

## MUST

She waited in an interminable traffic jam and wondered if her life was always to be this. She had left the house with an amazing sense of purpose. A sunny day that seemed to beckon every dream that she had for herself. With each vision, she dreamed of more. The day cascaded in a shower of light. And she only felt that she was approaching some awakening, an immediacy. As her car had raced through traffic, it only confirmed that awareness. But now she faced the terminus of this flowering. A dark hollow. The refusal that haunted her all her life. The rabid rodent in the hat.

Her boy had been that sliver of light. That glorious promise of something else. And every triumph in her life only added to that sense of accomplishment. That she was part of his world. All his achievements were hers. His genius seemed to drive her on. At the same time, it only underlined the nakedness of her aspirations. His technical understanding, his facility with numbers only seemed to condemn her to a world of ignorance. Try as she might, she felt that she was coming back to the same pockets of silence. She tried to dismiss this deficiency as simply a balance of talents. What she could do with words, he could do with numbers. But in her heart of hearts, she started to feel that it was more than this. There was some story whose mysteries she could not penetrate. Could he sense her discomfort?

Here was a pocket of inadequacy where all her emotions seemed to come to a standstill. She came face to face with her own coldness. That chill could not overcome the severe frost of her disaffection. In its place, she sought a ravenousness to her own desire. An expertise about the body. Twists and turns of flesh replaced the hollows of calculation. She exploded in these rushes of passion. She rose to the empire of her senses, her appetites ascendent. She gave in to these flows more than anything in her life. She clung to that connection between them with all the eternity that overcame her feelings of nothingness. There was a simmering violence to their encounters. Her life turned upside down. This was the all.

She couldn't let on to anyone how deeply she was becoming absorbed by these appeals. The twist of his lips. His dark hair. His beckoning eyes. She ran her hands up his legs. The flesh was suffocating. There could be nothing else. There was no separation between them. As their bodies interpenetrated, she felt closer and closer to that source that eluded her. A free fall. A rescue. She held his hand tighter as a reassurance of just that one thing. The two of them seemed to glow in that fire. His smile told her everything.

For him the physical connection drove him to his limits. Her appetites cornered him, brought him to the edge of a precipice where he might have to admit that he could not keep up with her. As long as he maintained his fitness, he could pretend that it was he who was teaching her. His mastery was being transmitted to her. But the more that he saw himself reflected in the process, the more he felt that he needed to stay with her. His need was tangible. The more he attached this wonder to her body. Its sleek curves. The confidence in her pose.

She could tell all this about him. And it gave her a sense of power that suggested a reward for what she lacked. In the standstill of the traffic jam, she realized that she was creating the illusion. And the crystal architecture was so fragile. She needed to return to her moral certainties to convince herself of a resolute security. She could wander the city without fear because her faith outshone the depths of a wicked night. She could always remain on the other

side of the barricades that separated her from the riffraff. Those about to tumble under the give and take of life's struggle. Even though her knowledge was utterly personal, she was struck by its sense of object. What stared at her while all the time eluding the vermin. She wanted to take some time to help. But her time was being eaten away on the highway. She had to get home. She had to get to work. She had to call him.

If she couldn't reach him... She wondered where he was headed. Wondered where she was headed.

–Some people just have a purpose for their life. Goals. A reason to wake up tomorrow.

–And what are your goals?

She wondered if she was sufficient to live up to her goals. A summer trip to Costa Rica. Something to put it all in order.

–Do you like to ski?

–I do. But I'm feeling too cold to think about skiing right now.

–Have you ever stared at yourself for so long? Past the point where you start to see the faces of other people. To the point where you just fade away.

–What are you telling me?

–What if you couldn't come back from that stare.

–That's so silly.

–Have you ever parked your car and the next day gone looking for it and you don't know where it is. Your whole purpose just dissolves before you.

–That really doesn't happen to me.

–What if it did?

–Where are you leading?

–Where are you headed? I need a ride. I need to tag along. I need to have something to do.

–I can't help you on any of those accounts.

–Those are your accounts.

–And who knows that?

–Someone who's followed you. Someone who knows you well.

–Like who?

–Does anyone care enough to really know or really see where you are headed?

–I think that I know.

–Know in a way that noone else knows.

–I think that I've thought about this sort of thing before.

–And what did you realize. That you really knew.

–Knew about what?

–About yourself.

–I'm a student. I've got a job. I've got friends. I've got a future.

–When is that future? The moment after now. That's now. Your future that you had.

This is it.

–My future is something way off. And it's good.

–When do you know that it's good?

–I know a little more every day.

–It’s only more of the same thing. A ride that you can’t give to someone because they’re not going your way. Or you’re not going their way. Something magical about that dream.

–And it’s **my** magic. And it has very little to do with your magic.

–But I’ve still got something. And you know there’s something that you need.

Something raw that you want.

–Tell me what it is?

–I can’t. You have to learn about it.

–How? I give you a ride. You tell me who you are. Who are you? What do you do?

–I don’t do much of anything.

–You deal drugs. You don’t have much of a future. You use drugs. You have less of a future.

–Do you like to get high.

She blushed.

–Not really. I drink.

–Why don’t you like to get high?

–I feel like I’m losing control.

–But when you’re with him, do you let yourself lose control.

Her blush became a visible red.

–I don’t like to talk about that. Especially with you.

But she was talking with him. And he was getting in to her car. How long was she going to let this go on.

She tried to imagine the story from another point of view. As if he had done something. She could see it all with clarity. It was as if there was this massive hole inside of him, and she was staring straight at him. But suddenly the picture switched focus entirely. It was as if she was now sitting next to him in his car. And he was leading her down one of his adventures. Her whole personality was now wrapped around the very deficiency that she had found so evident before hand. To what degree would she ever be able to disentangle herself from this adventurer. He moved his hand along the seat until it was gripping hers. He gunned the gas, and the two sped off into the night.

Where she previously had spent bored sleepless nights, danger now kept her vigilant. When she did sleep, it was deep and restful. He watched her sleep on the bed as her nervously moved in a chair across from her. He wanted to wake her. He wanted to get out of this place. But for the moment, it was safe.

–You see that over there.

–I don’t see anything.

–Right over there.

He points to a patch of darkness as the car creeps down a deserted street.

–I don’t see a thing.

–There’s a car over there. It’s an A-Team. We don’t want to piss them off. Or even get in their line of vision.

–I don’t get it.

–It’s sort of scary here.

–It is?

–I’m going to hit the gas. I want you to get down. There could be some shooting. She was afraid by what all this meant. Not just for now. The scene has a sense of purpose so absent from her everyday experience.

–You’re really getting a kick out of this.

–I don’t know what I’m feeling. I guess that I’m scared shitless.

–You didn’t have to come along.

–Baby, I want to be here. It’s all new. But this is not really me. Not at all.

–It’s really nobody. No one should have to deal with this shit. But it’s all part of living down here.

–You could get out.

–Come live with you. In your world. If it’s so great, why aren’t you living back in it.

No one followed him as he sped up. For the moment, she thought that the threat had all been imaginary. It made it easier for her to think that.

Again sitting on the couch, he hunched over the coffee table as he opened up some foil. A bit of opium that he firmed into pipe before lighting it.

–Do you want some of this?

–What is it?

Her unease made it impossible to refuse. Already in an uncomfortable situation, this seemed like the only way out of her inaction.

The more that she stared, the more she could actually see her thoughts. Her lethargy was as solid as the chair across from her.

–This is a bit upsetting.

He couldn’t hear a word that she said. She ran her hands vaguely through his hair.

–You like it, baby.

He was talking more to himself. She let him float on by.

Sometimes the stimulus was just what she needed to get her out of her ordinary life. And the twists of this extraordinary situation twisted around and around here. She felt herself hold on to something tightly. Almost crash into something in front of her.

–Are you all right?

–Am I all right?

She didn’t want to think what was making her ill. The heavy smell of the apartment. What first seemed attractive was now wearing on her nerves. Anything that she did in this place only made her more subject to the same influences.

–I need some air.

–You OK, baby?

He didn’t hear a thing that she said. He might as well not have been there. She was facing something about herself. Not just a feeling. A general malaise. This was her.

–I got to get out.

She tried a door. But her hands were too sweaty to turn the lock.

–What the hell is going on? What the fuck did you give me?

She reviewed it all. She hadn’t done anything. This was all coming from inside.

Crossing realities. All interrupting her former complacency. She did everything that she could not to pass out.

–Watch out!

Where was she hearing that? She braced herself as she felt her body turn.

–Are you OK?

She heard someone tapping on glass.

–OK.

Why wasn't the traffic moving? Her boredom had overcome her.

–You got to get the hang of it better.

–I'm trying.

–Do you want some flowers?

–Not today.

She watched a flower truck run by her.

–Why are you always so mean to me?

–I'm not.

–You think because you have it rough out there that you have to take it out on me.

–I'm just trying to get by out there. It has nothing to do with you. What's outside, I leave outside.

–That's nonsense. We're not like a faucet.

–I'm not raining down my shit on you.

–But your attitude.

–I'm by the books with you.

–But you have nothing else. You're just how you are and that's it.

–I just don't think that you understand.

–Maybe, we're too different.

–I thought that you wanted different.

–I had different. This is freaky.

–You don't want to know what my life is about.

–I know. And I don't want it.

–You want to lead these parallel lives. This everyday workaday world of yours. And then your amusement park coffee table book perfect hair life. And you're skirting the two like your walking the razor's edge.

–You're telling me. You don't know what I'm going through.

She kept pursuing this confrontation as if she could make it go somewhere. That world was still out there somewhere. Beyond the reflection on her car window.

–You want to stop for some coffee.

She was talking to herself once again. As the cars sped past her now, they each seemed involved in the same give and take of the conversation.

–I never wanted you involved down here.

–I am here.

–That's the problem. You're too down here. Like all of us now. There's no going back after what you've seen and what you've done.

But it was just the opposite. A shower back at her place and she could clean it all off. A new hair cut and it was her past. Last season's news.

–What do you really want? A thrill that you can't walk away from.

- I've got plans for myself.
- And if anyone stands in your way.
- No one stands in my way.
- Is that a threat?
- No, a fact. There is nothing in my way.
- Are you bitter?
- You are.
- It's easy flinging accusations. There's something down here that you want.
- You're saying down here again. Down from what.
- Your perch.
- Is that how you see it?
- Smile for me.
- What?

He swung the car around the deserted street. If it meant trouble, he was looking for trouble.

- Why are you bringing me here?
- Bringing you here. You got in the car.
- I needed a ride.
- You're thirsty.
- You could say that.
- You want some water.
- You could say that.
- All tapped out. So I'm going to the well.
- What does that make me?
- What are you making yourself? Like everyone else down here. Watching that flame

rise up.

She could taste something in his words. Like a kiss. Submerged in the turn around. Her hunger. Her thirst. She ran her fingers along his arm.

- Nothing else. Nothing else means as much.
- She smiled.
- I'm only doing this for you.

She accepted his nonsense. She wanted an immediate end to all of this. The lies. The fear. The hunger. He made it so easy for it all to go away. She just gave in.

He knew that smell. Her desire. And it now it pushed him along. To drink it up. All the attention.

- I need to make a stop.
- Is this for me?
- What do you want?
- I just want to go home.

He pulled her close and kissed her. The kiss was sweet for her. It said home. For him it was simply insurance. He could give himself to her intensity. He tasted something beyond the flesh. Her absurd appetite. And ultimately he was just in the way. And he knew it. Knew it the way that everyone else had nurtured the very thing that he need to deny.

He was feeling a power over her. All strange and shaky. Something that he couldn't pin down. But something that she couldn't exhaust. He liked it that way. He couldn't be shelved like the others because he held the key to something about her. For him it was reminder why he couldn't be just a user. But that flame held all the magic for him as well.

–Can you see it burn?

–What?

–It's us burning up together.

–What?

–You'll go back home and pretend that none of this happened.

–It really isn't happening as far as I'm concerned. That's what you've been telling me.

In the vision, he lived in this place where the shower didn't work. She longed for a shower. Longed for that life where she could pay her rent. Not see her credit balance balloon out of all proportion.

She turned the shower on high. A nasty grimy day in traffic. The mint of her bath soap. She immersed herself in the water. Wrapped herself in towels. Fell asleep, damp on the bed.

–From the moment that you got in this car, you knew where you were headed?

–I thought that I did.

–Things like this happen in small doses. First, you do a favor for a friend. You need a little extra money.

–Money for what?

–Comic books. Candy.

–Are you trying to tell me about your life?

–What do you need?

–A meal. Clothes.

–Is that really how it is?

–I don't know. You're telling me my story.

–So how am I doing?

–Magnificently.

–Really?

–No, I'm trying to flatter you. You're doing just how you want to do.

–And how is that?

–Pretty shitty.

–If you knew what you were doing is wrong.

–How would I know? How would you know? I conduct a service. I make people feel good.

–And if they eventually feel bad over what makes them feel good.

–I can't deal with all that, any more than you can. I do what I can. I have enough to think about just staying alive.

–You could find some other way to stay alive.

–You could do something else.

–Like what.

–Like your brother. Your friends. Your mother.

–Did you let me in here to give me a lecture.

–I’m just trying to figure out where you’re headed.

–Wherever you’re going to take me.

–For now.

–For now. For later. Things just happen too quick for you. And you figure that it’s the same for everyone else. Like some kind of entertainment. You can’t expect for someone to just get into your car, and you can just rearrange their lives. You don’t want that kind of rearranging going for your life.

–What if I see my life’s going the right way.

–That’s just because someone keeps saying that to me.

–You just keep saying the same thing to yourself. And that voice is so much louder than any doubt that you have.

–You don’t know that.

–Otherwise you wouldn’t be so damn worried what someone else was doing. It’s just how you try to keep together for yourself.

She settled back in the bed and tried to wipe the whole day away. What would it really take?

There was a bottle of vodka in the freezer. And she wasn’t going to drink alone. But then she could just call it a party to which no one else came. She just needed that wall between the comfort that she could taste and the discomfort which was starting to creep in again.

A little orange juice and the first sip reminded her how confident she really was. How she didn’t need to call anyone tonight. The party mood just spread over her. Made its way on its own without help from anyone. No voice telling her what she had to do. It could always wait for tomorrow evening. She made notes about how she could plan those moments.

She had thought about ordering in some dinner. But she wasn’t feeling as hungry. She wondered what her boy might be doing. But down deep, she didn’t want to hear from him. She didn’t want to hear from anyone. She thought about what she might say if he did call. He couldn’t call. She just hoped it would stay that way. At least for tonight. And she loved how she didn’t have to think about anything else for this moment.

–What about if you just want this moment to last? To last just like this?

This moment just on the verge of ecstasy. Her pleasure, here for her alone. She relaxed on the bed. Nothing crept in from the outside world. She felt the wall harden and protect her. So high.

How could she ever explain this moment to him? She was moving into this realm that disturbed her. He had warned her about. And her imaginative wandering only reinforced this sense.

–I’m just trying to make it on my own.

–On your own. Are you really making it?

–I’m doing what I can.

She took another sip and turned her head around. She felt like she needed a massage. But she felt this warmth pulse through her body. For what it was, it helped her to work through her tenseness.

A drama still played in her head. She was trying to shut it off. Not let the long commute



get to her today. Why had she ventured so deep into the city. So far out of her way. Where was she driving to. She thought the same thing every day. Work, school. It was all starting to seem so remote. As if it was someone else's life.

For what it was worth, she was now a witness to her own life. She had trouble settling down. Even the comfort required some commentary. She wanted to shut off that voice. Needed to get out of herself.

She poured another drink in the hope that it might deaden that annoying dialogue. She loved her life. She didn't want anything to disrupt it. That bite of the alcohol cut in two the unbalance. She held with a constancy, the wicked buzz. It was a different sort of calm. Almost a breathlessness. She teetered before this lack of control. A concentration that seemed to bounce back on her. For what it was, she soaked it in. It reiterated her isolation but in a way that she coveted. She wouldn't let go of this feeling. And if she had to drink more to maintain the feeling, so be it.

For now no one could penetrate this wall. It was not about someone else sharing a drink with her. In a sense that would be too easy. She couldn't let anyone get this close to her. Not him, not anyone.

She resisted the fantasy that even her everyday world invited. She was now way beyond that. For once she could focus on the very feeling that was before her.

She mused if this new satisfaction could penetrate her everyday journey. Could she accustom its instability. Was there a dependency that loomed over her every waking moment. Sleep was the only resolution for her confusion.

She felt the sun move across her body with a new certainty. She felt refreshed. She lay in bed and enjoyed that confidence. Suddenly the reality of the day hit her. She had slept in. And now she rushed to get ready. If she just stayed here, wouldn't that be enough. All that she wanted was to escape.

She was starting to confront something about herself that was seeming too painful. She couldn't hold herself together if she went down that road. She'd seen that desperation in others and it wasn't her suit.

–I really don't where I'm headed.

As long as she concentrated on that effort to get herself to work, she didn't have to worry. That edging of eye pencil as it made its outline was her reassurance. All about what she was doing today to dispel the gradual slipping into the dismal.

It would be a crime if she gave up on her plans. All the confidence that she had built up was invested in her routine. Today, she had let that routine slip. This wasn't like her. She felt the need to do something to balance for this mistake. If she didn't, she couldn't brake herself. She would just careen into that wall. She gripped the steering wheel even a she felt herself take a fateful turn.

–I'm a little lost. I got off the freeway. I don't know my way back.

–Lady, I don't have a car. Never had one. I think it's that way.

Fear blended with her need for clarity. She was in his living room as he rolled a joint.

–I could help you out. If you need it.

–I need it bad.

- What do you need?
- Directions.
- That’s all.

He had a strange sense of confidence. His place bothered her. All the mess. Nothing seemed in its place. This wasn’t how she lived. She couldn’t imagine staying in a place beyond a few minutes.

–Lady, you ever have a man who made you feel really good inside. Who warmed you even when he wasn’t around.

His candor seemed to get the better of her. She just wanted some directions to make it back to her place. But he was saying more than she needed to hear.

–I could have you arrested.

She knew that she could say that to him. That would be certain death. But she wanted to have one over on him. Why was she even here? She felt that her intentions had led her to this place. She could make things better for him just as he could do her a favor.

–You got a little time, honey.

–I’ve got to get to work.

–I’ve got some work to do. But I could show you some things.

She didn’t want to think of sex like that. It was something to enhance your everyday experience. Not something to distract you. She wanted something all consuming in her life. She pretended that was what she had. Her unconditional love. Her plans. But she was still attracted to something more sinister.

As she drove off from the house, she wondered what had possessed her to stop by there. She had a map. And a note. All told her of this place. Invited her to new pleasures. She needed that excuse. Please stop by...

What had really driven her to that door. Her unconditional love. What if she had been his love. Unloved in his living room. As he drew in the smoke from a massive joint, he moved closer to her.

–Let me touch you.

–I’ve been touched before.

–Woman, that’s your problem. You’ve *been* touched. If it was me who touched you, you would be one with the touch. You know what that means...one with the touch.

She didn’t. None of it made sense to her. She remembered to her first sexual experiences. She had felt some shame. But she was in love, and that helped her get over her hesitancy. *In love*. That was a good excuse. She was just fifteen. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Since then she had been in and out of love a few times. She still wasn’t very old. But then—those were ancient times.

She knew what he was offering. There was something brutal in his tone. He could give, but he also could take away. That was what she hated in his manners.

Where was she headed? She felt herself turning her back on everything that had made her

who she was. She was in this low life's front room contemplating a life of vice. What she did today would cut her off permanently from any plans that she may have had for herself.

–Do you want to go in the bedroom.

–No, thanks.

–Girl, why did you come back here if you didn't want to get busy.

She needed to ask him something. She had her question. She couldn't give it words.

–I don't know what's happening to me.

–And you think that I'm going to tell you?

–What are you doing with your life.

–Are you trying to hire me for a job or something. I've got money. More money than you've ever seen in your cushy ass life. You want a drink.

–It's eleven in the morning.

–In London, it's early evening. Madam, would you like a little alcohol in your tea.

–I'm OK

She wondered if he ever washed any of his glasses.

–I'm clean. I take two showers a day. Sometimes three. Spread the nicest lotions all over my body. I could do the same for you.

She wondered if she had ever been talked to like that. Where she could feel one in the flesh. She wanted him to take her by the hand.

–I guess I've found out what I need. I better go.

–Was this your tourist affair or something?

–It's not like that.

–I charge for my services. Don't come back if you don't know what you want.

She felt that if she stayed here that she would be continuing to ask questions why she was here. There was always something so mechanical in sex. The breaking down of the self as it became part of something else. That was what she was afraid of with him.

–Baby, let me give you a little kiss before you get out of here.

–I've really got to go.

–Just a little hug.

She got back on the freeway with the directions that she needed. She couldn't go back to work. She didn't want to think about her lover. She didn't want to think about this new guy. She wanted to leave herself. She hated the fact that her life had been so planned out for her. Hated it. It was barely afternoon. She found herself in a bar and she was drinking alone. In the dark of the daytime.

– I don't want to see the daylight.

–Is it a guy?

She was wasted by midday and found her way to an afternoon matinee. She passed out while watching the movie. She awoke to the sound of gunfire and screeching tires. This seemed to be all part of her detour.

She had always used love to protect her. Passion never existed in its raw form. Not until

now. She could see herself heading over to his place just to give him a blow job and then getting kicked out while he took care of business. Or waiting in the other room until he was good and ready. Then he'd come in and do his business and send her home. She'd be more than ever in her longing for real pleasure. Soulful pleasure.

But the denial of self seemed what she wanted for the time being. It was all just an experiment. One from one matinee to another.

–I'm just your entertainment, sister.

She wanted to feel him with both hands. Get warm, get hot underneath her pressure.

–This is what hot is. This is spirit and the spiritual. This is it all.

And she clung to that suburban belief. It shot all the physical back into this spiritual mode. That is what made everything so comfortable in her world. She could come into the city to work. But as long as she got out as soon as she possibly could.

When she arrived home, she made tea for herself. As the water boiled, the whistle took her out of her reverie. She like being by herself. She had no one to answer to. She didn't have to seek perfection for anyone. What she needed was floating around her. Peace. She valued the tranquility. If only all her days could blend into this solace. She hovered before unconsciousness. This would become her state for days. Others would see her as preoccupied. She was living just outside of her body.

She had no need to go back to the house. No need for anything.

Why couldn't the serenity last? Somehow the bubble burst for her. It was a particularly stressful day at work. She found herself watching the clock, taking stock of herself. Her comfort zone was pierced. She found herself driving downtown again. After so much time, she was surprised that she made her way back.

She needed something artificial to make everything right.

–So what brings the princess back. The natives are restless.

She knew that she wanted to lecture him on how to better his life. It was the same sermon that she had made part of herself.

–Do you want to be my lover?

Her breath was taken away by his query. She wanted him to have some purpose for his life. All that she could see was waste around her. At the same time, she wanted his touch.

–Do you have any tea.

–No tea here, milady. I can get you some coffee.

The coffee was bitter. Boiled over. But it tamed the atmosphere.

–You don't know until you find it. Do you now. So what are you back here for.

She knew if she went down this way that there would be no return to the order of her former life. Why did she frame it in such stark terms. It made it difficult for her to even do anything.

–I just need a friend. I need some comfort.

She was embarrassed by her helplessness. All the complexity of her life was boiling down to something too simple. She never asked. She was always offered the prize. And she chose among the best crafts. That was why she was a star. Here, her silver was all tarnished.

She should have never ventured out of wonderland. This was what coming down meant. She had even played the game and she was always coming down. That feeling started to panic her. She felt that the locked door behind her was locked forever.

–I think that I made a mistake.

–Are you some kind of cop or something? Showing up here with no earthly purpose.

He knew how shallow were her defenses. He wanted to destroy her just for interfering in his world. He embraced chaos. That was what she admired. But she still upheld this undisturbed calm. He wanted to shake her out of it.

–Just get the fuck out of her if you don't have a reason to be here.

As she squirmed to get out, he reached over to kiss her. She was flattered by the rawness of the gesture. Her fear was too overwhelming. She needed to squeeze out the door.

Her visit had been a complete disaster. Why had she even considered coming down here. There was nothing for her. Even the smell of the house made her sick. She wish that something could carry her over all her misgivings. She wanted to knock on the door again. But there was no way that she could.

She thought about her blessings, things that were becoming her curse. Her guy. Their plans. The house that they were looking at. That would be years in the future. But already she was living that life. Now, she hated all that. Her dreams had the same smell that disgusted her in that house. The smell of rotting dope. The cheap stale odor of smoke. And food left out to long. A world overripe.

She bought some wine and returned home. This would be artificial enough. She drank the bottle and passed into sleep. Waking up just in time, she rushed off to work. She started to feel that she was never going to survive like this. The drudgery slowed to a standstill. She again felt the sensation of the locked door.

That evening she spent by herself again. He called to have dinner and she blew him off. It wasn't time to go to dinner. She didn't want to recover with him. She wanted to recover from him. She drove downtown to the house, drove around the block, and returned home. He was glad to get back home. Her own peace.

She just felt herself torn apart. No mending could do.

She felt that she was living outside the law. She had a paranoia that filled her days. Her driving alternated between a meticulous obedience to every traffic signal to a more erratic flaunting of the law. She always had her eye out for police cruisers. She began to suspect unmarked cars that were behind her.

Perhaps someone had tracked her from downtown. They wondered what her luxury car was doing driving in that neighborhood. What was her connection? Who was her connection. The fear gave her life a sense of daring. In the daring, she finds rapture. She had a reputation. She was a wanted woman.

She realized that she had always bathed in these spotlights. The only reason that she gave in to her man was that he rewarded her effort. She had always waited for the best. Even though he couldn't offer it all to her now, she was seduced by her promise. But it was a promise that she expected. Someone would shower her with gifts. She was a starlet. Her body was perfection.

She knew that this shell of overconfidence protected a deeper bed os insecurity. No one

had ever phrased it so brutally before. She could always attribute her vanity to something outside of her, never to her actual beliefs. That's why she valued her guy because he was so real. But what happened to this reality as it was shattering around her.

After work, she headed to the neighborhood where she hoped to have her future home. The idle perfection fascinated her. Trees that had made their way to the heavens for hundreds of years. This contrasted with the blight of downtown. The smell of grease and burning tires. Old engines tossed in fields. She loved the expanses of mowed yards and cheerfully playing children. All she had to do was sign the card and send out her life forever.

She never thought of herself as that hard. Instead, she attached her dream to the struggles that she faced. In school, science was always a challenge to her. And she could barely meet its demands. She made it through and concentrated on the poetic. This is where she would forge her career. Temporary jobs and occasional situations drained her. But they convinced her of the necessity to keep on with that dream. She never became lost in any illusion about herself.

Confronted with another reality, she saw how much her privilege had got the best of her. It was more than expecting a man to hold a door for her. She wanted the deep uncertainties banished from her life. That's why she looked on criminals with such suspicion. The law was her everything. It told her that all her bad days added up could never equal the promise of success that drove her. And she believed that her aspirations were modest. She was fashionable, but she never had the obsessions of her friends. This convinced her that she was not materialistic. But face to face with utter squalor, she wanted to run back to her safe suburban home. She now realized that this was paramount in her life. She thought that her life had been coming apart. But she now knew how much her security meant for her.

Downtown, she felt that she was in the presence of another state of being. The evolution of the species. Her manners now shocked her. She thought that she cared for humanity. Her own liberalism had become her trap. She could look, but heaven prevented her from touching. In her world, all touch was with sterile gloves. No wonder the addiction to hand washing. She felt that she needed a long shower to get back to herself. She had faced her own death, and it frightened her. She wanted to wash off the fear.

A police cruiser followed her for a couple of blocks. Totally random. Then it changed its route. She kept on. The rush to get home.

She marveled about how she lived in a world of generalities. Like the facades in a Hollywood movie. For her, there were no insides. When she did go in, she wondered how the house had survived demolition. Was this how things had to be?

–We don't need some missionary coming to our neighborhood and converting us.

Was that her role? She was rendered frigid by her expectations. She was a skeleton in the flesh. A ghost in her story.

The next time that she drove downtown, she passed a house surrounded by police cars. All the residents were being led out of the house.

–Don't you know about law.

They had never listened to the lecture. It would have been so easy for her to have been

outside. She saw someone come out of “her” house. She decided to follow him. He didn’t notice her car at first. He was on a bike. He started to wonder why she was going so slow. She pretended to look for an address. Then she gave up the search so that she wouldn’t let on to her prey.

She turned the block, and then again caught up with him. He ended up with a bunch of his friends. The usual horseplay. She had succeeded in being a cop. She wondered why the boy was so obvious. Hadn’t he seen the cops a few blocks away. These were just the risks.

She never liked to drink alone. Even when she went out with her girlfriends, she was embarrassed if she drank too much. She was always impatient to get home if she didn’t find that immediate electric attraction. She was used to guys approaching her. She loved her prerogative to reject them. When she was ignored, it made her feel worse. She wouldn’t hang around drinking and wait for that magic moment. She’d just hit the door. But now things were different. She could sense that change in her. If she feared unwanted attention, at least she could make the magic open up for herself. She thought nothing of pouring herself a full glass of wine. It never hurt to finish the whole bottle herself.

Sometimes the wine wouldn’t do the trick. It’s slow effect made her dwell on too many things that she preferred not to think about. A cold vodka and orange juice could really get her in the right mood. She didn’t need to go out. She could make her own party.

Her independence shocked her. She sensed that she was changing. But she was afraid of what was coming over her. She could feel it take her into dangerous places. That only caused her to drink a little more. This helped to dispel that fear. She only felt numb. A bit entertained by herself.

For her there were no answers. Only a way to dispel the questions—all these questions that she had thought were so important. At least she still had her job. Even with a man that cared for her she started to feel more and more alone. For the time being, she needed to push him away. It was as if she needed a deep breath, everything would fall into place.

She wanted the lights to flash. She wanted to give in to the dazzle. It was her world. No one could stop her.

She woke up the next morning a little shaken from her drinking. There was still a bit of a buzz as she headed for work. This was just the edge that she needed. It would be scandalous to take a sip in the morning. But a little carryover from the night before didn’t really hurt. And she let her elation carry her until noon. Lunch gave her the chance to slip in a couple of cocktails before heading back to a laborious afternoon. Her boss was giving her the weirdest looks lately. She had always found him a little dashing. She was fascinated about hearing details of his life. His time at school. His poetry writing. His athletics. But she also resented his cockiness. He was no longer the hero of his past adventures. Even though the years slowed him down, he still tried to rest on these past laurels. She hoped that he couldn’t smell the alcohol on her breath. He didn’t want to give him the impression that she was a loose woman—whatever that meant.

She still wanted to be so proper. Even as bent the rules, she didn't want it to fall apart. She didn't want any of it to break. All to maintain decorum. She could still sense that this was a male regime. And she feared making too many waves.

Her man called that evening. She realized that she needed the booze just to be near him. At the same time, a couple of more drinks, and she wouldn't need him at all. She laughed as she poured another. All the better to make this sorry dinner taste like it was made by a gourmet. She was starting to like her own cooking more and more.

She finally got together with him a couple of evenings later. This was sort of a going away dinner.

–You've been really distant as of late.

–Work's getting to me. You have to be patient with me.

A vague nostalgia rushed over her as they separated that evening. She promised to take him to the airport. But she sensed this immense distance between them. At the same time, she remembered all the great times that they had shared. He was the definition of her world, the beginning and the end. She didn't want to let this go for anything. Her feelings were best expressed when he gripped her hand. She let him kiss her, but already by that point she was losing any sensation for him. She could only live in their past.

She tried to fill in for that sense of completeness. As she crossed the bridge to her home, she became lost in all the lights on the bridge.

In front of her apartment, there was this flickering street light. She sat in her car for almost a half hour staring at it. The tears in her eyes gave a different tone to the line. She immersed herself in that feeling. This was her transcendence. The real effects of the light and her need for something more. When she went upstairs for bed, she avoided taking another drink. All the intoxication of the night still held her.

When she picked him up for the airport, she felt that this was good by forever. She was giving up so much of herself. At first, she thought that this was maturity. Even moving to the city had been a big step for her. But she always had a protected world where she could return. Now she was losing that. He was her whole life. It was only going to be a few weeks. But the separation was a permanent divorce from her. She winced as she felt it cut deep into her.

She stored all this emotion for herself. Her final kiss was pathetic. He believed its sincerity. She just wanted to start drinking.

It was still early morning. She saved her thirst for lunch. She came back from lunch a little tipsy. Her boss could detect her edge. He mistook an idle comment for a sexual innuendo on her part. His retort was confusing.

–Do I feel touched?

She could make no sense of the comment. But he felt lionized. He tried to take her hand, but he was a little clumsy.

–Sorry.

He did have nice eyes. He stared at her, and she took it for a complement. She never would have given him the opportunity, but the drink was talking. She didn't want to be reduced to his instincts. But his masculinity had its present appeal. She could even imagine his lips close to hers.



He put his hands on her hip. This was his invitation. She didn't take it off. She could feel his breath as they both held there. He maneuvered her over to the wall. His mannerisms were all the more seductive due to their ease. She found herself temporarily succumbing. He place his hand on her breast. Momentarily it made her feel wanted. Why had he never done this before. She believed that he was taking advantage of her influenced state.

The next thing, he had her on the ground with his dry humping. As he tried to reach under her skirt, she pushed him off.

–You wanted this.

–You're my boss. You're married.

–That never stopped me before.

She felt a victim of his conquests. His aggressiveness was more obvious and pathetic.

She couldn't keep working that afternoon. She snuck out early.

–Cover for me.

She knew how to drown this unease. She called a few friends to meet her for drinks. By the time that they got off work, she was hitting that pleasant high.

–I'm going to be trashed before dinner if I don't watch it.

Dinner did take some of the bite off of her inebriation. But that didn't stop her from keeping the liquor flowing. A little dancing and she was even more distracted.

–I don't think that I could drink much more. I'm going to be dead drunk.

–I've got something to help that out.

She never understood the power of coke before. And she didn't want to stop drinking now.

–I can't even remember what happened today.

She discovered a way that she could do her work at home. That way she could avoid the office for a few days. It made it easier to set her own hours.

She promised herself that wouldn't become a coke user. But a little kick now and then wouldn't hurt. She started to dread coming down even more than savoring the present high. She gave herself to the night.

By the time that her man returned, her life had entered a new chapter. She needed to keep him on just to keep herself sane. She was a little irregular at her job. But her new ways gave her the courage to get over the disaster of a few weeks before.

–I called your apartment. You didn't even come home.

–I turned the phone off.

–I was waiting for you.

She felt like he was spying on her.

–I'm not perfect. If you wanted a saint, you should have joined church group or something. I'm not the girl that you want me to be.

He wanted to be patient with her. Their history was so deep. And he was traveling so much for work. His pressure only made her withdraw more. She refused to see him for a week.

She wondered what was happening. At first, she had just resorted to staying out late with her friends. But Dane seemed particularly appealing to her now that she had got her high. And

she didn't want to stop.

She and Dane became inseparable.

–You ever had sex with a woman?

Dane was teasing her.

–It's fun to try new things on coke.

–Do you have sex on coke.

–It's such a blast. You never want to stop. The only things with some guys. You know the problem.

–So that's how you got in to girls.

–I was kidding. I've never gone the other way. I've never had sex with for drugs. I party. But I know when to quit. You need to know your limit. This is a bottomless pit.

She was feeling jacked just hearing the story. But she also felt the restraint. Looking at herself, she was seeing how much she relied on getting messed up just to make it through the day. She decided to quit cold turkey.

Without the outlet, work started to seem hellish. But she wouldn't give in no matter how depressed she was feeling. She even stopped drinking during dinner. She still refused to take calls from her man. They had agreed to the separation. And she needed to stay away.

A new job might do the trick. She threatened her boss with a lawsuit if he wouldn't help her out. He complied. In a way, this was getting the promotion that she needed. The new office was smaller and run by a woman. But now she felt that she could really demonstrate her skills. What brought her back to a life of partying. They landed a new account, and to celebrate the head of the company took them all out for drinks. The drinking really did nothing for her. But she could again taste that excitement. Didn't anyone have some drugs. She hooked up with a stranger on the way to the washroom. She ended up doing lines in the men's room.

–I never thought of myself this way.

–A couple of my friends are heading back to my place.

–I don't know.

After a few more drinks, she was pliable. Three guys and Dane headed back to the stranger's place. Soon all of them split.

–Honey, are you going to be OK.

–I'll be perfect.

The mood was set by the time everyone left. She didn't want to head home with this high. She'd just be up to morning. Why not double or nothing.

She had heard about the high. But it was incredible. She could feel it extend from here to eternity. An eternal sun. His tongue deftly worked its way inside her. By the time that he slipped inside her, she could feel these multiple orgasms. Surely, an exaggeration. She could not stop herself. She gave in to the paradise.

She didn't want to admit the hold that the night had over her. She had to leave before daylight or she would be committed to him until daylight. But she knew what she needed. She had never been able to let herself go with such confidence. Nothing held her back. It was total freedom.

As she headed for sleep in her own bed, she felt the ripples of a constant ocean. She floated out in time.

Her new job started to remind her of her old job. And the call of the wild gripped her from midmorning until the rest of the day. On her coffee break, she snuck into the washroom to do a few lines. She looked at her face in the mirror. Could anyone see what she was becoming.

–How can you afford all that coke?

–I don't use much.

–But honey.

–I get it from friends.

Guys would offer her drugs when they realized that she gave off that vibe. It gave her new confidence. Her power. Now guys knew her power. She felt really fit. She started to be even more obsessed with her body. Exercise provided the same high. After a few hours at the gym, she only wanted to party more.

She didn't want to make her sex life into some kind of acrobatics, but she realized what made her happy.

–I've got a little something for you and a little something for me.

Just because a guy gave her coke wasn't a reason to sleep with him. In essence, she was even more selective. Guys would throw themselves at her. She would just laugh. Now she knew that she had it.

Coming down was the worst. She'd keep the party going for days just so she wouldn't have to face it. At work, she became better at covering her fascination. She even had a few allies at work to help her through the "hard times".

–Is something wrong?

–No, not at all.

–Your work has been great. Better than great. But you seem so jumpy these days.

–I didn't notice. Maybe, it's too much exercise.

As long as the cash kept rolling in, she had no problems burning the candle at both ends.

She did her part, but the business seemed to be suffering from mismanagement. With her provoked awareness, this became all the more obvious to her. But she couldn't do anything to stop it. And her resources were drying up.

–We're not going to lay anyone off. Just be patient.

She found that she was borrowing money in the hopes that the golden era might reappear. There was actually no hope of better days, but she let the coke do her talking. She only came up with better plans.

–I don't have any money tonight. But I'm good for it. You never asked me for money before.

–Girl, do you have any idea how much you're using?

To make her ends meet, she wondered what it would be like selling. Luckily, her job would tide her over.

The company did go down, but she found another job just before the meltdown. Only now she wasn't earning as much. She could do the work in her sleep, but she was always living in the red.

–Baby, come back to my place and you can live in luxury.

She wasn't going to have sex for drugs. But she didn't mind moving in with a dealer. In

fact, he was an ex-client of her former firm. She made sure that he earned most of his money legit. But he wasn't beyond slipping a friend some envelopes for a fee. A retainer. All part of the business. She even helped snare customers now and then.

–You are a real hot commodity.

She giggled. He got turned on by her laugh.

–You wouldn't mind entertaining one of my friends tonight.

Was he pimping her out now.

–If you're getting action, I want some of your action.

–You don't have to sleep with him.

–But you don't want to make a client angry.

–Is he cute?

–You decide. You do what you want to do.

For a night's supply, and really good high, she'd go along with pretty much anything.

–He's sort of in to threesomes.

–I've never tried that sort of thing.

This wouldn't be the night. But when the night's hours waned, she needed to keep the bright lights flashing.

–Don't stop baby.

–You're wearing out even this man.

She was enhancing her reputation.

–That girl just can't stop.

One morning, everything came out. She puked her brains out.

–I want to die.

She took everything that she had and put it in a suitcase and just took off.

–You can't come back to the office. I'm sorry. You haven't even been here for three weeks. You never called. You look like a mess. I'm not stupid, woman. You need rehab.

–What the fuck. What are you trying to say to me?

She called her man. She hoped for a reconciliation.

–I don't know what happened to me. I guess I lost my nerve.

He took her back. He knew that she was using drugs, but he was totally naive to her actual condition. He let her come and live in his apartment. They made love that first night. It felt like old times. She let herself be cared for that first week. But then it began to seem oppressive again. She saw one of her old friends at a supermarket. They spent all afternoon drinking. She needed money. There were so many odds and ends in his apartment that he would miss an end. An odd end, something thrown in the closet.

–You won't miss this. You don't even use it.

She was just helping him clean things up.

One morning he had forgotten a file for work. He returned to catch her taking one of his art objects.

–I was going to get it cleaned.

–I want you out of here. I've had suspicions but I couldn't admit them to myself.

She felt comfortable leaving. Between the cash and things stolen, she had a few thousand. She found a cheap hotel to stay in. She vowed that she would get it together. She found her old crowd. They'd help her get on her feet. She still had her car and her clothes.

She found herself in that downtown neighborhood again. She drove around the house. If she stopped in, she could score some stuff. But she wasn't that kind of junkie. She still had class.

Needing money, she was almost tempted to go back to the boss who had harassed her. Her indignity only made her feel worse. She never had to come down so deeply before. She thought about selling her car. She felt that she could hang on.

She cajoled herself into the club where she had scored the majority of her drugs.

–Hon', you ain't looking so good.

–Some tough times.

Was she looking that bad? She rushed to the bathroom. Around her the novices flitted. They adjourned to the bathroom in groups of three and four. She was too desperate to join any of these parties.

–We're not going to end up like you.

They were all casual users. As the doors closed on the stalls, she felt that her possibilities were running out.

–I'd get you some if you had the money. Everyone can see that time is running out on you.

–What are you talking about?

–You could score some if you did me some favors.

–I don't do tricks.

–That isn't how you were acting when you rushing for paradise.

Her options were running out.

–I knew that you'd be back.

–I'm not one of your lowlife whores. I've got money.

She had had it all. And she turned her back on it.

–Sister, you were always scratching for more. Now it's your struggle just to hold even. From where you are now, you can even see where you were. That is down deep.

She didn't need a lesson from someone whose life is going nowhere.

–I sell the product. I don't use the product. It's business for me. And it's always getting better.

She knew about his exaggeration. That the cops were always one step away. His competitors were ready to take him down in a gun battle.

–You've got the money, babe.

–I told you that I'm good for it.

–If you don't have it, I don't have it.

–I'm good for it.

–How do I know that. Are you going to try to get all tender with me.

It was a long night for her. She had rushed home from work. Unusual for her, she decided to have a glass of wine before bed.

–I just had the weirdest dream. I fell asleep watching this movie about the drug trade.