for Neil.

–Not at all.

–You’re acting this way because he’s going to do you a favor.

–What do you mean?

–You are presenting such a male perspective of sex. I am with who I want to be with.

And I generally find a more caring situation with women.

–That isn’t what your ex is telling everyone.

–What?

–You came here and you hardly knew anyone. And it was chic to like girls. So you blended into that scene. And you took her as a lover because she knew lots of people. Gigi knew lots of people because she was a friendly person. But you took that as a sign that she had influence.

–I’m not going to go for a girl just because she has loads of friends. I’ve always preferred women.

–So why did you put yourself in Neil’s corner when he could help your career.

–He seemed so caring. We spent a lot of time together.

–But you were supposedly committed to Gigi.

–She knew who I was.

–What is that supposed to mean.

–It means what it means.

–Don’t get moral with me.

–I’m not the one who humiliated myself for a little bit of success.

–It’s not like I got on my knees to worship him.

–You were never delirious.

–We had fun. I may have lost my head a little. But there were other factors.

As she was easing herself away from him, she did everything to qualify what had gone on. She was quick to point out that she never submitted.

–You were a cautious lover.

–More than that.

–You took, but you did not take.

–That sounds good.

–Because it was accurate.

–I’m a very physical person. If I know that pleasure is involved, I am not going to deny myself.

–So there was a strict exchange here.

–It wasn’t as if I consciously worked things out that way. I went with the moment because I expected something more.

–There was something more.

–More of that feeling.

–Explain.

–I have never thought of sex as something dirty. I like to explore the body in every way that I can/

–The body of your lover.

–Yes.

–But you do feel hesitant around men.

–Due to bad experiences in your childhood.

–I'm not looking to be psychoanalyzed. I just never got on that well with men.

–Neil was different.

–In retrospect, he wasn't that different.

–So you are going back to women.

–I didn't say that.

–Then what?

–I've never been that much of a passionate person. Except in my art. And I've leaened to admit that when passion takes over that I am willing to do pretty much anything to increase that passionate side of myself.

–Passion or sex?

–Whatever...

–What?

–I'm willing to do what I have to please my lover. Because at that point, it's more about the passion. My passion. I just want to maximize everything.

–Whether naturally or artificially?

–Yes.

–Yes, what?

–Yes to both.

–Are you admitting that you're more likely to be with a man when you're high?

–Not at all. I just have trouble naturally expressing my passions.

–That's why you're an artist.

–Yeah.

–To express those deep feeling that lie hidden in your everyday experience.

–Yeah.

–Do you have an aversion to the male sex organ?

–Not at all.

–So you like the penis.

–I didn't say that.

–But you do. You like it more than the man itself. That's why you're with women.

Down deep, you love the cock more than anything. You love it despite the man that comes with it. You live for it. And you are so afraid of that side of yourself that you have created this school girl personality for yourself that only responds to other women.

–I'm not a sex-fiend.

–Really. Who were you before you came here?

–I didn't know that my sexuality was on trial. We make of ourselves who we will. Sure there are influences from our past. But we are not bound to our past. We can break it down and put it back together again at will. It's not like my liking of sex is this overpowering thing that

overshadows everything that I do.

–That isn't what I was saying. In fact, I was arguing for just the opposite idea. I was saying that created this mousey character for yourself to hide the fact that you are primarily motivated by something that is primal and raw. And you do everything that you can to act like this ethereal otherworldly creature when in fact you are driven by your own appetites.

–I'm an artist. I am driven by my creativity.

–But you never really give in to your creativity. It's like a machine that you turn on and off. And the engine for that machine is sex. All your time with Neil has proved has much. He showed you for what you are. You make fun of these girls at Lucky's who hunt for cock. But that is your motivation as well.

–Why are you such a dick head?

–I don't know. Maybe Gigi should have conducted the interview.

–She did. But she was a lot more sympathetic. It's not like we're born one way or the other. There are shadings to our personality. Sometimes I get carried away. But that's not who I really am. I am most myself when I am on the stage.

–But you have to write the music. You have to rehearse it. You have to prepare to go on stage. All that is just as much of what you do on stage as the actual performance.

–But when I am on stage, I go to this other place.

–And when you're having sex, you go to this place. And you do everything that you can to control that. But you can't. Because down deep you are a driven creature. And you love that power. And it has nothing to do with your passion for women.

–Is this some updated version of penis envy? You just won't give a woman credit for what she does.

–Not penis envy. Penis love. You're not some ordinary woman.

–I'm a bisexual. That doesn't make me perverse.

–That's nonsense!

–You can tell me who I am.

–But you can't tell yourself.

–It's not like all gay women just want to be straight.

–We're not talking in generalities. We're talking about now. You've been with Neil. And you've pretended that it's some kind of extraordinary change in your life. But it isn't. It's always been about guys for you. You keep these gay men around you to compensate for the fact that you have this overwhelming passion to be with a man. They are never going to challenge that side of yourself. But you know that it's there. When you saw an opportunity for your music career, you swept aside all allegiance to your sexual identity.

–I never said that it was a black and white thing for me. I like to be with women. But that doesn't stop me from being with a man.

–You're out to get what you want, and you're not above using your sexuality to get you there.

–Fucking my way to the top? Penis envy and fucking my way too the top. Your analysis is so original.

–I didn't say that you had penis envy. But you love sex with men. And you are afraid to admit that fact because you are afraid to give of yourself. So you can find women who can get

you off, and you tell yourself that is love. And these poor unfortunate girls believe it. But you're always in another place. Never really with them.

>>When it comes to your music, it's just the same. You hold back. And you think because you get all excited on stage that you are coming out of yourself. But you are ice cold up there. And you're afraid to let the ice melt because there might be a warm affectionate person.

>>You know what it's like. When you speak in your hushed tones, any person would melt just being near you.

–You want to fuck me, Crucial. Because it never is going to happen.

–I don't know if you can be touched. You're such a phantom.

Neil stopped me as I left Restless.

–You and Victoria didn't get in it, did you?

–Did she say something?

–All she said is that the two of you discussed music. You didn't tell her to stop working with me.

–I hardly had time to say a thing to her. I admit that I got in this crazy imaginary conversation with her. But it never happened.

Victoria had her own version of the events.

–You won't even admit to the conversation.

–Because it never happened.

–What if it had?

–I don't know.

–After I admitted to liking cock, I'd get you to admit your own private fantasy.

–And what is that?

–Mind fucking helpless little girls.

–Not women like you.

–I am on to your game.

In her own way, Victoria had such a resemblance to KÉ. That may have been the most vibrant feature of this episode. She had created these two sides of herself. They worked themselves out on stage. But she always remained on that cool surface. I wanted her to break through. This may have been the curse of Restless. She could show these facets of her personality. But she could never pursue things any deeper. Any attention that she received only kept on the facade.

As she faded from the scene, Neil found another musical ally. Bertram had come up to Atlanta from Florida. He had label interest. Neil thought that he finally had the performer who would welcome his impresario talents.

–I've got a place where you can perform.

His style was much more professional than Victoria. He understood music much better. But he needed to round out his image.

–That was a great show. But you're going to need more people on stage with you.

–I could put dummies up there as props.

–Or we could find people to act as your props.

Mikhail was running around Lucky's telling everyone that he was in a band. It seemed like the ultimate form of casting on Bertram's part.

–Can you actually play an instrument?

–No.

His friend Nadja jumped onstage as a dancer. In her short skirt and boots, she completed the bondage fantasy,

–Hold a whip in your hand. Dominate!

Bertram’s songs chronicled a character, Roderick, who was immersed in a world of anonymous sex and drug use.

–It’s not like I’m a vampire.

He had drawn this elaborate comic book to go along with his performance.

–Are you going to market this?

He nodded his head.

–It would be brilliant.

Nadja and Mikhail seemed totally out of place. But the Lucky’s crowd really believed that it was their band.

–You shouldn’t let that guy sing in you band.

–What is his name anyway?

–Bertram.

–What kind of name is that anyway?

Mikhail answered with a slight Russian accent:

–English. Very British.

Mikhail liked to pretend that he had just stepped off the boat from the Soviet Union.

–I’m a political refugee.

The better informed knew that he was from southern Indiana.

–Who’s that girl over there?

Ruby was no longer hanging out with Damien.

–Who’s that girl over there?

–Do you like her?

–She’s a little frightening. Like a ghost. I want to know her.

–I think that she’s from Shaker Heights, Ohio.

–Really.

The next thing that I knew she had disappeared, and Nadja was talking to me.

–Do you think that Mikhail and I make a good couple?

–I guess.

–We’re not really together. But we do live together.

I wondered why she was telling me this.

–Bertram said that you’re going to do a show at Restless. We want to see it.

–I hope that you’re there.

–Bertram is going to make us famous.

–I thought that you already were. Everyone tells me that it’s your band.

–Don’t tell anyone that we’re imposters.

That weekend, I stayed away from Lucky’s. Nadja tried to make it to my show. But she had trouble at the door. I was sort of glad. I didn’t feel that good about it.

The next night, Bertram caught up with me on the patio of Restless.

- You’re a natural.
- My tracks seemed so naked.
- It was brilliant. I wish that I could do what you do. I just feel so restricted by my equipment. You know that you’re special. You’re a star. You could be more than you are. But you give so much of yourself everyday. You don’t have anything left for yourself. You need to be more mysterious.
- How?
- Don’t go out so much. You can’t hang out with everyone. You’re not supposed to be their friends.
- I wanted him to tell me more.
- Neil has plans for you.
- He has plans for you?
- No, for you. He’s going to change your life.

KALU

- One of your students was going to write a book on my political writing.
- What happened?
- You know what happened. He got infected by your thoughts. All that crap about psychoanalysis. He went off in search of a woman. It all became this literary nonsense.
- Maybe he just became disenchanted with you link between violence and politics.
- You make it sound as if I am talking about two equivalent things.
- It shakes out that way.
- Not really.
- You do argue on the necessity of violence as part of a politics.
- I’m not an anarchist.
- What then?
- I am trying to explain the origins of militancy in radical politics. I don’t really call it violence. It’s more a form of defense.
- You’re sugar-coating it.
- I admit that I see the beginning of the political animal in the resistance to personal aggression. But that doesn’t make the violence fundamental. It’s just the opposite.
- Say what you mean! Don’t just argue against the contrary.
- Politics originates in the desire to assert identity.
- Imperialism. Imperialism and violence.
- I never said that. You are the one who argued on the basis of psychic violence. The separation of the child from a parent. Birth. Those were your concepts.
- But the birth of a political awareness.
- I suggest that the politics precedes awareness.
- Explain.
- You have to have some kind of awareness to recognize the distribution of space. But politics originates in a topology. A displacement. And that gets built into the language. A sense of justice. Righting that initial displacement.

- But you have to have that displacement.
- I don't want to get to abstract.
- Offer an example. Oedipus.
- That's going to take us in a psychological direction.
- Hamlet?
- We could talk about the murder of the king. But that is going to take us back to the family drama.
- All dramas are family dramas.
- There goes your psychoanalysis, again.
- It's part of your notion of violent origins.
- My word was aggression.
- That implies property rights.
- No, just a sense of identity.
- But identity is linked to a place. And you are aggressed from your homeland.
- You are getting away from the original point.
- Aggression.
- Yes.
- Dovsky was ready to reply, but Kalu cut him off.
- Look at the imperial aggression of the English against India. The slaughter conducted by the English army to maintain their colonial regime.
- What is your point?
- That any defense on the part of the Indian people has some kind of justification against the aggression of the British.
- Are you distinguishing defense from aggression on the part of the Indians.
- They really had no capability of such.
- What about detonating a bomb in a London train station. Is that justified by the British colonial aggression?
- This is all hypothetical. IF the bombing actually leads to withdrawal of British forces from the colony.
- Would it?
- We already know the history so this is not a good example.
- Every example has its limitations.
- The French in Algeria is a better case.
- The Liberation army bombed cafes with civilians in them.
- All soldiers in the war of liberation.
- That seems heartless.
- I don't mean to say that they are meant to die. Nor do I excuse the casualties as acts of war. The Liberation Army had less precise weaponry at their disposal. In opposing the occupying force, the attacks were going to include civilians.
- What if that was the intention. To inflict losses on the civilian population so that they would eventually pressure the government to stop the intervention.
- It sounds good in theory. But it doesn't work.
- So you are arguing for limitations on violence.

- I never even argued for violence in the first place.
- But you admit that violence is the prime mover in history.
- You’re putting words in my mouth again. I simply said that a Liberation Army has a right to defend itself against a colonial oppressor.
- And that defense has to be sure and strong.
- Are you trying to trip me up?
- You need to have an army with some kind of rules of engagement.
- I agree that you need an army. But I use the term very loosely. I am more interested in the character of resistance among the indigenous population. How that resistance becomes transformed by the conditions.
- So a peaceful resistance becomes violent.
- The colonial power tries to crush a peaceful resistance.
- And that turns the resistance violent.
- Again, those are your words.
- To follow your reasoning: the colonial forces are overthrown by a resistance movement. Then the movement inflicts the same violence on the people in the name of liberation.
- That is your point of view. I never said anything of the kind. You see things only on the basis of your family model. Child becomes parent, and the cycle reimposes itself.
- My idea works.
- Back to the example,.
- Which one?
- Your student who is writing about me.
- You told me that he quit.
- He got distracted by some minor problem.
- But he still is interested in your writing.
- How do you know that?
- I had him read it. It influenced his thought.
- Did it now?
- Yes, it did!
- He often quotes the train problem.
- Suppose a crowded train has one car reserved for the military governor. Is it in the interests of militants to blow up the train?
- The problem assumes that it is the governor who is the foundation of colonial policy.
- Not at all. That is simply part of the question.
- What if the governor has slaughtered thousands? Isn’t it a good idea to make a statement and blow up the train?
- Then they send another governor. He imposes martial law, and he slaughters more people.
- What if it is possible to kill the governor without harming anyone else?
- It still may have no effect on colonial policy.
- I may be a first step in asserting independence.
- It may be more important to organize the people against the imperial authorities.
- That has only resulted in the assassination of the leaders.

- You are assuming that history operates only on the basis of the individuals.
- I am simply asking questions. I don't believe in your notion of history as an autonomous force.
- No, you believe in some kind of group psyche.
- Are you mocking me?
- No more than you are mocking me.
- What about the example of the Cuban revolution.
- A people's liberation movement was hijacked by Castro and his cohorts.
- Didn't Castro and Che agree with your theories. That the only way to beat back the imperial powers was to have a well-organized militant group.
- I never put it that way. I said that any actions has to proceed from mass support. The intent of a militant group is to lead the masses.
- And violence may be needed.
- It is important to try and win over members of the military to keep violence to a minimum.
- You don't believe it is good to demonstrate your power by blowing up military bases and munitions sites.
- There needs to be a clearly articulated program.
- But there is a moment that military action is required.
- The state will act to suppress a mass movement. The people need to be organized.
- So you are advancing a violent stand.
- It's not like the state which actually employs violence as a weapon.
- Who decides when the time is right.
- The leadership has to make a decision. But it has to be consistent with the needs and wishes of the people. It has to recognize the capabilities so that it does not expose the masses to repression.
- The leadership could be wrong.
- Hopefully not.
- But they are operating with limited knowledge.
- They are using their understanding of social processes to make an assessment of the actual situation. If they are trained in their method, it is unlikely that they will be wrong. This is a scientific problem. Are you trying to trip me up?
- Do these theories apply on a personal level?
- Like a right to do away with your next door neighbor.
- So you do advocate such a principle?
- Again, that is your idea.
- But there is the possibility of misinterpreting your philosophy to say as much.
- I'll go along with your example although it seems quite preposterous. There is the chance of a misinterpretation.
- The leadership can be wrong. Admit it!
- That's not the same thing as killing your neighbor.
- What if he's been cruel to you? What if he kills your kid?
- You'd call the police.

–What if the law lets him go?

–Is this about developing political philosophy based on vigilantism?

–You’re evading the issue.

–You’re creating these examples without any context. And you’re introducing all these elements of violence.

–What context do your readers have?

–Historical context. Political analysis.

–When it comes down to it, you still argue for this necessity of violence?

–I’m not defending the police force. And I’m not arming local gangs. So what is your problem.

–If you advocate violence, you don’t know where it is going to stop. Your political leaders are no longer held by the constraints of morality. They do whatever they want whenever they want. And if you believe it is OK to violate the law in a general case, then it is OK in a specific case. Someone makes fun of you. They attack your reputation and your character, they attack your soul. You have no choice to stop the cancer before it grows.

>>You develop a list of those who have wronged you. And you decide to punish those on the list.

In the discussion, Kalu had done quite a bit to revise his theory on political militancy. In his volume on *Political Necessity*, he argued quite clearly for the necessity of political action that was decisive.

–It is the same thing for a political group as it is for an individual beating back the neighborhood bully. If he shows his weakness, this will only make the bully more confident. It is imperative that the group is decisive in its actions. It is critical that it leaves no doubt about its actions. This is putting the idea into action.

Kalu seemed to be advocating for a brutal nationalism. His arguments could have almost been applied to by a fascist group.

–You are misinterpreting my writing.

–I am quoting you.

–You are taking it out of context. The emphasis is not on the action. It is on the response.

–But that subtle difference might be lost on an eager reader.

–It’s not subtle. It’s the whole point.

–But you don’t make it explicit. Suppose a reader takes a look at your book. Let’s call him Jay.

–The Jay problem.

–And he recognizes the need for decisive action. And he takes that action. He enjoys what he does. Because he recognizes that it is necessary. And he begins to feel history as a process not as something intellectual. And that desire to kill comes back to him.

–Crucial, you are imposing Dovsky’s ideas of trauma on my work. It’s just so that you can create this character of Dovsky who can explain your own hatred. Your own desire to kill.

–So you admit such a desire.

–I don’t give it much credibility.

–But political action requires resoluteness.

–Not insanity!

–We’d both agree that Jay is unbalanced. But there has to be a reason for that. And you have researched the basis for such political alienation.

–I have.

–Coupled with your theories, an alienated individual like Jay would defend himself the only way that he knows how. He is striking out at a guilty society. He is punished those who have suppressed our freedoms.

–It doesn’t work like that.

–But he could believe it works like that. When your oppressor gloats at your suffering, you want nothing better to do than punish him for that.

I had made my point in this hypothetical meeting with Kalu. I needed Dovsky to continue the argument.

–The suffering is tied in with the pleasure. And if there is pleasure in inflicting pain, then Jay will only seek to inflict more pain.

–The model is distorted.

–But it’s pretty close to how people act.

–Jay is an exception.

–But that abnormalcy has become accepted in our society. The employer fires an employee with a family. The power company cuts off heat in the winter to a poor man. Power is all about inflicting suffering.

–You can’t generalize based on deviance.

–The deviance has become universal. People find pleasure in the suffering of others because that suffering could be your own. So you try to abstract it and apply it to others.

Dovsky was trying to summarize Kalu’s philosophy in a nutshell:.

–The political urge proceeds from a more universal application of this deviance. The revolutionary leader has been put down in his social interactions. He recognizes the source of that cruelty. He feels that it is necessary to react against that suffering. Anything goes. If he is part of a revolutionary movement, he must show the society the same cruelty that it has shown its members. This is the only way to expose its philosophy to that society. It is a theater that represents the oppression by acting it out. You blow up a train station to demonstrate that we are all prisoners of the society.

–This is not my philosophy.

–But you like the ring of it. No more little guy. Fight the power!

–There is no semblance of a political program.

–But the program was just a prop for the drive to act.

–It’s one thing to be angry. But if you give into the anger, you only continue the suffering. Your model of the theater is like the secret police. It carries the version of cruelty forward.

–But we are complacent. We are giving away our freedoms everyday.

–Make sense, man.

–I am reading your philosophy back to you. You can’t take it.

–I am taking it. I am patiently listening to what you are saying. But you are wrong. All wrong!

Dovsky had been riding Kalu. This was an argument that went back to their days at the Sorbonne with Koyre. They had the same arguments in the classroom. It had been decades since then. But the conflict has stayed alive.

Dovsky's disciple, Crucial, had tried to put into practice his philosophy. But Crucial had reacted against his teacher and incorporated elements of Kalu into his thought.

–Political terror is a necessary complement to political philosophy. In itself, it is not terror. It is a reflection of the dominant society. The only way to shake off the manacles is to give it some of its own medicine.

>>Fucker, you are making fun of me. That is to no avail. I am a better man than you. I could kill you right here. I could follow you home. I have the power because you are a blind obedient. I can become your friend. You will let down your guard to me. Then I will destroy you.

>>I can do all these things. That is the foundation of my freedom. You cannot infringe against me. I can make my own law. But I decide to spare you.

Who was talking? Jay? Kalu?

The discourse of the novel had been detoured severely. This perversion had asserted itself. It may have infected Crucial. But it had also filtered into his characters. Who was Jay?

He lived in a suburban community. He worked at a strip mall. He had skills with computers and electronics. He could have been a lot more than he was. But he had felt the boot of society.

–I am not going to submit to these urges.

He refocused his energies. But his skills gave him new means. He observes his neighbors from a distance. He used surveillance techniques to get closer to his victims.

–I'm the only thing that holds your story together. Your list of characters. The theory EA. I give it a real form. These are a group of inter-related victims. They may not know each other. But they all communicate with the same source. The paradise. That gives them a special power. These sparkling celebrities. Your EA girls. You don't say a thing to them. They don't know who you are. But you know all about them. First, I am going to take down their suitors. And when I am closer to them, I will start to kill your EA girls. You are helpless. I am not. I will act out your desires.

–I don't need a crazy double who is acting out my violent thoughts.

–These are not violent thoughts. These are your everyday beliefs.

It had become clear to me how Jay went about his distorted reasoning. He had been inspired by Kalu.

–Crucial, you've invented this Kalu to advance your own cruelty.

–You gave me the book to read when I was a kid.

–No, I never did. You read Nietzsche. You read Kant. You read Hegel. You understood the notion of the necessity of history. The necessity of time. And from there, you abstracted this notion of the historical subject who acts with a feeling of necessity.

–That was pure Kalu.

–Not at all. You wrote that paper on the French Revolution. But the character Kalu is a sheer invention on your part.

–I saved the paper with the footnotes.

Dovsky was trying to absolve himself from his influence on Crucial. He was even denying the existence of Kalu.

–At the Sorbonne, you had these arguments.

–With Koyre. I questioned his interpretation of Hegel.

–But that idea of the necessary subject. You taught it to me.

–There is a difference between a psychological observation and a political prescription that follows from that psychology. There are two different kinds of necessity.

–You linked the two of them.

–That was your question. You asked me if the two were linked.

–What about Kalu’s history as revolutionary. There are records of his involvement in Prague, and then in Paris. He advanced a political perspective contrary to the American occupation of Germany.

–Again, it’s all a compilation of other thinkers. There was no Kalu.

–And there is no Jay. Where the hell is EA?

–That has been your search.

–But he seems to be one step ahead of me. Just as I get close, he steps in.

–You saw this girl at a club. She ignored you so you created this theory that links her up to these other girls that you have known. You have a resemblance to Jay.

–What about KÉ? She is real.

–Where is she now?

–That’s my whole point.

–There is no point. She found a guy. George. And now you’re carrying on about someone else. Monica or Suzi. You still haven’t found your EA

–There’s the girl from Shaker Heights.

–Some nonsense that Damien put in your head.

–She is real. I am going to find her.

–Sure you will!

I knew that I was getting closer.

I wanted to go to Emory to try to find some of Kalu’s books in the library. It wasn’t a myth that I had created. He was real. Dovsky was afraid of a mind that might be more brilliant than his.

It turned out that there were titles that jibed with my memory. But they had been removed for repair.

–They are being rebound. They’ll be back on the shelf soon.

When I checked back in a month, I was given a new update.

–Those volumes needed to be destroyed. The insects had gotten to them.

–Really.

It was more complex than that. Kalu was an alias used by a group of revolutionaries in Germany in the twenties. It helped them maintain their secrecy. After the war, a Parisian student had adopted the name. He used it in his thesis on Hegel.

–He is like a ghost. He reappears whenever he is needed.

–Could he be recalled by an evil man?

–Someone like Jay. Perhaps.

Was Jay following KÉ?

–There is a necessity that links all of your characters. And I need to act out that necessity.

–That was Dovsky’s fallacy. Those are two separate necessities.

–Not if I feel them as one.

–This is a total inflation of the subject. Kalu criticized that idea in his thesis.

A political philosophy needs to break the urgency of the subject from the realities of political action. Otherwise, that action stays an abstraction. To have any actual effect, it needs to assert a necessity independent from the subject.

Jay had none of that independence.

–Was that the actual Kalu, or the student who assumed the alias.

–It was all alias.

–Imagine a group of people who come together in the hope of finding paradise.

–Sounds like a church.

–Or the refugees from a church.

–What are they after?

–A higher state of being.

–Or getting high.

–That may give them a glimpse of what is going on. They all come together to get high.

–And that is that!

–No, it just the beginning.

–And what follows.

–Some complications.

–We can get rid of the complications.

–How do we do that?

–A higher state of high.

–We have returned to our first principle. This is history of people getting high.

–History as the higher states of being.

–It all comes down to pretty much the same thing.

–Let’s assume that we’re closing in on EA.

–The EA principle.

–You have what I want. And I want what you want.

–What if I want more than you want?

–Then we have a situation.

–The conditions for a revolution.

–What do you have in this?

–Love.

–L-O-V-E.

–EA.

The story stalled for a brief moment while the characters assume new identities.

–We are never going to get out of here.

–There are alternatives.

–Someone stands in our way. And we have to eliminate the obstacles to our progress.

Kalu resumed his colloquy with Dovsky.

- We have a story. And you’re trying to interrupt that story with your precious Crucial.
 - What would you have me do?
 - You gave him these ideas of violence.
 - Where does the story begin.
 - With your character Jay.
 - So what is Jay up to.
 - He’s tracking down all the characters. And there is a detective who is trying to track him down.
 - A track on a track. So how does anyone get away with it.
 - That is part of Jay’s theory of history. That he exists at a level that is impossible to track. He is around all the time. We just don’t notice him.
 - How does he emerge?
 - He finds a moment.
 - So is Jay one of your students?. The one who has escaped. And when he finds his intersection with Crucial that puts everything into action.
 - The end of the world.
 - The beginning of history.
 - No one will be the wiser.
 - What is this philosophy about anyway? You bear a grudge against someone, and you try to raise it to the level of a metaphysical curse that needs to be expiated. From that point on, it pretty well justifies any action on your part.
 - What are you implying by that?
 - Murder becomes instituted as a political act.
 - That really isn’t the intention of my work.
 - You can package it in complex argument. But it’s all about the same thing.
 - And what is that?
 - Simple human motivation.
 - I might agree. But that indicates what is wrong with your reasoning. I am not justifying murder.
 - If your neighbor is a pleasure-seeking buffoon, it might be in your interest to quietly dispose of him.
 - At any moment, we all could be that pleasure seeking buffoon.
- It was another night at Restless. He saw her standing at the bar.
- Let me buy you a drink.
 - I’ve got one already.
- She tried to brush him off. He looked her straight in the eye.
- I’m not going to beat around the bush. I want you to make me feel good.
 - And you’re going to do the same for me?
 - All in good time.
- She was counting on a good time.
- If I give you what you want, how do I know that you’ll ever get me back.
 - You don’t.
 - I’m not that insecure about myself.

–You were at one time.

–That really suggests that there’s more involved than a lame promise for mutual satisfaction. What do you have to offer to make me try harder to help you out?

–I’ve got to be pretty good if I’m going to go for full service right off the bat.

It had been sometime last year. And it was now fading deeper in my memory. I had taken a corner too wide and slammed into an oncoming car. But the problem was quickly taken care of. I never saw the car again. And in a few months, it was almost as if it had never happened. I let it slip from my memory.

–Any other stories.

That was what they were. Stories. And given time and expense, I could let the least harmful slip from my memory as if they never really happened.

–That’s what we all are for you.

–I could go the other way. I could act as if it all mattered to me. And what would that do for me. Or for you.

–How does that make me feel?

–Do you want me to buy you a drink. To tell you that you are loved. To ask you for something. What do you want?

–I want you to go back to my place. And I’ll do anything that you want.

–I live up the street.

–I’m not going to sleep with you. But I can do what you need me to do to satisfy you.

–Why are you so giving?

–Because you’re going to probably hate me when you finally discover who I am.

–Is it really that bad?

–I don’t know. You’re the one who wants something so badly that you really don’t care how you get it.

–I look at your lips. They are so appealing. I don’t know how to express that to you.

–Are you afraid?

–Of what?

–That even after I give you what you want that I still won’t care a bit for you. Isn’t that what you want? You want to feel my heart beat next to you. Just to know that another soul is there. I am not here. Because I am a dead soul. You’ve killed me by that look of yours.

Kalu felt victorious.

–Dovsky always spoke of the triumph of pleasure. But you’ve proven that it works in totally the opposite way. In the summit of pleasure, there is only a will to dominate. Pleasure supplies no answer!

–We need you for a show at Lucky’s.

–Is there money?

–It’s a benefit show.

It was Valentine’s Day. Monica was dressed in red polka dots and sparkling red shoes. She laughed.

–Are you ready to sing?

–Yeah.

–I'm looking forward to it.

The dressing room was full of transvestites with breast jobs.

–I'll see you on stage.

I felt as this was my moment. I watched her staring at me. It seemed like it was so close.

–Monica, is that you....

I was feeling sick. I needed to get out of there.

–Just do one thing for me.

–I can satisfy you.

–I want you to make me feel better.

–I can make you feel better.

She disappeared before she could help.