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## The Unexamined Life

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## THE UNEXAMINED LIFE

JACK'S ROOM WAS AT THE TOP of the stairs and Miles and Claire stood just outside it. Jack was putting the roller into the tray when he noticed them standing together in the open doorway. He had everything pulled into the center of the room and covered with a canvas tarp. Claire looked at him like he was stuffing the body of a small child into a plastic bag.

"I've decided to redecorate," Jack said, leaning his elbow against an aluminum stepladder. "What do you think?"

"We can't leave you for five minutes," Claire said. "That's what I think."

"It's my room, right?" Jack asked. "I mean, am I right or am I right?" He was wearing white running shorts and a pair of black Doc Martens, laced to the ankles, a bony kid with Claire's fine blond hair and blue-white skin.

"How about an explanation?" Miles said.

"It's like the Rolling Stones," Jack said. "They said to paint it black, so I did!"

"This goes back," Claire said. "This paint job definitely goes in reverse. Meanwhile, you can sit here and stare at it."

Miles and Claire sat together in the kitchen, having coffee. It was a large country kitchen and Claire had decorated it and the rest of the house in country colonial, gingham curtains and copper pots and a butter churn on the hearth. On the wall above the butcher block kitchen table hung a brass sconce with a snowy scene of General Washington at Valley Forge painted on it. It was a good house—built in the '20s with wide-planked oak floors, high ceilings and spacious rooms—left to Claire by a maiden aunt, photographs of whom she was beginning to resemble. The house sat tilted sideways on a piece of land that was once part of a blueberry farm; the lot was narrow across the front but went back a few hundred yards into the pines. Late afternoon the kitchen was flooded with sunlight through the greenhouse windows that looked out on the ruined blueberry field.

"What are we going to do?" Claire wanted to know. She was smoking a cigarette and tapping her toes. She was wearing a faded pea green summer shift and she seemed as if at any moment she might rocket out of it and land, stark naked, in the center of the room.

"We can wallpaper," Miles said.

"I'm serious, Miles. This is like demonology or something."

"It's not so bad, Claire," Miles said. "It's not the end of the world as we know it.

I'll get some wallpaper and we'll wallpaper. It'll be good for him to learn. We can redecorate his room the way he wants it. The three of us can do it together."

"Annie Roos has this kid they adopted from Korea," Claire said. "He's sixteen now and telling them he's going to set fire to them in their sleep. He has bad memories from Korea that nobody knew about. Now Annie and Mark have to sleep with their bedroom door locked. Is that the road you want to go down, Miles?"

"I'll take him fishing," Miles said. "Just the two of us."

"Take him fishing," Claire sniffed. "And throw yourself in the lake while you're at it."

Miles Dell worked as a craps dealer at Caesar's Casino-Hotel in Atlantic City. His dealer's uniform was a pair of plain black trousers and a white shirt embroidered at the collar and cuffs with golden Roman numerals. The cocktail waitresses wore white togas trimmed with the same numerical pattern, and actors dressed as Caesar and Cleopatra strolled the casino floor reciting Shakespeare. The pit boss, a man from West Texas with over-large ears, claimed to be dating Cleopatra.

"She's got stretch marks down to here," the pit boss said.

"Then why are you dating her?" the floorman asked.

"Because," the pit boss laughed, "the stretch marks are attached to the tits that are also down to here." He held out both hands and squeezed his fingertips together.

"Strong," the floorman said.

"Double strong," the pit boss said. He laughed again and walked away.



At that moment the actress who played Cleopatra strolled by. She said, "I am dying, Egypt."

"Dying for some acting lessons," the floorman said.

The floorman, whose name was Guy Slater, was one of the few people Miles knew who actually seemed to have fun at his job; he enjoyed the idea of being a completely useless member of society. He spent his days talking about the liberating aspects of horror and waste. Twenty years ago he'd gone to Williams College, where he'd studied English Literature with a minor in Classics. He said, as he often said, "And then went down to the ship, set keel to breakers."

"And I'm the guy chained to the oar," Miles said, bending over to pay the pass line.

"Judah Miles Hur," Slater said.

"Three hundred dollars and I can't even get a decent meal," a customer complained.

Slater walked over to where the customer was standing in the space between the craps tables.

"Sir, yes sir, what is the problem, sir?"

The customer waved a comp slip in Slater's face.

"This is the problem," the customer said. He was old and bent sideways on an aluminum cane. "I ask you for dinner and you hand me this."

"Morris, don't make trouble," the customer's wife said.

"Stay out of it," the customer said.

"Sir," said Slater. "Relax sir. This is the Caesar's family. You're a Caesar's family player, sir. And that is what I have to offer you today. That is the very best I can do and I assure you that it is a very nice sandwich indeed. Go up, you and your wife, set keel to breakers and have a nice corned beef sandwich. Have a beer and relax and live like real American people."

"A three hundred dollars corned beef sandwich," the customer said and limped away with the comp slip in his hand.

"Un sandweech de jambone," Slater said. He rubbed his palms together and gasped, "Dunt mayke trubble."

Slater was forty years old, four years younger than Miles, although he looked fifteen years younger. His black Armani suit fit him like a knifesheath. He drank and whored without apparent

consequence or regret. He frequently told Miles that he knew what it meant to be alone in the world. He stood watching the costumed characters move up and down the cluttered aisles and observed that they were standing on the trash heap of history, blades drawn.

"The Caesar's family," Slater said. "It's like the Von Trapp family, only different. The Nazis chase you into Switzerland and you end up in Vermont, running a ski lodge. You sing 'Edelweiss' for the people after they come back from a hard day on the slopes. You send a round of kirsch to the refugees at the corner table. Mein eyes have seen the glory!"

Slot machines clanked and rattled.

At the end of his shift Miles drove out of Atlantic City and down the long stretch of White Horse Pike with marshland on either side of it. The sun was still up, glinting on the tall grass, the bay at high tide tipping almost onto the narrow roadway. The ocean water shimmered like wrinkled foil and the salt air rushed into the blue Escort through both open windows. Two egrets stood pecking the dry grass. Miles pulled the car to the side of the road and watched the birds and the stippled bay. After a while he started the engine and continued driving, but every ten minutes he pulled over and stared out the car window.

In the parking lot of the Absecon ShopRite he took off his dealer's shirt. Now he was just a guy in black pants and a plain white T-shirt. He drove to the stoplight where the Pike intersected Philadelphia Avenue in Egg Harbor. The day was still bright. Homeless men approached his car, hollering for change. Prostitutes walking the avenue half-naked propositioned him through the open window. Street boys soaped and smeared his windshield for fifty cents. On a whim he pulled into the McDonald's parking lot on the corner. He sat with his burger and fries, watching a family have dinner. The man took off his hat and said grace.

"Give us this day," the man said.

"As we forgive those," intoned the children.

The woman supervised the four children and the man sat as if by himself, staring at his meal in its various paper wrappers. The



children had names like Lisa Sue and John Bentley. Country people, Miles thought. Pineys.

After dinner he wandered Philadelphia Avenue. He went into a laundromat and sat quietly for fifteen minutes, watching the dryers turn. Next door to the laundromat was a tavern with a high cinderblock front and a single small window with a red and green neon sign in it that said, Joker Lounge. It was Tuesday evening and the narrow barroom had six or seven people in it. Nobody looked up when he walked in and took a stool near the door. The room was filled with cigarette smoke and was so dark that the few men and women present were just visible beneath the cloud cover. Behind the bar on a raised platform a girl with long black hair danced languidly around a brass pole. She was wearing a silver thong bathing suit and her breasts spilled out on either side of the skimpy material. The girl was dancing to a bluegrass number with fiddles and mandolins, a man yodeling about a girl named Ruby who had at one time in his life driven him insane. A young couple at the other end of the bar did a quiet and incongruous two-step on the swept wooden floor. When the song was finished it started over again.

"That's that Holly Plish," an old woman behind the bar informed Miles. "She come in here and put three dollas in the juke and we hear for a hour about how Ruby driven that man to be insane. What'll you have?"

"Draft beer." Miles reached into his pants pocket and set a creased five dollar bill on the bartop.

The woman drew the beer and put the change next to it, three ones and four quarters. "Beer's a dolla because the dancer is on," the old woman said.

"Sure."

She slid a basket heaped with broken pretzels next to the glass of beer.

"On the house," she said, and made no move to go. She was short, with a tight bun of gray hair twisted onto the very top of her head and large breasts that ballooned under her loose house-dress as if stirred by a slight breeze.

"I never seen you," the old woman said.

"That makes us even," Miles said.

"You're a big strappin' fella," she said, and winked. "Name's Agnes Kogod."

"John Bentley," Miles told her. He had never considered giving anyone anything but his real name before that moment, but it seemed the right thing to do. He was not in a place where he belonged or where he could trust anyone. Nevertheless, he looked past Agnes into the glass above the whiskey bottles and came to the conclusion that he did not look entirely out of place, either. His slack ruddy face and plain white T-shirt and big arms all seemed to fit with the surroundings.

"Rules are as follows," Agnes Kogod said. "Don't touch the girls and don't talk dirty to the girls. Don't proposition the girls and don't expect anything out of them. Any of my girls mix with the customers I fire them like a shot."

Miles drained the glass of beer in two swallows and added, "But I see only one girl."

"You're a smartmouth, John Bentley," Agnes said, and scowled. Then she laughed, exhaling simultaneously through both sides of her mouth, and punched him on the arm. She grabbed both his forearms and he could see her enormous wrinkled breasts straining against her open dressfront. She pressed her face inches from his and stuck out her tongue like a blackened bit of sausage.

"You want to play then let's play," Agnes Kogod said.

"Maybe later."

Agnes stepped back and released his arms and refilled the beer glass and set up a shot of sour mash next to it. The voice coming from the jukebox yodeled, "Ru-beee—!" The girl danced around the pole, one leg up and then thrust straight out as she spun.

"I've got a wedding ring," Miles said.

"Any one of them worth bothering about has got a wedding ring," Agnes said. She trilled, "Married John Bentley—with the ladies goes gently!"

"Well."

"Dontchu?" Agnes asked, barking it out. "Dontchu?"

"I guess I do."

"You know you do," Agnes said. A customer hollered for beer and she instructed him to blow it out his ass. The door



opened and a short blast of hot air rushed into the bar. A small girl with spiky, purplish-red hair sat down on the stool next to him. She had on a tight pair of jeans, torn not very stylishly, and a lipstick-red halter top.

"The bad seed," Agnes said, looking at the girl. "This girl had a good job here but she had to get greedy," Agnes said, turning to Miles. "I fired her like a shot. I sent her down to Uncle Billy's finishing school to learn her some manners. How's life among the whips and chains?" Agnes asked the girl.

"I can't even come in here and get a quiet glass of beer," the girl said. "I take shit all day from him and now I got to come in here and take shit from you."

"You don't have to come in here at all," Agnes said. "Nobody ast you to."

She drew a beer and set it down without a coaster in front of the girl.

"There's a beer," Agnes said. "Nice and quiet. You listen to it, it won't make a sound. She had it good in here but she ruined things for herself," Agnes said to Miles. "She's always ruining things for herself, little Patsy is. But there's one in every family I guess."

"I guess there is," Miles said. He knocked back the shot and finished the beer and took a pretzel for the road.

"Come on back when you can stay a while, John Bentley," Agnes called after him. "You hear?"

Patsy finished her beer in a long swallow that overflowed down her shirtfront. She followed Miles out onto the pavement. She said: "Listen mister I'm a little short and I'll do you for forty dollars in your car. No time to beat around the bush with a fast-walker like you."

"Maybe next time."

"I like you mister," Patsy said. "I like big guys. I wouldn't do nobody for money I wouldn't do for free."

"Then why charge me?"

"I got bills to meet, baby. And nothing in this life is free. You pay me the money means you don't have to hear my female bullshit. And you'll like it, I'm telling you. You want to save some money you go back home right now, because you're gonna be back for it every night once you get a little taste a heaven."



"That's a nice line," Miles said. "You're good at this."

"Oh," Patsy said. "You just haven't got no idea."

They came to his car in the McDonald's parking lot and stood in front of it.

"That's a nice car," Patsy said.

"It's a piece of shit," Miles said. "It's an eight year old Escort with silver duct tape holding the right front quarter panel in place."

"I was named for Patsy Kline the greatest female vocalist in country music," Patsy said. "I've sang in bar bands and I've been told I'm not half bad."

Miles wondered what that had to do with the right front quarter panel, or anything else for that matter, but obviously it did have to do with something because he unlocked the passenger side for her. He pulled the car to the very back of the lot, next to the dumpster where the streetlight was out. He handed her two twenties that disappeared the second they hit the air. He touched his fingertips to the downy place at the nape of her neck and said, "Honeybaby."

"Come and see my act over at Uncle Billy's," Patsy said, one knuckle turned sideways into the corner of her mouth, the door already open. "Come watch me work sometime. I go on, every day, two o'clock sharp, give or take an hour." She got out without closing the door and skipped away in the direction of the littered avenue.

"Where've you been?" Claire asked, standing behind the front door. "I was getting worried." It was seven-thirty and daylight was failing at the very tops of the trees at the back of the property, a short steady signal of light, opalescent, like a tiny nuclear explosion.

"I got a flat tire," Miles answered. He held up the palms of his hands as if to show that they were covered with grease, then moved quickly into the house through the living room and into the kitchen.

"You're soaking wet," Claire said, pressing the palm of her hand to the small of his back.

"You try changing a tire in this heat."

"I'll get dinner started while you change." Claire paused for a moment, watching.

"What? What is it?"

"Something," Claire said. "I don't know. Something about you."

"I just told you—"

"Yeah, I know, the flat tire," Claire said, turning to the stove. "Men always come home covered with slime and shaking uncontrollably after they've changed a flat tire."

"I'm not—" He trailed the sentence off and left the room. He showered and shaved, put on a pair of jeans and a white polo shirt with a red penguin stitched into the breast pocket.

He stopped at Jack's room but the door was closed, the lights turned off, the sound of a recording that played as if stuck in its groove: "All I wanna do is—all I wanna do is—all I wanna do is—"

"Well," said Claire when he came back into the kitchen. And that was all she said. Together they ate a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs with a loaf of Italian bread. Miles had a glass of red wine, a second, a third. The day began to lose its edge and as the heat died down a short breeze kicked up. The cicadas buzzed in the fields and trees all around them like the defective buzzing of a fluorescent lightbulb. Afterward they sat out in their rocking chairs, just the two of them, the evening breeze slanting sideways down the narrow covered porch.

"Golf," Claire said.

"Huh? What was that?"

"It's how I'll save him. Golf."

In the morning Jack began to act out the terms of his punishment, clearing and leveling the old aunt's ruined blueberry patch into a shag field where he could practice his drive. Claire's father was a scratch golfer even now, and Claire considered golf the key to right conduct in America. Miles watched Jack through the kitchen window, considering that it wasn't the worst way the kid could spend his time. He hacked his way in a straight line away from the house with a small scythe, the handle and shaft of which had been fashioned to replicate a golf club. He took his time, and his form was very good. When the heat rose toward midday he came back inside the house and showered and then stood in



the kitchen, toweling off his hair while Claire fixed a lunch suspiciously festive for a Tuesday afternoon.

"Let's go fishing," Miles said to Jack after lunch. "Can he get out of jail to go fishing for a few hours?" Miles said to Claire.

"You're the man," Claire said, washing dishes. "He can do whatever you say he can do."

"We'll pick some huckleberries for a pie," Miles offered. "I was walking out by the lake last week and they're growing fat as blueberries."

"I'll start rolling out the crust this minute," Claire said without apparent irony.

Jack grinned and the corner of his mouth quivered slightly.

Running behind the back of the property was a utility road that led to a stagnant lake where Miles fished for carp and catfish with a barbless hook. He liked to feel the fish hit the line, the jerk and spurt at the tip of the rod. He liked to set the hook and feel the desperate thrash on the other end. He always brought the fish in slowly, then gently removed the hook, holding the fish with wet hands so as not to damage the scales and let in disease. His favorite part was to watch the fish swim away.

"We'll get bitten by ticks and get Lyme's Disease and suffer paralysis and short term memory loss," Jack said, trooping along just ahead of Miles. "We'll develop flulike symptoms. We'll have a spot on us that looks like a bull's eye."

"It's possible."

"Why do we want to catch fish anyway?" Jack asked. "We never eat them."

"It's fun, I think."

"Not for the fish," Jack said.

"Everybody's got to have it tough once in a while," Miles offered.

"That's us," Jack said. "Spreaders of good cheer."

"Plus we have to get the huckleberries," Miles said.

"Let's tell her all the huckleberry trees are dead," Jack laughed. "Let's tell her the locusts ate them up."

"You have an evil mind, kid."

"I'm working on it," Jack said. "And what's up with these locusts, anyway?"



"They come out of the ground, lay their eggs and die. The young ones go back into the ground for seven more years. Then they do it all over again."

"So they stay awake for, like, two weeks?"

"I guess so."

"That's extra stupid."

"It must serve some purpose. Who knows what?"

The trees and the cars and the sides of houses were covered with locusts. They looked like grasshoppers only with broader backs and shorter legs, a brown line running down the center of the Kelly green topshell where the wings folded together. At the edge of the lake Miles caught one in his fingertips and spliced a hook through its belly and cast it out on the stagnant green water. Jack jammed a ball-of dough onto his hook and lobbed it a few yards. The sinker took it straight to the bottom.

"Bass in this lake," Miles told Jack. "I've see them rise in the spring. They're down deep now, cooling on the bottom. Let's see if one rises to the bait."

"Wickity-whack," Jack said.

"So what about your room?" Miles asked. "There's more to this than the Rolling Stones."

"Black is the color of my true love's hair," Jack said.

The tip of Jack's pole began to twitch. He pulled back and stood up and the fish on the other end began to peel off line.

"Tighten the drag," Miles said.

"DA-HAH," Jack said. He tightened up a bit and jerked a small ugly fish onto the sand, a black and white mottled carp, its flesh peeled away in places like old wallpaper. Miles put his own pole down and wet his hands. The hook was deep in the fish's gullet, and he had to reach in with a pair of needle-nose pliers to extract it.

"I'm sorry," Miles said. "I'm sorry to hurt you."

The fish rolled and flopped in the sand and blood spurted from its open mouth. The hook came loose, along with part of the fish's entrails. Miles stood up for a second. Jack smashed the fish under the heel of his shoe. He twisted his mouth up and looked as if he was going to cry. He scraped the bottom of his shoe against a rock and walked away, throwing his arms in the air.

Miles packed up the gear and trudged back to the house.

Beside the kitchen door Claire was spraying white powder on a trellised rose bush.

Uncle Billy's porn shop was set out on a bend of the White Horse Pike between two produce stands. Facing the road on one side of the door was a photograph of a nine foot whip-wielding dominatrix, on the other side a young girl on her hands and knees, bound at the ankles, handcuffed at the wrists, a red ball plugged into her open mouth. At the center, above the short opening, was a sign that said, "Uncle Billy's." A caricature of a balding avuncular man in suspenders smiled beneficently downward.

Three motorcycles were cut into the space of gravel beneath the submissive girl; they were large, immaculate, expensive-looking. A paper sign on the smeared doorglass said, "Push Hard." Miles pushed through the door that asked to be pushed hard. Uncle Billy, unmistakably, was standing high up at the counter in front of a small oscillating fan. The front of the shop was occupied by three bikers who picked their way among the cluttered aisles like a band of foraging bears.

"Here's one," a tall skinny boy said. "Gang Bang."

"We already seen that one," said another.

"We see that one every night," laughed the fat bearded one. Then all three laughed.

Billy said to Miles, "What you want?" The fan rustled the hairs that sprouted like brittle weeds from the top of his skull.

"I want to see the show."

"You want to see the show?" Uncle Billy said, pointing a finger toward the purple curtain above which a sign said, Live Show. Taped to the wall was a piece of red construction paper on which was printed in childish block letters: *Only one person at one time in the booths. Violators will be bared for life.*

Miles pushed through the purple drapery, trying his best not to touch anything. A long hallway confronted him. On the right side the paneled wall seemed solid, on the left there were small lights, like nightlights, above a row of curtained booths that reminded him of the booths they'd used to have in penny arcades to take your picture, three for a quarter. He stopped for a moment to listen to the low grunting sounds of the men in the booths. The end booth, curtain drawn back, was vacant. The



wooden floor was tacky and the soles of his shoes stuck to it. He edged in sideways and sat down with his hands on his knees. He opened his wallet and fed a ten dollar bill into the slot and a black screen dropped down. Patsy Kogod was in the room. She stood tilted forward on a pair of spiked heels so high and slender they wobbled, and she was draped in an ill-fitting leather costume, as if she'd recently replaced a much larger employee. It was done up with black fishnet at the exposed midriff, leather shorts and fishnet stockings, a dog collar with silver studs and a large eye-bolt at the base of her skull. You could easily see the collar from behind because her magenta-colored hair was cut short and twisted into jagged points on top. Miles looked at her narrow back, her rickety bowed legs. Above his head a red bulb flashed on. A voice from somewhere inside the booth informed him that the girl he was looking at wanted him desperately. She was hungry for his throbbing member; she was thirsty for some cum-quenching action. Miles laughed, even as he realized he had an erection. The black screen fell and he put another ten into the changer and the screen jerked up again. The girl on the other side of the glass removed her top; she licked her chapped pale lips in a not very convincing manner. The voice informed Miles that he could do whatever he felt like doing to the girl. At the same time, she turned languidly to reveal a scarred back, the vertebrae clearly visible beneath the parchment-colored skin. On either shoulder a flurry of welts rose up like a fresh case of measles. The voice told Miles that the girl wanted to be fucked and beaten. She was bad, that was what she deserved. Only a man like Miles could hurt her in just the right way. So that it was good. So that she would be good. The girl wanted to be good, the voice said. She just didn't know how. She needed a man like Miles, a firm hand. At this a man in a black leather mask came into the room. He was naked from the waist up and carried with him a leather whip and a conventional dog's leash, a thin chrome chain attached to a droopy yellow handgrip. The screen dropped and Miles exited the booth before the first lash of the whip came down.

"How'd you like the show?" Billy asked.



"It was good," Miles said, moving toward the door. "It was very well done."

"Well shit fuck piss," said Uncle Billy.

The straight narrow road cut through the scorched pine forest: blackened trees like men from times gone by, gesturing. Many of the mailboxes in front of the ranch homes and trailers had the name Kogod stenciled and scrawled on them, as if the place itself might be named Kogod. Patsy's house was a small red bungalow set fifty feet off a back road. Miles tapped the back of his hand on the screen door frame.

"Hey there John Bentley," Patsy said, coming into dark blurry focus on the other side of it. "How you making?"

"I wanted to see you."

"You know where I work at. How'd you find me?"

"I wanted to see you outside of work."

"It's a hundred dollars," Patsy said. "I have a kid in here. It's a hundred dollars. All right? How'd you find me?"

"I followed you."

A small TV flickered in the cramped living room. A little girl with feathery blond hair sat crosslegged on the greenish-black shag carpet, staring at it.

Patsy turned and went into the bedroom and Miles followed after her. He looked over his shoulder. The little girl was still staring at the TV set. Patsy was taking off her clothes. She pulled the clothes from Miles and they fell together into the unmade bed. "Get in," Patsy said. Miles thought she was talking to him, but she was talking to the little girl who was standing in the open doorway. Miles looked at the little girl and she went away. He pressed his face into the hollow of Patsy's collarbone and came in a few short strokes.

"Your daughter?" Miles asked, sitting up.

"My ball and chain."

"She seems all right to me."

"You can't get her," Patsy said, and whipped her head from side to side. "I don't allow that. You can go again if you want to but that's it, a hundred bucks. But you can't get her. I don't allow that. You want head this time? What you want?"

"That's all right. That was enough."

Patsy laughed. "Come again. Any time." Then, "You want her? How much?"

"No, I don't want her."

"You and me both."

She had a giggling fit, stood up and walked around the room picking up things while Miles put on his clothes. He gave her the hundred dollars and went out. At the door Patsy said, "Don't tell Uncle Billy you were over here. Don't tell Billy. You come back any time but just don't you tell Billy."

"I won't tell anybody," Miles promised. "My lips are sealed."

"You're sweet. Next time I'll show you a better time. Come back again and I'll really get you going. I was tired tonight. You liked it all right?"

"I liked it fine."

Patsy giggled. "You're easy mister," she said. "You're too damn easy." She stood just inside the threshold and her robe fell open and her small pale breasts spilled out. The little girl crawled in the open space between her mother's legs.

"You and me both."

Miles got into his car and went home. He sat by himself in the kitchen, drinking beer. Outside the window he could hear the rhythmic pok of driven golf balls.

"Seven out, take the line," the stickman hollered.

Miles reached out to pick up the bets on the pass line. He straightened his back and groaned; his feet were killing him, his sciatic nerve screaming. At the center of the table sat an old man, counting money. His name was David Mackie, and he'd been sitting behind a craps table for forty years. He claimed to have worked for Bugsy Siegel at The Flamingo and to have killed a man in a barfight, in self-defense, followed by five years in Joliet.

He looked up at Miles and said: "When you can no longer stand up then you must sit down."

He sang an ancient shanty about Jonah in the belly of the whale. He droned chorus after chorus above the clang and ping of slot machines, bets called out, money won and money lost.

"I am dying Egypt," Cleo said.

"Well then drop dead already," Slater said.



"They will fire us hence like foxes," Caesar said.

"Life in the post-modern," Slater said. "You never know which century you're standing in around here. Ah, well," Slater said. "Forth on the godly sea."

The two men went on break together and sat in the employees' cafeteria, drinking coffee.

"I'm having an affair," Miles said to Slater. "I'm seeing someone."

"Yeah, so?" Slater asked. "Want a medal?"

"Well, aren't you just a little bit surprised?"

"Why should I be? It's about time you wised up. I'm happy to think I may have been a good influence on you, in a negative sort of way."

"I'm in it but I'm not happy about it," Miles said. "I want to stop."

"These things run their course soon enough," Slater said. "Sit back and enjoy it while you can. Does Claire know?"

"I don't think she has any idea. I'd be surprised."

"Then you're living. Listen, Miles, don't be dopey. You work hard and pull the plow here in good old bag-over-head America. Does it hurt anything very much if you take the bag off, at least once in a while? Breathe the clean fresh air and lead the clean good life of a real American person? I hate to say it, big fella, but you're a bit of a stiff. I mean, who does everything they're supposed to do except a chump? It's a sign that your life is unexamined. And you know what they say about the unexamined life?"

"What?"

"Well, don't let me be the one to break the news to you then. But I will say this: if you looked into your own heart once in a while you'd see how scared and lonely you are, what a big fat failure you've made of your life. Fifteen years ago, perhaps, you thought you'd go back to school, change jobs, maybe even fall in love again. But you didn't. What you have in front of you is pretty much what you're stuck with. Face up to that, my friend, and the fun can begin! I'd like to get married, actually, just so I could fool around. And the girls eat it up, getting something they're not supposed to have. I cruise the bars once in a while with a wedding band on and you can't believe how I do."



"You actually tell women you're married when you're not?"

"Sure, why not? They like it, and it keeps them off my back in the long term."

"Talking to you is like talking to the Devil in a cheap suit," Miles said

"Watch it," Slater said. "This suit cost eight hundred dollars."

"I can't stop thinking about her," Miles said.

"Try phone sex," Slater said. "Did you ever try phone sex? It's great. Cost you an arm and a leg, though."

"I don't think I could with Claire in the house. Seems a bit demeaning, anyway."

"Most of conscious existence is demeaning," Slater said, lighting a cigarette.

"This is the No Smoking section," Miles said.

"I find No Smoking sections highly demeaning."

Miles stood fishing in the still afternoon. He cast a hand-painted plug that had been his father's out onto the surface of the stagnant green lake. He jerked the tip of the pole and the plug popped and wriggled to simulate a wounded minnow. The green day hummed all around him. The sound of locusts echoed off the trees. Jack came up the path from the house, pulling a teenage girl by the hand.

"This is Alison Six," Jack said.

"Hello Miss Six," Miles said.

"Call me Alison," Alison Six said.

She stood in front of Miles, flexing the tips of her fingers. She was thin and blond, done up in tight black clothes, silver bangles at her wrists and throat.

"I just came back from a trip with my church group," Alison Six said. "We went to help relieve the coal miners of Kentucky."

"And how are the coal miners of Kentucky?"

"Poor," Alison Six said. "And not very clean."

"What did you do down there?"

"We baked brownies and prayed a lot. It was all right. I'm glad I'm not a miner of coal in Kentucky, though. You can have that. I was thinking about doing missionary work, but if you land in a place like that I mean, let's be real."

"Yes," Miles said. "Let's be real."

"That's right." Alison Six looked at Miles. She blinked her eyes and did a little pirouette on the tips of her shoes.

"Come on," Jack said, taking her by the hand. "Let him get a girlfriend of his own."

"Who says I'm anybody's girlfriend?" Alison Six wanted to know.

"It's been years since I baked a huckleberry pie," Claire said to Miles. She rinsed the huckleberries Miles had picked on his way back from the lake.

"I bought a new pie basket and I want to try it out. We can take it to my parents' house. We're having dinner with them Friday night."

"Can I ask what exactly is a pie basket?"

"It's a basket that you carry your pie in."

"Why would you need a pie basket, Claire?"

"I already answered that question once, but if you must. You need a pie basket to carry your pie in because if you don't then it sloshes around on the floor of the car. Maybe the crust breaks. Maybe it's still a bit warm and you wouldn't want it on your lap, especially in August in a car that has no air conditioning. And the basket is ventilated, so the pie can cool while you carry it along with you. Look here."

Claire brought out a wicker basket that looked like a picnic basket with little plastic sunflowers twisted into the handle and green ribbon patterned with tiny sunflowers stitched around the lid.

"See?" Claire said, opening the basket. "There's a well in the basket where a twelve inch pie plate can sit, snug as a bug." She beamed.

"It's just lovely," Miles said, and lumbered off into the paneled living room.

Patsy Kogod jabbed the point of a syringe into the pad of flesh behind her knee. She was thin and sickly as a child: corpse-white skin, vacant smile, butch-cut hair the color of strawberry pie. Her mouth went all gluey, then she lit a cigarette and got expansive.

"Uncle Billy came after me when I was twelve," Patsy said to



Miles, "and he aint never let up since then. Once time I seen him chew the head off a live squirrel."

She took her top off and turned her back to Miles.

"He like to burn me with his cigarettes," Patsy said. "He like that more than anything on this earth, to burn me. And I let him. I let him do it. I don't know no other way how to be."

"You could say no," Miles said.

"No I can't," Patsy said.

Miles grabbed the cigarette from her. He took both of her wrists in one hand and touched the cigarette to her back with the other.

"That's extra," Patsy said as Miles pushed the smoking cigarette into her shoulder. "You can do it but it's extra."

"Bill me," Miles said. He lost himself in the sour scent at the nape of her neck, the disorder of the room, the last fat motes of daylight spinning off the tall trees in the space just beyond the blinded window. He peeled the condom off in the middle of it and knew that he'd crossed a line. What was it like here on the other side where people just did whatever came to mind, lust and squalor and hopelessness like the dark shaft of a centerpole in a tent where all the lights had been extinguished, night vision, shadows and silvery shapes as they rose and fell, everything in the world reduced to seeming, down and down. He slapped mindlessly at her as she seemed for a moment to disappear and then to reappear; she cried out and stiffened at the hips and he held to her, two bony points like the spokes of a wheel that he turned without sail or compass. He had a momentary urge to break one of her arms but resisted it.

Afterward, Patsy fell asleep. Miles dressed, closed the bedroom door behind him, sat for a while in the dank airless cluttered living room. The little girl, whose name was Stevie, crawled across his lap. He held her up in front of him: she was heavy, solid.

"You're a dirty, smelly little girl," Miles said. She stared back at him with luminous black pupils.

Miles gave little Stevie a bath and while she soaked he told her the story of a floating plastic bunnyrabbit that wished he was a fish. When she was clean and dry he covered her in an oversized Susie-Brite T-shirt, then took her into the kitchen and fixed her some supper, tomato soup with little goldfish crackers

that wished they were bunnyrabbits. He had some himself, washed the dishes and went home.

"Let's go to Nova Scotia next summer," Claire said to Miles at dinner. Jack was out somewhere with Alison Six and it was just the two of them, Miles tripping over himself to be solicitous. "Let's go up there and eat lox and Canadian bagels for a week."

"Sounds good," Miles said. "Do we need to bring our own cream cheese?"

"Probably. But maybe they have a Canadian way to eat it. We can drive up the coast and get this overnight ferry in Bar Harbor. I've been reading about it. Even Jack will want to go, I bet."

"Maybe Alison Six will want to tag along."

"You know how to wreck a mom's good time," Claire said.

Miles went into the refrigerator and opened a beer. The house was quiet. The appliances hummed in a way that pleased him. This was his. Why did he have to go and throw it all away? That was the question, wasn't it? Yes, that was the question that, if you gave the right answer, they paid you all the money.

"I am telling you, my friend, that you are there for one reason and one reason only," Slater said, exhaling cigarette smoke. "You do not go to a plumber expecting to purchase a diamond ring, neither do you employ a carpet cleaning service to install a new roof."

"This isn't the Yellow Pages," Miles said.

"Maybe it ought to be," Slater added. "If you're about to do what I think you're about to do then maybe somebody should tell you to run on home, your mamma's calling you." Slater looked at Miles, blinked, puffed his cigarette. "For the love of fuck, Miles," he said finally.

"Do you love Alison Six?" Miles asked Jack. He stood in the center of Jack's bedroom, tapping a golfball in and out of a plastic cup.

"What kind of question is that?" Jack wanted to know.

"I thought you liked questions," Miles said, glancing at the wallpaper that Claire had chosen to cover the black paint. Red and gold question marks the size of dollar bills, some of them



upended, floated in a vibrant field of blue. "I'm not against asking the tough questions," Claire had said. "I never said that."

"I'm just curious," Miles said. "It's about time you fell in love. Everybody does, you know. Oftentimes not to their overwhelming advantage."

"I guess I do," Jack said. "Except that she's a gigantic pain in the ass some of the time, I think she's—excellent."

"I suppose she is pretty excellent," Miles said.

"She's not like anybody I ever met."

"You're a goner," Miles said, handing Jack the club. "Want to play some golf?"

"Want to jab a pointy stick in my eye?" asked Jack.

"You can't come back." Claire said. She was wearing an apron printed with yellow tea roses, her face and hands smudged with flour.

"No. I know that."

"Pathetic fat unintelligent loser," Claire added, slapping the dough down on the floured board. All through the quiet house and even as he stood at the front door Miles could hear her, slapping it. Then the slapping noise blended with the reedy sound of her voice, the first few words of a song, an old favorite of hers, "Too Young to Go Steady."

Miles drove the country road in the hot windless August afternoon. The blue Escort rattled and pinged for some time after he turned the engine off.

"I can't keep away from you," Miles said, pushing through the unlocked screen door.

"I'm a regular Sharon Stone, I guess."

They stood together in the cluttered living room. Patsy was dressed for work. Miles stepped forward and grabbed her by the dog collar that hung loosely at her throat.

"I love you," Miles said.

Patsy blinked hard and clutched at herself as if a chill had just run through her. She blinked again and looked down at the space of carpet at her feet. She kicked it with the pointed tips of her boots. Little Stevie crawled up and sat down on the tops of Miles' shoes.

"You can quit that now," Miles said, releasing the dog collar. "I'm here. I can take care of you." Patsy walked stiffly into the bedroom, dropped a few articles of clothing onto the bed, smiled wanly and sat down with her hands folded between her knees. Miles picked up little Stevie and hefted her backwards across his right shoulder. She tangled her fingers in his hair; her clothing was sticky and she smelled bad; she made tiny gurgling sounds in his ear. She'd need a bath, Miles thought, and some dinner. "Time for a visit with Mr. Bunnyrabbit," Miles whispered, closing his eyes for just a moment.