

## 6. GUILT

Silhouetted in the doorway

She is taking a long drag from a cigarette.

“Why are you treating Ariel so badly?”

Do I know you?

“No. But I know you.”

I move to try to see her in the light.

“Don’t come any closer. Please don’t try to see my face. It will make it easier for you to answer my questions.”

“What questions?”

“I asked you about your wife.”

“Ariel expects me to act like this.”

“If she knew how you act, she would be devastated.”

“Why should you care?”

I’m concerned

“There’s no secret to what I’m doing. I just do it.”

“Then you could stop if you wanted to.”

“I tell myself that I could. But I feel that I am getting further and further away.”

“You could just go back. You could tell her much that you love her.”

“It’s not that easy. Look at you. Could you just quit smoking cold turkey?”

“I have before.”

“And what’s brought you back.”

“I love the feeling. It just sparks things up when I’m around something that makes me bored.”

“I’m the same way.”

“You can’t compare us.”

“I like the chase. The give and take. All those things.”

“But this is different. We’re talking about someone who you love. Someone who’s a part of you.”

“That’s part of the problem. I have already made her part of me. So it’s hard to think of her as still independent.”

“You seem to have lost your ability to empathize with her.”

I want to move closer. Maybe get something to drink.

“Are you sure that I can’t come in? I could use a cup of coffee.”

“Walter, we have to keep it as it is right now.”

“Why?”

“I know what you’re trying to do. You want to influence me to think like you do. You want to look into my eyes so that I can feel sorry for you. Walter, you want absolution.”

“What are you talking about? I just want to sit down.”

“Lean on your car. I’m comfortable the way that I am.”

"I just feel like nothing is happening. Like we've reached this impasse. We're both talking to the darkness."

"I can see you find as it is."

"I can't see you."

The mysterious silhouette intrigued me. Her seductive pose added to the mystique.

"That's how it has to be if you want to hear what I have to say. No one is forcing you to listen."

"But you know all these things about me. I don't know anything about you."

"Would you listen to me if I was that guy who you picked up in Des Moines? Are you listening to me now because you're interested in me?"

"What?"

"Exactly Walter. You know what I'm saying to you. You can feel it in your bones. That's why you're giving me a chance. Why you're listening so intently. What would you like to hear Walter? What can I tell you that you need to help you get by with your day?"

"Tell me something about yourself. What do you like? Where are you from?"

"That's how it works, Walter. You want to get a girl on an equal footing with you. But with you, there really is no equal footing. You really want to bring her down to ground level. So you can just walk on her like you're doing with Ariel."

"Ariel and I get along just fine?"

"Why aren't you with her right now?"

"I'm on the road. I have work to do."

"You could get a leave of absence."

"That wouldn't help." I am propped against my car.

"This is just about simple concern. Why did you sleep with Evangeline?"

"It was just something that happened. I felt scared. She gave me what I needed."

"It happened more than once."

"I don't know what to say. I just did it."

"Like you want to do with me. Do you often do this sort of thing when you're away from home? As long as you're away, you can keep that spark going. That this mystery woman is going to pop out of the shadows with the offer of a lifetime."

"Isn't that what you're promising right now?"

"This time is different."

Different for how long? I can't say that. Not now. I sense this veil between us. It only give her words a special quality. They ring with an air of excitement. I want to touch the lips that spoke with such tenderness and awareness. I need to keep her talking. She already has me hooked.

"Why is it different?"

"This time is about you. All the evasiveness that has filled your life."

"You can't say that. What give you the right?"

"You do. You're still listening to me."

"That's temporary. I could stop feeling that way the minute that I took off and did something else."

"You like being the man in the shadows. It makes you feel more dashing. Makes up for

something that you've lost along the way. You're not some boring guy going from sales appointment to sales appointment. You're this appealing character with a hidden motive for his life."

"What do you want from me?"

"What do most women want from you? A token of affection. A charming little gift to tell them that you care. Is that what you have for me?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's not what I am talking about. It never is. It's something that you're talking about.

"You need to get her talking about the same thing."

"Isn't that what you want to do with me? Maybe start by staring in my eyes. Get my heart pumping. What next? A kiss. You touch my hand. Anything to get me going. To spark that feeling. "

"Is that what's happening right now?"

"Down boy! You wish. I haven't even started with you."

She puts out the cigarette on the metal part of the doorway.

"Hold on," she tells me. She goes in and lights another cigarette. She returns to her perch.

"You like those things."

"It sustains my interest."

"I'm not enough for you."

"Honey, no one really ever is."

"Do you share this house with someone?"

"Walter, I'm not here to share my secrets with you. We were talking about your little gifts. How do you guys do it?"

"I've got money for expenses."

"So you skip lunch and give her something that you buy with your lunch money. I didn't know that diamonds came that cheap."

"I don't think that I've ever bought anyone a diamond bracelet. And lunches are more expensive than you think."

"Particularly when you're trying to liquor her up before you take her to a hotel room and fuck her."

"That is a little brutal."

"Sorry, Walter. Did I get you a little excited?"

"No more excited than if you put your hands down your pants and started touching yourself."

"Walter, you do have a dirty mouth. Are you trying to get me cocked up?"

"I don't get it. Isn't that what you're doing with me? If I'm with a lovely person, I like to get her something lovely to match how I feel about her."

"But you never seem to have enough money. You're never getting that sale that you need to put your over your quota. You're not getting that bonus."

"I try."

"And when you can't get it one way, you get it another."

"I'm good. I'm persistent. I do get bonuses."

“I’m not really here to examine your work record.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Just a casual conversation. A little entertainment on a rainy night.”

“The rain’s stopped.”

“I know. Otherwise, I’d have to ask you inside.”

“Maybe I should wish for a little rain.”

“Maybe things are starting to dry up.”

I can tell that she wants to venture into the outside. She remains in the shadows of the threshold.”

“You’re biggest fear is that I don’t turn up the heat.”

“Turn up the heat.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“By asking you what happened to that little girl Angel.”

“I dropped her at Snake River.”

“There’s nothing at Snake River. Nothing at all.”

“She said that her father had a cabin there. That...”

“When did you make up that story? In the car afterwards.”

“You did have sex with her?”

“I never did.”

“You were afraid that she was going to tell the cops. How old was she? Thirteen.”

“She told me that she was almost eighteen.”

“You believed her?”

“You’re making it sound like something perverse. I gave her a ride. She needed help. I did what I could.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“What else should I say instead? Do you have a better explanation?”

“For why you do the things that you do. Where should I start?”

“I’m not here to do the same sort of thing with you.”

“What sort of thing? Don’t think that I have my door open because I trust you.”

“I didn’t seek you out. I was getting in my car. You came out for a cigarette. You said, ‘My, nice night,’ and I said something back to you. I don’t remember what it was.”

“It was the other way around. I came out for a cigarette. I saw you standing there. You said something to me. And then we started talking. I don’t even know how long you were there.”

“I told you that I was just getting in my car.”

“I opened the door at that moment. I don’t know what happened before I looked out.”

“But if I was waiting outside your door, why did I have my door open?”

“I don’t know. You looked rather suspicious. You might have given up. And then you hesitated when I opened the door.”

“That’s not how it happened.”

“I’m only saying that I can’t say for sure. You couldn’t have been walking around my house.”

“Did you see that?”

“You might have been good at it.”

“You’re totally speculating.”

“I’m just going over all the possibilities.”

“I could have been dropped down by helicopter. But you’re not considering that option.”

“Now, you are getting ridiculous.”

“No more so than you are.”

She leans against the door so that she is just balancing on one foot.

“If you won’t come out, maybe I could come in.”

“The door is open for my benefit not yours. I just don’t want to smoke in the house.”

“So you have your own problem.”

“Walter, it’s not the same.”

“You know my name I want to know yours.”

“You’ve always maintained this illusions of equality. You just get her to tell enough about herself to destroy her. All the while she feels pretty useless with what you’ve revealed to her.”

“You’re different, whatever-your-name-is. You’re making up stuff about me..”

“If it has to be that way.”

“You just want to make me feel bad about things that I didn’t do.”

“That’s always how you end up forgetting those things that you do.”

“What is this about? Erasing who I am.”

“I don’t know. You always seem really good about that.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s something like messing things up. And then getting the credit for cleaning them up when you put things back the way they were.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“You end up benefitting from the process. You have an affair with your neighbor. Then you’re forgiven. And things seem even better than before.”

“No one knows about Evangeline.”

“You do.”

“I can’t tell Ariel. She’s sick.”

“Isn’t that why you did it in the first place? Something unforgivable. If she was well, she could leave you. But she’s dying, and she has nowhere to go. You still do what you did.”

“Ariel doesn’t know.”

“You assume that she doesn’t know. I didn’t tell. Evangeline didn’t say anything.”

“She’s the weak link. She wouldn’t say anything.”

“So it’s all down to you. Do you confess? Do you keep it a secret?”

“I really can’t say anything.”

“So you’ll let her find out. She will find out.”

“You can’t say that for sure.”

“I can say that.”

“I’m going to stop.”

“Walter, I don’t really believe you. Do you believe yourself? It’s a little late to stop.”

“I don’t need to be with her anymore.”

“Are you telling me that you’re tired of Evangeline? That’s the only thing that would cause you to change. Boredom. You’re not telling yourself what to do. There’s a force that’s moving you along. And you can’t do a thing about it.”

“How do you know so much about me?”

“You don’t think that I’m right.”

“If I want to leave Evangeline, and just to go back to Ariel, I can do that of my own free will.”

“You need something to motivate you. Why do you think that you’re still listening to me?”

“You probably wouldn’t wait like this if I was some guy that you met. If you’re having doubts about Evangeline, it because you have someone else in mind.”

I move over to sit on my car.

“Someone like you.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Walter. You’re hooked.”

“I’m also married. I could go back to Ariel.”

“You’re looking for something. You’re not going to find it if you go back.”

“We could renew what we had.”

“Was it ever really there? Now that you have the distance from that time when you felt the heat of your passion. When you pledged your love for each other. Can you get that back again? With what you know now, is that enough? Really, is it ever enough?”

“I think that’s simply a sign of maturity. Focus. Conviction. A strength that can see all these experiences and draw a single lesson from it all.”

“Are you telling me now that you see Ariel in all things? That’s bull shit!”

“I could try. Isn’t that what you’re telling me?”

“I’m asking you to look honestly at yourself. Not just to tell me something to make me happy. Something to make yourself not feel guilty.”

“Should I feel guilty?”

“If there’s something to feel guilty about.”

“Is that what holds it all this together? This feeling of guilt.”

I am becoming confused. On the one hand, she wants me to go back to Ariel. On the other, she questions my conviction to return.

“I want to feel that guilt that you’re talking about. I just can’t.”

“That’s my point. You feel something else. You feel hungry. And you just give in to that appetite.”

“If it really is an appetite, then it’s part of my nature. I can’t do a thing about it.”

“But there’s another side to you. The side that let those things become an appetite.”

“It’s just natural. You’ve as much as said that yourself. Anyone else in my position would feel the same natural curiosity about who you are. A mystery woman in a doorway.”

“But there’s something more. Someone with a real purpose wouldn’t have let this distract him. He would have got in his car and driven home. Here you are waiting for something to happen. You’ve given into that appetite.”

“You’re encouraging me to feel that way. A haphazard meeting. I end up parking my car at this corner. You come out at the right moment and start telling me things about myself. I want

to know what's going on."

"You want to know because you can't figure it out on your own. Or you don't want to figure it out. There's really nothing that I can do to help you."

"If that was right, I'd be in my car at this moment. But I can't move. I'm fascinated."

"Are you trying to flatter me?"

"Not really. It's just a fact."

"Or more likely, you're flattering yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"You feel special. Privileged. The longer that you can keep me talking proves that you have this power."

"It could be that you have this power. That is where nature comes in."

"It could be all coincidence," she tries to dismiss me.

"Or some devious plot. You wait for me to come back to my car. You plan to open the door at just the right moment."

"But you just happened to park your car here."

"This is not the first time that I've parked my car here."

"I'm not going to move in here just so that I can catch you the next time that you park your car here."

"You could have convinced the owner to let you wait for me."

"That sounds like a lot of work. I could just approach you on the street."

"But that wouldn't have piqued my curiosity."

I am restless trying to carry on the conversation under these circumstances. This is all part of her discipline. I get nothing to drink. Nothing to eat. No snack or anything, and I'm supposed to stay interested.

"You're not losing that curiosity."

"I want to know more. Although it could turn out to be something trivial. You could be a friend of Ariel's."

"Why would Ariel go to all that trouble to get me down here? Why would I even bother?"

"I'm still wondering about that."

"I have nothing to do with your Ariel. This is about your guilt. Your imagination. How far it has affected your waking life."

"What does my imagination have to do with anything?"

"What are you thinking about me right now?"

"How I'd like to come over there and grab you..."

She interrupts me, "Can't you come up with something more imaginative than that?"

"I'm just beginning."

"I hope so. For your sake I am. I only hope that you weren't thinking the same things about Angel."

"Are you Angel?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"You haven't denied it. It would only stand to reason."

"I don't even look like her. Tell me, do I dress like her, do I talk like her, do I even stand

like her?”

“I wondered about the reason for all your concern.”

“I wondered about the reason for all your lack of concern.”

“I told you that I did all that I could. I looked for her.”

“See how your story is changing. First, you dropped her off. Now you’re telling me that you looked for her. You lost her?”

“She was with me. Then she disappeared. I told the police exactly what happened.”

“But you told me that you dropped her off at the Snake River.”

“That was how it happened more or less. I brought her to that point. And I left without her.”

“That could mean a thousand things.”

I can tell that she wants to chase me down. She can’t leave her place by the door.

She is doing her best to break me down. She is acting the part of a detective. She goes over my story hundreds of times hoping to find some inconsistency that will prove to be the break in her case. Only there is no case.

If it appears that I am straining to protest my innocence, so be it. It is one thing to be controlled by my appetites. It’s quite another to appreciate the finer things in life. If I have strayed in that pursuit so be it. I blame it on all the nasty time that I have spend in rundown motel rooms.

“You only have yourself to blame for who you are.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You lack real ambition. You lack anything of real significance. You are settling for this life. I don’t know how you convinced Ariel to marry you.”

“We both shared the same dreams. We’ve been a little distracted. But there’s still the love.”

“You have a wandering eye. And you’re feeding your lust. It won’t stop.”

“It’s not working now.”

“It’s working for you. That’s why you’re still sitting on your car. You’re expecting the same kind of romantic resolution offered by Evangeline.”

“And you are different?”

“I am an original. I don’t take that sort of shit. Either divorce your wife, or stay faithful.”

“I couldn’t divorce her at this point. That would be cruelty.”

“Then ‘fess up.”

“I’m not doing very well at explaining myself.”

“That is an understatement.”

“That is the least of our worries.”

“Come on out here, and sit with me.”

“This is not about trying to conquer me. You can’t always have your way. Hold on a minute. I have to take a piss.”

She closes her door. This is my chance. I could sneak up to the door and be ready when she opens it again. She is gone about five minutes.

“I know what you were thinking. You were going to try and rush the door. I was just too

fast for you. I was back before you could even hatch your plan. You're not even good at trying to get me."

"Are you saying that you would have slept with me if the offer was right?"

"I'm willing to go down for the right offer."

"Is that a joke?"

"Now it is. The offer is off the table."

"It's the thought that counts. All I have to do is make you remember."

"It was all a manner of speaking. I never really had any intention to favor you."

"So why are you telling me this?"

"To ruffle your feathers."

"You're doing an adequate job."

"Thanks. I love flattery."

"Just adequate."

"But I would do a better job in bed?"

"Is that what you expect I mean?"

"No."

"It's always the same. A girl acts all snooty to me. But when it comes down to it, she just wants what I want."

"For once, it is not going to come down to what you want."

She takes a long drag off her cigarette.

"You really ought to smoke."

"It's extremely unhealthy. Anyone can tell you that."

"Do you really want to sleep with me?"

"Of course I do."

"Would you stay the night, or just hit and run?"

"I'd give you everything that you needed."

"That's very cute."

"Yes, it is."

"Why don't you get a head start, and take off all your clothes here and now."

"Nice try. You could then take a picture for Ariel. My choice. Why don't you peel off your clothes in the doorway?"

"I'm not a fucking stripper. But I will touch myself for you."

She turns as if to engage in something a little risqué.

"Walter, isn't this how it all started with Evangeline? These games of cat and mouse. And then the cat caught the mouse. You're not going to stop. You'll only get moral with her when you find another woman. Then you can go off the deep end again."

"I love the taste of women."

"And I love to be tasted. Isn't that a good start, Walter? How could I be different? I could give you all this crap about my loving boyfriend. How he tolerates all my crap. And I just dish it on him. And those days when I feel like a lead weight. I just let him have it. You want to hear about all that, my lovely man. Then I can let you come to the rescue."

"I would love to know."

"I don't want to be known by you. Because you will never do the same. You pathetic

dick sucker. Anything that I do for you will only make it harder to get to know you. I know that for sure.”

“If you had have told me something about yourself, we could have deflected it from becoming sexual.”

“You still would have moved it in that direction. You would have tried to make me feel shitty about myself. Then you would have showed me this extraordinary sympathy. I would have been moved. Your seduction would have been complete.”

“Except we are talking about sex. And the focus is on you.”

“Simply a way to distract me about your guilt.”

“What guilt?”

“That’s the whole point. You’re guilty by the way that you act.”

“What does that mean?”

“You spend time on the road so you won’t have to be with your sick wife. You get involved with Evangeline as a way of denying that you feel any sympathy for Ariel. It keeps developing all the same way.”

“You’ll need to explain that to me.”

“I’m trying. But you just want to get me started in a little intrigue of your own.”

“You could use some of that.”

“Of course, that is why you opened your door to me.”

“That is the source of all my wrong. I could just close it.”

“Go ahead!”

“I’m not here to satisfy you. This is about me. I want to see you squirm. To soak in your own juices.”

“I just want to know if you look as good in a bra and panties as you do in a shirt and tight jeans.”

“I could take the jeans off. I’m not wearing panties. I’m not even wearing a bra. That would settle it.”

“It might.”

“Is that what happened to Angel. She did it so many times until she wouldn’t do it any more. You hit her. She was going to tell. So you only hit her harder. She taunted you. You didn’t know your own strength. So you had to dispose of the body.”

“That story is familiar. Except for the stuff about the body. It was a story that she told me. She made me promise not to tell. How do you know about it?”

“You’re making this all up to get yourself off the hook.”

“Let’s say that I am. So what!”

“Then I’m right about her. You couldn’t have your way. So you killed her .”

“No, detective, that’s not true. Now bring out some drinks, and let’s get down to business.”

“My business is almost done. The question is about whether you are ready to do some real business. Or keep the flattery up.”

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“Yeah. Every girl does. That has to be your first assumption. Otherwise, you’d be stop dead in your tracks.”

“You want me to go back to Ariel. I can’t. I’ve discovered this power that I never had with her. I want more of that.”

“She’s discovered something else about the balance between life and death. You need that thing more than ever.”

“If I can’t fuck it, I can get it!”

“Are you that crass?”

“I’m not crass. Real.”

“What about when you hit the immovable wall? Angel?”

“I move on to a skanky whore like you.”

“If you can’t get it done, then you really get it done. I suppose that you’re the type that can barely get it up.”

“You want me to try.”

“The tough man. Admit. You have finally shown yourself as the really tough man.”

“I can’t joke about this. You are setting me up.”

“Is anything sacred to you?”

“My own survival.”

“It’s not really that easy.”

“I could make it easier for you!”

“I’m sure you can! I need to get another cigarette.”

She closes the door. I get in my car and drive on. I know where she is. That is enough.