

1. A GAME OF CHANCE

I am sitting in a café, drinking a Pernod. I am watching the crowd. A few moments ago, I was part of that crowd. My name is Wallace Simpson. It is late. I cannot sleep.

I am again among the crowd. I think that I recognize her. A random wave. She smiles back. It isn't her. She disappears into the night. I am at my café. I sit with my drink.

At any moment, I am besieged with possibilities. A smile. A wink. A wave. You could abdicate all your responsibilities. Everything that makes me part of the day. To wander in the shadows. Just to go.

I am waiting for them. My friends. They know that I am here. I am early. Ten minutes early. I am waiting. From the moment that I have started waiting, I am afraid that they are not coming. I feel that they are late. I am impatient. I am getting ahead of myself.

My friends are avid readers. They love mystery novels. They love to play the part of the detective. It makes up for the drama that they lack in their lives.

There is Nick Sears. And Trey Monroe. They arrive late. I think about leaving. I have a drink. I sit and finish it.

"Do you want another drink?" It is Nick. Of course I do.

Nick has an idea, "What I hate about detective novels is that you never have a really perfect suspect. There is always something obvious that connects the killer to the crime."

Trey breaks in, "That's the advantage that the mystery writer takes. It is his prerogative. He knows who is the killer. He can plant the clues the way that he sees fit."

"There are no truly random suspects."

"It's not just the advantage of the writer. It's the advantage of the police. A woman is killed. It's probably her husband or her lover who did the deed."

I propose an idea, "Imagine the perfect crime where the suspect has no connection to the victim."

"A random killing."

"Edgar Alan Poe."

"It's Dostoevsky. The stuff of the nineteenth century. Man has no god so he can do what he pleases. He runs in the street and kills someone at random."

"It's like that Hitchcock movie *Rope*."

"Think of the idea," I repeat.

Nick adds his observation, "There's always something that connects the killer to the victim. Even if it's just a pattern. You're presenting an abstract idea. In the concrete, there's always a connection."

"Like what?"

"Something about the victim attracts the attention of the killer. Her hair. The way that she walks. That she is standing at a particular place at the right moment. Something that reveals some aspect of the suspect's psychology."

"Suppose that there is no connection."

"Wallace, it's just not possible."

"One just thrusts into the crowd and finds a victim, and then disappears into the mass."

"Why would someone want to do that? Why would someone want to kill like that?"

"The person feels an impulse. It brings him closer to his humanity."

"It just seems perverse."

“Nick, you read detective fiction. Why do people kill in those?”

“They want something that they can’t have. They feel that impossibility. Killing makes them believe that they can get what they want. A man believes that his life will be better if he has a nice watch. Status. It’s all part of the psychology.”

“He kills for an abstraction.”

“It’s always for an idea. But there has to be a concrete form. That’s where the sparkle of the object means so much more. It affects the person. It makes him think that he can get something more. He kills for the promise.”

Trey is sitting at the table and listening. He takes a long sip of his drink.”

“Killers want an intimacy with their victims. They think that they can bypass normal communication” Trey adds. He seems to be supporting Nick’s point of view.

“If there is no connection between the killer and the victim, then that is truly abstract. He must kill everyone. Or no one. Once he starts to kill, he deals with the limits of his environment. He reveals himself. That is real and concrete. Along the way, he leaves clues who he is. It is about his selection process. Even the random start becomes meaningful, all part of what motivates him.”

“You’re offering an abstraction. That one can know the killer’s motivation. But if he acts in a way that makes no sense to the police, then he is acting in a random fashion. No system can explain why he does what he does.”

Trey gets more specific, “If a wealthy person wanders into a strange neighborhood, he is facing danger because he has something that someone else wants—money. Someone sees what he has. That person follows the rich man. He eyes his riches. The suspect is the one with the most to gain and nothing to lose.”

Nick offers another scenario, “Or someone kills because he has a lot to lose. And the only way to stop the hemorrhaging is by doing someone in—getting rid of him.”

“You’re already putting your killers into the situation. I’m talking about someone who has no connection to the victim. No motivation.”

“The moment that he notices the victim, there is a connection.”

“How would the police know that?” I reiterate, “They are not mind readers.”

“What is inside always shows itself outside. What we think comes from some arrangement in our environment. The mind simply records those balances.”

Trey offers a more emotional rendering of Nick’s argument, “You can see the same thing in someone’s clothes or how they walk.”

Trey is looking for his random victim for the night.

She has just finished her coffee drink. The spoon lies inside the fountain-style glass. She has finished her preoccupation and is looking around for a new distraction. She is particularly attracted to Nick. He knows what she is up to but ignores the volleys his way.

“She doesn’t look that bad.”

“I came here for a conversation not to pick up a lonely girl,” Nick states adamantly.

“You can’t say that she’s lonely.”

“It’s past midnight, and her eyes are wandering around.”

“Our eyes are wandering. That’s how we found her.”

Trey ended up going over to her table and inviting her over. She seems very shy but tries

to gesture in an exaggerated fashion to hide it.

She sees life is sweet. That is why she needs a sugared drink. All the caffeine makes her wired. We offer her a drink. She opts for something a little harder.

“My name’s Babs. That’s Barbara.”

She has big red lips. She accentuates their pout. When you look at her, she look down in a bashful way.

Nick continues to play his casually cool self. She doesn’t know what to make of him. She finds Trey a bit forward. She delves into a conversation with me.

“Wallace, what do you do for a living?”

“I teach Italian.”

Nick cleverly interrupts, “No he doesn’t. He teaches film.”

“Well which one do you do?”

“Either one.”

“What?”

“One of the above.”

Our dear Babs works in a hair salon. But she is taking acting lessons. Anything to add mystery to that screen star look of hers.

“Do you like my nail color?”

Trey joined in, “I love it.”

“It’s cotton candy apple.”

“Lovely.” I add my two cents. She seems intrigued by my silly banter as if I am some major Hollywood producer. If this is her first impression, I am surprised that she has not already graced the screen.

“I have. I had a small part in a sitcom. And I did a commercial. My ex had a used car lot.”

“Wow.”

“A pity though. He sort of tossed me off like one of the cars.

“I hear the turnover is crazy in a place like that.” She gives me a strange look. Maybe I just insulted the love of her life.

I try to imagine the appropriate script for my starlet. It seems this is what Trey and Nick have been doing with me since they first sat down. But I need to pretend. It gives me such a sense of purpose. At this late hour, purpose is in such short supply.

“What’s your dream my dear?”

Nick gives me a glare that means he thinks that I’m being condescending. I’m doing my best to be gracious.

“I’d like to study oceanography.”

“Wow!”

Trey wonders, “What about the acting.”

“That’s just something that I do on the side until I get my chance.”

I catch Trey looking at her legs. She is posed in a most attractive but apparently uncomfortable position. She takes a sip from her drink.

I am waiting for a cynical comment from Nick. It is already long due. Prompted by an internet survey, he asks her if she has ever had a gun held to her head. He is intimating that her

ex may have been a gangster. Trey switches the inquiry to another question on the survey.

“Have you ever made out with a woman?”

“That depends on what you mean my making out.”

In my pedantic way I resolve the ambiguity, “I think they mean open-mouth kissing.” I am ready to explore the deep dark secrets of our ingenue.

She laughs, “What I haven’t done!” That reply seems to satisfy the rather prurient interest of dear Trey. But that leaves Nick and me to explore other areas of provocative research. I am really feeling like a voyeur. Nick has the fiendish scowl of a surgeon. I am praying that her soul will remain immune from his cutting.

Trey suspects that he has all the entertainment that he will need for the rest of the evening. I realize that I am the only hope to rescue the poor thing from this den of lions.

“You realize that you have been abandoned to a gang of killers.”

She smiles. “My only hope is to run.”

“I’ll come along,” Trey adds.”

“I’m running from you.”

She has entered as an innocent. Now she bears the mark of her pursuers. She wonders how she can get away.

“In the chase all is revealed. The blood lust stands forth.” Nick is trying to be philosophical. It makes no sense to her.

She doesn’t seem ready for any more interrogation. But her thirst is not yet quenched. Things are only going to get more pathetic as the night wears on. Her naivete will no longer be charming. I consider sacrificing her to Trey.

She is sitting right across from me and staring. “Why aren’t you playing with me, Wallace.”

I wonder what I should be doing.

“Wallace, she is your perfect victim. You had no contact with her before tonight.”

“You’ve all seen me with her.”

“We don’t remember a thing,” Nick testifies.

She chimes in, “Why are you talking about me as if I’m not here.”

I take her side, “I don’t think that you want to be here for this discussion.”

She still doesn’t get it, “I just want to be someone’s friend.”

Trey speculates, “Just for one night or permanently.”

“If you go with her for a night, you’ll leave evidence. Better to think about it than actually go through with it.” Nick summarizes his argument.

Babs has her shoes off. She is waving her feet around me.

“She wants you.”

“No, Trey. You want her.”

“I’ll go with whomever will have me.”

“I’m free for the night,” Nick asserts.

“Nick, you wouldn’t know what to do with her.”

“Shut up, Wallace. You’re the one talking about the perfect victim.

I don’t want to think that I am the only one who has her best interest at heart.

“Wallace, you only want to sleep with me. That’s why you’re trying to be nice.”

She has her feet on the floor with her legs spread in front of me with the knees pointed inwards. She is staring in my face.

“Wallace, you know that you want it.”

Trey is turned on by her performance. He is rattling my concentration, but it might be best if both of them leave now. I can continue my conversation with Nick.

“You don’t know what it’s like until you’ve tried it.”

“I need to work in the morning.”

“You know how to ruin a party.”

Trey and Nick watch me fade away. She heads off with Trey for more drinks.

“Are you leaving together?” I ask them.

“No, we just want more drinks.”

“Just as long as you don’t drive.”

Nick turns to me, “They are already tied too closely together.”

“We could forget that she was here.”

“There’s the bartender.”

“He doesn’t know her from some other girl earlier tonight.”

“She is pretty hard to forget.” Nick works to establish her presence.

“He could be distracted by something else. Or if enough time past, she would fade in his memory.”

“There could be other patrons. She was pretty talkative.” Nick looks for more evidence.

“Admit it. She was barely here. We gave her a script. She hardly understood it. It could have been anyone else.”

“But she was here. You and I talked to her.”

“Nick, what did you really say. You tried to take her apart with your eyes. You are the prime suspect.”

“You are a material witness.”

“Something holds us together.”

I imagine what makes one person roll over on the other. The pressure of the detectives. The fear of punishment. The lack of confidence about the crime.

“What about remorse? Isn’t that the one thing that breaks down the psyche?”

“Nick, you’re seeming like a humanist. You know the mind is like a wall. It blocks off what it does not want to share with the world. Some people are good liars.”

“But the world incriminates the mind. Alibis are not air tight. And when they dissolve, there is nothing to protect the killer.”

“You seem so self-assured. But you’re dealing with an abstraction. We only can know what we see. Even then, we can be fooled by what’s right in front of our eyes.”

“We’re often afraid of what is unpleasant.”

“Or we just live with it. It’s not a neat package that just shows itself.”

“What about your idea of a card trick? You look for your victim in a deck of cards.”

“If it’s in the cards, then it happen like it’s supposed to. Our killer learns the pattern. He hides his intentions in the cards. Lets them do the work for him. No one can find him if he blends in.”

“You have to watch the sleight of hand. It’s the same thing with a detective novel.” Nick

demonstrates his expertise. “You learn to read back wards.”

“You learn to act backwards. You leave the clues that you want to be found. It’s about being random. And the most random thing is the most planned. But it’s almost in a mystical way. You see a pattern where there is one. After you act, everything reflects your intention to deceive. No one else can ever figure out what really happened.”

“It sounds like a zen of mystery novels.”

“Maybe that’s what we’re talking about. It’s like scripture. The killer learns the sacred text. But it’s a negative learning. An unlearning. He learns to avoid detection. He learns how to subtract the evidence that ties him to the crime scene. In its highest form, this is a mental activity. If you don’t leave the traces, you don’t have to take them away. You make the victim do all the work. He veers off his daily routine. He goes off the radar. This is who the killer looks for. He senses how the victim wants to die.”

“The perfect suspect needs the perfect victim. That is hardly random.”

“It’s random because what ties them together is imperceptible. The one person has left the grid. The other person has an intimacy with the invisible. He moves in a world of ghost. He acts like a phantom.”

“You’re dealing in fantasy.”

“Not at all.”

Nick doesn’t like my creation. He is trying to undercut its vision.

“Nick, this is the new world that we live in. This is where all questions of life and death are answered.”

“How can an individual ever really know?”

“That is the art.”

“It seems misguided. If there are these waves that control our behavior and if the detectives, the law givers, the authors, if they decide what happens, no killer can escape his fate.”

“Don’t tell me that you haven’t thought about it.”

Nick realizes my intention is to trap him, “You’re trying to convict for something that I haven’t done.”

“But it’s been in the back of your mind. It only takes a little push to move forward.”

“It’s all the way in the back.”

“Each day, it inches forward. You can’t do a thing to stop its forward progress until it is pushing on you like a headache that you can’t relieve except by acting.”

“I take headache medicine.”

“It’s not that kind of pain.”

“You can’t entrap me, Wallace.”

“You know the feeling. It’s what keeping you from crossing the median. It’s what makes you sane.”

“You’re questioning my sanity.”

“Sanity can be a murky thing. One moment you’re doing what you want, the next you’ve crossed that line just to be yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The booze, the pills. You’re like everyone else just hanging on.”

“You sober up. You realize how it’s messing with you.”

“Or you don’t sober up. You increase your tolerance. You come down only to want more.”

“I have enough.”

“Until someone threatens to take it away. She tells you that she’s met someone else. You feel rage. But you know that you are the prime suspect. You act it out on someone else.”

“This doesn’t sound like the perfect anything.”

“I’m just showing you how the impulse grows.”

“That’s the point. Once it builds, it leaves evidence. You blow up at work. You threaten the check out boy. You get in a fight with your neighbor. All this puts you back on the radar. You don’t act. You don’t go any further because you are already known.”

“If you just could put on a mask. Let your inhibitions dissolve. Then you would have no control. You would virtually be a madman.”

“It never happens the way that you say. It’s always a person with a record of violence.”

“What about the harmless neighbor who one day snaps? Everyone testifies what a mild and gentle person that he was.”

“That is because they are violent in their own way. And they want to ignore what Mr. Meek has done that is so like them.”

“That is my point. If we did nothing, that wouldn’t end our violent tendencies. Our world only magnifies that side of us. The road rage. The murderous car accidents. The chemicals in our environment. Poverty and civil war. Violence rages in our world. To live is to express that violence. The striving for the top. Winning through intimidation.”

“Those are all great metaphors. But you have to be a killer to enjoy killing.”

“Nick, you love to read detective fiction. But in a good book the killer stays one step ahead of the police. It is the clever detective who thinks like the killer.”

“But that is the difference. He is not a killer. He thinks like a killer.”

“The murderous impulse gets in his brain. Once it’s there he only needs a nudge to go over the edge.”

“The psyche isn’t that fragile.”

“Oh, it is. If the impulse is in there, it’s like a disease. When the antibodies break down, nothing holds him back.”

“This is not a perfect suspect. In a rage, he does something stupid. He needs to hide his crime to avoid detection. But everything point to him. And he gets caught.”

“This is another story. He realizes that he might get caught. So he plans his crime.”

“You called it random.”

“He avoids the obvious. He throws himself into the tide. He finds a way to hide.”

“There is nothing mystical about your rage. It’s in a man’s hands. It’s in a woman’s eyes. It’s all around us.”

“If it’s everywhere, then it’s nowhere. You can’t distinguish the cop from the criminal. Each puts on the same face. You’ve heard all those stories about cops crossing the line. Being around the brutality so much that they snap. It can happen to anyone.”

“Most people know where to stop. They don’t give in to those thoughts.”

“You can’t hold back until it is too late!”

Nick doesn’t take the bait. But he is outlining my conspiracy step by step. He knows that

there is that side to his personality.

I continue, "Once you've enjoyed it, you feel damaged. Remorse sets in. But that doesn't stop you. Your humanity drives you to do it again. That's the only way that you can avoid the constant watching, that you can escape your conscience. It makes you complete. When you realize that you are being haunted by yourself, you realize that you have to live as a ghost. That is my theory. You learn how to hide in plain sight."

"Detection is more sophisticated than you think."

"It sounds like you're saying that we can anticipate crime. If that's true, then we're encouraging the citizen to cross the line, to realize those impulses. When you lose your balance, you fall over the line."

"Wallace, you're trying to push someone over the line."

There is a strange anger in his voice. I am striking too close to home.

"Nick, why are you protesting. This seems right up your alley."

"I know the difference between right and wrong. I read detective fiction because the criminal gets caught."

"But it's ultimately unsatisfying. You figure it out too soon. You have to read the rest of the novel with that fact in mind."

"I'll get another one."

"But you're only frustrating yourself. You want reality."

He is perturbed, "You can't tell me what I want."

"Are you angry, Nick?"

"A little."

"Are you going to say that you're sorry? Sorry for disrupting this civil discussion."

"This is not civil. This is talking about sympathy for killers."

"I'm showing pity for you Nick. For your moods. For your story. It's your life. And you don't like the way that it's gone. You read detective novels because there are really no complications in them. Everything follows the determination of the detective. Everything breaks down like a puzzle. An abstraction. You don't have to deal with real people. Their emotions frustrate you all the time. You want people to be simple. Cops and criminals. Criminals try to make things to complex. Cops show what's wrong. They crack the code; they figure out the puzzle."

"The criminal thinks that's he some kind of god. He's acting against society."

"But you're sort of a rebel yourself. You're tired of all the stupid people in your way. You just don't know what you can do to get rid of them. Do you, Nick? Just a push. That's why you read detective novel. They make you feel clever. You can solve the crime before the detective. But if you're staying one step ahead of the detective, if you're the rebel, then you're the criminal."

"Novels aren't like that. The criminal gets caught."

"It's not real."

"Wallace, criminals aren't that bright. They steal from a convenience store that only gives them enough money for a few days. They risk years in jail for nothing"

"You want the big pay off. You don't want to be stupid. You want to blend in. You don't want to be found out. You know how not to get caught. You have rage. I can see it in our

conversation. Go ahead; order another drink. You're becoming a nasty drunk."

"I'm supposed to be your friend."

"This is a game, Nick. But we have to play to the end."

"Come to think of it, I would like another drink. Are you buying, Wallace?"

"What is your poison?"

I go to the bar to get another drink. I wonder if I am letting him off too easily. We have been so close to some kind of resolution. Now he is slipping from my grasp. I need to tighten the screws.

I come back with the drinks.

"Wallace, you think that a little brains gives you the right to do whatever you want."

"I'm not the one who's becoming enraged."

"You're acting like a crazy man. You're trying to make me explore my murderous impulses. This is not a game."

"That's what you say when you realize what you've done. Then you try to get out of it. Use any possible way to escape yourself. And it all comes crashing down on you again. I've seen in it so much."

"Quit playing mind games with me!"

"It's only a mind game until you admit what you've been doing. Then you can't escape the simple fact that you're a killer."

"I like reading books."

Trey came back after being gone for a couple of hours.

"Where's Babs?"

"She had to rush home."

Nick questions him, "Rush home. What did you do to her?"

"Nick, I don't think that he hurt her."

"I don't know what she would say. There has to be two sides to the story."

"Nick, who's playing detective now?"

Trey is oblivious to the questions. He's just trashed.

"Se, Trey is my example. He's under the influence. He won't remember what he did in the morning."

"Wallace, he's not a violent guy."

"Why are you talking about me as if I'm not here?"

"You're falling over as if you're about to pass out."

"Nick, you're drunk 'round the clock."

"I only drink at night. And I drink very little."

"I'm not going to get in the middle of this."

Nick glares at me, "You started this, Wallace."

"Remember, Nick, you called it a game."

"It is a game to you. Wallace has been trying to convince me that I'm a killer."

"You did have a run in with that girl. She told one story."

"Trey, I never heard that story. What did Nick do?"

"Basically, I did nothing. But she was telling some shit story about me."

"Nick, if the shoe fits."

“That’s what I told him.” Trey is slurring his words. He is propped up in two chairs.
 “Wallace, you need to cut Trey off.”
 “Not while he’s speaking the truth.”
 “I broke it off with some girl. I phoned her one too many times. She claimed that I did
 all these things to her.”
 “You did what?”
 “I did nothing.”
 “We need to get her in here.”
 “Wallace, it’s two thirty in the morning.”
 “Call her up. Tell her you need a ride.”
 “That’s about as psychotic as your mystery novel idea.”
 “It’s a great idea.”
 “Go ahead. Tell Trey.”
 “Trey is not in the mood to hear much of anything.”
 “Wallace has this idea of running into the street and killing someone.”
 “Trey, it’s not like that. It’s about selecting a random victim.”
 “It sounds plausible.”
 “See, Nick, Trey agrees with me.”
 “You said yourself that he was in no shape to agree to much of anything.”
 “The perfect victim to a murder. He doesn’t know whether or not he wants it.”
 “Do you want it, Trey?”
 “I’ll have another drink.”
 “You’re cut off.”
 “You’re going to cut it off.”
 “Shut up, Trey.
 Trey sits up and pretends to be in good mind.
 “You really are a sloppy drunk,” Nick sizes him up.
 “That isn’t what Babs said.”
 I analyze her, “She didn’t seem to be in very good shape to analyze the human condition.”
 “She was a condition herself.”
 “Nick, did she piss you off? She didn’t give you enough play.”
 “I never said that.”
 “I could feel you squirm in your chair. She turned you on, didn’t she? She was all flirty.
 Her short skirt and all. It just made you crazy. But you couldn’t do anything about it. Not
 without touching her. You wanted to press your body against hers. Feel her heat. Smell her
 perfume. But she said no. She stopped you. And it pissed you off. You wanted to hurt her.
 Wanted to get yours.”
 “Trey, he keep putting me in these violent fantasies of his.”
 “Nick, it hits close to home.”
 “Nick hit me once.”
 “Tell me about it, Trey.”
 “It was nothing, Wallace. Trey won’t even remember.”
 “I do remember very well. Nick, you’re a real prick sometimes.”

"I never threatened you. I never hit you."

"I left before I hit you."

I laugh, "See how easy it is to pull your chain, Nick. I'm not saying that you're a killer. But you're such an easy mark."

"I've been claiming my innocence all along."

"Nick, you're a voyeur."

"I want another drink."

"Hold on, Trey. We need to get you home. Nick, we need to get him home."

"He is trashed."

"I've never seen him this drunk before."

"Nick, I've never seen you this enraged."

"I was playing along."

"But do you know when to stop? When she tells you not to choke her anymore, do you stop in time?"

"I'm not into rough trade."

"You do like to get a little kinky."

"That's not my style."

"What about the books?"

"It's fiction. It's not me. The psychos get caught."

"Is it that easy to restrain yourself?"