

10. ESTRANGEMENT

I am on foot. I am taking a short cut through an alleyway. A 1972 gold Cadillac convertible is blocking the way. I have to walk around it. When I do I see a body lying by the car. I am afraid to say anything because the driver might threaten me. As I walk by the car, I am afraid to look back to see what is going on. It is almost as if I have never been here. But I can tell what he is doing. He opens the trunk and loads the body inside.

This is far too gruesome to contemplate. I imagine that it never happened. I just walk on. All my life has been this series of coincidences. Things that I would prefer never happened.

I walk further down the street to find my car. Ariel has called me for a ride. She is exactly where she tells me that she is going to be. I pull up so that she is walking right ahead of me. The path of the car trails her from the street.

“What you doing?” she screams back.”

“You told me to show up.”

“Walter, why are you following me?”

“You called me!”

“You have to stop including me in your life. It’s over.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I drive off.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“You brought this on yourself.”

“I’m sorry if you feel that way about it.

Ariel has been out for the evening. I’ve been at home watching TV. I am almost asleep when she comes in.

“I need a drink. Do you want something?”

“I’m OK.”

“You’ve never told me much about your family.”

She looked down briefly. “There’s not much to tell. When I was eight, we lived apart from my father. My mother was thinking about getting a divorce.”

I wondered how much affect that had.

“Walter, I really don’t think that’s made much of a difference.”

Her mother still works in a library. She started working when she thought about leaving her husband. It probably gave her the confidence to go back. I decide to track her down. She doesn’t know who I am.

“I’m looking for a good book on family trauma.”

“Is that self-induced trauma or trauma due to external circumstances?”

“I’m not sure. What’s the difference?”

“The end results are often indistinguishable.”

“You sound like an expert.”

“I studied psychology in college.”

“Wow!”

I feel as if she is trying to read my motive. I wonder if she knows that I am going out with her daughter. I feel nervous being here.

I continue my query, "Have you ever suffered any type of trauma?"

"No, but my daughter claims that she did."

Ariel turns away from the camera.

"I'm tired of posing for your pictures. I don't want to do this anymore."

"You look so fantastic on camera."

"I don't feel fantastic. I feel like you're draining the life from me."

"Just give me a little more."

"I've given you all that I have. There is no little more in me."

Ariel moves away from the set. She goes over to sit on the couch. She is reclining.

"Stay like that. I can get some pictures just like that."

"Is everything that I do just an excuse for another picture?"

"Just hold that pose."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I don't think with words. I use images."

"Picture this! I'm going away."

"You need to relax."

Ariel is stretched out on the couch. Her right leg is stretched over the arm rest so that the heel of her shoe points in the air. She is wearing sleek black hose.

"Ralph, do you really think that you're going to get anymore from me?"

He ignores her and continues to shoot. She moves on the couch. She is trying to find a place to hide, but he's only getting more excited by her poses.

"I'm not doing this for you. Ralph."

"I know. It's for posterity."

"That's not really funny."

"It's not meant to be."

"Let me put my clothes back on."

"You looked dressed enough for me."

"I'm pretty well wearing my underwear."

"Just let me take one more shot."

"I'm not that tolerant."

His last shot is critical. He can't know for sure that he got what he wanted. But he check the digital image. She is perfect in the frame.

"You've given me everything that I wanted."

"What could that possibly mean?"

"Anything else that you are is hidden from the camera."

"Thank God. I thought that you were going to force me to pose nude?"

"Would you do it if I asked?"

"I wouldn't even do it if you didn't ask. Why? Are you asking?"

"Here's where things get a little tricky."

"What are you saying?"

"Look at the last shot. You look great."

"That's how it has to stay."

“If you could give a little more. Show me something hidden.”

“I can do that with one more shot of the face.”

“See. That’s really taking away nothing.”

She realizes that she is acting for him. That means revealing more than she intends. She realizes that she is giving up too much of herself. She wants to take all the pictures back. But she can’t. It is part of her new independence. She will draw the line at just that. No more photos.

He can do things with the image. Get it to reveal so much more than intended. He is ready to do just that.

“Ralph, you don’t know what it is really like. You distill your art down to this essence, the purity of form. Beauty. For me, it is just the opposite. I live with something temporary. In those explosive moments, I play the part of a goddess. But for the other twenty-three and a half hours of my day, I can only aspire to that summit. I feel my flesh melt on the bones. It’s like fading make up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s like a horror movie. The beauty queen destroyed in a car fire. Fiery flames. It’s all the same. The brief spark and then the fade out.”

“Ariel, you are being overly dramatic.”

“That is what you love about me. What your camera sketches and fills in.”

“I still didn’t get the picture that I wanted.”

“You liar!”

She has escaped his imprisonment, but he is trying to get her to return.

“I want an encore.”

They both laughed.

He asks for more, “You die and are reborn.”

“That is the great wish of all stars, that they become their photographs.”

“And so you melt like ice cream in a heat wave.”

“Drip, drip.”

She is now standing. Her steps are rather balletic. She spins around the room.

“How is that?”

“It wasn’t real because I never got it on camera.”

She smiles, “I’m going to strip naked for you. But you never got that because it wasn’t on camera.”

“What will Walter think?”

“Who’s Walter?”

“Your husband.”

“Not anymore!”

“You’re still married. And Walter is supposed to be my friend. I’m not the one who is going to ruin it for him.”

“What do you think that you’re doing with your fatal photos?”

“Capturing art! Truth!”

“You are trying to strip me down to size.”

“Hardly.”

“It’s a damned anatomy lesson! I might as well spread my legs wide open for you”

“You did that, monster man.”

“Would you dance with me?”

“No touching!”

“I’ve got it all on camera.”

“That is how it works. Even in real life.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s about seeing what we want to see.”

“I still haven’t seen until the camera can shoot the insides.”

“As I a said, an anatomy lesson.”

When I get home from work, Ariel is already there. She’s taken the day off to visit

Ralph.

“What have you been doing today? I know that you weren’t at work.”

“I took the day off. Ray asked me to do some photos.”

“Isn’t he working on a book?”

“He’s got this commission to do these photos. He wanted to try some things out with me?”

“Portraits?”

“That was his intent Although it’s become more than that.”

“Vanity shots.” She stares me down.

“He’s your friend. At least you can trust him.”

“I do for what it’s worth.”

I suppose that I am coming off too cynically for her. There’s a point where trust has its limits.

“I should be worried about you. Not the other way around.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing really. It’s just that you seem a little distant recently. I’ve been trying to tell you things. You aren’t taking the hint very well.”

“Sometimes you have to spell things out completely.”

“That’s too much. You’re fucking up, and you want me to do the work to bring you back to normal.”

“I got to work. I come home. I help around here.”

“It’s not help. You live here too.”

“You know what I mean.”

“If I did, if I really did, I wouldn’t have to say anything.”

“You’ve already seemed to say too much already.”

I guess it’s my turn to shut up. I get a drink and sit in the living room. She prefers to putter in the kitchen. This has become a silly routine on our part. But it shows no signs of abating.

Later on, I come back down and help with dinner. I end up doing the dishes. As I rinse them to put them in the dishwasher, I look out the window. Ariel is on our patio. She is talking to our next door neighbor Eva. Eva has just moved in with her husband Henry. I fantasize just looking at Eva. What could my wife be doing?

“I don’t want to live with you anymore.”

“What are you talking about?” She tries to ignore me.

I question her, “I just saw you talking to that woman out there.”

“Our new neighbor. The one who you made a pass at. She told me that you were hitting on her. She told me to keep my philandering husband to myself.”

“I don’t know why she is making up stories about me.

“I don’t know why myself. I don’t know why I even tolerate you.”

I finish the kitchen. Then I head up to my study to do some more work.

I can’t stop thinking about my fight with Ariel. I can’t stop thinking about Eva. This has been the worst that it’s been since we got married. It doesn’t bode well for our future.

“Ralph got me thinking. I just do all this work. And you don’t seem to notice me. He made me think that other men would take a real interest.”

“That’s not really fair. It’s one thing to take an interest in someone. It’s quite another when you have to live with them night and day.”

“You sound as if you’re bored with me.”

“I’m not saying that. It’s just that I don’t know where we are going.”

I think about the time that I went to visit her mother before we were married. I pretended to be a patron at the library. Her mother never even remembered the experience. At least she said nothing about it.

I decide to get a snack before bed. Maybe watch some TV. Ariel is looking at herself in the mirror. This is different than anything that I have seen before. I feel as if Ralph had put ideas in her head. And they’re going to float up there until something real materializes. She never looked at herself with that same sense of concentration. She doesn’t realize that I am watching. But she is performing for someone else.

She has always realized that she had something special. In a sense, it has driven her on to seek something more from herself. That is what she noticed more than anything else. Her commitment to life, to her work, to herself. She has never been attracted by the glitzy or the shallow.

Even if she feels the same about herself, she now believes that it is not enough. There is really nothing that I can offer that will make her feeling any better about things. She is suspicious of me because I represent her past. She has cut herself off from that. When she looks in the mirror, that is what she sees. If it is not enough to reassure her, then she intends to look for something more.

She wants someone who can appreciate her new sparkle. I only make her feel faded. She doesn’t want to be reminded of that. When she was younger, she was all caught up in her career. She is viewing the world with a different eye.

She has given all her life to this marriage. For all this time there has been nothing else. Even our flaws were accepted as part of the course. Now she is asking too many questions to stay satisfied with what we have. She hates our house. She is losing affection for the neighborhood. And a feeling of contempt now dominates her attitude towards me. I only fear that she will have to act it out somehow.

“Maybe I just need to get out with my friends. We spend too much time together.”

“I can come along.”

“Walter, that the whole point. We need to do some things separately.”

“Would it really hurt if I went out with you?”

“Give me this. That’s all that I really need.”

Maybe this is all she needs. Just some time away.

“Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know. Out for a drink. Maybe see a show. Go dancing.”

I have this image of some guy whisking her off the dance floor.

When she finally decides to meet Sherry for a drink, she pulls out all the stops. She is a young girl getting ready for prom. I am the nervous mother. Nervous is a gross understatement. I am in fits. But I try not to show it.

When her friend show up to drive, I feel like I have been ambushed. Already Ariel is in the shortest skirt and highest heels that she has. Sherry stunning blonde hair hangs over the lowest cut dress. It tightly hugs her body. These girls mean business, and it seems to be at my expense. I have never really seen Ariel like this before. I can almost taste the hunger that motivates her.

“We won’t be too late. But don’t wait up for us.”

What am I supposed to do? Not wait up. Go out on a mission of my own.

They end up going to a dance night. It has quite a reputation around town.

“It doesn’t mean anything. We just want some fun.”

Here the dancing doesn’t end on the floor. The groove continues in the lonely darkness as partners try to win each other’s affection before the lights come on. Sherry is hardly an example as she is already making out with some guy after a couple of drinks.

“Ariel, what were you doing with that guy?”

It’s been over an hour, and they meet back to compare notes.

“He was just buying me some drinks.”

“You look all flushed.”

“You should talk. You almost fell off that couch, you were making love so hard.”

“You weren’t watching his hands, were you?”

“I had my own game going.”

“Did you make out?”

“I kissed him a little. He wants to take me back to his place.”

“You can’t go.”

“Of course, not. But don’t believe that I didn’t think about it.”

“It would be good for you.”

“I don’t know this guy from Adam.”

“You could really get to know him if you took him home.”

“That may be your thing, Sherry, but I’m still married. He could be some kind of psycho. I have a little respect for myself.”

The temptation is too great to stay much longer. Sherry gives her guy her phone number. Ariel sneaks out.

On the way home, she thinks about a lost opportunity. But she has a new confidence. She wonders if she could have stopped herself once she got things started.

At work the next day, she is all decorum. But she finds that she is now living off of the

attention of strange men. Whether it's smile in the hallway, a glance in the grocery store, or seductive looks in the parking lot.

She feeds that. Her image has changed. Her skirts are shorter. None of the conservatism remains.

"Are you having an affair?"

"Walter, you could at least tell me that I look nice."

"You look great. But there's something else."

"I just want to live a little."

"But there's a danger when you try to live a little too much."

"That sounds like nonsense, Walter."

"I am right, you know."

"Keep it to yourself."

That night, Ariel is downstairs reading. I go upstairs to my office to do some work. I can see Eva in the window across the way. She is changing. Her curtains are open. She performs for me.

"Give me a little dance."

She is in her lingerie. She sashays around the room. This is her little dance. I can almost feel us gliding together on the floor.

"Walter, I need you inside me!"

I feel like I need to participate in the mischief. This will only cause her to be more provocative. She might toss off her bra. Or reach her hand in her panties and touch herself.

"Walter, what do you want? I'll give you what you want."

She puts her finger in her mouth and sucks on it. Then she stoops down and grinds for me. I want to squeeze her ass. I want her to know of my excitement. I am desperate.

Ariel knows nothing about what is happening. I just don't want her to surprise me. She'll see more than a guy looking out the window.

No wonder my wife is suspicious. I would be if I was her. Does Eva know what I am doing? She has to wonder. I am sure that she can't see my from in my window. Or maybe she can. I would smile for her if she could see. Just to let her know that she was doing the trick.

My mind wanders. I move my hand along the desk. The computer has moved to stand by. I have hardly touched it. I am preoccupied otherwise.

"You make me sick, Walter."

"What are you saying?"

"I want a divorce."

I ignore any interference from Ariel. She is safe downstairs. I have business to attend.

"I would think that my short skirts would turn you on."

"They do."

Ariel only offers a familiarity. I accept it. I take it for granted. At this moment, Eva offers me danger. If I could just sneak over there.

I imagine getting in to it with her husband.

"What are you doing leering at my wife?"

"She had the curtains open and the lights on. It was as if she was on stage for me."

"You could have ignored her."

I can hardly ignore this. I find a place to focus my intense gaze. My hands slide along her smooth ass to the heart of my affection. Her panties are pulled tight and bunch appropriately. My kiss is certain. My aim is true.

“Walter!”

I jump. It is Ariel on the stairs.

“I’m going to go to bed,” she tells me.

I get up and give her a kiss good night.

“I’ll be in soon.”

As I move back to the window, I notice a completely naked Eva leaving the room. I sit down in hopes that she might be back. Ariel has broken my concentration.

I could go to the bedroom and enact my fantasy. I feel too guilty for that. There is something about Eva’s body that has a special appeal for me. The fuller curves. The smell of her sex. The intense hunger.

I turn off the light and go downstairs to watch television.

“I haven’t been feeling well.”

Ariel complains of having a sore throat. She decides to get a check up. After a series of tests, she is apprehensive about the results.

“I have a completely clean bill of health.”

“Why have you been sick?”

“Probably the stress,” she asserts.

“I guess you’re right. We could take a vacation. Go up north. Get to know each other again.”

“I can’t take off work. Not now. Maybe in a few months.”

The next day Ariel heads for work early. I have to do some things at home before I head in to the office. As I get in to my car, I see our new neighbor.

“Hi. I’m Walter.”

“Hello, Walter. I’m Eva. You weren’t watching me last night.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was getting undressed, and I noticed that there was a lighted window in the way across from me.”

“I was doing some work in my study.”

“Can you see me from there?”

I look her directly in the eyes. “No, not at all.”

“Too bad. I put on a little show for you.”

I wave as I am driving away. Maybe I could come back for the sequel tonight. I admit to being a lively audience.

At work, I am still thinking about Eva. I look at one of the girls in the office who has a resemblance.

“Walter, where are you?”

One of my coworkers tries to bring me back to reality.

“I was thinking about that package.”

“Have you found it yet?”

“They’ve given me another week.”

“The package is a myth. They’re just trying to create fear in you.”

I close the door after he leaves. I have even forgotten his name. It is not clear why I am here. All this pressure with work and Ariel.

“If you’re not going to keep a job, I don’t want to live with you.”

“This is a temporary slump. I’ll get something better.”

“Like what?”

“I’ve sent out some resumes.”

“They’re not hiring in sales now. They’ve got too many people working.”

“I’ve got a great track record.”

“You haven’t been making many sales of late. That’s why they laid you off. I can’t take much more of this.”

“I’ve helped you out before.”

“Like when.”

We don’t say much during dinner. Afterwards, Ariel goes up to our room to read a book in bed. I decide to do some work in my office. It’s just an excuse so that I can watch Eva.

“Are you looking at me?”

“Of course, I am.”

I tell myself that the more that I pay attention to her, the more that she will decide to show me. It is really getting me excited.

The next day I get into it with her husband. I am trying to be friendly, but he screams at me for blocking his driveway.

“Henry, I put my car in the front of my house because I was in a hurry. It didn’t block out your driveway, did it?”

“It made it more difficult to turn around. I almost hit you. I ought to put a slug into you.”

Here’s this executive trying to shake me down like a street thug. Fuck him!

His wife is out there sun bathing. She keeps adjusting the strap on her top. I notice something in her that is absent in Ariel. This sense of abandon. It really turns me on.

I am able to watch her from inside without him seeing me. This is ideal. She stretches her legs. I feel that she is engaged in another performance. How can I signal her? I notice that she is smiling. How can she know what is going on?

He goes back in the house. But she stays out in the sun. My door is open for her. I wonder what he would do if he knew.

“My husband really got into it with you. He’s such a dick.”

“I just parked my car in front of my own house.”

“He’s really sensitive about things. If he knew what you were doing, he’d kill you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If he knew that you were taking peeks at me.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was sunning myself, you were staring at my crotch.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“I know what you were doing when you went inside.”

“You couldn’t see a thing.”

“I’m not stupid. You’re treating me as if I’m stupid.”

“No, I’m not.”

“I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Stop by and see me sometime. I can get you a drink.”

“What about Henry?”

“Henry is a little puppy dog.”

“I thought that you said that he’d kill me.”

“If he caught you. But we’re not going to get caught.”

She pulls up her suit as she walks back to her door. I see her stoop by to pick up the paper. Then she looks back at me and smiles.

It really is doing to trick. I am having trouble concentrating.

“Is something wrong, Walter?”

“Ariel, I’m the one who should have gone to see a doctor.”

“You better do it soon while you still have health insurance.”

I need to see someone fast. I am on the verge. I am ready to do something really stupid.

It is early evening. The sun is going down. Eva is out on her patio having a drink by herself. I sense that she is somewhat of an exhibitionist. She has tied her shirt so that it exposes her pierced belly-button. I want to kiss her there. I want to put my hand flat against her abdomen and slide my hand down her pants.

I can see her from my car. She looks up and notices me in the car. She adopts a suggestive pose. I open my fly and pull out my penis. I am masturbating in my car while she is watching. She moves ever so slightly in her chair. I can feel myself moving along her long legs. My face is buried in her breasts.

She walks over to the car so that she can see what I am doing.

“If you open your door, I can finish it for you.”

Henry isn’t home. Ariel doesn’t notice a thing. She is watching TV.

I come in afterwards and go upstairs and take a shower. I feel more naked than naked. Eva is sending me into a spiral. Why isn’t Ariel doing a thing about it?

Ariel is in a short nightie. She is in bed next. Usually I couldn’t keep my hands off her. She makes me cold tonight. I have to get up. I go over to the window and see if Eva is up. Her lights are off. I go in the office and just sit at the desk. What am I doing?

“Walter, I saw what you did with that woman the other day.”

“What are you talking about? I said hello.”

“It looked like a lot more than a hello. I’m leaving you.”

“Please, don’t.”

“What do you expect? You’re cheating on me, and you want me to stay.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“We don’t even have sex anymore. Do you even like my body?”

“It’s all the stuff at work. It’s not helping.”

“We’ll talk about it at night.”

Ariel doesn’t come home. She doesn’t even pack a bag. She decides to jump on a plane and go visit her sister in Portland. There’s not much that I can do, not much at all.

I can see Henry go at it with his wife. Eva has intentionally left her curtains open again. I can see is with the light from the bathroom.

“Did you enjoy the show?”

“He’s a fast worker.”

“Which means not much work at all.”

“Does he ever hurt you? He seems as if he has a temper.”

“It’s all bravado. Nothing real. So you think that you could last a few more rounds than him.”

“I’m not that kind of fighter.”

“That’s not what I saw in your car.”

“Have you been looking inside me car. What did you see?”

“Just a few tools. I didn’t know that you were a working man.”

“I’m just doing some things on the side.”

“I suppose that you’re doing a little around back as well.”

“If there’s a job to do, I’m the man for the task.”

“You don’t seem like much of a handy man. More of some guy trying to sell himself.”

“I’m good with my hands, and I never sell myself short.”

“I’m really afraid to let strangers inside.”

“They so most damage comes from someone that you already know.”

“I’m going to get a little sun today. I might need some help spreading the lotion.”

“Sometimes a little sun isn’t a good thing.”

“I need some color. I think that I’d get bored if I stayed in the dark.”

“I know a few games to play in the dark.”