

The Answering Machine

This is the story of Rick Morris, whom everyone in New York City knew as Gray. Rick started calling himself Gray almost three years ago. This club promoter friend of his, I think his name was Balthazar, suggested that he start a guest list at the Sky. Sky just opened then (before it was some low-life loser club called Tune), but it was very promising because the owners were the same guys that started Moomba. He was told he would make \$2 off every person he brought in, “But they have to be cool for you to get paid” the Moomba creator told him. When Rick was designing the flyer for his first Wednesday night party at Sky, he came up with the name Gray. The name just settled on him, kind of like a gray rainy morning does. Gray found it exotic sounding, maybe even foreign. Surely people wouldn’t guess that he was born and raised in Upstate New York. I think the real story is that Rick liked the name because it sounded jaded. He always played jaded - the kind of guy that even the wildest club scene could never take by surprise. He had that “I’ve seen it all before” attitude imprinted in his soul. In retrospect, I must say, it was a good decision to change his name to Gray because it provoked many conversations, and helped him meet cool people that later came to his clubs, and directly increased his income. After he introduced himself people would always asked him “Is that your favorite color?” or “ Is your mother called Green?” And then they would remember him the next time they saw him. Needless to say, this was a great gimmick for a promoter. He told me once that he imagined what people’s reactions would be when they read his first party flyer with its funky, futuristic design. He often thought of what people felt when they read his new name “Gray.” He liked the way the letters lay thick and heavy beneath the heading “Wednesday’s at Sky, the new fashion industry party. A new Genre all together. Hosted By....” And then “Gray”. Personally I think he took this

whole club image thing way too seriously. One time, in a moment of intimacy after we had sex, he jumped up from the bed and pulled out the original flyer to show me what he was talking about. I didn't know how to respond, so I lit an after-sex cigarette and every few seconds exhaled loudly through a half smile instead of commenting.

Few people in the city knew that Gray wasn't his real name. He threw away the shy boyish Rick like old news the moment he saw how suavely his new name fit his nightlife profession. Wednesday's at Sky became such a success, such a self-fulfilling prophecy. At first, Gray wasn't sure if his parties were good, even though a lot of people told him they were. He finally became persuaded of his success when Time Out New York and Nylon Magazine raved about how trendy and chic his Wednesday's had become. At the same time, he learned what it meant to have a good party in a New York City. It meant having velvet ropes at the door, and a lot of really beautiful, young, tall and skinny people inside, speaking about how good the party was. If you could keep the models in your party for over an hour before they began leaving in cab loads to the next happening scene, you were guaranteed to have the model wannabees and wealthy "model hunters" consistently come to your club and spend money at the bar all night. That was Gray's belief. He must have gotten something right, because his Wednesday's at Sky remained the happening scene for roughly one year, a record time for the quickly changing nightlife of the attention-deficit disorder capital of the world.

In any case (I think I'm getting way off the subject), after all the great magazine reviews and the subsequent lengthening of lines behind the Wednesday night velvet ropes at Sky, Gray was on his way to nightlife king status. He started promoting Tuesdays at Salon (a special artsy party night catered to downtown Bohemians he called "Performance"), Thursdays at Lounge 431, and Fridays and Saturdays

at Liquid Planet (a rave scene with pierced and tattooed emaciated bodies jumping up and down on Ecstasy to European techno.) Gray would roam lounges and parties in the city, giving “Wazzup, man” greetings to pals from the business, and kissing models on the lips as a way of saying hello. He looked so slick. He would move his body to the music while being engaged in two separate conversations. Gray grew a courage he’d never had before – a courage that Rick never imagined existed. Gray would target every beautiful girl that didn’t have a man wrapped around her, wearing that charming boyish smile contrasting with two piercing eyes. He would walk over nonchalantly, always pretend to be chill, just flowing, but inside he was all agenda. He didn’t want to experience these silly young girls, get to know them, date them, love them, or even fuck them (although sex was often a side result). He only wanted to seduce them with a smile and flyer to come to his parties. They always did.

When I became close with Gray, Sky had been temporarily shutdown by the city. He recreated his Wednesday scene at 222, and he was set on making his Liquid Planet Saturdays the hippest in the city. Gray often dreamed of transforming the nightlife of New York, or more specifically, extending the usual cycle of a trendy New York City nightclub, which lasted 6 to 9 months at the most. He worked hard at keeping all the contact information in his contact database current. He hired two girls with cute British accents to call all his VIP guests and invite them personally to his big weekend nights.

But at the point in his life when he finally felt close to accomplishing his mission (a New York Times Sunday Style article compared Liquid Planet with the legendary Studio 54), a remarkable thing happened. Nature played a game on Gray, or maybe I should say technology. I don’t know how to define this bizarre trigger in the tale of Gray. I think I will let his written words tell you the story. I cannot ask him to retell it to you because Gray is dead now. The little light of life he managed to

preserve during his three years of nocturnal existence was finally extinguished. On the evening he died he was as black as the night he had lived in. You see, two months ago Gray had an awful car accident. He was arrogantly riding his mountain bike with no helmet, trying to weave his way through midtown traffic, when a Pakistani taxi driver accelerated while switching lanes and drove right into him. The driver, witnessing Gray's body bounce off his windshield, fly through the air, and land on the hard asphalt five cars away, had a heart attack and died on the spot. Maybe the driver freaked out thinking he would be deported. It doesn't really matter. This was the end of Gray and some anonymous Paki driver. But the driver had no name (the cab and it's license weren't his and there was no ID found on his body). So really the cabby never existed in the first place. But Gray? Everyone knew Gray. His death definitely had an impact. Some downtown partiers claim that New York City nightlife will never fully recover.

But I'm not here to write about nightlife, really. I'm writing this merely to present the story of Gray. Luckily, when he had his mystical awakening with the answering machine, he thought it was so revolutionary, so significant to human development that he decided to document his experience in a journal. And guess what? His parents gave me the journal after he died. They found my phone number written in red on the back cover of his journal. They thought that the fact that my number was written in red and on his journal made me more important than the 3,432 phone numbers in his contact database. I'm pretty sure Gray was simply transcribing my number from his answering machine one day, and the only thing he had handy was his journal and a red pen. If they only knew how little I meant to him, that he only knew me as Kaz the Australian bartender from Serena, and at best would describe me as a pretty girl with a sexy accent. Or a good fuck, I suppose. We did have great sex. I'm fairly certain he thought of me as another dumb chick. The few times that he did come home with me,

he only stayed for an hour or so after sex, before putting his pants back on, buckling his belt in front of the mirror (giving himself a macho look of a man who just got laid), and taking a cab home. He always said he had to wake up early the next day, but I knew he only worked nights. Anyway, I won't get into all that. I really don't care that much. And besides, I'm not writing this to contaminate the reputation of a dead man. I am just here as an introduction, really. The truth is this. Craig, an old school buddy of Gray's, walked into Serena a few weeks ago when I was bartending. I mentioned something about having Gray's journal, and he offered to pay me \$1,000 for a written introduction and some juicy journal excerpts. He said he was making a documentary about Gray's legendary nightlife and that his offer was a research expenditure. So, I guess this is my first freelance writing assignment. [Craig: I hope it's OK that I included our deal. I wanted to be real all the way. If you don't like it, you can take it out.] Here is the answering machine story, written by the late Gray:

4/4/00

I have decided to document my recent experiences in writing. I want to clarify that it is not that I think I am special. I'll be the first to admit that I'm a classic New York City slut. I sleep with at least two girls a month that I meet that same night. I own a pair of Prada leather pants. I always wear my Bottega Veneta sunglasses. I have a Palm Pilot. I like cocaine. I love sushi. But then I am also a slob. I smoke a lot of dope, and I usually don't go to bed before five in the morning. I have a weak spot for deli pizza. Sometimes in the winter I don't shower for four or five days because I'm too cold or too lazy. But one special thing differentiates me from the crowd. It was revealed to me two months ago and now I see myself as a chosen scientist of society. I guess in the world of academics they would call my expertise Social Science, or maybe Anthropology. But those analogies are stupid because I only have my bachelor's degree from a community college and I've never published a scholarly paper in my life. The

special thing about me is that I own a very special answering machine, which I call the Reality Machine. Now I will write down the story of how this machine brought me to enlightenment.

Everything changed exactly two months ago, when I returned home from playing squash with Craig. God, how happy I was that evening until I heard my messages! Earlier in the day, Craig and I were running around the small white room with wooden floors, holding our rackets tightly with both hands. He wasn't that into the game. He was telling me that he and his girlfriend decided to get married, that he realized that what makes him happy in life is growing together with another person, and that that person was Denise. That he now knows life is only truly fulfilling when shared, that he knows it's a cliché but it is so true. I didn't say anything. I kept chasing the ball around the sealed room throwing myself forward towards the jittery black ball, stopping sharply before every shot I took and whacking it with the force of a giant. I didn't tell him, but I felt everything he was saying was a defense for his lame life - an excuse for not coming to my club nights with his girlfriend or alone, an excuse for taking that marketing job instead of going to Cuba to make the documentary he's been fantasizing about for three years now. To avoid the uncomfortable silence and slow down my aggressive hits, he asked me how I was doing, was I happy in life. I was telling him that I was pretty happy, even though he thought my life was shallow. I told him that I feel I have many real friends, girls and guys. I go to cool parties, I have some babes around me, and I'm in good relations with my parents. I don't have a boring job; I get to meet people all night long. I learn something new everyday. People around me are kind and interesting, very international. I spend my time talking and connecting, which is really all I like to do anyway.

Well, maybe I'm exaggerating this a little now, and my point is to be true in this writing, make it as scientific as I can. Maybe I only thought my life was so perfect because I know of the awful downturn everything took later that same night. In any case, I beat him, we parted at the courts, and he took a taxi home. I smoked the leftovers of a joint I had in my back pocket, and took a nice hour-long walk all the way downtown to my apartment. I watched night slowly land on the city, allowing the yellow cabs to smear in front of my diluted vision and transform into one uniform line of yellow light. I was thinking of how messages are probably accumulating on my answering machine. When I finally got home, I hit play to hear my messages. I should tell you right now how much I love listening to my messages. I am probably the only club promoter in the world that doesn't carry a cell phone. I can't. If I did, no one would leave me messages at home. God, how I love listening to my messages. I hate voicemails that you have to dial in to retrieve your messages, because then you can't hear them played out loud. Everyday, at least once a day, I blast the volume to the max on my machine, and light a cigarette. I sit back on a chair as the voice from the tiny speaker floods the room and mixes with my cigarette smoke. The number 3 flashed in digital red on the display and I pressed the play button, ears attuned, cigarette in mouth, and lighter in hand. All my life I will never forget that first message that played: it was Donna. She was calling from a noisy restaurant, and the sound of people chatting and eating filled my living room along with her voice.

“Hi Gray, It's me, Donna. I'm at Café Noir with a friend of mine from London, Christina. She's visiting for a few days, and we want to go out later on tonight, and we were wondering what you were up to. It's 8:30 now. We'll probably be here for a while. You can call me on my cell. It's 917 334-0943. We were thinking about Sway or that new place on West Broadway, I can't remember what it's called, 442? 342? Or is it 357? Anyway, call me when you get home. OK? Bye.”

I was so absorbed in her voice and the background sounds that I forgot to jot down the number. So I jerked myself forward towards the machine, aiming for pause, but I hit record instead. Instinctively, I hit stop to correct my mistake, and then play out of desperation, hoping to clear the whole mess I created and get back to the message.

“So what’s this guy’s deal?” I heard one voice ask.

“Gray? Oh, Gray’s a real player. He promotes the hottest nights in the city, he always wears shades in dark places, always tries to kiss you on the lips when you give him your cheek. You know the type?”

Laughter. “God, how cheesy, so what’s the story? Are you sleeping with him?” the first voice asked.

“God no.” The second voice replied, which I now confirmed was Donna’s. “I talk to him on the phone once in a while to keep in the loop of where the good parties are at, that’s all. He’s kind of dumb, but also kind of funny. You’ll like him, actually. I’m sure we’ll meet up with him later. He *always* calls me back. But hey, don’t leave me alone with him, OK? I don’t want to be cornered. He can get pushy sometimes when he’s drunk, and I find him kind of slimy.”

“Don’t worry, you know I wouldn’t do that to you. I still remember when you saved me from-

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP

I have transcribed to you here exactly what I heard because I rewound the machine and wrote it down right after the message ended. At first I thought “What a lying bitch!” I couldn’t believe my ears. I paused the following messages just to absorb what I heard, to let it soak in, to gather my thoughts.

Donna had been calling me three times a week for the past few months. In fact, she’d been calling me since we met at one of my Tuesday nights at Salon. How could she lie about us not having had sex?

And the part about being afraid to be alone with me? We had had an intimate dinner together that same week. She's one of those corporate chicks who try to pull off the serious career woman and crazy club girl image at the same time. She's such a fake. Without me she'd never know where the party was. She showed me games on her Palm Pilot all night for fuck's sake. I was so bored I thought I was going to die. And anyway, her ass has gotten so big from sitting in her cubicle all day that I'm embarrassed to be seen with her. I didn't want people thinking she's my girlfriend or anything, not with that ass. She wanted me to take her to a Beastie Boys party after dinner and I lied and said I didn't know people at the door too well and could only get myself in. She totally wanted me, too. How could she be so fake every time she sees me if she really thinks I'm stupid? What a fake fucking cunt.

I was so pissed off. I washed my face in the kitchen sink, slicked back my hair and hit play again, hoping to drain Donna's message down the sink of my mind and fill my head with the contents of the next message. She wasn't even worth the bad thoughts I was having. She was just so, so insignificant. Such a zero.

Message two was from Craig (I also transcribed it).

"Hey, you stoner, you forgot your Palm Pilot at the courts. They just called me from the Sports Club. Ah... you're probably not home yet. I think you said you're going home. So call me when you get back. Just so you know, I turned it on. It says you have a midnight meeting with Sasha about money at Spyrol, in case you don't know your schedule by heart. I'm going to Chicago tomorrow morning for two days on business, so maybe you can talk to Denise about picking it up tomorrow or something. She should be home.

CLICK

“I can’t believe he forgot his Palm at the gym. He’s such a stoner.” I heard Denise’s voice say through the machine. I think there was running water in the background, because I didn’t hear her voice very clearly. I’m pretty sure she asked how I was after that or something, because then I heard Craig’s clear voice respond.

“Yeah, he’s totally losing it. Living like he’s eighteen, and going nowhere with his life.” I heard my boy keep talking about what a space I was, how we’ve gone in totally opposite directions, and he can’t relate to me anymore. “Relate” was actually the last word I heard before BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP.

The third message was from my mother, saying that it’s the third time she’s calling, and asking me to call her back because Jonathan and Katy Sweany’s son, Jimmy, is moving to New York City, and she told the Sweany’s that I would show him around, and maybe he could stay on my living room futon for a few weeks until he found a place of his own. Then, after the “CLICK” and half a minute of silence, I heard my father say in the background “He’s definitely on drugs.” “Oh, stop it, Ralph” my mother replied, “He’s probably really busy, that’s all.” “Doing what, taking drugs with his creepy friends?” “Stop it, Ralph,” mom said angrily. I felt her anger penetrate my empty apartment through the machine. I could not hear the rest of her reply. They must have moved to another room.

BEEEEEP. NO MORE MESSAGES, the computerized female voice said. I listened to all three messages a few more times and wrote them down word for word. Then I hit erase, MESSAGES ERASED the computer-woman declared. I escaped into the shower.

As the water was washing over my face and my body, I pulled my head back and spit out some of the water that got into my mouth. I held my hands clasped at the back of my neck. I looked down at the drain, and only then, I fully realized what had happened. That weird combination of record, stop, and play that I pressed on the machine must've messed it up. It was now playing the voices of the message leavers a minute or two after they finished recording. They didn't all forget to hang up. I heard Donna trash me, Craig call me a loser, my father call me a drug addict... this was all because my answering machine was blessed, or cursed. I didn't know which. But what ever it was, I would've never known any of their true voices if it wasn't for that accidental combination of record, stop, and play. I ran out of the shower and put my gym clothes back on. I walked down three flights of stairs, and then one block south to the nearest payphone. I called myself. I left a message "Hi, this is me. This is a test. This is a test." I whistled for a few seconds after hanging up, and stuck around the payphone for a few more seconds in silence. Then I ran back home. I hit play. I heard my message "Hi this is me. This is a Test. This is a Test." BEEP. I stared at my answering machine for a few seconds, and then hit the magic combo: record, stop, play. I heard my message again from the start. CLICK. Then I heard my whistling, voices of cars, a long angry honk, and a taxi driver yelling "Hey watch where you're going, asshole" – the exact same sounds I heard from the street after hanging up. I sat on a kitchen chair and stared at my machine. The green light, meaning "no messages" lost focus in my eyes, and grew to the size of the world. I was staring at the new reality I discovered. Fucking hypocrites, liars, all of them, everyone.

I won't bore you with details about what I think about each of my so-called friends. I don't mean this to be an emotional journal, but a record of an invention, or rather a document of society. For the past three months, I have been experimenting with my machine. I now call it the Reality Machine because

it is revealing to me a truth. During the month of March I have transcribed twenty-two mind-boggling messages. There were eighteen other messages that didn't bring me anything juicy. This is because people don't always talk after they leave a message and I can only hear exactly one minute and thirty seconds after each message click, which isn't much time to play with. But that day when I returned from squash and heard Donna's voice, I changed. I am not the same Gray that New York City has known, or the same Gray that I have known, for that matter. I have become an experimenter. I still schmooze people and chicks at clubs, give them my card with the VIP guest list number. But it's only a job now, and I never bring it home with me. It is completely insignificant, as far as I'm concerned. Actually, I don't bring anything home from the outside world, not even a slice of deli pizza. All I do is listen to people's voices on my machine, and then their real voices. I decode their fake words. I unravel their gibberish to discover reality. All I ever do is listen to my machine. I'll be the first to admit that I am completely addicted. It's worse than cocaine. I don't listen to what anyone says to me in person, or for that matter, what I say to myself. What's the point? It's all lies. I only pay attention to the minute and a half following each message, that brief time range that is so precious, so potent, filled with the true message of life.

Attached, you will find transcripts of all my reality machine recordings. It can help you discover the real society behind its fake veneer. I have grown cynical and gloomy through my tedious experimentation. But most of all, I have grown confused. I don't understand why people are my friends, why they have the desire to spend time with me at all? It's clearly not out of love, or even mere likeability. I don't know what people are anymore, or how to explain their behavior.

4/15/00

I feel like a mini-God. When I listen to my messages, and then contemplate human nature, I feel I am excluded from it. I am an outside observer, hovering above all humans. I now believe I am one of the few living humans (if not the only one), who can see people as they truly are. I wear the only pair of glasses that shows truth. The reason people share time from five minutes to a lifetime is not friendship or love. In fact, friendship and love are mere social illusions. Every social exchange people have is a pure manifestation of human fear of loneliness. This is why some people have pets. Pets give people the illusion of not being alone without needing to invest precious time connecting, exposing themselves. With pets, people don't have to become vulnerable to feel loved. All they have to do is clean their pet's shit.

5/28/00

I have just returned home from a weekend of exile in my ex-girlfriend's parent's summerhouse in South Hampton. No one was scheduled to be at the house, since it is still off-season, and she agreed to give me the keys so I could take a long weekend to be alone. I told her that I needed some space to figure out where I am, who I am, to sort out my life. She said she understood, but I know she didn't believe me. Even though she sounded sympathetic when we met and generously gave me the keys to her parent's place, I just heard her say on my reality machine, supposedly speaking to her new boyfriend, that she's sure I'm making all this up, and that I'm probably bringing some girl to her parent's place. Her boyfriend quickly asked her "That's crazy, you don't mind?" She said she didn't. "That's just the way Gray is," she said. "That's why I'm glad we're friends and not lovers."

The number “15” was blinking in digital red on my machine when I got home earlier this evening. I spent an hour, playing and replaying, recording the reality voices in my notebook (see attached transcripts from May 28th, 2000). Seven messages had insightful truths for me to feast on. One from my dealer Bam, saying he just received a good shipment, but he really wondered where I have been and if I split town without paying my outstanding balance. One from Jimmy Sweany, who said he just moved to New York and got my number through our parents. He really wanted to figure out how to get laid in this town. One was from this horny bitch Kaz. At least she told a fellow bartender at work in the 90-second interval that I was a good lover. My mind hasn't stopped racing since. I have reached a crucial decision about myself in light of these messages. Maybe this decision is also the result of my long solemn weekend in the deserted pre-season beaches of the Hamptons. I have to write it down right now. That's the only way my decision will mean anything. Only written things contain value. I now know for certain that most spoken words are pure bullshit.

I, Gray of New York City, hereby vow to change myself. I will not be like the disgusting fake humans that surround me in this city of plastic. I will make sure that every phone call I will make (or any other form of social interaction I have) will contain afterthoughts that I would voluntarily share. I will become the first human who follows reason and logic in my relations with people. I will not speak insincerely to anyone ever. I will not be manifesting fear of loneliness through fake words and kisses on cheeks and lips. I don't even think this will be a hard change. Maybe this is not even a vow. It is the only option I see for me to continue to exist. I would rather be alone than manifest this fear that results in such awful fakeness. I would rather be dead than fake like the rest.

6/3/00

I just woke up from a nightmare that is still fresh in my mind. I am sweaty, cold, and frightened. A beautiful man and his super model girlfriend are in their TriBeCa loft getting dressed for a party. Their slim, tanned bodies can be seen as reflections in the many large mirrors and windows of the loft. Then they are frantically changing outfits, looking at themselves, and looking at each other for validation. They are walking the streets with perfect posture and long steps, holding hands as if the city pavement were a fashion show runway. A beggar with an "I'm HIV+, please help" sign looks up to them and asks for change. His eyes on their bodies make them feel alive and glamorous. He validates without even trying. Then, the man stops at a building, confirms that the building number matches the address he wrote on a note in his pocket, and opens the door for the girl. They both smile at their beauty in the lobby mirrors and step into the elevator. The elevator stops half way between floors. They are so close they can hear the music from the penthouse party only a floor and a half away. But they are stuck. Forever. I watch them bang on the metal elevator door, then get tired, then bang again. I watch her cry, him search for a reflective surface. I watched them sweat, remove their jackets, try to sleep, and then get up again. Then they very slowly begin to disappear. At first they became slightly transparent. Then they vanish all together. They are nothing without an audience.

Gray stopped promoting and although everybody felt his absence from the nightlife, they acted as if he had never happened. I tried calling and left plenty of messages, but he never called me back. I bumped into Pascal, the owner of 431, (where Gray used to promote), and he told me that he didn't know where Gray was either. He just stopped showing up at the club, stopped printing his flyers, stopped submitting his guest lists. He said that eventually he started leaving messages for him, but that Gray

never returned any of his calls. He said that he thought he spotted Gray a week before, crossing a street in SoHo in the late afternoon. He was wearing a cowboy hat, black jeans, and a black T-shirt. He looked really skinny and frail, his shirt was blowing in the wind, and he held his right hand over his hat, so it wouldn't fly away. But Pascal wasn't sure because the guy was covering his face with his forearm. Pascal said he called out his name, and Gray didn't seem to hear him, even though he was the only man on the street. "He was so skinny, it's like he was half see-through or something," he told me. Two days after seeing Pascal, I read about the accident.