

2. A DECK OF FIFTY ONE

There is an expression: *He's not playing with a full deck*. It describes someone who is not altogether mentally. He playing with a deck of fifty-one.

I am doing a magic trick. I am trying to find her in a crowd. A crowd of fifty-two cards. Four suits of thirteen cards. Fifty two cards in all. Fifty two weeks in the year. One of those weeks is her week, our week.

I will show her the deck. She will pick out a card and put it back in the deck. I will find her when I find her in a crowd of fifty one. I need one card for myself. I am also in the crowd. I am looking for myself. I am not playing with the full deck. Then there is the card for her.

I am a particularly bad magician. I have to mark the cards. It still is not good enough. I have to go every card. I have to flip them over. I have to flip out.

I am impatient. My trick is not succeeding. I am trying to find her in the crowd. She has disappeared. I have very little to go on. When I find her, I'll just go crazy.

I am good at my game of solitaire. I am missing a card. But there are so many others. I play carefully. I cannot win. I can only lose.

I cannot lose. There are only so many possibilities. And I will go through them all. Methodically. Painstakingly. I will find her card. I will find her.

You flip through the deck of cards. You are looking for your card. Someone to pick you out. Something that says you are the one. The perfect candidate, willing or unwilling. What is the connection? It is in the cards. How does the detective figure it out. Find the pattern in the cards. Go through each one in the deck. The long and laborious process.

You want what everyone else wants. You are driving along. Your car veers off the road. You hit a bystander. You are driving too fast, just fast enough to lose control. If you had been more in control, you could have chosen the path of the car. You would have picked where it was going to go. Instead the car assumes a life of its own. It's not your fault. The car hit a pedestrian.

You have what everyone else wants. You seem to have made friend. A new neighbor. Someone says hi to you. Tells you that the mail is here. Helps you get your car started. Someone is looking in window. You leave your curtains open. He can see into your place. He is looking at your. Wave back. He only wants to be like you. To be your friend. Do you like your neighbor?

Can he guess what's on your mind? It's in the cards. One among many. You put your card back in the deck. And the one that you picked is back in there. He only has fifty two possibilities. Take one off for him, his card, a deck of fifty-one.

"I think that I have your card."

I've got your number. I know where you live. I'm ringing you up.

If I follow you home, I better be quick. Otherwise, I might get traced next time that I try the same thing. We're both looking for a little action. Only if I am quick will I not turn into the perfect suspect.

You are my perfect candidate.

We smile.

You make a list of all the people that smiled at you. You will need the list for evidence.

Look up and down that list. This is the connection to your killer.

If you had not smiled back, he would not have felt encouraged. This is what connects you together. Remember someone is not playing with a full deck. He takes his encouragement even when he is ignored. You are only preparing to love him more.

It would be easier if you didn't look at all. You wouldn't need to make a mental note. You ignored what happened.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

There is a connection between us. I see it in your eyes.

Check the eyes for that clue. Going through all the images. Looking for the right face, the face card in the deck of fifty two. That is the one. You know how to check him out before he even catches you doing it. If he were the one, you would avoid him. But you need to get closer to make sure. And the closer that you get, the more that it turns you on. You need to get jacked higher, some deeper thrill. The edgeplay. You taunt him to do it for you. To do it to you.

There is nothing perfect about this crime. You want it messy. He picks you because you match. He will eventually be matched in the same way.

It would be perfect if it didn't match. But all fifty two cards can be matched from suit to number, from face to marking. From artist to victim. You are mine.

He follows you home.

"I wanted you to come with me. I wanted you to come to my home. You are perfect, a perfect stranger."

But are you a stranger to love like this. You have everything that I expected. Will you meet me in a public place? That will be safe.

You realize how frightening that is. That is the most frightening thing of all, the public place. Do you recognize why you are afraid?

Once you realize that he is watching you, he will have to accept your dare. That he cannot do what he wants because everyone is watching. That is why he wants to act the way that he does. Everyone is watching and they will not expect him to do anything. Everyone is watching, and no one is noticing.

You are his first, but by no means his last. He picks you out. He has the nerve. You have told him that it is OK. You have given him the signal. You have given him your consent. He wants to follow you. You have told him that he can do what he likes.

Is this the evidence that he needs? Is this the evidence that a detective needs?

When does he make his approach? When does he let her know that he is watching?

"I was looking at you."

"I know. I was watching."

He has been made. He isn't very good at a stake out. He is a terrible suspect.

"That's the one. He's the guy that's been following me."

He is the perfect suspect. He is the spouse. They meet for a reconciliation.

"I thought that you still loved me."

"I didn't want to come here."

"Why did you come?" He is downtrodden.

"I thought that we still had something between us."

"We do."

“What’s that?”

“You came. That’s a first step.”

“I came because I didn’t want to feel guilty. I didn’t want to think that I was the one who couldn’t make this work.”

“But it’s not going to work.?”

“From the moment that I sat down, I knew it was the same old thing.” She does not want to allow him to dissuade her.”

“You don’t know for sure!”

“You haven’t changed a bit.”

“You have to give me a chance to change.”

She knows that she can push him into becoming the perfect suspect. She can hold out hope and then snap it away. Make him know that her hope is his life or death.

He needs to get up and walk away. He needs to take away his motive. But if he has a motive, she cannot suspect him completely. Otherwise, she would have avoided the meeting.

“I shouldn’t have come here. But we have money matters to settle.”

She needs to let the money matter fade into her past. It is the one hold that he has over her. He will use it to his advantage.

She has acquiesced to him. It is her sign of weakness. For a moment, she wants him to take her back. This provokes his rage. He has tasted his triumph only to draw it away from him. He is now the perfect suspect. She can use that to her advantage.

Nick complains, “You are wasting my time with these abstractions.”

“But to propose a perfect crime is to play a mental exercise.”

I feel that we have already been through this together. Nick is leading me astray.

“Nick, is this your story? Does it cut too close to home.”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“You could play the role,” I tell him emphatically.

Nick is correct. The story has been led astray. But that is the way that it is meant to be. The wife has the game going. She will make sure that he is picked up for the crime.

“Is she planning her own demise just to blame it on him?”

“That is the idea. It needs to be more complex than that. She wants the satisfaction of seeing her plan in action. She can’t let him kill her; otherwise, she has failed.”

“So what does she do?”

“She needs a substitute.”

“I am beginning to get the hang of things.”

“A body double.”

“Any kind of double. Just to make him think that he has got the right one.”

“Then she wants him to go through with it?”

“You are getting the idea, Nick”

“What am I to make of it.? Wallace, is any of this real?”

“His name is Jason. Hers is Lydia. Perhaps you know them.”

“No, I do not.”

“You will.”

“Lydia is going down. All the way down. But she doesn’t want to go down herself. So

she is going to have Jason do the work for her. She is going to turn him into her killer. But she doesn't want to die. She wants Jason to be afraid of her. Afraid of even saying a cross word to her. But he is so frustrated. He wants to hurt her. She likes it that way."

"Why doesn't he leave?"

"He can't. She is his world."

"How is he a perfect suspect? He is the only suspect that wants to hurt her."

"That is the point. He is not going to kill her. He is a prototype."

"That makes her a prototype too. He is searching for a stand in for her."

"You understand too well, Nick."

"It's basic psychology. That is the reason for the perfect suspect. A man wants to hurt his wife. But he is impotent in his social milieu. He looks for somewhere that he can act out his frustrations."

"It sounds like you, Nick."

"What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing, Jason."

"Go on with your story."

"I feel like there's not much to tell."

"I'll take over then. He want to get to know you. Just enough so that he feels the he really knows you. But then he wants to destroy you."

Nick knows who we are talking about. The portrait seems a little too close to home. Wishful thinking has caught up to him. What he cannot do is realized in what he can do. That is all the more frightening.

"Nick, have you ever met Lydia?"

"Has Jason met Lydia? Is that your theory?"

I try to get a reaction from Nick, "He needs to know her. Know her too well. He meets these other girls who play the part of Lydia."

"But does there have to be an original?"

"There are fifty two cards in the deck."

"Take one out for Jason. Now you are not playing with a full deck."

"Any one of those cards could be her card. If he can just guess her card, he can get into her mind."

"Wow, you guessed my card how did you do that?"

"My name is Jason. Jason the magician."

Nick interrupts me, "He marks the card. The deck is already arranged so that the card goes into a place that he can quickly recall. She does not see his sleight of hand. He is messing with her."

"What is her name?"

"It's your story."

"What was her name last night?"

"You're trying to guess my card, Wallace. You're not even a very good detective."

"Hell is what we love but can't put our hands on."

"Do you want to get some coffee?"

"I have to get to work."

“Another time. After work.”

She loves his magic. She wants to see another trick. Perhaps something with a larger deck of cards. He has already found what he wants. He has written her story in large type. Maybe she is distracted and can't see what he has written. Maybe she is self-destructive.

“What's your name?”

“Lydia.”

Nick objects, “I thought that Lydia was the catalyst, the one who makes it all happen. Now you have made her the perfect victim.”

“That is why Lydia is so potent. She knows how to make Jason do her bidding.”

“Does she control him, and is she also the perfect victim?”

“She wants to drain him of all his power. Make him think that he has found what he wants. Then make it impossible for him to do anything.”

“The story seems cyclical. He has to meet Lydia before he wants to meet her. Lydia has to send him out to find Lydia. All the characters can't be named Lydia.”

“That's why I need a double!”

We don't have a story if they don't try to escape themselves. She decides to skip work.

“That's always been my dream. Just to quit my life. To leave it all behind. To start again”

She isn't thinking about paying rent. She wants to pay for something greater.

“Do you live near here?”

“I live in a run-down place near the waterfront.” She knows that it is too soon to invite him in. She want him to take her to somewhere fascinating.

“I don't have many tricks in my bag. I can only offer you my humble self.”

That is a beginning for her.

Nick seems bored.

“How long is this story going to go on?”

“Until it strikes a nerve. I can't have the climax in the beginning of the story.”

He doesn't really want to get to know her. Not in that way. He doesn't want to go to her place and see the box of empty tuna cans that she is saving to recycle. He just likes the idea that she is struggling. That she wants something better. That she has not been beat down by the failure of her dreams to correspond with reality.

Maybe he can share his vision with her. They can live the same life in a very different way. For him, her life is only a facade like in a Hollywood set. She can pretend to visit melancholy and suffer in squalor. But after the performance is over, he expects her to rush back to a world of leisure that he associates with her. That is why he loves the mask of sadness that she can don for her soliloquies. He can imagine himself as her audience of one ready to make swift rescue after she has revealed herself.

If she feigns more dire straits, that will only make him feel more sympathy. It will also convince him of his initial belief that her condition is only an act to influence. He wants to indulge this side of her more. He needs to be shocked by the scampering of the rats. He relishes being sickened by the other vermin crawling in the place. This is not a home, only a way station on the road to something bigger and brighter.

If she feels crushed by life, he will bear her suffering. He will turn her rancor into

affection. She cannot avoid his concern. He offers her what she cannot find for herself. It makes her feel more alive. The cuts deep into her psyche so that he can bandage the wound and lead her to a new salvation. They are tied by something cosmic.

Nick grasps the idea, “She has made herself an open book so that he will expose her soul to her.”

“She wants to hold his heart in her hand so that she can crush it. She is so calculated in her suffering.”

“He’s been waiting to be rescued.”

“She is his Florence Nightingale.”

“Nick, he knows that he is diseased. And there is little that he can do on his own. She had created the ultimate dependence.”

He needs to risk something if his affection is to proven real. Such a pledge might offer her an escape from her sordid paradise. He is ready with any resources that he can offer. At this point, he is almost as destitute as her. But they tie their fortunes together. She rides his trip to prosperity. She has reminded him all along of this knot that binds them. Now she will pull it hard so that it his noose.

Her primary tool has been her love for him. She has played it with finesse. Now she will have to withdraw its opiate if she is to work her power. She applies her pressure with sheer acumen. He does not see it coming. And at that point it is truly too late.

He admits that he would do anything for her. She tramples upon his affection. She has never really needed it. At least, she was able to crawl out of her perdition. She now radiates his beneficence. He has denied himself all along. He has lived through her. She has trained him so well. She can withdraw her love. Her cleverness seems beyond reproach. She claims that he has always been jealous. Now the green monster has got the best of him. He seethes with his poison.

“It is the purest form of a mutation,” Nick adds.

“Of course it is. She has used the environment as her ally. She could never go back to the disgusting origins from which she has emerged.”

This appears to be the moment that Nick wants to manifest his violent tendencies. But he seems so married to his life with Lydia that he is afraid to turn against her. The tendencies have remained buried in their time together. He thought that he had casting off that side of himself permanently. As they well up again, he is doing everything to deny that this is part of him.

Due to his desire to turn a new leaf, he is even more a mark for her con. He persists in his belief. What had formerly seemed so real and depraved, now seems like only nightmare. If he refreshes himself in the daylight, he never has to admit to a violent past. She can hardly be fully aware of this impulse on his part. She is doing everything that she can so such a feeling will not manifest itself. But there it is in full form.

Nick wonders, “Did he ever show any previous signs of psychotic behavior?”

“At the moment, he truly believes that was only a nightmare. Sure he has memories. And they might seem so real, real enough to act on again. But as long as he leads his changed existence, he hope that he will never have to look back.”

It is a sobering experience for someone who thought of himself as a wild killer to see himself transformed as a free man. He has promised himself to walk the earth in this new light.

He will not give in to his homicidal urges.

It doesn't make sense to Nick, "If he feels as extreme as he does, don't you think he can figure out that it has its origins in real experiences."

"The emotions are real. But he no longer believes that they are based on actual offenses on his part."

"The only offender is his mind?"

"Correct."

"Wow!"

Already Jason can feel his new identity impressing itself. But its hold is based entirely on Lydia's devotion. She is already plotting to derail his feelings. The clash seems fated. There is little that he can do to arrest her wrath. If he could only catch wind of her plot, what would that do for his new confidence.

She believes that she is training him for his meant-for vocation. She can see it in his eyes. They are the eyes of a killer. He is trying to guide himself out of the darkness. He is convinced that he has found his light.

"She is really taking him for a ride."

I defend her, "She thinks that she is only revealing him for what he is. If she doesn't play her cards, he will only turn on her."

"So she decides to let him loose on the world. Isn't that logic a little perverse?"

"She has to protect herself."

"She's endangering everyone else in the process."

"She can't but know how far it will go."

"How far is that?"

That's the scary part in this. It could go on forever."

She considers that she may be opening the infinite well. This could even set a pattern that might be duplicated by others. She almost hopes for this. Then she will be absolved of her need to answer for her actions.

"Maybe I influenced him in some marginal way. But these others. I have no contact with them."

Nick surmises, "Does she realize how far she has gone?"

"For the moment, let's say that she has gone nowhere. Done nothing. She has just heaped her scorn on him."

"So she has already revealed herself."

"That was a precondition to their interaction. She would show enough of herself to get him worked up. The intimacy was all about an exploration of the soul." I am guiding Nick with the precision of my argument. The key is to show enough about the boy so that he will identify himself with the portrait. It will only work if Nick is moved by the experience. He is starting to blame her. This can only be to my advantage. There has to be a Lydia in his past.

My assumption is fairly ugly with regards to him. I am not playing. I really intend to offer incriminating details about his own experience. But he seems taken by Jason's attempt to clear his name. So I continue with that vein of things.

"I assume that you like the way the story has been progressing."

Nick takes Jason's side, "I just feel that Lydia has been interfering in his progress."

“By progress, you suggest that he was pretty down and out to begin with.”

“That doesn’t make him a killer.”

“But he did have those kinds of fantasies.”

“They weren’t really fantasies.”

“OK, more than that. They were realities.”

“No, they weren’t even full-fledged enough to be called fantasies. He didn’t enjoy the recurrence.”

“Nick, you do admit to a pattern. He was progressing this way.” I have Nick cornered for the moment. He is really without recourse.

“There can equally be a pattern to the good.”

“But he has these fantasies about murdering Lydia.”

“I thought that you said the experiences predated their contact.”

“But he is focused on Lydia now.”

“So what!”

“And she is about to take away the one thing that he values. His serenity.”

“That damn bitch!” He is livid.

I can only smile. “Nick, you are only identifying with Jason’s plight.”

He works to regain his calm. He orders another drink.

“You’re playing a game with me.”

“But it only tells us something about you.”

“What can that be?”

“I don’t know. I am only trying to tell Jason’s story.”

I wonder if I can abandon my story to dig deeper into Nick’s past.

I continue my interrogation, “Nick, you are so enamored by mystery novels.”

“You have been exploiting that interest on my part.”

“I am only doing what I can to get your attention.”

“You’re really pushing too hard. I could do the same thing to you.”

“I’m not going to identify with Lydia. I am only telling a story.”

“Aren’t you ultimately blaming her for what has happened?”

“I’m only telling the story as I know it.”

“You haven’t told me that much about her.”

“I don’t really have to. It’s not her story. It’s his. Isn’t that how you like it.”

I am taking it all for my advantage. Of course, it is about her. Nick wants to identify with this story. He needs to have a fixed image of Lydia to make it work.

“How would you like her to be? Blonde. Green eyes. Five foot nine.”

“That seems a little tall.”

“That works. She has to seem a little formidable to him.”

“I’ll follow that for the moment.”

“Lydia, you look great.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s going on?”

“What do you mean? I just want to look good.”

“You just did your make up.”

"I know."

"But you're only going out for cigarettes."

"Exactly."

"You're going out!"

"I know, Jason. I'm going to the store. Why are you interrogating me?"

She knows why he is asking questions. The more that he pushes, the more that she appears to have the justification to do whatever she pleases.

"Jason, you won't let me have my life."

"What do you mean, your life? You have your life."

"Wallace, she's messing with him. Anyone would crack under her full-court press."

"Exactly my point. She is turning him into a killer."

"No one can turn into a killer at the touch of a button."

"But we all have a side of ourselves that is hard to bear. If the right situation exploits that side, it can transform into something truly frightening."

Nick is not admitting to the same logic that he applies when he reads detective novels. He begins with all the decorum of a society matron assaulted by the indecency of the blood-letting in polite company. Later on, he thirsts after the hunt. He lives for the blood. That is all that he can taste.

"Are you following me?"

"Is there a reason that I should be following you?"

She denies him with a straight face. That is enough to provoke him. But he does not want to give in. He needs the promise of a new life.

Nick sympathizes, "Is he giving her the licence to do whatever she pleases?"

"I think that she has taken that on her own."

"That is my point. She is mocking him. And then you make a big deal about his reaction. You paint her in a way that she couldn't even affect him if she wanted to. That gives her more impetus to taunt him."

"Nick, that isn't my point."

"But she doesn't need to act like a tart." Nick is restraining his venom.

"What should Jason do?"

"He needs to set down the law."

"How do you *set down* anything? Lydia is an adult."

"Jason is a man. He had his methods."

Jason has already gone too far. And she cannot pull him back. If she has a life that he has no control over, then he must find the same. He has finally complemented her brazenness.

"Lydia, you are a glutton for punishment. You are only going to get hurt."

"You're not going to do anything to me. Then you'll have nothing."

Her logic is flawless. He needs to realize his frustration. But he is paralyzed around her. He is being sent back in time. He doesn't want to end up like this again. But he has no other recourse.

The night welcomes him.

"There are so many other Lydias waiting for Jason. Once he starts, he will not know where to stop."

“You have created a monster.”

“So it all makes sense to you, Nick.”

The logic is inescapable.

“Do you love me Jason?”

“I do.”

He can sense an utter impotence flash over him. He needs to escape from her forever. That is his cue. He will attempt to start over. But it will only take him back to where he is now. He will find Lydia, another Lydia. Then dispose of her.

Nick again objects, “It sounds good. But he doesn’t have the courage to really do anything. A man is a man in the way that he uses his hands. He does not have the hands of a killer.”

“Nick, this sounds like something that you know intimately. Are your hands the hands of a killer.”

I want him to put his hands around my neck. I want to see what he can do with his hands.

“If I asked you to strangle me, could you do me that favor.”

Nick gives my request the brush off, “That’s stupid.”

“What about Lydia. Could you put your hands around her neck?”

“I don’t think so.”

“She has such a smooth neck. So inviting. You want to bite it. You’re inside her, Nick. You’ve felt this before. And the only way to prolong your arousal is by inflicting pain.”

“What are you asking me Wallace?”

“Would you let her strangle you? It would give you such a mind-blowing orgasm.”

“I don’t like to talk about such things.”

“But you would.”

“I don’t know anyone who would do that sort of thing.”

“I’ve felt your handshake. There’s a lot of power in that handshake of yours.”

“I’m a guy.”

“I’ve heard that when you’re aroused that you have the strength of ten men.”

“Wallace, I’ve also heard the opposite.”

“But what if she wouldn’t do what you wanted. You would make her do it, wouldn’t you?”

“Wallace, I am not going to give in to your perverse fantasy.”

“It’s not a fantasy for you. That’s the way that you are.”

“What are you doing? You need a drink.”

“So I can be like you, Nick. So I can imagine things that you imagine. You imagine that she likes what you’re doing to her. That’s what you feel, isn’t it?”

“I’m really not that way.”

“Nick, if you were, a few drinks would let you feel comfortable with that side of yourself.”

“I’m not a violent guy.”

I get in his face. I am almost spitting on him.

“You’re not violent, Nick.

He pushes me away. I come back close to him.

“Come on, Nick baby, show me what you’re made of.”

“Quit it Wallace!”

He shoves me a little harder. I push back. Now he grips my arms. I thrust into him.

“Is this how it happened?”

“It didn’t happen.”

“The strength of ten men.”

I push him into the wall. He grips my throat.

“Go ahead, Nick.”

He realizes how I am trapping him. He pulls his hands away. I shove him into the wall and step away. He loses his balance and almost goes down.

“It’s not very fun to be humiliated.”

“I don’t feel that way.”

“Jason, you’re not even very good in bed anymore. You get your jollies by slapping around women.”

“Lydia, I’m not like that.”

“You’re soft more than you’re hard.”

“I still have my grip.”

“What are you going to do, Jason? Are you going to strangle me while you pump away? Is that going to keep you hard?”

“I’m not like that.”

“Tell me about it. Turn over your card. What is your fortune, Jason?”

She pins him to the wall. He is in tears.

She wonders to herself how she can escape. If she changes her name, will he find her?

“I could leave you. You will never find me.”

“I know you inside and out. I am inside you. I can think like you.”

He is bluffing. But he wants to get to that point.

“Who are you?”

“I am the perfect stranger. There is nothing that you can say that will truly affect me. You can do what you will with me.”

“What kind of game are you playing?”

“Your game. You brought me here. You were the first person to ever make me feel as if I was truly alive.”

“Now what?”

“You want to take that away from me.”

“You’re the one who’s threatening to leave me.”

Nick doesn’t like my story. I am getting too good at drawing his portrait, all the variations, the nasty secrets. All the things that Nick would prefer that no one else saw.

“You’re to one who’s threatening me.”

But Jason doesn’t feel it that way. He only feels like a pawn in his own game. She is out way ahead of him. Even if he tries to stop her, he feels as if he is just playing along with her plan. He can’t even figure out what she intends.

Nick sits down at the table. He covers his face with his hands. He hates the fact that I am playing for keeps. But he wants to hear more.