

An Obtuse Label

The Fund Raiser

“I don’t think that is the good stuff.” The vintage bottle didn’t have a sticker but a gold cord and a thick cork plumed from the bottle’s rim. Miles tapped his finger on the empty glass warm and smudged from his palm.

The party was a thin haze of fog. Laser lights and dry ice machines hung on the garish pillars, framed with gold. Hard heels tapped the floor rhythmically to a song more than two decades old. Formal wear of political party members, donors, and lobbyists quietly got less formal as laminated badges and guest passes made their way to purses and pockets. Collar buttons loosened. High heels got tucked next to walls and chairs. As the ruckus got louder, the music rhythm fought against laughter, stories, and shared lies. Last minute deals and checks were signed. The people who ran America making known their wishes and sending along with the allowance to the very receptive. There wasn’t much persuasion. People only got into this kind of part by taking orders.

“The busboys stopped freshening our glasses.” Stephanie licked her lips, looking at the bottle without seeing the bars.

“I think some of them quit. The senator kept calling them ‘boy’ or got ‘complimented’ on getting out of the ghetto.” He turned his head, half hoping there won’t be a server to overhear and half hoping one would be close enough to flag over.

“Pussies, we run this country. They should be happy to have their place where it is.”

“You are already drunk, anyway. I don’t think you need any more.”

“Did you learn that kind of attitude from your whore mom because you're jerking me around.”

“The thing says POISON on it.”

“Alcohol is a poison. A real man can take it.” She moved closer.

He hesitated to try to take her arm. “The FDA certified alcohol for consumption.”

“No cuck committee is going to tell me what to drink. It's right there, at a party.”

“It’s in a locked box.”

“How do you know it’s locked?”

He let his hands slide up and laced his fingers in the thin bars. “Not opening.”

She pushed him out of the way and braced one hand against the box and wrapped her fingers around the lock. Two quick tugs and one long pull and a black chunk broke off with a crack. She turned to him with a smile, holding the emerald green bottle, thin gold cord dangling a tag. “Let’s go.”

She turned, working her high heel clicking as she went.

Miles sighed but his eyes wandered up to curves holding up her dress at the waist. He found himself following. “The tag says it’s poison, right?”

She took the loose cord off and tossed it in the air behind her.

He shuffled to catch it and it bounced off his palm. He scooped it off the floor and held it in front of his face.

The word poison came to his attention first, in flat red letters but around it were the words “not the best alcohol you have ever had but POISON.”

He cocked his head, “Steph, this feels a little obtuse.”

She looked at him, furrowing her slender eyebrows and half stuck out her bottom lip.

“*Obtuse?*”

He held out the tag.

She snatched it from his hand, scratching him with a nail. “It’s all tongue in cheek, shut up.” She rolled her wrist and flicked the sign away.

She made it back to their table and spun around on her ankles and leaned on the table. She held the bottle in one hand and in her other palm, the cork. “If you notice the annoying drunks, you aren’t having enough fun.”

The bottle tipped in her hand. The slick rim drifted toward her puckered lips.

“No,” Miles said.

Stephany parted her lips to mouth “Yes.”

Stephany wondered what kind it would be.

Miles’ eyes widened.

A clammy hand intersected the bottle.

The senator cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, deary. This party is running dry and we have plenty of glasses.” Her smile was tight and controlled. “Would you mind if I shared this drink with you?”

Miles forced his words, “We would be honored, Senator. It’s your fundraiser.”

“Why, aren’t you Bradley’s boy?” Seeing him smile and nod, “I think Bradley expected a better position for you in my campaign but I can’t look like I am playing favorites.”

“I’m glad to be on the team, Senator.”

“You’ll be running your own campaign soon, I think.”

Stephany’s eyes tore into Miles. “Maybe if he ever stops being a pussy.”

The Senator chuckled quietly. “Sensitivity is quality with merit if one works it correctly. Shall we sit, I just spent forty minutes hearing about the oil speculations from Ethiopia.”

The two women sat at the round folding table with a thin linen tablecloth accented in gold. Stephanie sat on the other side of the senator.

Miles leaned on the back of his chair, staring into space. “Oil in Ethiopia is huge.”

Stephanie’s eyes rolled back in her head before resting on the bottle.

Miles continued, “The oil lobby must be all over it.”

The senator sniffed at the bottle and her fingers moved from the waiting shot glasses to the tumblers. “They probably would, if they caught wind of it.”

“They don’t know?” Miles breathed sharply. “Coltan must know. They have the mines.”

“Close, Coffee. They control most of the land and have more sway over the government. They need some help with the political dissidents and extremists, though. It might be a matter of national security.”

Miles’ face went wild with color. “Oh shit, my dad is tight with the Coffee lobby.”

The senator sat a glass in front of each of them, “We don’t support nepotism but you have value through your previously established relationships.”

“Thank you, Senator.”

“Speak of the whitest man in Africa.” The senator released a toothy grin. “Get the fuck out of here Abraham, I just spent an hour talking to you.”

A man in a brown and gold dashiki walked up smiling. “Well, I see little Brice here.”

Miles blushed. "Brice is my brother."

The man smiled even bigger and shot a finger, "I know Miles."

Stephanie sat forward, "The senator was just telling us about what is in the winds but she has the booze."

Abraham shook his head, "Those protesters are a pain in my ass. I'll drink."

The senator lifted her hand. "Dissident extremists. And, I already heard too long. Sit and drink with us. This might be the last bottle."

"It wasn't two hours."

"Sit."

Abraham's hand rested on Miles' shoulder as he settled into the chair.

The muddy liquid rolled in the glasses as the senator poured. Each person took a glass. Stephanie's fingers twitched when she finally got a hold of her glass. She brought it inches from her face and stopped to watch the senator.

"What drink is this?" Abraham said.

"I'm not sure." The senator said.

"Well." Stephanie sniffed the glass. "I'm not sure if it is a quick drink or a slow drink but there were a few more bottles in the box if we want more."

Miles sipped the glass and grimaced. "It's a quick one."

"Perhaps a toast!" The senator said, standing. "Capital."

"I think my tongue is numb," Miles mumbled as he stood with the others.

"To shape the world better for us and the future!"

They boasted *here-here* and slid the slick dark liquid down their throats.

Everyone coughed afterword and groped for their seats.

“Shit, that was a strong one, Senator,” Abraham said.

“I think I’m losing my edge,” the senator said.

They blinked at one another before leaning on the table. Everything felt disconnected.

“Another?”

“It hits fast.”

The women helped each other to another round. Abraham traced his hairline with his fingers. Miles felt the lining of his pockets, trying to remember what the tag said.

Miles’ chin felt wet. He touched it to find blood. He wiped the back of his hand across his face and a warm trickle found it’s way down the side of his neck. His hand covered in blood. He groaned as he shook, settling back in his chair.

The others laughed.

“Pussy.”

“Someone can’t hold their liquor like their father.”

“Wait, was that blood?”

“I don’t see any red.”

“My dress doesn’t look red, anymore.”

Everything became repeating lines smearing black across vision until there was only black left.

The senator woke, opening her crusted eyes. Her nose was stuffed and her mouth tasted of copper. She choked breaths through a dry mouth. She heaved her head around. People were

slumped over at their tables. A slight reverb rose and died from the aching speakers and was only accompanied by the lethargic clicks of empty fog machines.

The senator squeezed her eyes. She braced herself with weak arms, balancing her dipping body. The motion rang in her head. She tried to hold her stomach but found it wet and sticky. She looked down to see vomit. Little pieces of shrimp clung to her suit.

“I haven’t gotten fucked up like that since the seventies.”

She reached for the bottle and brought it to her lips. The liquid was heavy clumping grease. It seemed warmer. Her tongue felt no taste as rot snaked down her throat. She let the bottle fall to the floor. Color greyed out around her. She looked to Stephanie, lying with her head on the table, eyes open, a black trail cascading from her nose and covering her lower face.

The senator had a sharp remark but only gargled, until she slumped back into her chair.

The Campaign

There was a cold wind in the April afternoon. Miles sat picking at grass alongside a private lake. Eyes sharp to the dirt so that he could see through the tangles of grass. His face was red and little veins pulsed purple and blue. The chap of a rash spread over his skin from his mouth to his nostrils. Breathing left a burning sensation on his lip. His shaggy hair was loose in the wind. He felt the dampness from the ground creep into his pants.

His fingers pressed into his palm and he slowly raised them, feeling a dull rip whenever grass and root separated.

“I didn’t know you were spending so much time out here.”

“I wanted to be left alone,” Miles said. His eyelids drug as he closed them but even closed didn’t feel rest.

“You don’t need to take it so personally. It wasn’t your campaign.”

“It felt like it was mine. Dad, I felt like I was a part of a team. It was the strongest connection that I have ever felt. Every poll, every talking point, every development in the headlines felt like the most important thing to have ever happened.”

“That is the narrative that every good campaign needs to instill.” The man crouched and let his heavy hand weigh on Miles’ shoulder.

The sun peeked out from cloudy sky. Miles could see the pattern of shiny black thread that wove into his father’s suit. “I felt dead before we’d lost. Everything seemed to have lost its color. I saw everyone else determined and happy but I couldn’t feel that way, again.”

“You won’t feel better by moping around the summer home, in this cold spring. The election was over in November.”

Miles let his head roll back on his neck. He watched the turbulence in the lake as buzzing motor boats appeared from behind trees and disappeared venturing to other bends. “There was something very wrong. The feeling left when I learned something about Ethiopia.”

His father’s voice sounded with a low timber. He had a way of rolling onto his sentences like pulling a leather belt through its loop. “Oh, don’t worry about the Coffee Lobbyist. He’s a friend of mine, you know.”

“I know.”

“Then Brooks is a friend of mine.”

“Senator Brooks, who beat my campaign?”

“If it was your campaign, we would have won.”

“That’s your ego talking.”

“Senator Brooks has supported Coffee’s claim on oil and rallied support for our intervention into the region. The terrorists will be dealt with.”

“Weren’t we calling them insurgents? They were just protesting.”

“Our side lost, son. Their side went with terrorists and our friends will be helped.”

“It’s like it didn’t matter who the people voted for.”

His father smiled. “Now, you’re getting it.”

“I just don’t feel right.”

“What have I told you about feelings?” His father’s voice tightened. “You don’t feel. You know or you suspect. Things seem one way or another. Feelings betray your motivation. It shows a vulnerability to the world. You don’t fucking feel shit.” The leaves on the creaking branch above them rustled.

Miles sat quietly. He forced air through his burning nostrils. His father stayed still behind him, unfeeling. Miles felt a lump in his throat and tensed up to hide a quiver. When he thought he was composed enough he let himself look at his father from the corner of his eye. Brown suede shoes swung just above the grass.

Miles focused on the pit of disdain left by his father. “Why are you here?”

“The state election is coming up.”

Miles pictured rolling countryside and plane hangers turned Teamster hall. “Making a presence there seems like a lot to do in a year. Buying a home in the southwest, transforming

from a yuppie to young family man, and visiting patches of buildings barely big enough to be considered towns.”

The satisfaction of superiority dripped from his father's words like syrupy blood. “You won’t be running in the third district house seat. First district state senate.”

Miles turned. His eyes searched his father, unaware of the tear that clung under his eye and the stinging of wet on the rash under his nose. “Brant is the incumbent, they have had the seat since you left it; I was learning to tie my shoe.”

His father dangled from a rope that hung from the creaking oak branch. His neck stretched unnaturally long. All color went from his face except for flaking makeup. His socks bulged with ankle from under fitted Armani slacks. “Brant has a private sector job lined up, an executive consultant. All expenses paid everything.” His father's body twisted in the wind and his eyes rolled down to meet his son’s. “The old goat won’t even hold a rally. His campaign fund is less than your alliance, when you learned to tie your shoes, and most of that will go keep interns quiet and pay for lunches with old friends.”

“Lunch with you?”

His father savored pronunciation, “Wh-ell, we are old friends.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this.”

“That is because you do not feel anymore. You are my son. You have followed the path laid out for you.”

“What does that-”

“You cannot delay your calling. What I inherited from my father and great grandfather is power and enough of a fortune to use it. I have cultivated it every way possible and now that all comes down to you.”

Miles tried to remember what it felt like to be alive.

His father barked. “Look at me. It has to be you. I have shown you everything. You know how my operation runs. It’s more than simple memorization. You understand the mechanisms of power. Capital, the result of long dead labor. It persists. Now, gain the will to use it. Feelings would have only gotten in the way of all of that.”

The wheeze of the wind quieted. Rope around his father’s neck creaked. Miles waited for a feeling of satisfaction that he expected for this moment but remembered that it would never come.

His father lifted his arm. “I got you a tie for the occasion.” The purple rope ended in a loop, tied in a noose. Around the knots, there was a loose golden string and a tag. “I’m not heartless, you can back out. Perhaps find that part of you that has died. Stay at the summer home as long-”

“No, you’re right. I can do this.” Miles looked at the tag. The obtuse label blurred by his thoughts. It read, THIS IS NOT A HALLUCINATION THERE HAS ONLY BEEN REALITY. YOU WILL HANG. THIS WILL KILL WHATEVER HUMANITY IS LEFT IN YOU.

“What about turning to a family man?” His father sneered.

“There is Stephany.”

“You haven’t talked to anyone since you’ve been here sulking. She’s bound to have jumped someone’s bone-”

“I don’t care. She is hungry for power that her family bought her access to. We’ll be married by fall.”

“It might save some hassle if she is already pregnant.”

“Did you already pick some of your staff to spare? Maria has been Wayne’s assistant for three years. She might be ready.”

“I was thinking Wayne would head your staff.” His father’s feet twitched as they hung, scraping the tops of the grass.

Miles stood up straight, meeting his father’s hollow gaze. A slick trail shone from the corner of his mouth to the veiny slope of his father’s red and black bruised neck. His father raised his hand to Miles’ chest and said, “Shake my hand.”

“It’s decided.” Their hands touched like snow falling on ice.

Miles threw the rope over the branch. He pulled it just above his head and tied it off. He stood on a soapbox, put his head through the noose, brought the knot tight around his neck, and stepped off the soapbox.

His vision jerked and spun. He coughed and wheezed. Blood vessels popped in his eye as he felt the hot pressure in his cheeks. He forced his hands to stay at his side, mimicking his father’s dignity. He felt the hint of resistance against his feet, the tops of grass. He thought he could almost touch the ground, get a feel for it again. The rushing of backed up blood filled his ears before his hearing went. Then the color drained from the earth. He could only see the bright white beams of the sun reaching through the leaves. Then, nothing.

PART Three: The Press Conference

The blue curtains swayed under the weight of metal ball bearings that kept them in a permanent state of just ruffled enough to make you think something was alive on the other side. The cream white hallways gave the appearance of life curdled with the corruption of rot.

Miles rubbed his under his glasses and looked in the mirror. He pinched the corners of his eyes and the bridge of his nose. He noticed how the lines on his face seemed to fracture like spider-webbed glass after a bullet passed through.

Slender fingers with crimson nail polish wrapped around his shoulders.

“The press corps isn’t happy.” Stephany’s thin arms seemed to be put into motion by puppet strings more than pulled by muscles. The girly curves of her face had thinned out leaving prominent cheekbones. “They started to arrive as soon as rumblings of thirty or so coffee bean fields in flames hit Twitter.”

The small prep room barely shielded the noise of aides and officers and their hard-heel shoes clicking as they unnaturally pushed away the ground. “Do I look tired?” He ran his fingers through the grey streaks above his ears.

“No, this is your normal gym time, isn't it?”

“I want to look tired. Bad news is an approval boost if I show that it affects me.”

“Tonight, you’ll just have to get by looking strong.”

The thin door opened. A straight-haired woman with lusterless eyes stepped inside holding a tablet balanced on a clipboard, open file and, under her arm, a can of gasoline. “Sir, the reports for the press are ready.” She sat the can on the vanity and slipped a sheet of paper from her clipboard. Her neck was rough and scared.

“Thanks, Maria.” Miles took the sheet and scanned it. “Very dramatic. Have we released the pictures of the school bodies?”

There was a hurried knock at the door. Stephany was twisting a string of pearls in her fingers. Her thick gold bracelet sagged just enough to show the oft retraced razor lines. “Who is that, Maria?”

“An investor, ma’am.” Maria shared a sly smile.

Stephany stepped across Mile’s back, running her hand over the width of his shoulders and caught his elbows. “Seems Coltan is coming back to the fold.”

Miles unrolled and buttoned his sleeves. “Best not to leave a gentleman waiting.”

The man came through the door and the impeccably straight edges of his suit followed him. He flashed a broad smile and removed his Kente Kufi hat, revealing several entry wounds from various firearms. “Good morning, Mr. President.”

“Good morning, I don’t think we have had the chance to meet. Call me Miles.” He bowed, keeping his eyes on the man.

“The pleasure is all mine. I am Isaac Tuttirte.”

“Abraham’s brother, right? Will that cause any problems?”

“My friend, this will solve a problem. Being cut out of the oil market has been my regret for years.”

“I appreciate your support. My wife Stephany will keep you company during the press conference until we can work out the details.” Stephany released his arm and approached Isaac.

The press room was painted sterile cream. The chairs sat uniform with their clashing red cloth and green frames.

A woman held a press badge in between her teeth, shaking her head and muttering as she looked over her notes that sat on her chair, yellow hair slipping into her face as she wiped her glasses with her sky blue blouse.

The reporters gathered in clumps as they studied tri-folded sheets, sent texts and took notes. They turned and shuffled to their seats, tucking in tan polos, kneeling with cameras ready as staff shuffled in the room, faces stern.

Behind the curtain, Miles waited with Maria as she shot orders to waiting staffers. A woman approached Miles from behind, her suit jacket lifted her shoulders as her colored hair bounced. One hand touched his back and the other circled around to grasp his.

Miles smiled at the ecstatic woman. "Senator, it is good to see you."

"Do you mean in my seat or in the flesh?"

Miles touched her cheek, "Both. I hope you aren't rusty. Statecraft is at its peak and you lost your seat for most of my career."

"I would die for this. I have you to thank, your help was the deciding factor in the campaign."

"You will stand with me on stage to my right and Brooks will be on the left."

She squeezed his hand as they approached the curtain, golden light sparked over them from hissing bulbs. The senator whispered, "I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Thank you, the doctors say he couldn't feel any pain."

"I don't think he ever could."

As they crossed the curtain, the light chased away their held hands and smiles like shadows.

A flurry of snapping photos cascaded in the air as Miles allowed the senator to lead him.

His press secretary introduced him and Miles took his commanding position behind the podium. His presence fell over the room like a shadow.

“My Fellow Americans.” His words echoed in the hearts of his listeners. “We have been negotiating for months but we can no longer wait and talk as children stand in crossfire.”

The room took a breath.

“Two hours ago, a bomb went off in a school twenty miles away from the burning coffee fields. President Abraham Tuttirte is a dictator and we cannot let him exploit the people of Ethiopia.”

The lectern creaked under the weight of his hands. Reporters gave grunts of encouragement as they nodded and took notes and passed the gas can from one to another. The obtuse tag dangled from a golden string from around the can’s handle.

“I tried an emergency vote of Congress. With the advice of my aides, and the approval of God, our forces in the area have started to strike against President Tuttirte for peace and the safety of the children of America. We'll get the people back to work cheaper, for Americans.”

The congressmen on stage, staffers and most reporters applauded. Miles let his stern look melt into his casual stoic face. The blonde reporter in the blue blouse frowned as she put several quotes around the president’s key words.

He opened the floor to questions.

A photographer asked for the president to turn for a picture.

Another gargled through gasoline, “How soon we would deploy troops?”

One man asked how he made such a hard choice, and Miles said, “I looked at the pictures of the children.”

The blonde reporter raised her hand, “Are you worried about the corruption charges that were brought against Wayne Denton, former campaign manager of you and your father’s campaigns?”

Miles smiled, “My late father.” He paused for the room to sigh. “He was an excellent congressman.”

“Charges weren’t brought against your father because he was on his deathbed. Denton was a key member-”

“Please, can we stay focused on the current topic?”

The woman flipped her notepad. “Early reports of the incident have more in common with a drone strike than an improvised explosive. Aren’t we rushing into this conflict?”

“You can’t rush to justice, Jan.”

Someone shoved the gas can into Jan's hands. For a moment, she blinked at it. The smell of gasoline invaded her nostrils. She took a step forward, leaving her front row seat. She turned to see the press corps, covered in slick liquid. Their eyes held bags of deepest black and blinked themselves bloodshot. She noticed the ceiling, ash and soot left in the details of the textures and streaks left by dirty rags.

The fumes started to sting her eyes. The glittering golden string drew in her attention. She lifted up the label. FLAMMABLE surrounded by OPPOSITION IS CONTROLLED TO MANUFACTURE CONSENT. THE RULES EXIST TO DRAIN LABOR BLOOD OF THE LIVING INTO DEAD, VAMPIRIC CAPITAL.

She dropped the can. “Most of Ethiopia has been a no-fly zone, enforced by the US Air Force. Our planes are the only ones there.”

Brooks stepped up, “If I may, Mr. President. Our party is not completely behind a ground invasion. We want to take advantage of our air superiority in the region and fortify our existing bases in the region.”

Miles rested his hand on Brooks’ shoulder and said, “That is the option put forward from my friends across the aisle. A balanced perspective from both sides.”

Jan shook her head. “That’s not an opposition. This isn’t right. What your doing is wrong! What we are doing is wrong!”

One of the lights broke, raining over people filling the sides of the room. Hot red flame squealed. Jan shielded her eyes. The flames leapt from one person to another.

“We will bring peace to Ethiopia!” Miles yelled.

People applauded, flinging flames and their own ash from one to another. Jan was surrounded by a cacophony of hissing light and rapturous applause. She coughed on smoke and beat out a flame that caught on her sleeve. She was surrounded.

“What are y’all doing?” she cried. “You are just going along with this?” she coughed.

Some laughter and popping of heated marrow exploding out of bone crept through the room. Garbled words from people too far gone to understand human life. Too rich to be alive.

She squatted under smoke. She took off her jacket and covered a hanky with water from her bottle, then poured the rest on her head and crawled out of the room. The looming figures of the politicians stood tall in the smoke. They softly chuckled to themselves. Ghouls who long gave away their souls that don’t understand what people need to live or the cost of death.

“Any more questions? None of this is a secret.” Miles was long faded away.