

Alternate

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for Harry Mathews

An audience cheers. From podium 2 (flashing 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2), a youth trumpets the refrain of a current hit single. He, the trumpet player, is a contestant on an interactive game show. Winners provide a verbal answer, then select, and properly employ, the correct object. They must choose from a collection encased in glass; answer options wait behind multiple windowpanes. Each dwells in its own separate cubicle, whose doors maneuver with a square steel handle. Among this segment's response picks: brass horns, balls of yarn, knitting needles, a current world atlas, satchels filled with red and green colored candy or pills. The theme is not obvious. Objects assembled for the next segment (track and bike shoes, sport balls, heart monitors, energy drinks) suggest things linked to an athletic appetite.

The camera pans to next-up contestants, huddling around a table piled with enough food to sate the fiercest appetite. The tallest, now plucking at a bunch of grapes, wears an eye-catching pair of glossy pants patterned with trumpets. He chews and swallows his grapes, opens up a bottle labeled *Efficiency UN-Pill*, says to the camera, "This 100% natural concoction improves personal production, and not just in your looking glass. These tablets read and enhance a subject's requested mood for the day: competitive, passionate, curious; they, however, are not without a downside: Swallow them and your actions will be prolific, but your bowel movements hard steel. The heaviest water and roughage consumption won't stop your BM's from coming out brutally painful. View the UN-Pill process as a duty incapable of generating passion, pleasure, pain. During hard BM's I picture things mildly pleasant; this morning it was a photograph of holiday gifts, decorations, appetizers."

The camera returns to the show, its host. Her mouth is wired with steel. She makes small talk between segments: “Braces at my ripe age; I still savor that final, pre-orthodontic-work meal: steak, celery, nut-filled caramels, alcohol in oversized glasses.” From there she goes on to announce that the trumpeter wins the highest possible number of points. She chats with him during the commercial break. This starts out pleasantly but turns edgy when he expresses hope for a day human nourishment can be taken from special pills.

She, disbelieving, repeats, “Pills, Pills, PILLS?”

The host is proud of her interactive quiz program, its questions, replies, competitors, its answer selections waiting behind their individual windowpanes. She masterminds the show and carefully nourishes its sense of competition, process, detail, drama. Truly theatrical is the youth, for example, blowing his reply on the trumpet. He carries himself somewhere, satisfies some appetite. Body taut, forehead smooth, eyes fixed and glassy. Audience members would do anything to get that blissed-out without having to lie, do drugs, pay money, steal.

Next contestant. This one tackles the question put to her by reaching for a set of knitting needles which are long, extra thick, and made of steel. These cannot be intended for knitting anything delicate like booties or a cozy for a pot of tea or container of pills. These must be intended to construct something big, bulky: an afghan or an oversized sweater, a cover for a fine window or collectible looking glass. Or a grand holiday stocking, large enough to hold boxes of presents in addition to chestnuts, mints, candy canes. This contestant clicks and clacks the needles, needles suggestive of danger, weapons, wound infliction, needles suggestive of satisfying an S and M appetite. She—the contestant—talks about college, her band, how back then she sang and played trumpet. It is not for her, she tells the camera, the healthiest pastime. Dwelling on college, her band, her trumpet. When dwelling this way, she grows nostalgic, weepy; exaggerates happy times, blots out the bad sex, cold showers, stealing. Things linked to your drug/sex/criminal appetite.

The knitting contestant holds up something finished, big, unidentifiable; the host claps, gets the audience to clap (!), then offers a personal anecdote from her own university days. Drugs:

her crowd in college swallowed handfuls, mixed in with their vitamin pills. Also in style was to shun clean sheets, good meals, warm clothing. The point was to radiate discomfort, even heady pain. The host, in fact, used to think that pain was something to enjoy until one bad night, dancing shoeless, she gashed her foot on a shard of glass.

The camera moves to her sensibly heeled shoe, she removes it, reveals one tanned foot, a glassy set of toes, steel blue second-toe ring, completely callous-free pinkie—then, along the inner high arch, a disfiguring scar; the crowd roars, music trumpets, the host starts, “We had a party, guests with hard pill and booze appetites threw drinks, shattered windowpanes...” an explanation barely audible over the crowd’s earsplitting expressions of high stimulation.