

Was It Good for You?

Joseph Harris

“I’ve never done this before.”

“That’s sweet,” I laugh at the voice. “What do you like, sweetheart?” I don’t look at the pictures of the people I see in the bottom corner of my screen. They’re my clients, and I don’t want to attach a face to the things I do for them, the things I make them do.

“Um, well... do you have any, any things?”

I reach over to the bedside table between the burning candles and grab something, wave it slowly in front of the camera.

“That’s fine. That should work.”

I imagine the other eyes, dry from staying open, stretched, aching in anticipation as I click and start the timer. “How do you like it?” This is the part in the dialogue where I know how much I’m going to make. It’s where they show their cards—what makes them tick, squirm, explode.

“No one’s asked me that before...”

“Join the club.” Nervous erotic energy. Power shifting. I begin. “Does this turn you on?”

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When my dad left he told me, “You’re a pretty girl, Gina, a lot of girls ain’t. Boys like pretty girls, you know that?”

I nodded and stared at my pretty reflection in the hallway mirror and thought about my mom at my age, if her dad had ever said this to her, how she wound up with a man like mine.

“You can make a lot of money, sweetheart. In this country, in this town you can make a living off your looks.”

Sometimes, when I refresh my page and minimize the window in the corner of my screen I imagine my dad staring through the other lens, taste his shame the moment I take off my bra and he sees how pretty I’ve become.

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When it’s over I’m flushed, sweating, my windows fogged. The radiator hums and exhales its murky heat. I like this job if only because it keeps me

warm during the bleak midwinters in Detroit.

“Can I ask you something?”

I forgot to close the browser. “Sorry, sweetheart. I’m afraid I’m tapped out.”

“No, I don’t want you to do anything else... I’ll keep paying you, if you’d like.”

“Trouble with the wife?”

“Not exactly.”

“What’s your question?”

“Do you ever feel... feel like there’s something wrong? Like you’re not living the way you’re supposed to? Like everything that’s supposed to matter is a lie?”

I hesitate. “...Yeah.”

“My wife doesn’t understand. She just thinks I’m bored with her.”

“Come back same time next week. Let’s see if we can’t work something out.”

“Wear something... wear something coarse.”

I hear a click in the other room. It’s faint, but I have perceptive senses—very perceptive.

I pull the covers up and close my laptop as Rose, my great aunt, opens my door, sticks her head in the room.

“Busy day?”

The “b” lilts, like it’s caught between her tongue and the top of her mouth. Must not have her hearing aids up.

“Very,” I shout. She cranes her neck to the right and fidgets with her lobe.

“Are you coming tonight, dear?”

She’s always trying to get me to go to Mass with her. When she was a nurse she used to go every night after she clocked out. I humor her sometimes; after all, she’s putting me up. “I have plans.”

“Next time?”

“Next time. I promise.”

Other than Catholicism, Auntie Rose’s favorite lecture is about me working—about how I need to get a job and save my money to get an education to get a job women like her could only dream about when they were my age. Then I have to tell her a lie (that I would never sell myself short) and then tell her a truth (that no one can get a job right now because there is no work to do).

“Don’t get too far from the Word, sweetheart. You start chasing worldly things you’ll wind up like your mother.”

“Not that.”

“Sorry?”

“I don’t like things, Auntie Rose.”



And every time I think yeah, maybe I do like things, maybe I want them, all I have to do is take John R out to 8 Mile to I-75 North and get off at Big Beaver. A few miles west and I'm at the Somerset Collection, which, for those not familiar, is Detroit's answer to the delicious material want of the urban centers that still have consumers. You know—Barney's and Nordstrom's and Neiman Marcus; Hugo Boss, Gucci, Versace. Disembodied wealth in all of its meaninglessness. Prices on things so absurd that I have to remind myself that they are just commodities made from base materials that someone has decided costs an amount of money so outrageous that it makes me feel sick.

So I do. It's a Wednesday afternoon and my windows are all fogged from the melting snow—the weather lady on WJR says it's 45. Almost record for January. It feels hotter, especially when I get out of my Cutlass Supreme and unwrap my scarf from around my neck. The valet boys—valet parking for a mall—watch my movement like wolves at first but then like puppies as I walk by them and flick my keys away.

The crowd at Somerset during the day is the same, just the faces change. The women who married well and don't have to go through the indignity of work, the kids from Troy High and Athens and the private schools skipping class.

“Can I help you?”

I'm browsing the cashmere sweaters at Ralph Lauren and there's a sales associate next to me. “I'm looking for something... flattering.”

“Flattering?” He's not sizing me up. His eyes stay on mine.

“I'm seeing someone later who likes rough material.”

“A wool blend, cut short with a low hanging neck?”

“It won't be too itchy, will it?”

“Depends on the person.”

“He's very... he's very particular.”

“It'll be rough when he touches you.”

“Oh, he won't be doing that. It's an... an online date,” I finally say.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It's... I do performance art. In front of a webcam.” I wink.

“Oh,” he says, intimidated, then intrigued. “Where do you... perform?”

“Hazel Park.”

“With all the workers. How romantic.”

“Yeah well, not too much work to do now is there, smartass.”

“People made these clothes.”

I turn the dress inside out. “In fucking Burma.”

“I’m Brad,” he says.

✱

“Have a good week?” I start the timer.

“Not really.”

“What can I do to make you feel better?” I start to take off that itchy shawl from the mall and think briefly about Brad, about seeing him tomorrow.

“You don’t have to...”

I reach for the thing he liked last week. “Clothes on this time?”

“No, I mean,” I hear breathing, a heavy sigh. “Can we just talk?”

“It’s your money.”

“I’ve been feeling... I dunno... depressed?”

“It’s January. Everyone’s depressed.”

“No, I don’t think it’s that. It’s, well... I lied, the last time we... it’s my wife.”

“Most of my clients have trouble with their wives.”

“My wife is beautiful. She always has been. We’ve always had a great, um, we’ve always been compatible romantically. But lately she’s been—she’s been asking to use, other things in bed, other objects?”

“And you feel threatened.”

“Not at all. It was a few weeks ago, she took these things out of her closet, and while she was doing it I looked over her shoulder and saw all of her... all of her stuff. Dresses, shoes, jewelry. And, I dunno. It’s like I can’t stop thinking about it. Like it’s making me sick.”

Cold air comes in through the window crack. Always colder at night.

“Does that make any sense?”

I can picture my mom out in California with her face lift and tit job and tummy tuck. “Yeah.”

✱

The box feels stiff, too upright. The window door slides open, and I hear breathing coming from the other end.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned.”

Silence.

“Well, I haven’t sinned, really. I don’t believe in sin. Too much guilt.”

Silence.

“My great aunt, she wants me to be more religious. It’s important to her. She thinks without religion I’ll be too materialistic.”

Silence.

“And I oblige her because she’s the only family I have left, and that’s something I understand and respect, but I don’t think you need to believe in something abstract to know right from wrong. Especially in a material world.”

Nothing.

“Stuff like clothes, father? Makes me nauseous.”

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We’re at breakfast afterwards. Auntie Rose punctures her soft-boiled eggs with rye toast.

“Do you think Mom’s happy?” I ask.

“Hmm?” She turns up her hearing aid.

“Happier in California?”

“I don’t think anyone’s happy there, sweetheart. Too much sun.” Her rosary dips into her coffee. “Not like where your father’s going.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“I don’t think there’s a hell, Auntie. Not literally, anyway.”

“I’m sure, before he passes, that his whole life will flash before his eyes, and I’m sure he’ll hear God ask him, ‘Was it good? Was it worth it?’”

This is the part where she talks about sin, about work, about the relationship between them. I nod politely and pick at my oatmeal.

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In front of the Louis Vuitton store on his break Brad tells me how long he looked for work after his shop closed.

“I always found something erotic about it. You’re using your hands to create something from raw materials. It’s hot and noisy, smells like sawdust and metal... your vision is altered from the sweat and dust on your work goggles. You’re making something using all of your senses.”

“You go to school?” I say.

“Yeah.” We look at the purses, the shoes. “Philosophy at U. of D.”

“Why don’t you use it?”

“What, to make money?”

“Man’s gotta eat.”

“Why? So I can buy one of those?” He points at a \$1500 belt. I get that nauseous feeling and walk away.

We take the skywalk to the other side and I tell him about my job, my parents, how I wound up living with Auntie Rose.

“She’s the only one of my grandma’s siblings that’s still alive.” I stare at the watches on the models in front of Swarovski, watch the crystals shimmer under fluorescent lights.

“Does she know what you do?”

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s a little warm for January.”

He talks for a while about his thesis on dialectical materialism as we linger in front of glass windows, sizing each other up. The skylight’s streaked with melting snow.

“For me, it comes down to believing that the material world is not the authentic one,” he says. “And since there is no God, and thus no religion, the authentic world can only be created once producers and consumers become aware that material commodities are not authentic. Only relationships are.”

“The fake world. Rockin’ in the fake world.”

“Do you ever... do you ever fake it?”

“We all fake it,” I say.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re the philosophy major.” The melting snow trickles faster. The roof like a river. “You figure it out.”

✱

“Do you ever get scared?”

The timer blinks. I reach to reset it, then lie down instead. “About what?”

“You know... about the whole thing? The big picture?”

I relax. “You mean about dying?”

“I dunno... I don’t really consider this being alive,” he says.

“What do you look like?”

“You can’t see?”

“I choose not to. I have that option.”

“I’m pale, I’m soft, I’m rich, I’m scared...”

✱

“Do you ever have doubt, Auntie?” We’re sitting in front of the fireplace, burning synthetic logs.

“We all do, sweetheart.”

“Then how can you have faith?”

“Because doubt isn’t real, Gina.” She puts her hand in mine, runs her wrinkled fingers over my smooth ones. “This is. This is almost real.” She untangles

our fingers and stares into the fire.

*

In the food court I watch the thawing snow drip from the skylight, leaving icy patterns that smear my tiny reflection.

A sheepish boy keeps looking over from another table. He's real young, no more than 16, and the way he's looking at me, hot and scared, means he's probably seen my show. I wave him over.

"I'm a huge fan of yours," he says, eyes on the ground.

Brad looks at me, puzzled.

I lean in close to the kid. "That's the most fleeting experience you'll ever have."

"What?"

"All you'll have is the memory. And that leaves when you die."

He fidgets, stiffens, and walks away.

"I don't know anything about you," Brad says.

"That's part of the job."

"Commodities like to touch each other, don't they?"

"Is that what I am? Is that all I am? A sex object?"

"Yeah."

"Why? Because I get paid for it? Because of how I look? Because of how I dress?"

He stares at the ground.

"Is that all I am to you? Is that all I am to anybody?"

Nothing.

"I'll tell you why I'm a fucking sex object. Because no matter how far my Auntie Rose made it, if you look pretty you're just a thing." I pick at my clothes. "A fucking sweater."

"I don't know if you can be a casualty of the material world if you consciously turn something rare and beautiful into a commodity."

I start to get angry, but when I look into his eyes all I can see is jealousy. I hold his hand.

*

"Hey, sweetheart," I say, starting the timer.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. I have to pay you."

"Free lunches, etc."

"Have you ever studied psychology?"

"A few courses at community college." I pull off my stockings. "Why?"

“I think you’d make a good therapist. You can stop there.”

I leave them half-rolled, squeezing my calves.

“What do the other guys make you do?” he asks.

“Anything that gets them off.”

“What about you?”

“You want to know what gets me off?”

“Yeah, if you want to put it that way. Sure.”

“Both my parents left because they wanted... more. And you know, where I live, you can’t really get a whole lot more. Might never be able to ever again. And the thought of that kind of living makes me so anxious I could scream...”

There’s a pause; I can hear the cars rolling down I-75 desperately in the night to some job that no one wants to work but has to, to get their things, and back home to a house like mine, where generations clash because of material on the wane.

“But when I come there’s nothing. For a little bit there’s nothing. And the anticipation of leaving that world, this world...”

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah. Just a little wet.”

✱

“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

Auntie Rose lights candles at an altar. Placed in the middle, bound by the wax of a thousand exhausted candles, is a picture of my Great Uncle Ron.

“Here, darling.” She hands me a match. “I want you to do the last one.”

I spark it and hold it up against the picture, searching for my uncle’s faded face. Auntie Rose holds my hand.

“I’ll see you soon, my love,” she says. “The soul is immaterial.”

I light the last candle.

“For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

Wax drips onto my hand, burning and turning hard.

✱

“Who decides what’s sexy?” Brad says. We’re in California Pizza Kitchen, sharing an appetizer. “Who decides what sex is—the gender, the act? Once you can commodify that you can start making money; you can turn an act of the senses, a natural act, into something material.”

“The free market,” I say. I look over to another table—a girl my age with bags from four different stores—and a shudder works its way up my spine.

“Why do you come here if it disgusts you?”

“To remind myself, to keep myself sane.”

He fidgets in his seat, adjusts his merino cardigan. “Will you come over next week?”

“I don’t know, sweethea—Brad.” Snow falls outside the window, melting as it hits the ground.

“I’ll make you an authentic, homemade dinner.” His smile is genuine. Not a hint of lechery.

✱

“No, “ I say. “This one’s on the house. You’re a gentleman.”

“I should pay you. This is a commodity exchange, after all.”

“Not if we just talk. Conversation isn’t worth anything. Shouldn’t be.”

“Well... I haven’t... in a while. My wife left four nights ago. Took all her stuff.”

I start the timer and reach for something on the bedside table.

“Just your hands,” he says. “Slowly, like you’re with someone you love.”

I feel my temperature rising. My hips constrict and my legs arch and my breath leaves me, all of it, and for one beautiful moment I am only a body—I’m free.

“Was it good for you, too?” I say.

That’s when the door creaks open.

Auntie Rose stands in the doorway, deaf, looking at me, my body.

“We fought, you know that? We fought long and hard.”

Shaming. I’m looking down from above.

“You’re more than how you look.”

The “m” lost between her teeth.

“Things are different now, Auntie Rose.”

She can’t hear me.

“Men will respect you if they see what you can do with your head.”

All muffled, foggy, forgotten.

“Auntie!” Screaming. “What is it worth?”

✱

The candles are perfect, and through their teasing flare I see Brad’s face against the sparseness of his apartment. I see how beautiful it is, he is—how gentle, how warm. It’s hard not to look at him as my ideal client. Maybe someone I could love.

“This is new for me,” I say as he spoons salad onto my plate.

“What?”

“Sorry. Not used to being so... pampered.”

Gentle? Caring? Why is that? Lack of work, manual labor, the kind that eluded my father? That pushed away my mother? That sustains my aunt?

He puts his fork and knife down, wraps his hands around mine. “I want to see what it’s like. What you do, I mean. I want to see if it makes me...”

I lean in to meet his eyes. They’re both reluctant. They’re both scared, both—“Ashamed?”

“What?”

“Don’t be ashamed.”

I take his hand, lead him to his room.

I stand over him in his bed, camera pointed at his face. “Are you nervous?”

He shakes his head, nods. I run my fingers down his chest. “Do you like it?”

He nods his head, shakes it.

I put his hands around the camera; he turns it around on me. When he does, I see a hollow void of aching pride; it swirls and lashes the lenses of my eyes.

Rain blows against the window.

It is warm for January.

“What do you like, sweetheart?”

I pull off my shirt, slip off my heels.

Use your mind to make money, use your brain to make money.

“Do you like this?”

My jeans, my bra.

Took such a long time, you foolish little girl.

“Does this turn you on?”

Kneeling into the camera with nothing on me, in me.

You’re not a commodity; you know that, right?

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