

11. THE MYSTERY OF HER BODY

Her eyes stare at me in the night. She is my ghost, my phantom. She floats in darkness. Nothing can bring her down to earth. She is so high.

I am haunted by Alea. She sits across from me in the dark. We are both creatures of the night. She is married to the darkness. She is like a cat. She sees when there is hardly any light. She can pass through walls. She has magic.

“You believe me now.”

“You are teasing me.”

“No, I can really do magical things.”

We laugh.

I am alone in the darkness. I can see her eyes staring back at me. I am making every effort to remember her to bring her back to life before me now.

I am looking at her tender lips. The lips without a face. I can taste her tender kiss. the tender kiss.

Her lips speak her words. They may seduce. They may entice. They may deceive. I ask them to do what I need from them. I listen to her words.

With her voice, she is back again with me.

“You have taken my voice.”

I have something of yours that I cannot give back!

“What do you mean that I have something of yours. You left and took everything with you. You even took back our time together.”

You cannot speak without my consent. I consent only when I remember. If I forget you, you lose yourself. You lose your voice. You speak in fits and starts. You try to sustain a conversation. But I cannot hear you. You cannot hear yourself. You sneak in and take your voice back. You speak. You write. You are devoted to finding your voice. That works until someone else takes it from you.

I still hear you voice.

“When you take something from someone, you need to give it back when she needs it again.”

“What do you need?”

“I need to speak to you.”

She speaks by touch. It is dark, and she speaks with her hands. She outlines my body in the dark.

“How are you doing?”

Not a word is said. The touch is gentle. It radiates over my entire body. Over her body. My touch is her touch, and in me her touch is my touch.

“What do you want me to say?”

We are in darkness. We speak in flashes of light. By our pain. The aches of our muscles smoothed over by the touch.

I am your darkness, Alea. You are my light. You warm me up by your touch. I come alive. I come alive with you. I come alive in you. Your touch fills my body. You paint my body with your hands. Your gentle touch is driving me crazy.

I can smell your body. You are at the other side of the room, but I smell your body. What do you want me to say? Only words that can be felt by touch. You find your voice just long enough to speak in the gentle caresses that we share.

You try to deny me my share. I let your body speak. I am drunk on the scent of your perfume. You wear it like a dress that suits your form. It extends your desire.

You are not here, but I can sense that you have been here. I can smell your perfume.

She has taken a long shower. She comes out of the shower, and starts to dry her hair. All that she held her in past, all her negative thoughts, has been washed away. She is completely clean. She had refreshed herself. She is reborn. There is nothing that can hold her or affect her from her past hurt. All that is long gone. The shower is her present. The filth is her past. It is now associated with people that she has forgotten.

“What if he had said the right thing instead of the wrong thing? You’d really be in a fix now.”

She know that she would. But he did play himself out. And she forgot about him in just the right way.

“Are you going to give me another chance?”

“You’ve run out of chances.”

So she closes the book on that nasty part of her life. She doesn’t save these books. She tosses them to the wind. In a week or two, it will be as if none of this has happened. She begins again.

Her nakedness is pure. She has dispelled any connection that the prurient may share over her flesh. She has found utter self-determination in the body. She serves no masters.

The mind may dirty itself in its preoccupation with the depraved. But the body liberates itself from the subservience to the past. If the marks cannot be seen on the skin, they have not touched the body. The traces have been washed down the drain.

Your body is your only witness against you. Everyone that you have known. Everyone who has spoken about you. And your body is taken away by your words. This new self that you have become speaks against you. And you are made shabby by your own thoughts. This is who is trying to destroy. Your own words have been turned against. You are the perfect suspect against yourself.

You try to wash away the stains. But the words mark your flesh. They make you feel used. You are damaging yourself. You try to wash away the marks. It only leaves you more sullied. You cannot free yourself from yourself.

“You are self destructive”

She gives me a bone-chilling stare, “You say that about me to give you the excuse to harbor negative feelings towards me.”

“I’m not making it up. You sometimes hate yourself.”

“You are only adding to that feeling by trying to focus on how I feel. My feelings pass. But you hold to those thoughts of yours.”

“I know how you play this game, honey. You rough me up. The you claim that I was cheating on you and planned to kill you.”

“How does the game work? You pretend that I’ve roughed you up so that you can get lover boy to kill me for you. Then you use him as a patsy and find someone better and brighter.”

“What are you going to do with you info? Go to the police. I have way more on you than you know.”

“I could kill you right now, and it wouldn’t make any difference what you have on me.”

“You’ll get caught.”

“A lot of good that will do you. You’ll still be dead. Vengeance won’t bring you back to life.”

“We could make a deal.”

“Is that what this has been about all along?”

“It’s been about me. You don’t realize that. I’m the star in this movie.”

“The last reel has almost run out. You better think of something fast.”

I hear her speaking, “You know me. I will know myself in your eye. You will be my mirror. I will hate myself. I will hate what I see.”

She disappears with her words, “I want to die when I am around you, You make me feel like nothing”

I am doing an errand downtown. I am in the courtyard of a large bank. I see her looking at me. She is waving at me.

“Do I know you?”

“No, that’s the whole point. You’ve been looking for the perfect victim. That’s me!”

“There has to be something that connects us. I’ve been staring at you. There is already your image print on my brain.”

“That just adds to the confusion. It can be dispensed with. There’s still nothing that really connects us.”

“You connect us. The story that I’m making up about you. The time that we’ve spent together.”

“We’ve never met. You said so yourself?”

“I gave you that look.”

“That’s you. You give that same glance maybe one hundred times a day. Over a quarter of a million times in a year.”

“But for this moment it is special.”

“But you won’t remember a thing about it in three weeks.”

“I’ve stopped to talk to you.”

“Just long enough for me to tell you that I’m the one.”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“You are supposed to do it quick. Because in a couple of hours, you’ll have trouble picking me out in a crowd.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll remember you.”

“I have a memorable face?”

“Especially now. Your every emotion shows in your face. You’re not hiding a thing. Not a thing from me.”

“So you’re here to do what you have to do.”

“I thought that you were going to turn the tables on me.”

“That’s how the story is supposed to end. But can you deal with that?”

“I won’t look you in the eyes.”

I have become lost in her life. I need to make my way.

“What is your name?”

“I am Alea. Take no chances with me.”

“I’ll see you later.”

I promise that I will remember her the next time that I see her. When will that be? It is all moving too fast for me. I want to slow it down. I want to take this scene again.

She is sitting across from me in the restaurant. She doesn’t know why we are here. She pulls up her skirt slightly. I am looking at her legs. There is a nonchalance in the way that she is sitting. She will not involve herself in a serious conversation. She only wants idle chatter.

“You were looking at me?”

I turn again to look at her. “I guess that I was.”

“Am I that forgettable?”

“Not at all. I have a lot on my mind. A nasty break up.”

“Sorry to hear that. You could use some cheering up.”

She adjusts herself in her chair.

“I’m not sure what I need. I feel like I’m drowning.”

“Nothing to take the mind off your troubles than a good drink.”

“I’ve been drinking all evening. It’s not doing the trick.”

“Maybe you need a new love.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a painter. I paint souls.”

“What?”

“I like to think of myself as a fortune teller on canvas. But I guess it never really gets to that stage. It’s all mostly doodling.”

“You seem too modest.”

“You should see my work. You’d understand.”

“Where can I see your work?”

“Have you ever been to the Dundas Gallery?”

“I actually had a friend who exhibited her photos there. So you’ve already had your opening.”

“They’ll only be up a couple of more days. I think there’s a particular one that you would like. It’s in the window.”

I take her advice. But I want to see the work on the way home. I make a detour, and I am in front of the gallery. The lights give a great view of the work even at 2 in the morning. I flash back to the girl that I met near the bank. This is a weird coincidence. The painting is an abstract jumble of color. But it seems to echo the experience of the previous day.

I am not sure if I should find the artist or Alea. Who will give me the best answer.

“The only reason that you’ve looked for me is that you want to do something bad to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m your perfect victim.”

“But if I am really going to do the crime, I need a motive. I just can’t feel raw aggression.”

“What if I did a really fucked up thing to you?”

“What could that possibly be?”

“It’s about the worst thing that I could do.”

“I hardly know you. You’d have to do something pretty bad to me if it was going to affect me that badly.”

“It has something to do with your break up.”

I need to find Alea. She knows what is going on. But she claimed that our meeting was by chance. I am violating my own theory. I believe that there is something that hold us together.

The police know what that connection is. You can’t make a move without them knowing what is going on.

A detective visits my apartment.

“I’m looking for an Alea Jones. Do you know her?”

“I’ve heard the name. I may have met her. But I don’t recall anything at all.”

If I see her running for the train, I will run after her. I am sure that she knows something. I see her on the stairs. I am just entering the station. I have some trouble at the turnstile. She is gone by the time I get to the platform. Another girl across the track waves at me. I look away. She is insistent.

“I found something of yours.”

She hands me a wallet. It looks like mine. I look inside. It’s my license.

“Where did you find it?”

“It’s yours?”

“Yes, it is mine. I didn’t know that I lost it.”

I check my jacket. My wallet is not there.

“You want to buy me a cup of coffee.”

I am being distracted from my search. She has a great smile. She wears a low cut sweater and glasses.

“Do you remember me?”

“No, I don’t think that we’ve met. I’d remember you. You have striking eyes.”

“You didn’t attend a class with me.”

“What class?”

“A seminar on the Theory of the Novel. It was at George Mason.”

“I was at a conference there. Wait. I do remember you. You weren’t wearing your glasses.”

She takes them off. Her eyes seems even more stunning.

We are sitting across from each other having coffee.

“Where were you headed to?”

“Sorry, my name is Wallace Simpson. I was following someone. Someone that I thought that I knew.”

“What a coincidence. Now we run into each other. I’m Dana.”

“I don’t remember meeting you.”

“I don’t think that we met.”

“Where did you find my wallet.”

“I think that you dropped it coming in to the train station.”

“What do you do for a living. Is suppose that you teach.”

“Actually, I’m a writer. I’m writing a mystery novel. It’s about a girl who has amnesia. She becomes close to this cop. He’s actually trying to kill her.”

“There are so few suspects in mystery novels. That’s the problem.”

“That’s the mystery. There is always something important that connects the killer and the victim.”

“Or the killer wants to believe that there is a connection. Something mystical. The real world has violated that connection. In violence, he tries to correct things. To put it all back in perspective.”

“That sounds a lot like that conference. Didn’t you present a paper?”

“Yes, I did.”

“That is where I know you from. I copied down your name. I wanted to make contact with you. I never did. Here you are.”

“Yes, here I am.”

I am staring at her. She catches my glance. She doesn’t know what to make of it.

“Are you lonely, Wallace?”

“Sometimes. More so when I think about my past.”

Alea has escaped me another time. I feel like Dana knows too much. This does not seem like an accident.

“You don’t work for the police.”

She laughs.

“Really, have you been following me?”

“What gives you that idea?”

“It just seems like too much of a coincidence.”

“I guess that it does seem that way. But that’s all that it is.”

She was taking a liking to me. It now appears that I am pushing her away.

“You have a great smile,” I tell her.

She puts her glasses back on. Her eyes have tears in them. She looks away.

“I didn’t really think that you were with the police.”

“If I was, I guess that I didn’t do a very good job. You already know who I am.”

“Maybe you’re trying to get in my head. You ever wonder how hard it is to start a conversation with someone. And when you finally break the ice, you feel like telling your life story.”

“Is that how you feel now?”

“Sort of.”

“Do you feel that way about Alea?”

“I never said her name. You know that I never said her name.”

“I was sure that you said it. I guess that was chance.”

She seems more knowing than she lets on. I think that the tears were a great effect.

“Have you ever done any acting?”

“I did major in drama. But I wasn’t very good.”

“You’re excellent. You can turn your face on and off on cue. Who are you?”

“I told you.”

“Really, who are you?”

“I am your perfect victim. You are attracted to me. You want to sleep with me. But I also disgust you. You will be so disgusted that I have distracted you from your Alea that you will kill me in a rage. There is nothing to connect us because I look nothing like her.”

“You are working for the police. You think that you have found the pattern to my life. My random attractions. My weakness a quick seduction. You are better than good.”

“I’ll do whatever you want. I just want to make you happy.”

“What makes you happy?”

“I live by what other people offer me. I am happy if they are happy.”

“I want to make you happy. Happy for yourself.”

“I don’t have the part in me. I’m too driven. I know too much about myself to give in that way.”

“Are you calling it a weakness on my part?”

“It could be.”

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“I should be thanking you, Wallace. You bought it for me.”

“You found my wallet. You took your time to talk to me.”

“I guess it’s good by then.”

“We’ll meet each other again. If we were meant to meet.”

I get on the train. It is not far from where we have shared coffee. Now I am convinced that I am being followed. Alea is turning the tables on me—somehow. I was following her, now she is having me followed.”

I call up

“I’ve seen your work. It is really fascinating.”

“You want to stop on by my place.”

I know what she has in mind. I want to have sex with her until I start to forget who I am. To become the body, you end up leaving the body.

I cannot follow through with my wish. I decide to meet her at *Occasions*.

“The lighting is subdued in here.”

She is an artist. She would notice something like that.

I can smell her. I can taste her. Just sitting with her satisfies my urge to be with her. We are polite. She gets a little tipsy. I kiss her passionately. The I say good night. I embrace the night.

Alea is near. I can feel her. She is hiding around a corner. She is getting closer. I know that feeling. I am also sure that Dana is following me. She is pulling that net closer around me.

A detective comes to see me.

“Do you know an Alea Jones?”

“You were already here to see me?”

“Her wallet was found around here.”

“I must have her address.”

“There’s an address on the license. But it doesn’t match a real street address.”

It seems to confusing.

“That’s all that I can do to help you.”

“If you know where she is, you could tell us.”

"If I knew where she was, I 'd be there right now."

"You shouldn't try to play games with the police."

I go back to the train station where I saw Dana. It is too late to go to that coffee shop. I find a nearby bar. I am looking for her. She knows about mysteries. She can tell me what I need to know.

I don't see her in there. I see a smartly dressed woman sitting with a man. She looks at me for a moment. When he gets up to go to the bathroom, she calls me over to the table.

"Do I know you?"

"My name is Robin. I took a course from you on the novel. I wrote a story for you. You liked it. You asked if you could keep a copy. It was about a missing girl. Alea."

"I remember the story. I told you that you could get it published."

"I wanted to revise it. To add some more stuff. But I got loaded down with my business classes. I'm here with my friend. I'd like you to meet him."

"I really should be going. I came in here to find someone. I actually live pretty far from here."

"I really do what to talk about my story."

"You have my email. It hasn't changed."

"I will email you, Professor Simpson."

I barely recognize her from class. She had given me that knowing look. But I was simply attracted to her. I am losing focus.

I get back in my car and drive home. I see nothing of interest on the street. A rat crosses my path as I walk back to my apartment. It is hard finding a parking space tonight.

I hope that Robin emails me. I always found her attractive. I need to catch myself. I had told myself that I hadn't remembered her. Now these memories are coming back.

A story about a girl name Alea. I need to find the story.

Robin was in a tight white cashmere sweater. Her hair was blonde. I don't remember it being blonde while she was in class. My memory is already playing tricks on me. I need a good night's sleep.

The next morning I find Robin's story. It is about a girl named Ashley. Why did she tell me that it was about a girl named Alea? The story is about a man who paints a picture of a woman for his exhibition show. He does not use a model. He tries to match an image from a recurring dream. A woman shows up at the opening who looks like the woman in the painting. She wants her identity back.

"I've been feeling strange for the three months. It's as if your picture stole something from me. I've been erratic. I can't concentrate at work. I've been saying crazy things to my friends. I broke up with the guy that I've been going out with."

"I thought you were a dream. I didn't know that you were real."

"And now you think that I'm going to fall in your arms, and that will make it OK."

"The painting doesn't look that much like you."

"It looks completely like me. Let me ask someone."

Ashley turns to one of the attendees at the opening, "What do you think of the picture that Foster painted of me?"

"It looks exactly like you. It's amazing how good job he did. I feel like you can actually

reach out and touch me here.”

“You’re kidding me. You brought this woman in here with you.”

The woman contradicts Foster, “I’ve never seen her before in my life.”

“See what I’m telling you.”

“I just created the picture. It has nothing to do with a real person.”

“It looks exactly like me.”

He starts to feel haunted by her. He doesn’t everything that he can to get to know her. It disrupts his life. It is all a trick by his friend Nathan to take his paintings away from him. To get him to share his gains with his wife-to-be Ashley.

“I was looking for her for a while. She looked enough like your painting. But I had to have her change her hair. To adjust her makeup.”

“You were going to kill me?”

“No, I just wanted some of the money.”

“How was she going to take it?”

“She was going to clean you out.”

“What stopped you?”

“You found out”

Robin’s story is full of suspense. It seems too close to my situation. I want to track her down and ask her if she knows something. I send her an email. It is the same address that she had used while she was in class. But I get my email returned to me. Her email is inactive.

I find her number among my class lists. I call it. The number has been changed. There is no info on the new number. I hope that I’ll get an email from her. She promised.

Nick is talking to me about Alea, “Wallace, you are enamored with a concept. And you apply it to everyone you meet. You need a real relationship. With a real girl. Not someone that you’ve met while chasing Alea.”

“Alea is real.”

“But she left. She’s not with you anymore.”

Nick isn’t helping. He is just trying to accuse me. I know what I am doing.

The body is a mystery. It starts with a look. A glance. The eyes. A smile. A wave. She calls me over to her. I touch her shoulder. She holds my hand. We kiss. I melt with her.

She is a presence. She is an absence. She takes me over. She lives when she is not here. She becomes part of me even when she is apart from me.

“Wallace, you are hopeless.”

Robin emails me. I feel that this is the soul that I need to give me the answer.

“I’m glad that you agreed to meet with me.”

“My friend thought it was strange that you wanted to see me after all this time. It was a coincidence to see you in Alexandria.”

“It was a ways out from where I live. I’m glad that you made it in to this restaurant. It’s not that hard to find.”

“You said in your email that you reread my story.”

“I did. I feel like you can tell me something that I need to know.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said that the name of the girl in your story was Alea. But I read the story, and her

name was Ashley.”

“It’s always been Ashley.”

“I swear that you told me Alea when you were in that bar.”

“I did. It must have been a slip of the tongue.”

“You don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Not at all. I knew an Ashley. She was my best friend in high school. I’ve since lost touch with her. But I never knew an Alea.”

“The girl in the story is a lot like the Alea that I know.”

“In what way?”

“She just appeared in my life. It was some kind of weird set up, as if someone had planned it to be that way. I thought that Nick was playing a trick on me. But she had never met Nick.”

“Life is full of coincidences. Like meeting you the another night.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence. Like it’s part of a larger plan.”

“I always had a crush on you. You were my teacher. I think that we were meant to meet again.”

“You’re with that guy.”

“I know. We’ve been looking at houses in northern Virginia. But he doesn’t really know how to enjoy himself. There is no mystery in his life.”

“You’d give it all up for some mystery.”

“I wouldn’t mind a little adventure on the side.”

I feel that my life is becoming a series of disconnected adventures. Behind it all is this one core that holds it all together. I want to explore things with Robin. But she seems clueless.

I am returning from the National Gallery. To catch the train I cross a courtyard. She is sitting there. She looks up at me.

I ask her, “Do you know me?”

“No, not at all.”

“You just gave me a knowing glance.”

“I was actually looking for my ride.”

“Do you want to get a drink?”

“I don’t know you. And my friend is going to pick me up in five minutes. He should be here.”

“If he doesn’t come, do you want to take a chance? There’s a bar across the way. We could share a drink in public. Then you could come back and get your ride.”

“It wouldn’t be a chance. This has been planned for a while. You’ve planned. The forces of nature. Time. All of you have conspired to offer me this distraction.”

“If you know so much about it, why don’t you take a chance.”

“I love my life. I love what I have.”

“When was the last time that you really did something risky.”

“When I was younger. All that I did was risky. I lost everything. I almost went to jail. I am what I am because I stopped taking risks.”

“Even what you have now is a risk. Your friend could decide not to come. He could get in an accident. You *could* meet someone else.”

“I haven’t met anyone else.”

She stares in my eyes. She was meant to stop me. She had planned it with the forces of time. Here we are together for this brief moment. She has already taken the time to hear my argument. She is wondering what to do.

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Alea.”

She gives up on her ride too easily.

“I don’t think that he was coming.”

“You have beautiful eyes. I think that’s what captivated me. I was just on my way. Heading back to my place. I saw you look up. You caught my eye.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” She smiles. It lights up the dingy bar.

“It’s bizarre. We do one thing differently. We change the pattern. And then everything else seems to follow from that.”

“There’s this pattern just because you want one. I’m living my life entirely separately from you. I have my own fantasies.”

“But the two worlds can coincide for those brief moments.

I look over at her. I want to kiss her.

“I’m not going to kiss you now.”

“When?”

“Maybe later. After dinner.”