

15. BLISS

We met ten years ago. For a while she wanted to leave me. She even disappeared for a while. But she finally came to her senses. I did too. I turned over a new leaf. We live in a beautiful home in northern Virginia. It is far away from the city so that I can see the stars at night. I love it here. Ashley works part time at a real estate firm she spends the rest of the time writing at home. She also cares for our son when I am not there.

I still have my doubts. I see a girl glance at me in the park, and I think that I could whisk her off to Paris and start a new life. Of someone waves at me while I am on the train, and we could hop the red eye to Vegas and take a chance on a new life. But I do nothing.

Maybe I like what I have because it is easy. I don't have to do anything, and it's all there. Everything that I want. My share of paradise. No skeletons in the closet. No ghosts under the bed. This is the life that I have always dreamed about.

I never work too hard. I don't want to kill myself before my prime. I teach in the city. At American University. I drive my car to the train. It is a leisurely drive. This is the life that I love.

I am getting ready to leave for home when she stops by the office.

"I don't know whether you remember me. I was in your class a few years ago. I wrote a story. You said that it was good. That I could get it published. I have it with me."

"What's your name?"

"Stephanie."

She is about to give her last name when I interrupt, "I remember now. This is really a bad time. I'm going to catch my train."

She looks forlorn.

"I guess that I could catch another train. Sit down."

I am sitting across the desk from her.

"You revised the story."

"I did. But I feel like I am at a dead end."

She is looking directly in my eyes. I try to look away.

"I feel that this is a big deal for me. I feel like everything in my life is falling apart. Except this. This is something real. I remember what you said."

"I'm probably not the best person to ask for life advice. My life is hardly a stellar example. I'll do what I can to help."

"I feel like my character is starting to mirror my life. When I was in your class, I was living at home. Working part-time. Everything seemed to make sense. But then I graduated. I got a job. Not the one I wanted. The guy that I was going with left me."

"You're a very attractive girl. Why would he want to do that?"

She looks at the door, then she again stares at me.

"I don't know at all. I'm sure that you have a great life."

"I love my wife Alea. I've got a lovely son. We have a great home."

"Nothing strange at all."

"I suppose not. What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. I always felt this thing about you. This mystery. Like you were leading a

secret life.”

“I think every guy on the southbound home to Virginia thinks about some romantic possibility. But maturity is about separating reality from fantasy.”

“I bet you told that to yourself when you started grad school.”

“To be honest with you, that’s exactly how it happened.”

“That’s probably why you teach the way that you do. You seem so secure in yourself. I still think that there’s a mystery in there.”

“It’s like writing. There are a lot of writers who can create these pop twists. But it takes a master to realize what is really important in life. Who can create a character with a real personality. Someone who sees the details of life and can make something meaningful amidst the chaos.”

I feel that I am sounding too over-confident. She probably sees me huddled over a copy of Jane Austen, smoking a pipe, and drinking brandy.

“I envy you.”

“I don’t want to make it sound all boring. I like to get out and have fun.”

“When was the last time that you really had some fun.”

“I go to an occasional concert. There’s this great amphitheater near where I live. We come into the city for dinner now and then. We also have some great places near where we are. But it’s hard doing too much with a young son to take care of.”

“See! Your life is preventing you from following your dreams.”

“My life is what I’ve always dreamed of. All the other stuff is just childish silliness.”

I feel like I am insulting her question. I continue, “It all makes sense in good time.”

“I’m sure that your wife sometimes thinks the same thing.”

“I know there are days that she feels like killing me. She always complains that I keep too much stuff. I won’t throw out my junk. As if I live in the Wallace Simpson National Museum. But it’s all in good fun.”

“You really love her.”

“I do.”

“You aren’t cynical. You believe in true love.”

“I think that I do.”

“You seem hesitant. I know that I am. If you had asked me two years ago, I would have been as optimistic as you.”

“You’ve had some temporary set backs. There are loads of guys out there for you.”

“Do you find me attractive?”

“I told you what I thought about you. It wouldn’t be appropriate of me to say anymore.”

“Which means that you want me, but you don’t want to be the first to say it. Can I close your door?”

“It might not be a good idea.”

“I don’t think your colleagues would like to hear you talk about cheating on your wife.”

“I’m not talking about anything of the kind.”

She slides the door closed. I sit back in my seat.

She smiles. “I had you going there.”

“You like playing games.”

“Let’s just say that everything is on the table. That is how a good writer works. Nothing is left to chance.”

“You sound like you hardly need me.”

“I do need you, Professor Simpson. I need *you*.”

There’s a wide line of fantasy that keeps our everyday life going. We can walk that line for a while, and when the full breath of our real life blows upon us, we can return from the fantasy. Stephanie is taking me on a journey. I just have to know when to get off.

“I’m sure that this flatters you. You probably wish that every girl that you see wants you. But you can rush home to your prize in the sky.”

“Something like that. So all this is in your story.”

“That’s why I thought that you’d remember me for sure. Like you remember anything important in your life. The story of Alea. Isn’t that what you call it. As long as you stay here, as long as you don’t go home, you are becoming part of my story. You leave and you go back to what you’ve been living everyday.”

“If I go along with you, it appears to be all imaginary. If I go back home, it’s real. I have a house, a wife, a real life.”

“I’m giving you life like you’ve never known it before.”

“You told me that your life is crumbling around you. Now you’re offering me the palace suites.” I hope that I am not cutting too closely.

“It’s that risk that only you can take.”

“How do I do that?”

“You have to give in to your desires?”

“I could get arrested for that.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

With the door closed, her perfume fills the room. I wonder how long this can go on for. This is not something that I can just do and forget about. Even if I could hide this one time from Ashley, it would get to me. I would have let myself down.

“This is the thread that you pull at. And the whole fabric comes apart. Professor Simpson, you’ve been pulling on it all this time. But you just run your hands along it, and then you let it go. This is your chance to finally check it out. See what a good tug will do.”

“And you know that I won’t be able to stop once I start.”

“This is the movie preview. You’ve got your popcorn. You’re getting a little taste, Now you want the whole box. All of it for yourself.”

“Stephanie, do you like popcorn?”

“I love it.”

“Where can I catch this movie?”

“I don’t think that it’s playing the suburbs. It’s a little more daring fare than that.”

I wonder if she is preparing evidence to blackmail me. I have so much to lose. Too much. It’s not like I can walk away from my life, my mortgage, all my obligations. I am committed permanently.

“This is your road to ruin. You need to get ticket before the train leaves.”

“Speaking of trains, Stephanie, I do have a train to catch.”

“There are other trains.”

"I should call my wife."

"Of course you should. But she's probably doing something right now. She'll just say *yes, honey*, and then she'll hang up. Give it a while. Let the pot boil."

"How do I do that?"

"You need a drink. You rush home too soon, and she won't even notice that you've come home. She's preparing dinner. Or is it your turn to cook tonight?"

"We were going to eat out."

"You could eat out with me." She puckers her lips at that moment.

"I don't know why you're doing this. I know that your friend left you."

"Actually, I left him. He was making eyes once too often at my friend."

"Like your making eyes at me."

No sir. Like your making eyes at me. I hope you know the difference."

"I'm not sure. But I'm learning. I just wish the characters that we perform had more depth."

"You mean less sex and more thought."

"A little like that."

"Or sexy thoughts. Isn't that how it works. It's ethics for the rest of the world and poetry for yourself. A good recipe. That works for you. Each time, love is new."

"I have become a stand in for your man. You're going to get your revenge on me."

"I'll take what I can get."

"You don't really mean that?"

"I know."

"So why did you pick me?"

"You're here. You keep office hours. I knew where to find you."

"Those office hours are over."

"You haven't left yet."

"You seemed like you needed me."

"I think that we're past that."

"Where are we?"

"We're in the home stretch. Where you make a dash for home, but you realize that you've forgotten something. Something like your wallet. Instead, it's your identity."

"I actually forgot my wallet at home today."

"I guess that I'm buying you dinner. A good thing that my parents have money."

"I think that's how risk works in this world. The first thing that we bet on is the silver spoon that we're born with."

"I don't get it."

"You know the saying 'Born with a silver spoon in her mouth.'"

"I know the other saying, 'Born with a silver spoon up her nose.'"

"Is that your life?"

"Not at all. I just drink. It lubricates the libido."

I gasp.

"I thought that I saw a mouse."

"Stephanie, it is getting late."

“You better call your wife.”

“I really don’t want to do that.”

“You don’t want to disrupt a perfect life.”

“I never said that it was perfect.”

“Just the closest thing to it. When you were with your guy, could someone have told you different.”

“I wish that they had.”

“You would have never listened.”

I’m listening pretty good now.”

“I’m only saying what you want to hear.”

“Like you need a drink before you catch the train.”

“I know a place across from the station. I can stop there on the way. Is that OK?”

“Sounds perfect.”

It is a relief to escape the privacy of the office. I feel as if she has been grilling me to elicit a confession.

“I’m sorry. I did nothing?”

“What?”

“Nothing, Stephanie. I was just thinking to myself.”

I gather my papers in my briefcase.

“You’re not forgetting something.”

“Not that I know of.”

“You’re sure?”

We walk briskly to the station. The bar is mildly crowded with people who have just got off work.

“What do you want to drink?”

“I thought that you had no money.”

“I have enough money for one round. I borrowed money at work.”

The alcohol gets me going. I am having the most bizarre thoughts about Stephanie. Our meeting now seems like fate. Pre-ordained.

“Professor, I feel like you have some deep knowledge. That’s why I sought you out. But I have always found you rude. Almost a brute. You were always so nice in class. And when you offered me help, you were patient. That’s all part of your mask. Your home life is the same thing. You’re hiding behind your wife. You’re really this animal who thinks about women in this one way. All your mystery is shit. You just want to roll around on the carpet with an attractive girl like a wild charging in from the woods. You’re waiting for someone to pull that mantel off so that you are naked with your desires.”

“Stephanie. I let you go on because there may be some truth to what you’re saying. We all have those desires. But there are other things in our life that take over. We don’t have to give in to that side of ourselves.”

“You will give in. Your wife knows that about you. That’s what attracted her in the first place. She thought that she could tame you. You’re wilder now than you’ve ever been.”

“Fantasy is fantasy.”

“Some part of it is real. It’s how you give yourself to other people. It’s how you hold

yourself back. I can tell that you're trying to hold yourself back right now. Have another drink. Let's see how you do with that."

I can feel this brain fever coming over me. Whenever I get an idea, decide on a plan, I just zero in on it with full force. That is how I feel at this moment.

"Are you buying now?"

"I thought that you had a train to catch."

"The station is across the way. You've got a business proposition. I owe it to you to hear you out."

"I'm glad that you're coming to your senses. Or should I say, your senses are taking over where your reason fails."

She is bopping her head to the music on the juke box.

"You do like to party."

She comes back with some really stiff drinks.

"They gave me doubles."

"Watch out world!"

I am giving in too easily. The train station appears farther and farther away. I feel like I will have to crawl just to make it there.

"What if your life had never happened. If it was all starting now. How would you live it?"

"I don't know."

"You're not married. You don't have a kid."

"I really don't know what I'd do differently. I think I'd look for someone like my wife."

"And she thinks the same thing?"

"I hope so."

"She's off in the suburbs plotting here little deviancy while you're agonizing with your conscience. When something good comes along you can't worry about it."

"I can't think like that. Everything that I have is tied up in the house, in my family. It's my investment for the present. For the future. It makes me what I am."

"So you'd fight if someone tried to take it away."

"You're damned right I would. What do you have in mind."

She shakes her head. She giggles. "You have no idea what the rest of the world goes through."

"I've got a mortgage, a car payment. Eventually I'll have to pay for private schools, braces for my son. That doesn't even include college."

"Private school. There are people in the city who don't know where their next meal is coming from."

"I vote Democrat. I favor federal representation for the District of Columbia. No taxation without representation."

"You're such a rebel. Just as long as your comfortable."

"Stephanie, you should talk. Your parents paid for everything up to a few years ago."

"I pay now. I pay dearly."

"You can always run back to them. It's your own fault that you squandered their legacy."

"That's a cheap shot."

“You asked if I could fight.”

She is up in my face. I don't know whether to push her back or to kiss her.

“I'm a girl. Are you going to take a swing at me?”

“You're a girl. Is that your excuse.”

“You live in the security of your fenced in suburban world dreaming of the unsolvable crime. Crimes go unreported all the time in the city because no one gives a damn. You love to play detective to make up for what you can't do as a man.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That the little lady is probably changing your diapers too.”

“My son is out of diapers, thank you.”

“It was a metaphor.”

“It wasn't a very good one.”

“It sounds like you could use another drink.”

I am game to her suggestion. I am ready for anything at this point.

“You really got me going?”

“Is it really worth that much too you.”

“For the moment it seemed like it was.”

“You need some way to get rid of all that excess energy.”

She is staring right at me. She blocks my exit. I wait for her to buy another round.

The doubles are slamming me. She is loving it. She is playing hostess to my quick demise. Any sense of decorum is swiftly going out the window.

“Where do you live now, Stephanie?”

“About fifteen blocks from here. It was the same place that I had when I was in school. I held on to it just in case. Why? You want to come over.”

“I don't think that would be a good idea.”

“That means no?”

“I have a drink to finish before I make plans.”

I end up calling my wife to tell that I will be late. She doesn't answer, but I leave a message. There is no way that the two of us can walk. I get the train to Stephanie's place. I have already crossed the line. I haven't touched her. I haven't even thought of touching her. It's just the idea of being here. I've lost all sense of direction.

“Wallace, you can still get a train out of here.”

“I've got an eye on my watch.”

I am not looking at my watch. I only have eyes for her.

“I'm glad that you came back with me.”

“You're not working for my wife, are you.”

I catch a late train back to Virginia. The wait is long. I am planning what to say to Ashley when I get home.

She is not back yet. It is graduation for the swim class. The mothers have gone out after practice. Our son is staying with a friend.

She comes in around 12. She is a little trashed.

“Honey, you left your wallet on the stairs this morning.”

“I realize that. I wanted to come home and get it, but the day was just too busy.”

“How did you manage at the office?”

“I borrowed some money from Trey.”

“That was lucky.”

The next morning I decide to go in late.

“Ashley, Nicholas has been writing stories. Weird stories. Detective mysteries with murders in them.”

“He’s definitely our son.”

“He’s been watching too much television.”

“You can’t say that.”

The wear and tear of each day is showing in her face. She can feel the strain.

There are thoughts that I keep to myself. Some days I just want to drive my car right through our picture window. That will show everyone how I feel

I learned something really strange the other day.

“What is it honey?”

“A couple of years before we bought this place, they found a woman’s body in the living room. The place was abandoned. She had been murdered.”

I wish that you never told me that.

I feel that my story ends here. But there is unfinished business with Stephanie. I only hope that I still have her number. I have a vague idea where her place is. But I was more than a little drunk.

I really don’t know how I made it home from the terminal station in Virginia. I must have been driving on automatic pilot. My wife was flying herself so she never asked if I had been drinking.

Tonight I am sitting on one side of Stephanie’s couch. She is on the floor on the opposite end, propped up against the couch. She has her story with her. She is looking through it.

“If you keep coming here, this could become a regular thing.”

“My wife would eventually suspect something.”

“What is she doing tonight?”

“Some neighborhood improvement thing. I told her that I would be late.”

“What if you missed the last train.”

“I could try to get a ride.”

“What if it’s too late for that.”

“There have been a few times that I haven’t made it home. I got by.”

“What if you never had to go back at all. If you just concentrated hard enough this could be your life.”

“I don’t think my imagination is that good.”

“What if they discovered your body here. What would she think?”

“I know that she wonders on some days. All my temptations at the school. I don’t think that she has time to think about it.”

“Does she trust you?”

“It used to be a matter of trust. It was the way that I was. I didn’t act the way that I did

because I felt guilty. I just wanted it to be that way.”

“There’s not a little guilt now.”

“I don’t even remember kissing you. There’s really nothing that I have to worry about.”

“That way you can’t lie. You simply have no recollection.”

“I don’t think that we did anything below board.. We never really crossed any lines. You just nursed my drunkenness.”

“I was pretty gone myself.”

“You were charming.”

She gives me a big smile. Her eyes light up.

“I was. I would have taken advantage of you.”

“I’m glad that we’re both on the same page.”

“I’m not going to spread some scandal about you,. Not yet anyway.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“A couple of more tries at you.”

“That I would not mind.”

I try to remember if this was how Ashley and I started. There is a bitter tone in Stephanie’s delivery that probably doesn’t suit the neighborhood garden club. She is thinking about planting other weeds anyway.

“The sin hasn’t really set in,” she declares.

“I think forgiveness is a given in our community.”

“Where the past is truly that.”

“I think that some people have it rough out there.”

“Take a drive on the East Side, you’ll know what balance is.”

I am getting my courage from just such a reality. My house is a world away from trouble. Stephanie is still trying to tiptoe the razor’s edge.

I hate how our encounter is bringing me back to something real in my life. I ought to respond that way to what I have in the suburbs. It is my safe and protected life. Everyone wants some modicum of the same.

“You know how it starts. You pay attention to the least detail of her behavior, how she butters a piece of toast. As the years go by, you couldn’t care less whether she’s dropping crumbs on the ground. That’s how it all seems to go.”

“Wallace, is that your summary of marital bliss?”

“It goes along with the phrase *happily married*.”

“Sometime you need something else just to make what you love bearable.”

“The contract doesn’t get written like that. Arty lover in chic neighborhood is the bonus with your wife. That would just give her licence to mess around on me. I think that is what I’d hate the most.”

“That’s where all this fiction comes from. You’re trying to escape your mundane existence.”

“I think that there is a point that I actually do escape it. I haven’t concentrated on it enough.”

“You’re waiting for a kiss from a princess like me.”

“We probably should continue your story another time. Come see me on Wednesday

morning.”

“That is a very adept transition, Professor.”

The train ride seems momentaneous. Driving home, I am much more reflective. I am losing this battle. It has always been the same. I am just looking for someone new to blame. Ashley is being too perfect. I have to look to Stephanie as the source of my new doubts. I wish that I could talk to someone about this. The moment that I give any of it credibility means that I am going to follow through. No wonder people love mysteries. It gives boring moments like this a sense of real purpose. I’m acting like a worm. I want to be inspired by a cause. I could even be a spy.

Ashley is asleep when I get home. The garden society must have been too stimulating. I decide to pop in a movie in the DVD player. A second rate Hitchcock imitator. I could write stuff like this. It could get me out of my teaching gig. I have become too staid. No wonder I am so short with Stephanie. She appears to offer me the only breath of fresh air in years. Why am I choking the smoke? I entertain all these possibilities while I watch the film. If Ashley were only more conniving, I would have my excuse. This is getting old.

After the film is over, the house is dreadfully quiet. This is how an intruder feels. There are no welcoming voices. I slip up the stairs with a darker motive. Fortunately, no one hears me get ready for bed.

Being on neutral turf, I hope that Stephanie can no longer exercise her advantage. On Wednesday morning, I soon realize that she herself is the advantage. I am overwhelmed. She has also revised her story. That lends more credibility to her case. I feel like a defendant who is facing mounting evidence against him. A confession seems like my only option.

“I’m not really in to slow torture.”

“Wallace, I didn’t really come here to hurt you.”

“Killing me with kindness.” Her smile is adorable. I have quickly forgotten dear Nicholas.

“So in one version of the story the wife and mistress work together to trick the husband. That only seems like a fair end.”

“Why? It isn’t fair to the husband.”

The man treats them both the same. They are devoted to him. A woman needs to assert her independence.”

“A woman can be in a partnership with a man”

“Like you’re doing now, Wallace.”

“That’s why I decided to change our meeting to the office. It is much more appropriate.”

“For you to get away with your little game.”

“You’re accusing me a agin.”

“You love it. You get chance to get away with your shit.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re search for the impossible woman.”

“Impossible how.”

“Impossible to find. Impossible to hold. She’s you’re killer. Your castration nightmare.”

“How do you know about that?”

“That’s who I am?”

She makes a motion as if she is stabbing me.

“Not here, Stephanie.”

“It’s your perfect fantasy. You’re a spy. And you’re seeing how adept you are at sneaking around on your wife. It only lasts so long. She’ll eventually find out and divorce her.”

“What are you telling me to do? Act first.”

“You’re already acting first. You’re committing yourself. And now it’s too late.”

“She’s waiting at home.”

“She didn’t return your last phone call. You know you’re not going to be as attractive if she dumps you. It’s not that you’re no longer a challenge. It’s that you’re used up. If she doesn’t want you, why should anyone else.”

“Maybe we could write a novel together.”

She doesn’t take to my idea, “Why? So you can steal my ideas.”

“Did you come here to tell me that I’m all used up?” I seem dejected.

“I just came for suggestions on my writing.”

“Am I helping?”

“You’re giving me some ideas that I can actually put into practice.”

“Practice makes perfect,” I remind her. “Do you think that we can still get away it.”

“I’m not going to tell if you won’t.”

She interjects, “I reserve my right to tell.”

“You have to kiss before you can tell.”

She looks up at me and smiles. There is such fire in her eyes. I drop my pen.