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Billy Ducks Among the Pharaohs

The Billetdoux front yard should have told me right away that the job wouldn't amount to much. The lawn was overgrown with spikey weeds, what grass there was had died a number of seasons ago, deep tire ruts oozy with muck grooved the yard, and a rusty tub filled with crankcase oil sat on the warped porch. But I had just turned eighteen and was still untuned to the distress signals the world volunteers with unfailing reliability.

Price Billetdoux — he pronounced his name “Billy Ducks” — answered my knock. He was in pajamas and bath robe, even though it was mid afternoon. He stood before me, dark and grizzled, blinded by ordinary daylight. When he focused on me, he shoved his hand into his robe pocket as if looking for a gun.

“I’m the one who called,” I explained quickly. I held up the newspaper and pointed to his ad. “I want to try it, photography.”

“Amigo,” he said, pulling a crumpled pack of Camels from his bathrobe. “Come in.”

I followed him into the kitchen. There was a plump girl at the stove peeling an egg off a skillet. She was also in pajamas and robe. She had stringy, mud-colored hair and very small feet. She looked about twelve. I figured she was Billetdoux’s daughter.

“Pour us a couple of cups of java, will you Shyanne?” he said to her.

The girl dragged two cups out of the sink, rinsed them, and filled them with inky coffee. She moved listlessly, as if she had been sick and was just recovering.

Billetdoux lit his Camel, drank some coffee, made a face. He had haggard, blood-shot eyes. Dark, tender-looking pouches hung like pulpy half moons under them. He squinted at me through the smoke, sizing me up. Then he explained the job. No salary. No insurance. No fringe benefits. No vacations. Everything I made would be a percentage of the gross. I would go from door to door, trying to get housewives to let me take pictures of them and their children. I would offer them an eight-by-ten glossy for only one dollar. That was the “bait.” How could they refuse? But when I went back with the print, I would also have a portfolio of five-by-sevens, three-by-fives, plus a packet of wallet-size prints. The portfolio would cost anywhere from \$5.95 to \$11.95, depending on how many prints were purchased. Of course, if they accepted only the eight-by-ten “bait” item for a buck, there was no profit or commission.

“You can make a hundred or more a week if you’re good,” Billetdoux said. “And your hours are your own. I’ve got a boy over in Sulphur Springs who nets one-fifty.”

I admitted that I didn’t know the first thing about taking pictures, but he fanned the air between us as if to not only clear the cigarette smoke but also the heavy cobwebs of confusion from my mind. “I can show you how to take pictures of a prize-winning quality in ten minutes, amigo. The job however is salesmanship, not art.”

He took me down to the basement where he kept his "photolab." We had to pass through a hall that led to the back of the house. Halfway down the hall he stopped next to a door and tapped on it softly. Then he pushed it open an inch. I saw a woman with wild gray hair lying in bed. She was propped up on several pillows. She also had the sickroom look, just as the girl did. Her eyes were dark and lusterless and her skin looked like damp paper. There was a guitar lying across her lap.

"I've got to break in a new boy, Lona," Billetdoux said. "I'll get you some breakfast in a little bit." Lona, who I assumed was Billetdoux's wife, let her head loll off the pillows until she was facing us. She didn't speak, but her large, drugged-looking eyes seemed to be nursing specific, long-term resentments. After Billetdoux closed the door, he whispered, "Lona is very creative, amigo."

The basement was a hodge-podge of equipment, stacked boxes, file cabinets, work tables, half-finished carpentry projects, all of it permeated with the smell of chemicals. He shoved stacks of paper around on his desk until he found a small brass key. He opened a cabinet with this key and took out a camera. "We'll start you on the Argus," he said. "It's simple to use and takes a decent picture. Later on, if you stick with me, I'll check you out on a Rolleiflex."

He took me step by step through the Argus, from film loading to f-stop and shutter speed. "I'll go around with you the first few days," he said, "to show you the ropes. Then you're on your own. You're a nice looking boy — the housewives will trust you." He winked, as if to suggest that trusting the likes of me and Billetdoux would be the biggest blunder a housewife could make.

We went back upstairs to the kitchen. "How about some breakfast?" he said. I looked at my watch. "It's after three," I said.

"Is it? No wonder I'm so hungry. Where the hell does the time run off to, amigo? Well, how about some lunch then? Could you go for a bite of lunch?"

"Sure," I said. I hadn't eaten breakfast either.

"Shyanne," he called. "Honey, would you come in here?"

She came in, looking slightly more haggard than when I first saw her.

"Shy, hon, fix us some lunch, will you? The boy here and I are starved."

"There's no bread," she said. "Or meat."

Billetdoux pulled open a cupboard door. "How about some Cheerios, then?" he said.

"Fine by me," I said.

He poured out three bowls of the cereal, then added milk. He handed one bowl to Shyanne. "Here, hon," he said. "Take this in to Lona, will you? She hasn't eaten since yesterday."

"No one's eaten since yesterday," she said. "Except me, if you want to count that measly egg."

Billetdoux grinned darkly at me, embarrassed. "Time to make a grocery run, I guess," he said.

We ate in silence. The milk on my cereal was slightly sour. A big, late summer fly droned past my ear and landed upside down on the table where it exercised its thick, feeble legs. A loud, nasty voice broke into the homely sound of our spoons tapping on the Melmac bowls. I heard the word "swill" hiss from the hallway. Shyanne came in, carrying the bowl of Cheerios. "Lona doesn't want cereal," she

said, dumping the milk-bloated O's into the sink. "She wants Spam and eggs."

"What about toast?" Billetdoux said.

"Right. Toast, too, and hashbrowns."

He leaned forward, his eyes damp and tired looking. "Listen, kid," he said. "Can you loan me ten bucks until tomorrow? I'm a little short. I had to get a new transmission put in my car last week. Cost? It's legal robbery."

I took out my wallet. I still had about fifty dollars from my last job. I gave him ten.

"Thanks, amigo. Splendid. I won't forget this. This is above and beyond, amigo."

Shyanne plucked the ten out of his hand. "I'll go to the store," she said.

"Don't forget cigarettes," Billetdoux said.

Billetdoux told me how to snowjob a housewife, but the first door we knocked at was answered by a kid of about six or seven. I looked at Billetdoux, who was standing right behind me. "What do I do now?" I asked.

"Is your old lady at home, buster?" Billetdoux said.

The kid started to close the door. His little sister, naked and grimy, stood behind him, a gray pork chop in her muddy hand. Pale green bulbs of snot plugged her nostrils.

Billetdoux pulled a bent Tootsie Roll out of his pocket and gave it to the boy. The boy accepted it, visibly relaxing his doorway vigil. "Mummy not home, huh?" Billetdoux said. "Well, that's all right. That's no problem at all." To me he whispered, "In a way, amigo, it makes our job easier."

He pushed the door all the way open and we went in. "Set the flood lamps up like I told you," he said. "Remember, the mainlight sits back about seven feet. Put the fill-light about three feet behind it, but over to the right. That way we get an arty shadow."

I opened the equipment case I'd carried in and took out the lamps. I set them up on their stands. While I was doing this, Billetdoux set two chairs up in the middle of the living room. I moved the two lamps so that they were the proper distance from the chairs.

"Hey, buster," Billetdoux said to the boy. "Your sis got any clothes? Why don't you be a good scout and hunt up some drawers for her, okay? We don't want to take what you might call filthy pornographic pictures, do we? And wash off her snot-locker while you're at it."

I set up the tripod and attached the Argus to it. The boy pulled a pair of pink panties on his sister. I took the pork chop out of her hand and set it on the coffee table. I used my own handkerchief to clean her nose. Billetdoux sat them down in the chairs. He stepped back and looked at them in the unmerciful glare of the flood lamps. "Good enough," he said. "Now, amigo, you are going to have to work on their expressions. Right now they look like starving Lithuanian refugees about to be processed into dog food by the S.S. Not a cheery sight, is it?"

"Smile, kids," I said, bending to the Argus.

The kids looked dead in the viewfinder.

"Smile won't get it, amigo," Billetdoux said. "Smile is the kiss of death in this racket. You might as well ask them to whistle Puccini. No, you've got to bring out some personality, whether they've got any or not. You want to get something on their faces their mama will blink her eyes at in wonder. You want her to think that she's never really *seen* her own kids. Got the idea?" He knelt down in front of the kids and raised his hands up like an orchestra leader. "I want you kids to say something for Uncle Billy Ducks, will you?" The kids nodded. "I want you kids to say, 'Hanna ate the whole banana,' and I want you to say it together until Uncle Billy Ducks tells you to quit, okay?"

He stood up and said to me, "Take ten shots. Press the shutter button between 'whole' and 'banana.' Got it? Okay kids, start saying it." He raised his hands like an orchestra leader again and started the kids chanting the phrase. I hit the button too soon the first time, too late the second, but I gradually fell into the rhythm of their sing-song chant and was able to snap their pictures on the simulated smile generated when their mouths were opened wide on "whole" but starting to close for "banana."

I took ten pictures, then shut off the floods. Billetdoux was nowhere in sight. I felt uneasy about our being alone in the house with these kids. The heat of the floods had raised a greasy sweat on my back. Then Billetdoux came in. He had a pork chop in his hand. "There's some grub in the ice box, amigo, if you're for it," he said. "Make yourself some lunch." He bit into the pork chop hungrily. "I'll say this," he said, chewing fast. "The lady of the house knows how to fry a chop."

Billetdoux began rummaging through the drawers of a built-in sideboard that filled one wall of the small living room. "Hello there," he said, lifting a pair of candle holders out of a drawer. "Take a look, amigo." He hefted the candle holders as if weighing them for value. "Solid sterling, I believe," he said. He slipped them into his jacket pocket. Then he continued rummaging. The kids didn't pay any attention to him. They were still mumbling "Hanna ate the whole banana," as they watched me taking down the floods. I worked fast, sweating not just from heat now but from fear. "Hello hello hello," Billetdoux crooned, dumping the contents of a big black purse onto the dining room table. "Coin of the old realm — silver dollars, amigo. Cartwheels. 1887. The real McCoy. The landowners here appear to be silver hoarders...shameful, no?" He picked up one of the silver dollars and bit it lightly. Then he shovelled the big coins into a pile and began to fill his pockets with them. "It's rotten to hoard money like this when there's so much real need in the world today," he said, his voice husky with moral outrage.

"Let's go," I said.

"One momento, por favor, kid," he said. "Nature calls." He disappeared into the back of the house. I snapped the equipment case shut, picked it up and headed for the door. I heard the sound of water hitting water followed by a toilet flushing. As I opened the front door I believed I could hear him brushing his teeth vigorously.

I waited outside, down the street. He showed up in a few minutes, his pockets bulging, another pork chop in his felonious hand. He had an electric frying pan under one arm and a desk encyclopedia under the other. "You didn't get any lunch, amigo," he said, his forehead furrowing with concern. "What's the matter, no appetite? You got a flu bug? Here, this chop is for you. You need to keep up your strength in this business."

I put the equipment case down. "You're a thief." I said, realizing that this surge of righteousness was about ten minutes late.

He lowered the pork chop slowly. He looked astonished, then deeply hurt. "Say again, amigo? Billy Ducks a *thief*?"

"You heard me," I said, unmoved by his dismay.

"You're too harsh, amigo. I assure you it will all go toward an excellent cause. Look at it this way, try to see it as a redistribution of wealth. It's good for a society to have its wealth redistributed from time to time. Otherwise you wind up like the Egypt of the Pharaohs — a few tycoons eating chili and caviar in their plush house — boats on the Nile, and everybody else straining their milk shoving big slabs of granite around the desert. Does that make sense to you? Is this an ideal society?"

"How am I supposed to go back there with an eight-by-ten glossy of those kids?"

He raised the pork chop thoughtfully, then bit into it. "Well, amigo, you won't have to. This was just a practice run. I'll develop and print that film and see what you came up with. Consider it basic training. Boot camp. This is boot camp."

Boot camp lasted a week. Billetdoux was a good salesman. He almost always got into a house, and when he didn't, he vowed to me that he'd come back with a vengeance. I didn't ask him what he meant because I'd begun to suspect that he was crazy. I guess I would have quit after that session with the kids, but I figured that once I was out on my own his activities and mine would be separate. He was a thief, he was crazy, but I wasn't. He would develop and print my film and pay me my commissions and that would be the extent of our relationship. I wanted the job badly enough to gloss over my own objections. I liked the idea of taking pictures door to door. It was better than working in a saw mill or on a road crew or baling hay for some stingy farmer. I'd be out in nice neighborhoods every day, I'd meet interesting people, no foreman looking over my shoulder, no timeclock to punch.

The last day of boot camp Billetdoux parked his car — a 1939 Chevy whose interior smelled of moss — at the edge of the most exclusive neighborhood in town, Bunker Hill Estates. "Top of the world, amigo," he said, sipping black wine from a square bottle. The neighborhood was lush and hilly, the houses sprawling and surrounded by vast, perfectly tended lawns. "The land of the Pharaohs, amigo," he said. "Makes me jumpy, going up against them. I need this little bracer." He offered the bottle to me and I took a sip. It was sweet, thick wine, like cough syrup.

We got out of the car and started walking up the steep street toward the looming estates of Bunker Hill. Billetdoux began laboring right away, wheezing, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. I was carrying all the equipment, but he acted as if he had the full load. "I don't feel so hot, amigo," he said, stopping next to a tall bushy hedge. His face had gone white. His mouth was open like the Mask of Tragedy. There was a short picket fence on the street side of the hedge. Immediately behind the fence was a narrow flower bed, then the hedge. Billetdoux stepped over the fence and into the flowers. "I'm sick," he said. He unbuckled his belt. He took off his jacket and handed it to me. He dropped his pants and

squatted into the hedge until only his pale, stricken face was showing. A dark eruption of bowel noise broke the tranquil air. Billetdoux sighed. "Lord," he said. "What a relief. Must have been that goddamned chokecherry wine." He smiled weakly. I stood there, holding his jacket, the full weight of the incredible situation beginning to impress itself on me. A small dog, alerted by the commotion, came snapping up to Billetdoux. The dog was perfectly groomed. It looked like a blond wig that had come to life. Billetdoux put a hand out to it, to appease it or to ward it off, and the dog bit his finger. Billetdoux fell backwards into the hedge, disappearing. The dog went after him, lusting for blood after his initial success with this hedge-fouling trespasser. Then they both emerged, Billetdoux roaring to his feet, the dog in frenzied attack. "Son of a bitch," Billetdoux said, picking the dog up roughly by its collar, a satiny bejeweled affair. "I hate small dogs like this, don't you, amigo? Probably eats anchovies and cake."

I looked up and down the street, expecting a crowd of curious Bunker Hill residents attracted by the ruckus, but the street remained empty and serene. It was the serenity of people who knew who they were, enjoyed it, and who believed in their basic indispensibility to the great scheme of things. Pharaohs. Serene Pharaohs untouched by the small and large calamities that nipped at the heels of people like Billetdoux and me.

I turned back to Billetdoux. He was squatting back into the hedge, the dog firmly in his hand. "I really hate these lap dogs," he said, "but sometimes they come in handy."

"What are you *doing*?" I said. But I could see very well what he was doing. He was using the small dog for toilet paper.

"It's all they're good for, dogs like these," he said, a sinister joy playing on his lips. "Bite my jewels, you little pissant, and I'll feed you to the flowers."

The dog whined pitifully. Billetdoux tossed it aside and stood up. The dog burrowed into the thick hedge, making a shrill whistling noise. "I feel much better, thanks," Billetdoux said to no one's inquiry as he buckled up. I handed him his jacket and he slipped it on, squaring his shoulders in the manner of someone who has just finished important business and is ready for the next challenge. He stepped over the picket fence. "Well, don't just stand there, amigo. Time, like the man said, is money."

We continued up the street, stopping, finally, at the crest of the hill. Billetdoux leaned on a mail drop. "Look," he said, "you can see the whole town from up here. Lovely, no? See the smoke from the mills? See the pall it makes across the town's humble neighborhoods? Wouldn't it be nice to live up here where the air is pure, where all you can smell is flowers and money? What do you think, amigo. Think I should buy a house up here, with the Pharaohs?"

"Sure," I said, thinking of the ten bucks I loaned him that first day, the twenty I'd loaned him since, thinking of his wife and child, his wrecked yard, his mildewed Chevy.

He laughed bitterly. "No way, amigo. I couldn't take it. Too stuffy, if you know what I mean. A man couldn't be himself up here. I'd wind up playing their game...Who's Got it Best."

We walked along a narrow, tree-lined side-street called Pinnacle Drive. Billetdoux pointed at the street sign. "Here we are — the top of the world. The Pin-

nacle. Everything is downhill from here. That's the definition of pinnacle, isn't it? Isn't that what they're trying to tell us? You're damn straight it is."

It might have been true. The houses were two and three stories and wide as aircraft hangars. Giant blue-green lawns were fitted with precise landscaping. Three to four cars gleamed in every garage.

We stopped at the biggest house on Pinnacle Drive, a slate-gray, four-story saltbox affair with a seven foot wrought-iron fence surrounding it.

"What do you see, amigo," Billetdoux said, his voice cagey.

"A nice house."

"A nice house he says. Look again, amigo. It's a monument, dedicated to arrogance, greed, and the status quo."

I looked again. I saw a nice house with a long sloping lawn studded with beautiful shrubs, a piece of metal sculpture — a seal or possibly a bear — curled at the base of a fine elm.

"You're stone blind," Billetdoux said when I told him this. "You'll never be a real photographer. You've got scales on your eyes. Stick to mothers and babies — don't take up real picture-taking. Promise me that, will you?"

Billetdoux stepped up onto the stone retaining wall that held the iron fence. He grabbed the bars and began to yell. "Hey! You in there! We're on to you! We smell your goddamned embalming fluid, you fatassed Egyptian mummies!" He began to laugh, enormously entertained by his performance.

Twin Dobermans came galloping up to the fence. The drapes of the front room moved. The Dobermans leaped at the fence, going for Billetdoux's hands. "I bet they've got us covered with Tommy guns," he said, stepping off the retaining wall. "Look at those front doors, amigo. Eight feet tall and wide enough to run a double column of storm troopers through them. Now tell me, do you honestly feel there is warm human activity blundering around behind those dead-bolted doors? No you don't. Tight-assed nasty withered old Pharaoh and his Pharaohette live in there, stinking the place up with embalming fluid. Christ, amigo, it turns my stomach." He sat down suddenly on the retaining wall and covered his face with his hands. His shoulders heaved, as if racked with sobs, but he made no sound. "Lona is sick," he said, half-whispering. "That's why I steal things. You called it right, kid, I'm a thief." He looked at me, his face fighting a severe emotion that threatened to dissolve it. "These people get a head cold and they fly to the Mayo Clinic. I can't even buy medicine for Lona." He took out his handkerchief and mopped his face with it. "Give me the Argus, amigo. I'll show you how to take a picture."

I opened the equipment case and handed him the camera. He began snapping pictures of the house. The drapes of the front room moved gently as if the house was suddenly filled with soft breezes.

"I'm looking at those doors," he said, sighting through the camera. "I'm looking at the shadow that falls across them on a severe diagonal due to the overhang above the steps. The effect, amigo, is grim. Now I'm sliding over to the left to include a piece of that window. This is interesting. This is the geometry of fear — a specialty of the Egyptians." He snapped a few more pictures then handed me the camera. "Everything makes a statement whether it wants to or not," he said. "It's up to you, as a photographer, to see and record it — in that order. *Seeing*, amigo, that will come with maturity."

Billetdoux was full of himself. His eyes were shining with the power and accuracy of his perceptions. He looked stronger and more self-confident and even healthier than ever. He looked brave and intelligent and generous and sane. I raised the Argus and took a picture of him.

The front doors of the house opened. A tall, silver-haired man in a jumpsuit came down the steps shading his eyes to see us better. Seeing their master approach, the Dobermans renewed their attack. They leaped at the fence, turned full circles in mid-air, came down stiff-legged and gargling with rage.

"Down, Betsy, down, Arnold," said the silver-haired man when he reached us. "Is there something I can do for you gentlemen?" he asked, a charming smile on his handsome face. He was elegant and calm and genuinely undisturbed by us.

Billetdoux shoved his hand through the bars of the fence, offering it to the old man. "We're doing some freelancing for the *Clarion*," he said. I waved the camera for proof.

"Ah, journalists," said the man, dignifying us.

"Right," Billetdoux said, grinning horribly.

"Well, why don't you come inside and take some pictures of our antiques. Nedda, my wife, is a collector."

Billetdoux looked at me, his face so deadpan that I almost giggled. We followed the old man along the fence to the main gate. He sent the dogs away and then let us in.

The man's wife, Nedda, showed us through the house. It was tastefully furnished with antiques. The dry, musty smell of old money was everywhere. It rose up in the dust from the oriental carpets. It fell from the handsomely papered walls. It lived in the stately light that slanted into the rooms from the tall windows. It was a friendly, bittersweet smell, like stale chocolate, or maybe like the breath of a Pharaoh.

After the tour, we were given ham sandwiches and coffee, along with cole slaw. Nedda brought a tray of wonderfully frosted cookies and refilled our coffee cups. Then we toured the house again, the fourth floor where Nedda kept her most prized antiques. Billetdoux, still playing the journalist, snapped a dozen flash pictures. He was working with a kind of controlled panic, on the verge of breaking into an avaricious sweat. His jacket pocket clinked with dead flash bulbs.

Then we went downstairs, exchanged a few more pleasantries, and left. "Guess you were wrong about them," I said.

He brushed the air between us with his hand. "Petty bourgeois front, amigo. Don't kid yourself."

"What's wrong with Lona?" I asked, surprising myself.

He shrugged. "The twentieth century," he said. "It depresses her. She's very sensitive."

"Oh," I said.

"You think being depressed is a picnic?" he said, annoyed at my tone. "It's an illness, amigo, serious as cancer."

"Really," I said.

He looked at me strangely, then slapped his stomach hard. He made a loud barking sound.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't eat cole slaw. The bastards put out cole slaw." We were halfway to the front gate. "I can't make it, amigo. Let's head back." He turned quickly and headed back toward the front doors. The Dobermans didn't come after us, though I expected them to come sailing around the house at any second. Billetdoux, doubled over and barking, ran up the steps of the front porch. He rang the bell until the door opened.

"The journalists," said the pleasant old man.

"Please," Billetdoux grunted. "Can I use your facilities?"

"Most certainly," said the old man. "Do come in."

The old man led Billetdoux away. I waited in the foyer. Nedda saw me. "Oh, you're back," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "My boss had to use your bathroom. He can't eat cole slaw."

She touched her cheek with her fingers. "Oh dear," she said. "I'm so sorry. I hope he isn't too distressed. Would you like some candy while you're waiting?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. So these are the Pharaohs, I thought.

She went out and came back with a box of chocolates. I studied the brown shapes then selected one I hoped was filled with cream instead of a hard nut.

"Oh take *more*," she said, holding the box closer to me. "Fill your pocket. I'm not allowed them anyway. Neither is Burton."

Billetdoux came in, smelling of expensive cologne. "Let's hit the road, amigo," he said. "We've bothered these fine people long enough."

"No bother at all," said Nedda. "We don't get much company these days. I'm glad you came. Do drop in again."

Out on the street Billetdoux said, "Christ, what a pair of phonies. I thought we'd never get out of there."

"Better check your wallet," I said.

He looked at me sharply but didn't say anything. I popped a chocolate into my mouth. Mint cream. I didn't offer him one. He reached into his pocket and took out a small sculpture of a Chinese monk lifting a wineskin to his grinning lips.

"Look at this piece of junk," he said. "I thought it was some kind of special jade, white jade maybe, but it's only soapstone. Chances are all those antiques are phonies, too." He tossed the guzzling monk into a shrub as we walked downhill toward his car.

After my first one-hundred dollar week, Billetdoux invited me over to celebrate my success. "You're on your way, amigo," he said, uncapping a quart of cheap vodka. He made us a pair of iceless screwdrivers and we clinked glasses before drinking. "Here's to the hotshot," he said. "Here's to the man with the charm."

We drank half a dozen screwdrivers before we ran out of frozen orange juice. Then we switched to vodka on the rocks, minus the rocks. His mood changed as we got drunk.

"Here's to the hotdog capitalist," he said, turning ugly. "Here's to J.P. Morgan Junior."

He spread the photographs of Nedda's antiques out on the table before him.

"There could be some money in these items, amigo. Enough to finance my retirement. Enough to escape the twentieth century. Unless they're fakes." He looked at me then, his eyes hard and rock steady. "How about it, amigo?"

"How about what?" I said, thick-tongued.

"How about we take it. How about we pay a midnight visit to Pinnacle Drive and get us a truckload of antiques?"

My mouth was already dry from the vodka, but it went drier. "No way," I said. "I'm a photographer, not a felon."

"Photographer my suffering ass!" he said. "You just don't have the belly for it, amigo. Look at yourself. You're about to muddy your drawers." He laughed happily, poured more vodka. My stomach rumbled on cue, and he laughed again.

Dinner was a blistered pizza that was both soggy and scorched. Shyanne made it from a kit. She cut it into eight narrow slices. Billetdoux and I ate at the kitchen table. Shyanne carried a tray into Lona's bedroom, then went into the living room with her two slices of pizza to watch TV.

"I should have gotten some T-bones," Billetdoux said.

"No, this is fine," I said.

"Don't bullshit a world class bullshitter, amigo," he said.

He squinted at me; meaning to change the subject, I told him about some of my weirder customers. I told him about the old weightlifting champ who posed for me in a jockstrap, holding a flowerpot in each hand to make his biceps bulge. I told him about the couple who took turns sitting on each other's lap, touching tongues. Then there was the crackpot who wore a jungle hat and spoke German at a full shout to a photograph of his dead wife.

Billetdoux wasn't amused. "You think the human condition is a form of entertainment for us less unfortunate citizens, amigo?" he said. "Remember, 'There but for the grace of God go I.'"

I thought about this for a few seconds. "Sometimes it is," I said, refusing to buckle under to his hypocritical self-righteousness. "Sometimes it's entertaining as hell."

He glowered at me, then brightened. "Hey, come out to the garage with me. I want to show you something."

I stood up, felt the floor tilt and rotate, sat back down. When the room stabilized itself, I got up again.

Outside, the air was crisp. A cold wind seemed to be falling straight down out of the sky. Billetdoux opened the garage door and switched on the lights. "Ta da!" he sang.

A long, pearl-gray car gleamed in the overhead light. "Wow," I said, honestly moved. "What is it?"

"That is a car, amigo," he said. "It's a 1941 LaSalle. I got it for a song from an old lady who didn't know what she had. It's been in storage — only eleven thousand miles on it."

We got in. The interior was soft, dark-gray plush. Even the door, when it latched, sounded like money slapping money. Billetdoux started it and backed out onto his lawn.

"It's a little dusty," he said, getting out of the car. "I'm going to hose it off. Dust will murder a finish like this."

I went back into the house. I found the vodka and poured some into my glass.

Noise, like a mob of crows in flight, passed through the kitchen. I looked out the kitchen window. Billetdoux was leaning against the front fender of the LaSalle. He saw me and winked. He began to undulate, as if performing sex with the car. "I think I'm in love," he shouted.

What sounded like a mob of raucous crows was actually Lona. She was singing in a language that might have been Egyptian. She could have been strumming her guitar with a trowel for all the music that was coming out of it. Then a tremendous crash shook the house. Glass tinkled.

Billetdoux came in. "Are they at it again?" he asked me. Glass shattered. Wood splintered. "Oh oh," he said.

Oh oh seemed like a totally failed response to the din.

Billetdoux sighed weakly. "I smell trouble," he said.

We poured ourselves some vodka. The uproar changed in character. Two voices were now harmonizing in throat-tearing screams. Now and then something made the walls shake.

"Maybe we'd better have us a look," he said, sipping.

I sipped too. Outside the kitchen window, the perfect LaSalle gleamed like a classy rebuttal to human life.

We went to the back of the house. Lona's bedroom door was open. For a second or two I didn't understand what I was looking at. What I saw was Lona and Shyanne kneeling face to face on the bed, combing each other's hair. A dresser was lying on its side and a mirror was on the floor cracked diagonally in half. I saw, then, that neither one of them had combs in their hands. Just great knots of hair. Lona was growling through her clenched teeth and Shyanne was *hissing*. Shyanne's mouth was very wide and the teeth were exposed. She looked like a cheetah. Then they fell over and rolled to the floor. They rolled toward us and we stepped back, holding our drinks high. The air before us was filled with flailing legs and whipping hair. "Knock it off, okay?" Billetdoux suggested meekly. He watched them a while longer, then set his drink on the floor. "Give me a hand, will you, amigo?" he said.

He grabbed Shyanne under the armpits and lifted her off Lona. She continued to kick out at Lona as Billetdoux pulled her into the hall. I reached for a waving leg, then thought better of it. Lona got heavily to her feet. Her gray hair had shapes wrung into it. Horns, knobs, antennae. Lumps that suggested awful growths. She picked up a lamp and flung it at Shyanne who was no longer in the room. It exploded against the wall, next to my head. "God damn you to hell," she said to me, but meaning, I think, Shyanne.

"Fat witch! Pus hole! Slop ass!" Shyanne yelled from somewhere else in the house.

After things quieted down, Billetdoux fixed us a new round of drinks. Vodka and warm apricot nectar. "That was intensely embarrassing, amigo," he said. "They go ape shit about once a month or so. Don't ask me why."

I made some kind of suave gesture indicating the futility of things in general, but it didn't come off well since I was barely eighteen and hadn't yet earned the right to such bleak notions. I pulled in my gesturing hand so that it could cover my mouth while I faked a coughing fit.

But Billetdoux wasn't paying any attention to me. "The television, the guitar," he said. "This house is too small for us. They tend to get on each other's nerves. Sometimes it comes to this."

I was drunk enough to say, "How come you let your daughter treat her mother that way?"

Billetdoux looked at me. "My daughter?" he said. "What are you saying, amigo?"

"Your daughter, Shyanne, she..."

"My *daughter*? You think I'm beyond insult, amigo? You think we've reached a point in time where anything at all can be said to Price Billetdoux?" For the first time he pronounced his name in accurate French.

"She's *not* your daughter?" I said, thoroughly numb to the hard-edged peculiarities of Billetdoux's life, but somewhat surprised anyway.

"*Damn*," he said, glumly.

"Then Lona..."

"Lona? Lona? Jesus, amigo, what godawful thing are you going to say now?"

"I thought Lona was your wife."

"Lona," he said, measuring his words, "is my Mom." His voice was dark with a dangerous reverence that adjusted my frame of mind for the rest of the evening.

Shyanne came into the kitchen. She opened the fridge and took out a bottle of Upper Ten. She made a face at Billetdoux then at me. "Oh baby baby," Billetdoux said, his voice wounded with love.

"I think you should tell her to move out," Shyanne said.

"Oh, baby. No. You know I can't do that. It would kill her."

"How do you think I feel?" she said. "Maybe you want *me* to move out. Is that what you want?" Her small red lips puckered into a hard, toy-doll pout. "I'll go. I'll just go."

"Don't say that, baby," Billetdoux said, miserably.

Shyanne still looked twelve years old to me. But the hard unwavering stare she had levelled at me was not something a child was capable of. I moved her age up to sixteen or seventeen. But something older by five thousand years hung stupidly in her face.

"Say the word, I'll go. I'll pack," she said.

I went out into the front room as Billetdoux began to weep on the small breast of his teenage wife.

I switched the TV to the Perry Como show. I watched it all. Then I switched to Wagon Train. I had ignored the sounds coming from the kitchen — the soft, sing-song assurances, the cooing words that dissolved into groaning embraces, the serious oath-making, the baby-talk threats, and, finally, the mindless chit-chat.

Billetdoux came in and sat down on the couch next to me. He was eating a peanut butter sandwich and drinking beer. "What can I say, amigo?" he said. "Are you going to think of me now as an old cradle-robber? Hell, I'm only thirty-eight. Shyanne's almost sixteen. You think that's too young?"

I shrugged. "What's a dozen years more or less," I said, my arithmetic deliberately sentimental.

He straightened up, set his sandwich and beer down on the coffee table. "My situation is not easy, amigo. I'm so crazy about Shyanne. I can't live without her. You understand? No, you don't. Maybe someday you will, if you get lucky. At the same time, I've got to think about Lona. I can't set her adrift after all she's done for me, can I?"

"No," I said, remembering to be careful.

Billetdoux was chewing his lower lip and absent-mindedly cracking his knuckles. "Mom thinks the world of me," he said. "Did I tell you that? She calls me her Honey Boy."

I went back to the kitchen to get myself an Upper Ten. My stomach felt like I'd swallowed a cat. Shyanne was still at the table. She was looking at her hands, studying first the tops, then the bottoms.

"They're red," she said, without looking up. "I hate these hands. Look at them. They're not very elegant, are they?"

I got my Upper Ten, opened it.

"I'm sick of my hands," she said. "I'd just as soon cut them off."

She tried to show me her hands, but I walked past them and back to the living room. Billetdoux was pacing in front of the TV. "I'm going to Carnuba the LaSalle," he said. "It's been on my mind." He stalked out, like a man with pressing business.

I sipped my pop. Some kind of detective show was on now. After a while, Shyanne came in and sat next to me. Lona was strumming her guitar again and singing in Egyptian. "Are you going to take me fishing or not?" Shyanne said, her lips brushing my ear. Her tone of voice made me feel as though I'd broken every promise I'd ever made.

"Did I ever say I would?" I said.

"No one's taken me fishing since we came to this dumb town."

I noticed she was sitting on her hands.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, turning her face sidelong to mine. "I know *exactly* what you're thinking."

I got up and went outside. Billetdoux was out on the lawn rubbing wax into the gleaming LaSalle. He was holding a flashlight in one hand and buffing with the other. "Amigo," he said. "Loan me twenty before you go, okay? I'm in a bit of a jam."

I gave him twenty without comment and walked away. I felt, then, that I'd seen enough of the Billetdoux family and I wouldn't be back, ever.

But a half an hour later I was in his kitchen again for no reason other than a vaguely erotic curiosity. I made myself another vodka and nectar and took it out to the back yard. It was a clear, moonless night. *The moon*, I thought, *is in Egypt*.

I sat on the dead grass and drank until I got sick. The sickness was sudden and total and my stomach emptied itself colossally into the lawn. When I was able to sit up again, I saw Lona. She was standing before the open bedroom window, naked, her strangely tranquil face upturned to the sky. Her eyes were closed and she was holding her arms out in front of her, palms up, in a gesture that reminded me of ancient priestesses. Her big silver breasts gleamed in the chilly starlight.

"Honey Boy," she said, her eyes still closed, her face still raised to the delicate radiations of the night. "Honey Boy, come here."

I got up heavily. I thoroughly believed in that moment that I had once again decided to leave. But I found myself walking trance-like to Lona. Like an inductee to a great and lofty sect, having passed my preliminary ordeal, I moved, awestruck, as if toward the Sphinx.