

2. THIS MEANS WAR!

Those who already look great have to do their utmost to keep looking their best. This seems like a basic law of universe. It is the idea standing forth among all that is created. The organism seeking from nature everything that it deserves. The world in flux drawing all energy to it. It is like an athlete who does everything that he can to tone his body and get the utmost in performance.

I need to pinch myself just to remind myself that this is real. Of course, it is. I shine in the light of the sun and feel the blessings of its warmth. A gentle kiss can awaken me from my slumber to bestow on everyone their just desserts. So be it!

The mirror tells me how to shape my physique towards the desired end. Such is the necessary course of my being from its origins. And I embrace this relationship. It is the synergy that makes me tick. I love it!

This is not the source of vanity. I have maintained all along that this is natural law. I am the artist impressing her vision on my plastic materials. I am bringing alive the spirit in the stone. Wow! This is good.

My detractors feel that I have distorted nature to make it accord with my personal vision. But where else could such a vision have emerged if not in nature. And who better to represent such acuity of perception than me. It is from such a foundation that the true form can take flight. You would think that I was talking about something more abstract. In fact, I am worshiping the human body. And it is a struggle to keep the body in the shape of which it is worthy. I am the first to admit that nature may need a little push to put its plan in effect. So be it.

For what exercise and diet cannot effect, our whims are supplemented by fashion. The ties and clasps, zippers and belts, straps and stitches pull the physical contours into a single line and bestow grace on the ambiguities of intention. This is giving reality its good measure. A thrashing with the sash of our choosing.

The array of color and texture grant certainty among a maelstrom of doubt. Just the right pout of Mack lipstick, and the heavenly creature can admit to her divine attributes. If perfection cannot be attained, it can certainly be counterfeited to a high degree, and I will welcome such tomfoolery.

I perfectly understand that such elevated taste comes at a price. And if a Coach bag costs the same amount as the GDP of a Central American country, then I am waiting to collect all the pennies from heaven so I can make up for any deficiencies in my finances. And while it might be difficult to stomach a knock off, I am not averse to any bargains that may come my way. It is not as if I feel that this is my personal entitlement. Any girl merits those blessings that may allow her to live a happy life. Such a desire is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. So much for my rebelliousness!

Fashion sense is not just a desire, it is a basic right. And such basic rights come with the utmost of responsibility. If there is an element of discomfort in a tight skirt or heels towering towards the sky, a girl has to accept the rigors of attraction if her goals are to remain in her reach. A red-blooded male may feel the blood rush to his head as he contemplates the sleek definition of my long legs, but let him know that it is my doing that has him contemplating my most appealing features.

Why let myself become a victim of the most sadistic of designers? This has to be a worse fate than surrendering oneself to a demented surgeon in an operating room. As he pushes and prods at the body, he tries to make it conform to a myriad of perverse contortions that beset his addled brain. And I am submitting to his regimen. All to control my worst excesses!

This is my your world! You know it is! Who would think that a decision that I make with credit cards could alter the international balance of power. Call in the eggheads, it's time to unscramble this mess.

It's not just that I'm a type. And I know a load of guys who have tried to type-cast me. Listen to my argument for a second! The world economic order is based on American consumers over-spending out the ass! If frugality was once thought of as a virtue, then there equally must be an art to profligacy. And I am not averse to letting my desire for prosperity trickle down the proverbial hill. Let that waterfall flow, baby!

–What was the name of your pet?

–What's your mother's maiden name?

–What's the name of your first elementary school?

–What is your father's first name?

We can help you construct a password. What is your zip? What is the credit card code. Add 5 to each of these numbers. Now subtract 14!

Far worse than identity theft, my credit cards trace the outlines of my personality. I look at the profile of all these numbers, my passwords, my spending habits, my available credit, all of these figures create my portrait. And I am staring back at this mirror and the distorted image that it provides. Who is this creature?

There has to be some kind of make over so that I can accommodate to the person that is staring back to how I want to be seen. How can I adjust the contours so that the face actually accords with an image that I can live with. As these numbers shift their order and follow the currents of deeper formula, I feel that I am only the surface of this mysterious mathematics.

I know that I am preparing myself for the ultimate confrontation with my mathematical self. And I must be ready for the challenge. It is all about reducing every whim down to the mathematical function that determines its fluctuation. Surely, there must be some kind of norm that permits these oscillations.

I just freak out thinking about all these entanglements. How can I undo my wavering allegiances so that I don't go down with the ship. I don't want to drown. Here I am a survivor on a desert island. My message in the bottle is my cry for recognition. Isn't there someone who can pick out the real me in a crowd. I'm having more and more trouble. Any signs of stability and a shoe sale just gets it all out of whack. I need to start again.

It's like trying to add a column of numbers in your head. No wonder they invented calculators and computers. The least distraction and I'm at wit's end. I have girl friends who can pick up a stack of twenty dollar bills in their hands and know how much money is in the stack. It's the same as telling time internally. I need that kind of order in my financial life.

There must to be a secret here. Some hidden principle that will unlock these numbers and arrange them in a synchronized ballet. I want to be the lead dancer in this performance.

I am ready to submit to the mystical arrangement of these geometric spheres. I'm not a bubble head. I can do it.

I am a number among numbers. I resonate with the vibration of the universe. I am the new psalm. I speak in these combinations. I am made aware in these infinite sums. I soar in these monumental calculations. I am all time. I am eternal. I have no end because I have no beginning. As these figures slide back and forth against each other, they create their own friction. And the contact sets off energies that echo back and forth across the chains of numbers. It is a reformed double helix crisscrossing the universe embodying all its power in a single form. Among the shadows of these coincidences, a being emerges. I have been reborn.

I am the secret agent in my own story. I am tracking myself as I head to work.

–Honey, what’s going on?

–You seem distracted.

–Sorry, I was in the middle of reviewing this contract. Let me take a break.

–Is everything all right?

–You just caught me at a bad moment.

–Maybe I should have waited to call. I was finished at the gym.

–Are you headed back to work?

–I’m actually taking the afternoon off. I’m going to miss the girls for shopping.

–Must be nice.

–You work too hard.

–That’s how I make money.

–You spend most of your time moping around. That’s hardly efficient. You have to take some time off now and then.

–I work a serious job. We can’t take time off like that.

–If you don’t relax a bit, you’re going to end up in an early grave.

A lot of good my advice does for a man on a mission. More and more his road to absolute wealth seems to be paved over the Elysian fields of my dreams. I naturally assumed that I could predicate my extravagant spending habits on his ambitions in the world of finance. I am sure that he viewed his first conquests of my feisty independence as the intrinsic reward for his achievements in business. However, I am starting to doubt this partnership as it appears to be based on an over- exaggerated assessment on his part. It turns out that I am not the only one living beyond my means.

My time out with the girls is sufficient for me to get my mind off his mood. I know that I can allow myself to be just as overwrought. But that my lord is what shopping is for. It takes nothing for me to just spend the pain away.

–Isn’t that what put us in a mountain of debt?

–I thought it was our propensity to buy inferior products.

–Where ever did you figure out that gem of wisdom?

–Lisa, I’ve got nuggets that would astound even the most worldly of commentators.

–Kate, it sounds like your inner buyer talking.

Whatsoever could she mean by that?

Lisa was cradling some dainty polka dot heels in her hand.

–Are you really going to wear those things?

Dana was hoping for a little restraint from Lisa’s corner.

–If I’m going to spend that kind of money on a pair of shoes, I expect a little value for the

dollar.

–I don't that equates into a higher heel.

–Dana, how many inches do you have on me? Are you trying to limits my freedom. Isn't this one of the basic rights enshrined in the Constitution?

I am trying to remain on the sidelines. I know just how Lisa feels. But it's so easy to get sliding down that slippery slope.

–Who greased the wheels?

–What are you talking about?

–Where do your increased riches come from?

–Kate, your bags are pretty empty this afternoon!

–We have a couple of hours left. I can catch up.

–I thought that you were on a savings binge.

–Lisa, speak for yourself. You promised that you weren't going to buy any shoes this week.

–My only fear is that our habits tie us to men who really don't give a damn about what we do on our own time. They'll willingly foot the bill if we just curl up in a cubby hole of our own choosing.

–It's not as if we're preparing ourselves for a life of being trophies on a shelf.

–More like wild game mounted on the wall.

I am getting a sinking feeling hearing philosophy dispensed along with the shuffling of credit cards.

–Financial independence is a state of being that we all aspire after. There just seems to be an imbalance in the economic system.

–And we're doing our best to rectify those imbalances.

–Kate, you strike me as such a revolutionary.

–Are you keeping things from us?

–It's not as if I'm looking at a quarterly bonus in the next week.

–What is it? The parents are sending some gifts your way.

–I'm not an Astor.

–If you're not born into luxury, you can always marry beyond your station.

–I didn't know that we were casting for Cinderella.

–If we are, Lisa, I don't think any of us is doing well in that department.

This was supposed to be my tonic. It is only opening a new volume of doubt for me. I can't see my futures as all that promising. I think that is why Alan always taunted. I just don't want to give him any more opportunities for one-upmanship. It isn't as if he is truly a prince among men.

If I am really getting beaten by this skirmish in the wilderness, then it is clearly time to call on my resources. Retreat, regroup, and come out fighting!

–I think that I have made a serious error!

–You sound like a killer.

–What are you contemplating in that little head of yours?

–World domination!

–We've known that all along.

Who would know that the chaotic rustling in my bailiwick might reverberate throughout the world. This goes far beyond theories on butterflies and hurricanes.

–This is too terrible to contemplate!

–I just need a little push to put things in order.

–Oh, no. Washington, watch out!

–Remember, it's not by our words but by our deeds that we will be judged.

–I don't need new shoes!

–What do you need?

The question seemed to echo through Georgetown.

–An infusion of capital. I'm really no different from any of the high rollers in the world.

–A new dress?

–A new bag?

Inside my heart, I feel the call for some meaty revenge. But the offense that I feel is of a completely abstract nature. I need to have more corroborating evidence if I am going to make a case. On the other hand, if I wait, I cannot not strike with certainty. And this is my appointed moment. I need to come to my senses while they are being bombarded with such a cornucopia of stimulation.

–Kate, there is no time like the present.

I feel like I am having a panic attack. This is not like me. Too much choice! Oh my Lord. This is the stuff of legend. I never thought that I was ready for this stage, but here I am entering the realm of the metaphysical shopper. If I could just get my hands on that elusive Holy Grail!

–Is there something that I could eat?

–A celestial pastry.

–The ambrosia of the gods.

If it isn't enough to be suffering under my own delusion, I have a chorus of angels echoing all my doubts.

–The trick is jewelry!

–What?

–Stick it to the world!

–If you say so.

–I don't make the rules. A dress can rip and tear. Shoes can get dirty and wear out. But nice jewelry lasts into perpetuity!

–Do you know what the price is in mining gold?

–Exactly. And good silver can ward off evil spirits!

–You're not going to get to me by telling me that diamonds are a girl's best friend.

–Maybe not. But the sparkle of a well-cut ruby can pierce the pitch dark of the deepest night.

My friends are trying to get me to consider a way out. Thank heavens for such blessings!

–We're just trying to care for you!

–I just don't think that I afford your advice.

–When you're in the shit, that's when you have to go double or nothing!

Lisa and Dana give me that look!

–You’re not going to pull out your credit card on this one.

–If you’re going off to battle, then you’ve got to put your best ponies on the field.

–I’m sorry!

But Lisa refuses to yield.

–You’ve got to follow your heart.

–There’s no way that I’m ever going to cover this!

Maybe I am finally starting to recognize that heart comes at a price!

–I know what Ryan would say to our ideas.

–Ryan knows nothing!

–It’s just that he keep making the same point to me over and over again. In a healthy market, solid stocks outpace precious metal by three to one. It’s like a pretty girl. She wouldn’t be of much value if there wasn’t a hard-working guy keeping her in diamonds and furs.

–I told you to dump that guy.

–Hold on, Lisa. Maybe he has a point.

–You would take his side Dana.

–I’m not taking his side. I’m just asking us to consider his point of view.

–I certainly am.

–No, Kate. Don’t say it’s so.

–If it’s about jewelry, maybe he should buy it for me!

–All that negotiating just seems exhausting.

–He always exercises the right of first refusal.

When I finally catch up with Ryan, he is still in his own world. I am not ready to admit defeat, but I’ve hardly brought home any treasures to compensate for my sense of impending doom.

–You haven’t stopped loving me.

–No, not at all. Why?

–You just seemed a little hesitant on the phone today.

–You were the one who was so wrapped up with work.

–It was just bad timing.

–No problem.

–Maybe it is. Sometime it just feels as if I am trying to push you out of my mind.

–Are we being honest now?

–Sort of!

–Knock down drag out honesty.

–Not quite. But there are times that I wonder how much you do love me.

–You know what they say?

–What is that?

–If you have to ask, you probably don’t want to know the answer.

–I think that I can take that kind of honesty.

–You’re the one who was having the doubts. And now you’re asking me how much I love you.

–I think that’s the basis of my doubt.

–So you can ask me to commit myself, and then you can remain deep down in your doubt.

- I’m not saying that. I just need to know. How much do you love me?
- More than you can know!
- I think that I know quite a bit about you.
- You do!
- Yeah. But I still wonder.
- I love you enough to have one of those over the top movie weddings.
- I didn’t know that we were talking about weddings.
- A girl’s not going to let you know everything about her without getting something in return.
- Like what?
- Eternal love!
- Nothing is eternal!
- Now you’re playing that game again. Wondering what it would be like if you were someone else.
- Are you asking me if I wonder?
- You can’t help but wonder. But do you think about it all the time?
- Are you telling me that I have to work on my love?
- I’m telling you that I expect you to work on our love. It’s got to be a little more important than your contracts.
- But if I didn’t have money, would you love me as much?
- That’s a silly question.
- No, it’s not.
- I don’t love you in that way.
- You were the one who brought up the idea of a wedding.
- That’s a fantasy. But this is something real.
- You’re not trying to start a fight about this.
- We were just talking.
- About true love.
- About real love.
- Maybe we’re just getting lost in semantics. We’re together. That’s all that matters.
- We’re together. But if you want to be with someone else, then all this is temporary. You’re not trying to break up with me.
- I just don’t want to play games about why we’re together.
- I feel the same way.
- So why are we testing each other about our love?
- We could kiss and make up.
- We could.
- But you’re not going to get off that easily.
- You’re the one who’s trying to break up with me.
- Nothing of the kind.
- So what was happening on the phone today.
- We were talking while I was at work. And I was very, very busy.
- Too busy for me.

–Don't say that.

–What are you saying?

–If we are together, we have to have our separate lives.

–I don't feel about it the same way.

–You were the one who said real love. I'm just trying to be realistic.

–You want separate lives. Fine. I can give you separate lives.

–Why are you trying to break up?

–I'm just giving you what you want.

But is this what I want. I was the one who was thinking about an extravaganza wedding. And now I am questioning if I even know this guy. Did I ever? Sure he looks great in a suit, but if I strip him down to nothing, what does he really bring to the table.

Maybe he is thinking just the same thing. I can feel myself parading around his office completely naked.

–Except in heels. Keep your heels on!

This is my fantasy. And I am not feeling very sexy. So he wants realism. I can give him realism. Or can I? I'm the one who's feeling all the emotions in this relationship. He's staying as cool as a cucumber with his contracts. Who knows? He probably has a contract for us. Wait a second! Of course he does. There I am down on line thirty-four with all those specifications about a dream house and plans for children. Children? Do I even want his children. He's the one who seem more like a child than I am.

This was seeming so much easier in the afternoon. A routine of heavy shopping had put all my doubts out of my mind. And then here they come again like a summer shower. I should have opened my emotional umbrella a little faster.

Maybe my days with Ryan are numbered. But what am I going to do without my better half. I could trade him in. On the other hand, I wonder if I can do any better than this. I'm stuck with him.

My mother tries to get me to abandon my evil ways.

–Maybe if you were a little more modest in your demands, you might be able to keep a good man like Ryan.

I keep thinking of Dana and Lisa. They are much more reckless in their habits than I could ever be.

–Mother, I have pride. I'm not going to let a man tell me how to run my life.

–So be it. But if you don't take advice from someone else, there may not be much life to have.

–He's been ignoring me for weeks.

–He's a man. That's his right. He's trying to keep a job. Trying to keep you in finery.

–This isn't the fifties. I've got my own career.

–A lot of good that is doing you. You are just getting more and more mired in debt.

–What are you trying to do? Sell me off for a hefty dowry.

–There was value in the old ways.

–Maybe I should practice swooning too! I hear that works wonders in getting a man.

–You're not being serious.

–Does anyone really think that money can buy you love?

–By the way that you dress, I assume that thought is paramount in your mind. Look at your friends. You are all promoting the same illusion. It's not as if you're stocking up book from the bookstore.

–I do read!

–That's nice too, dear. Just remember that breaking up with Ryan is hardly a wise choice.

–It may not be a choice. It's a reality. I don't feel that we're actually together.

–You have to be a little more accommodating. He's not a monk. He sees other women all the time. You don't want one of them to take him away.

–His only love is green.

–You could consider a different color scheme for your wardrobe.

–Mother, you are not being serious.

–I just think that you need to take stock of your life. Get rid of any bad habits that are standing in the way of your advancement.

–Like learning to live on a budget.

–Your father and I can't keep sending you money to support this little experiment of yours.

–When have you been sending me money?

–Isn't that why we're talking.

–You called me up. You wanted to get together for *tea*

–Tea? Neither of us drinks tea.

–This is getting stranger by the minute.

–It sure is!

–I know Ryan isn't capable of loving me. And I'm not ready to become some man's possession.

–We should have never paid for college for you. You have an overly romanticized view of love.

–Do mothers really get away with saying this kind of shit?

–You ask me for advice. Then you insult me.

–You came here for the sole purpose of trying to get me to admit the evil of my ways. I am not ready for confession. I let my religion lapse a long time ago. And this is not the occasion to resuscitate it.

–You are willing to disown your heritage.

–You were a pot-smoking hippie. Don't come here to lecture me about heritage.

–There still is a tradition in this family.

–And I feel that I'm quite a good representative of it. It's called spending beyond your means.

–I never spent a day in the poorhouse.

–Of course, you didn't. You married your sugar daddy. And you expect pretty much the same out of me.

–I'm older than your father.

–By how much? A few months.

–You know what I mean. I never got anything that I didn't come by honestly.

–I think that was everyone's excuse during the Reagan years.

My mother's intervention is only convincing me how little that I want to stay with Ryan. I am not ready to don a hair shirt and say my penance. I am right about this!

–Ryan, we weren't meant to be together.

–Love is never something that comes easy. You have to work at it.

–I feel that I'm the one who's doing all the work.

–Kate, we have to be adult about this. If you want pretty things, I'm going to have to work pretty hard to get them for you.

–There's a little more to my life than pretty things. I'm the one who's the adult here.

–By running up your credit card bills.

–Are you trying to lecture me too.

–I just want you to be honest.

–And where is your version of honesty going to get me?

–I'm not going to leave you hanging. I'll bail you out when the time comes. But you have to bring a little prudence to managing your finances.

–This was never about money.

–I'm not saying that it is. But you have to be more realistic about the world. You deserve lovely things. It's only the right way of things. I can only do so much.

–You're making love sounds like one of your contracts again.

–I want to bring some common sense into our relationship.

–We're not relating. Not in the way that you want.

–You want too much. Too many things. Money doesn't grow on trees.

–Do you listen to yourself? With one hand you give me a free pass. And with the other you take it away.

–I'm willing to do whatever I have to sustain the lifestyle to which you are accustomed. That takes effort on my part.

–You're not listening. I don't want that kind of effort anymore.

–So you are breaking up with me.

–It feels that way.

I can see my safety net ripping beneath me. They say that a bad economy is not a good occasion for a break up. Nevertheless, bad economic times seem to breed deteriorating social conditions and I have become a statistic of the times.

I know that I could have negotiated a better deal with Ryan. There he was offering me everything that I could possibly desire. And sex with Ryan was more than passable. He was a passionate and caring lover. More than can be said about some men that I have attracted in my day.

They say that sacrifices help us to grow. Here I am sacrificing poor Ryan so I can keep my spending habits afloat.

–You did what?

–I dumped him.

–You dumped him.

–There goes your nest egg.

–I thought that you girls were cheering me on.

–We wanted you to stand up to him. Not dump him.

–Maybe I could just take him off your hands.
–Lisa, quit trying to make light of a serious situation.
–A good man shouldn't go to waste.
–How good was he?
–Pretty good in the department that counts.
–He was a self-centered boor who was becoming more and more absorbed with his work.
–Who knows? He might have been having an affair!
–Thanks, Dana. That's more information than I need to know at a moment like this.
–I'm just trying to get everything on the table.
–*Everything on the table! Huh!* It's not like you and I were going out. Zip it, honey.
–Dana, does have a point! He may have been having an affair.
–I no longer care. He could marry his secretary if he wants. The spark is gone.
–Spark, smark! There is no such thing. If he has an open wallet, that's your only worry.
–We are supposed to be independent women.
–Amen!
–And we are all in so much trouble financially that we'd welcome the first guy who comes along willing to bail us out.
–I, for one, am not that hopeless. That is why I am sending Ryan back to pasture.
–You mean out to stud.
–Lisa, there is more to life than sex.
–Like what?
–A new handbag.
–A pair of shoes.
–Matching of course!
I catch myself in the mirror. Is someone following me? No, that can't be.
–Whew!
I look at my phone to give me an answer. No, someone is there. What is happening?
I take a breath and walk tall. I'm OK!