

4. THE ENCOUNTER

My company is all of a sudden in a panic. My boss is going crazy. He calls me in
 “That package that you were supposed to receive in Dallas. We need it now!”

“What are you saying? It’s been over a month since then.”

“I guess that they assumed that you already received the package. That it had all been
 filed away since the time that they needed the documents. Well, we need it all now.”

“Now, when?”

“Now, like now!”

“How long do I really have?”

“You have a week. If you don’t get the package from that guy in Dallas, you’re going to
 lose your job.”

I never thought that it would happen that quickly. But I am on notice. I catch a flight to
 San Francisco. I am told that my contact will be waiting there for me. When I get to his hotel
 there is a message that he has gone to Virginia City, Nevada. I book a flight to Reno. From there
 I am going to drive to Virginia City.

I stay at a hotel built up with the height of the mining industry. It represented the dreams
 of the well to do to have a Mecca for leisure and entertainment. There is still a pool table in the
 lobby. The bar has a turn of the nineteenth century appeal. Ghosts of another time float in and
 out and try to evoke an opulence that is long gone.

She exploits the rather anachronistic juxtaposition of her modern passions in this quaint
 location. Her insatiable appetite is the sole remnant of the gold fever that once entranced this
 place. She is giving me the eye. I am trying to ignore her. She licks her lips. Her eyes get big.
 She is rehearsing more extreme couplings. Her look expresses her intent. Her physical nature
 offers her entry into a more prolonged paradise.

She is a believer. She knows this is about the self. But her personality has been
 refashioned to absorb what she has learned about the body. She has made herself the prize since
 she is the portal to this other realm. She aspires after an eternity of physical stimulation so that
 she doesn’t have to come down from her supernatural journey,

Her body is the prize. Her handsome face is proof against the ravages of time. It will not
 fade. She has been sculpted to express this permanence. Relentless, there is no lapse that might
 allow her to slip back to a moment of helplessness. She hardly tires as she moves from one
 region of force to another and uses these to counter-balance any drift towards fatigue.

There is a twinkle in her eye that suggest that she has been here since the former days of
 yore and will remain here until the fall of this ordered world. She has adopted a face that suits
 her years and advances her purpose. She seems barely out of childhood. She is no innocent. But
 she is willing to learn anew.

She uses her youthful charms to introduce her into this world of gratification. Once
 inside there are no limits to how she extends her body to soar in the celestial air. It is her ocean.
 And she is caught in the renewing flow.

Even as she sits at the bar, she is already somewhere else. She floats on these tides until
 they carry her further and further out into open waters. She is unencumbered by any attachments
 in her pursuit. She is already so far out to sea that no rope can hold her, no anchor can keep her

in place.

She knows that she captivates. She is a storm waiting to happen. I need to stay clear. Her body is marked in every way imaginable. It bends and twists to speak its delights. The marks are signs to open these charms. I learn to engage these counters. With each touch, another door opens and she is more willing to surrender her wonders.

Her eyes engage the first of these indices. She works to draw me in, to get me to say something back to her. I take tiny glances, enough to capture her form, and then quickly turn away. Her will moves in an even more wily fashion. She catches each flinching on my part. Her stealth is the hummingbird's flash. I can't keep up.

She puts her finger to her lips. I take a sip of my rye and ginger. The pleasant sweetness is the perfect kick. I taste her in these sugary gazes. I take another sip of my drink. Maybe too quickly! I use a straw to dab a little that drips from my mouth. She smiles in satisfaction. She is much more cautious with her drink.

Her fingers slide enticingly along her glass. The condensation makes the surface a little sticky. She rubs harder along these points. The friction adds a character to her movement.

She adjusts herself in her seat. Her jeans hug her snugly while offering just enough freedom to express her unruliness. She shakes her head and lets her hair fall to affirm this independence. In that motion, she shows an awareness of the rawness of her passion. She is unrestrained. Nothing will impede giving herself completely to a sensation that obliterates all other perception. These movements describe how she has molded herself around that core of pleasure. Every inch of her body sings the same song. The flesh is electric for her enjoyment.

Her body is flawless. In action, the indentations blend together for a completely smooth surface. The hand moves its way along her gentle curves and recessed crevices. She shivers with the insistent tickle.

“What are you doing to me?”

She glides along the floor, her path broken only by the clicking of the heels. The washroom door seems to open for her. Her perfume sails across the room. Even in her absence she still dominates the bar.

I look over at the empty seat. Her drink seems to sizzle on the bar. The tension is thick in anticipation for her return. I look away before she comes back. She returns with even more confidence than she exhibited when she left the room.

The legs of her pants rub together as she sleekly charts her territory. She eases herself into her chair. She adjusts her top until it pulls tight on her body. She is proud of how she looks. She smiles to herself as she stretches her legs out. She holds her head up. This wave of excitement pulses through her body. She knows that I am watching. This gives her more of a sense of self-assurance. Anything is possible. Nothing is possible.

She uses her power, her ability to offer and pull back. To deny. She lives off of this give and take. Where I am attracted by her. Where she can lead me along. Where she can drop me like a hot potato. It gives her a rush. And she is starting to take flight.

I know what is going on. I resist her for just that reason. She may draw pleasure from being so elusive. That matters little to me. I stare straight ahead of me. That is not enough for her. She is restless. Unable to keep still, she tried to engage my attention. It is not working. I can sense what is going on. I only let her play.

It frustrates her that her game is not working. She turns her charm to maximum. I smile. She'll have to do more than ruffle her feathers. She looks over at me. I find it difficult resisting her gaze. As I look back, she turns away. She rocks her legs back and forth. It is rather annoying, but it does get my attention.

She holds her drink as if it contains something sacred.

"I want whatever she's drinking," I whisper.

She downs it quickly. She needs something to perk her up. She is wondering if she's wasted herself. To get all dolled up just to end up a bridesmaid. She is doing her utmost to get me to look her way.

She realizes that she better toss more out there if she is going to get me to take the bait. I do everything that I can to resist her advances. She wants to make it seem as if I am the one interested in her. She is already the fireworks in this otherwise dingy place. How could I avoid playing along. But I still won't give her what she is hoping for.

In one realm, there is a bet on the table. Behind all this is a challenge. Can I manage to get her out of this room? Of course, the bet is fixed before I even consider it. She would only leave her for a credible return. None has emerged. I am here down on my luck. I didn't come to Virginia City for a vacation. I could leave her unemployed.

If I knew that she offered some kind of link to extricating myself from this mess, I might further pursue her overt hints.

Although the place is pretty deserted, she might have other takers for the challenge. Wonder boys ready to flatter her. Those with glazed over looks who don't see that the play is already crumbed.

Suppose I take the option.

She wants to do more than inhabit the neglect. She hadn't spent all that time to get ready just to be ignored. Her gestures are getting more and more exaggerated to include me in her performance. Since I am not reacting, she seems silly, almost pathetic. That hardly sways her. Since I have to exert myself just to ignore her, she feels that her own efforts have not been in vain.

Her lips sparkle in the bar light. She knows that this is particularly enticing. Even if I am trying to avoid her advances, there is something particularly appealing about her pure physical presence. She realizes as much when she stretches her long legs to touch the bar from her stool. She turns to me to get a reaction. I am taking it in without moving a muscle. This continues to be frustrating for her. But it hasn't dissuaded her from turning on the charm. She is coming alive in my imagination just as substantially as she is sitting her before me. She is getting under my skin. And that urge is becoming part of me. She smiles to herself. This is success.

She rubs her hands along her dress, down from her breasts all the way to her waist. She suggests a caress. As I follow her hands along the contours of her body, she realizes that my refusal has been the first step in a protracted seduction. She doesn't want to slow her progress.

She sips from her drink, her lips sliding along the edge of the drink. Then she becomes flush with the excitement. The drink gives her that proper rush. I follow a trail of light in the bar mirror until I am looking at the halo that is formed around her hair. The glow is a little more intense with all the neon reflecting. Nothing else has that sparkle. Admittedly, I am interested. I enhance my reaction in my own way. I put my hand around my drink and move it down along

the condensation. I am only mimicking her appeals. This is further delight for her.

She is the entertainment. Her restlessness makes her squirm in her seat. Every movement is a signal of increasing interest on her part. She knows that I am only more attentive. A finger flick. A jerking of the head. A rocking in the chair. It all becomes more involving. She is getting a kick out of making this happen.

I can't get any closer to her without tipping my hand. So I am imaginatively bringing her closer to me. Where my hands rested on her waste, I now bring her closer to me. Her body is now wrapped around mine. We are pressed cheek to cheek, locked in an embrace.

I cast off that image. Her success is too obvious for her. I can't let it go any further. She realizes her effect when she watches me turn the other way. I need someone else to walk in to break the tension. When I have turned back to face straight ahead, she declares victory. In the corner of my eye, I can see that her gyrations are more pronounced. The room moves with her song. It beats with her heart. I can only follow along.

I can feel that I am becoming aroused as her dress rides up her leg. The seduction leaves no restraint. I am relentless in the pursuit. This is her utmost pleasure. The touch is overwhelming. What was imagined and imagined again is now more real because of its prolonged effect.

How is this different than a previous experience? It is so effective precisely because it repeats something that I have been through many times. But there is still no contact. So the belief only make it all the more intense. A single touch would be devastating. Her stunning presence is only more enhanced by the act. And I go along full force. There is no hesitation. No room for consent. My body hurtles along the path. She is getting a blast.

As my passions explode, she eases back in her chair. She now has to stretch to reach her drink on the bar. She brings it up to her mouth and takes a wondrous gulp. This is the taste of victory. She savors the mix of bitter and sweet as it goes down with a gentle ease.

He enters the bar with all the dramatics of her performance. He radiates youth even as the years try to catch up to him.

"Are you trying to deny time?" the years ask him. He ignores the question. The bartender knows his drink. She looks over at him knowledgeably. She has done her part. She needs to leave.

"Have you been chatting up my wife?"

"Are you talking to me?" I wonder.

"I'm not talking to the bartender."

"I've been sitting here having my drink."

"Are you telling me that she doesn't turn you on?"

"I'm married. I don't make it a habit to stare at women in bars."

"Where do you get you rocks off?"

His levity is bothering me. He's hardly had a drink and he's already over the edge.

"I'm not looking for trouble. I barely know why I'm here. I'm just taking care of business."

"The business of flirting with other guy's wives."

He knows that he has nothing to worry about. But he is trying to mess with me. At least, I could turn away from her interference.

He repeats his query, "Are you messing with my wife?"

"Hardly. I barely noticed her."

"Bull shit. She's the kind of girl that will make you cream in your pants just by taking a little peek,"

"That's not my style."

"You want the real thing."

I want to leave. He sees my impatience. He makes an offer, "I'll buy you a drink."

If I accept his hospitality, it might quiet him down.

"I'm Aaron."

"Aaron Winters."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm Walter. I'm your meeting from San Francisco. Why did you have me come here?"

"I was on vacation. They said that you needed to see me. So I thought that it would work just as well to meet me here."

"I'm here."

"I know who you think that I am. That I'm here to help you. I can't even say that I'm here to do that."

"The package. You've got to have the package."

"They said that I had it?"

"You're trying to put it in the form of a question."

His large frame loomed over me. He seemed to be challenging me. I found him a little menacing.

"I've got nothing for you."

"Why didn't you just tell me that in San Fran. Why did I have to come here?"

"I thought that you needed to see me."

"I needed to see you because I need that package for work."

"I never had it. Or I might have had it. But I sent all that stuff back. I told them to send it to you."

"I never got it."

"I need it for my work."

"I wish that I could help you. I really do. But there's really nothing that I can do for you."

"You've wasted my time."

"No, I haven't. You need to step back. You're getting too caught up in your own bull shit. That's why I'm here. Someone has to let you know. That's my job. I was just like you. The machine was swallowing me up. Then I took my wife and got out. I go back to the city now and then. But I've escaped."

"If it's so great here, why does your wife wait around the bar hoping to meet some guy?"

"She's doing it for me. We knew that you'd be here. We wanted to give you a rise."

"It was really distracting. You could have told me."

"It's how we entertain ourselves here."

"I'd say that you need it. I was ready for you to meet me at the OK corral."

"Let's go play some pool. Are you a player?"

“I can be.”

We take our drinks in the other room where we can shoot a game. After the break, I bank a complex shot, off the side into the back pocket. I have imagined the shot and let it come into play. The perfect application of mind over matter. I then miss a simple shot and let him take over. He is a confident player. He plays with such ease. I watch him line up shot after shot.

I want to learn his method. I have skill. But he is one with the game. A natural.

He is somewhat proud of his victory in the first game. He only briefly falters. The second game is more of a contest. He lets a weak shot ruin a consistent run. I have to make up for my hesitant play last game. I learn by his application. Shot after shot line up. It seems that I will be able to put him away. But I can almost feel a curse on his part. It seems to shake me up. He takes over and uses his mastery to back me to the wall.

“This is more than a game, Walter.”

“Is this a life lesson? That’s why I’m here.”

“You could say that.”

I wish that I could give in to his pretense. It might make more sense for me why I have taken so long to make this trip. Sadly, it’s only a game of pool. Despite his skill, there is really nothing mystical about the game. When he does succeed, he takes a devious pleasure in humiliating me? It appears that he has taken so much time to practice just so that he can derive this kind of pleasure. It is aggravating. But I can deal with it.

It just seems like a lot of trouble for this. I need that package if I am going to keep my job. And he hasn’t been helpful.

After the playing three more games, I decide to head back to my room. He taunts me a little as I go.

“You can’t take it.”

“I still beat you one game.”

“You could earn your money back if you stayed.”

“I didn’t know there was any money riding on it.”

”You know what I mean. I could tell you my secret.”

“It’s only a secret if I lose. If I beat you again, you’ve got nothing to show me. Even then, it’s about your game. That may be something that you can’t teach. It’s part of your nature.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about the package. I’m talking about your job.”

“You could have said something earlier.”

“I need you to meet me in the mine tonight. After the tours are over. I have to talk to you there.”

“Can we even get in?”

“I’ll get you in. I’ll see you there at nine.”

This seems like the most preposterous thing. But I agree to go along with him. I have little choice.

The mine is particularly cramped. His dominance is emphasized even more in the tight quarters. I feel as if he is ready to conduct his liturgy here. I get ready for a sermon.

“You are one loser, Walter.”

“Is that all you have to tell me?”

“You should have fucked my wife while you had the chance. She’s like honey.”

“You’re oa weird sort.”

“I’m still at the top of my game. The years are already catching up with you. You can’t turn down a fuck when it’s offered. You’re not going to get many more.”

“If you had caught us, what would you have done? I’m married. I’m happy.”

“Your wife’s not here. You don’t know what she might be doing at a moment like this.”

“I know what she’s not doing. She’s not in bars seducing other men.”

“OK, Walter. You pass the test. You show you have character. Now you want the reward. My help.”

“I’ll take whatever you can offer. Up to this point, it hasn’t been much.”

“It has to be somewhat of a trade. What do you have for me?”

“I’m here. You were supposed to have that package in Dallas. You’re covering my ass. But I’m also covering yours. So there’s no complaints here.”

“So you can leave in peace.”

“I need something from you.”

“The package.”

“Forget the package.”

“I’m trying to no good effect. I need it.”

“That’s what I’m telling you. You need to let go.”

“I need it.”

“You can reconstruct it without me. That’s my lesson.”

“That’s bull shit.”

“It only had some papers in it. Or a disk. Just information. You need to figure it out from what you already know.”

“Why are you being such an ass hole?”

“You came here for enlightenment. I’m telling you like it is. Why do you think that I am so healthy. I don’t let the shit bother me.”

“I don’t need new age bull shit in a cardboard town.”

“Take my advice. It’s the one thing really worth having.”

He seems like a clown. And I am playing along with his circus. A shoot out would have been more appropriate.

That night Aaron’s wife Jenny appears to me in a dream.

“If you don’t leave right now, he’s going to kill you.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Sleep with me and you will realize that I am right.”

Her skin is succulent. I fade with her. Aaron has told me that she is like honey. Too sweet. I am overcome.

“Jenny, I want to know the secret.”

“You already have the secret. Leave. Please leave!”

I want more. The dream has left me desiring Jenny in a way that I had never felt the day before.

“Walter, you are incorrigible.”

Ariel seems like a world away. I am in Virginia City. I need to take what Virginia City has to offer.

I wait at the bar that evening, and Jenny doesn't show. I don't see Aaron either. I call the number that he left for me. I just get his voice mail.

I can't leave. I have nothing to show for my trip here. My life is almost in ruin. I feel like casting my fate to the wind.

I think about Aaron's suggestion. I want to reconstruct the information that was contained in the package. The secret for our sales. What could it be? It is at the apex of all my travels. Everything that has brought me to this point.

My helper wants to destroy me! "Come out, come out wherever you are."

"How did you get in here?"

"You shouldn't leave your hotel door open."

"I thought that you weren't coming back."

"You need me."

He gives me his devilish grin.

"I needed you. Now I realized that I'm better off getting along without you."

"I didn't bring you here for nothing."

I look outside the room. Aaron is talking to a man in a jumbo pickup truck. Then another gets out of the pickup and goes into the hotel. He is carrying a briefcase. I am certain that the package is in the briefcase.

The next evening I meet a woman in the bar who resembles Jenny. Her eyes are glazed over.

"I need to use your phone. Is it OK if I come up to your room?"

"Sure. But I don't really understand. You could use the phone in the lobby."

"I can't really be private down there."

"The desk clerk is probably listening to the room phone."

In the room, she is intense.

"You should have never left me in Idaho. My stepfather caught up to me."

"What do you mean? You don't even look like Angel."

"It's been five years. I've grown up. My hair is its natural color now."

"Five years. It's barely been five weeks."

"You really fucked up, Walter."

I get a call from Angel, my editor, in the morning.

"Walter, I need those chapters in the morning."

"I had them sent to you in Dallas."

"They never got to me. You better have a duplicate."

"I don't have one with me."

"You're going to lose that advance that we gave you."

Aaron's point is that a picture is a thousand words. This is the basis of his idolatry of the image.

I have Jenny's image in my mind as I try to write. This is something sort of important. It is the beginning of Aaron's hold. My encounter in the bar was the first step in his seduction. This is the technique of any advertiser.

What does Jenny promise that Ariel can't deliver? Ariel is favored. Jenny is a castaway. She is willing to take a risk. Willing to put herself at risk. This seems all the more appealing. It convinces me that it really is worth the effort to win Jenny over.

This is the story. It is not as if I have lost interest in Ariel. But she is a continent away. She is now in another world, a world that has little to do with Virginia City, Nevada. Jenny has seemed so seductive. That attraction has become everything. Of course, Aaron is in the way. I don't want to piss him off. He seems already crazed, and I haven't even done a thing. He's in my business. In some ways, he's my only business.

This may be the key to my deeper understanding. I am torn between these two poles, Ariel and Jenny. In the center regulating it all is Aaron. Ariel is all about the limits applied to an image. Her portrait. Her face. It is all so captivating because it reminds me of something else, her commitment to life. Everything that we've worked for together shows in her face. That is my attraction.

At some other level, I am drawn to Jenny. It is about taking everything that I have and throwing it away. It is the tickle that I sense in looking at a billboard. It is that distance that has become so proximate. I can see her before me now. I can touch her. But I never could touch her. She explodes with that intensity. I reach out for her.

Realistically, I could never make a life with Jenny. We could never make a life together. But my attraction for her is devastating. That appears to be Aaron's point. I am attracted by something that is beyond my means. In some ways, it is worth way less to me. But Jenny has been pumped up into this entity that I need to be a part of. I want to act out my feeling in another way. I want to do more than only be entertained. I want to touch. Those are the terms under which I have accepted the risk.

If she just live next door, I would ignore her. She does not. It's not simply that Ariel isn't around. I almost feel as if I am never going to see Ariel again. I feel as if she is dying, and when I get home, she will certainly be no more. I have to act under those terms.

I look at Aaron. He is appealing, a handsome man. He is assertive and knowledgeable. But he seems like a clown. He is over aggressive, and he is acting out this fantasy of being some kind of guru. His knowledge is bull shit. I know more than he does. I am the author of this situation. I create. He helps me out. When I have put it all together, I won't even need him.

Jenny would be better with me. I'd be tender. I wouldn't force her on another man for business. In my fantasy, I am already affectionate. This is bizarre. I feel as if I am already with her. I am rescuing her from her persecutor. This appears to be the final piece in the puzzle. Where is Aaron's place in this scheme?

I grasp it all as part of a deeper scheme. If Aaron is not in control of the company, he is moving in that direction. The package is vital for that reason. If it falls in the wrong hands, it will doom the financial well being of the company. On the other hand, its details could provide the director with the necessary means to engulf all competition. It is our secret weapon, our Jenny. We can use it to our advantage.

I get a call from Ariel in the morning.

"Walter, when you come back from your trip? I want to talk about a divorce."

"What do you mean?"

"I never thought that you'd be away so much. I can't take it. I don't want to be alone."

I beg her, "Ariel, I need you. It will make more sense when I come home."

She has to know that they are intentionally trying to break us apart.

"I don't know who or what you're doing out there. Even when you come home, you're distant with me. You don't want to be together. That's no kind of marriage."

"Believe me. Believe me. Things are going to improve."

She is trying to remain calm, "There's nowhere to improve. You're barely hanging on. I can't carry you for the rest of your life."

"You need to give me time. That's all that I need. Just some time."

"Walter, it's not going to happen."

"It will all make sense when I get back."

I know that it won't. I need to say something. This is getting worse. I feel that I am being punished just for my thoughts about Jenny. Now I grasp it all. The plan. The package. It is about stealth. Holding on to what you've got even as it's slipping away, and gambling that nothing on a bigger something that you can never really have at all. It about becoming the author of the story, the creator of the market. I am a rival to the director. It is my vision.

I am bracing myself for the inevitable. I don't think that I can deal with losing Ariel. I better leave this place as soon as I can. But there is something so appealing about meeting Jenny. I have no way of getting in touch with her. I don't even think that I could find Aaron if I wanted to.

In a way, the trip has been a waste. I have nothing in hand. But the lesson has been invaluable. I wonder if I have the means to apply it. Was the package just about a strategy, Or did it offer the means

Aaron has given me one part of the puzzle. I grasp the whole picture. Jenny offers me the other part of the puzzle. She is all about the means. That is the basis of my partnership with Ariel. We have put aside our lofty dreams for something very realistic. We make things happen. We have the house. We take vacation. We save. Jenny is about something more. The total gamble.

I have heard Aaron tell me the story. I need to hear it from Jenny. Is there a secret here that has nothing to do with the meager promise that I have fashioned with Ariel. Is this about winning the whole world?

I am ready to take that final risk. I need Jenny to script that for me. Or is that the point. This is getting beyond the script. About making it happen on the fly. This is why it is all so exciting. I am giving in even though I have previously resisted.

Ariel fears that I am taking her for granted. That I have given up on our future. I am using her until I can progress to the next stage. It is a brutal assumption on her part. It hardly give me credit for trying to forge ahead, trying to create something new for the both of us. It takes imagination to build on what we have.

I feel as I should be leaving. But there seems unfinished business. From this point on, I will have to live my life undercover. I will have to become someone else in order to be myself. I don't know if I can explain it.

I am sitting at a bar. A woman approaches me.

"You've won the bet."

"What bet?"

“You get to take me home.”

“I’m just visiting. I’m staying at a hotel.”

“I’ll come back to your hotel room.”

“What’s the catch?”

“There’s no catch.”

“You’re quite simply gorgeous. Why are you doing this?”

“Didn’t you make a bet about me? That you could get me out of this bar into your hotel room.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I’m not the prize.”

“I’m just a friend.”

“Who’s behind all this? Who made the bet if it wasn’t you?”

“What bet?”

“You’d like me to leave with you.”

“Is something wrong with you. Are you sick?”

“Why? Are you sick? Making bets about my life.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You saw me here. I was sitting by myself. You bet a man that you could take me home. Now I’m here to help you collect.”

“That makes no sense at all.”

“Exactly.”