

3. THE SEARCH

A courier delivers her picture in the morning. It is in a brown envelope.

“You are expected to find her,” reads the note.

How can I possibly meet these expectations? I imagine sitting in a city park or on the National Mall in the hope that she might walk by. If the picture were delivered to me, the intention is to get me to follow up the lead. She is already in my vicinity. How can I even assume this?

I study the picture. What was in her mind when it was taken? Could that be different from what is in the mind of the photographer?. I live in their ambiguous intersection. I want her to be smiling at me. I have never met her. She smiles for the photographer. But it is a genuine smile. It is as if she broke off part of a real smile and delivered it to the camera.

There is a child-like quality to the smile. She can be seen frolicking in an open field. But she has concern for her own childhood alone. She would not want to be around children. She is in a park of adults where they can treat her with that special quality only afforded to children. I imagine a small park, a place that she can dominate and not get lost in. Again, she is living her childhood exclusive of other children.

Such a park would probably be close to the road. If it were too secluded she might risk harm in the places of seclusion. She would not want to get obscured in the wooded areas of Washington. She would also avoid the tourists. It is more likely a neighborhood park. Just large enough for a couple of benches.

She is waiting for someone. She looks that way so that she will not be approached. She is actually trying to get away from someone.

I look at the photo again. Her hair is pulled back. She is wearing a top that exposes her shoulders. I am trying to memorize her image. Even with the photo, I will still remember her. If I see her, I will not look down. Her image will be printed on my mind.

“I’ve seen you before.”

“Everyone says that to me.”

“I have studied your photo.”

I have brought her to life. I can see her face. She is looking back at me. She is animated. She is nervous. She does not like to sit still. It is as if she is performing for me. She is doing a little dance. Tapping with her feet. She is playing a song for me.

“How are you doing?”

I wish that it were so simple to find her. If I concentrated hard enough, I might bring her to life.

“How can I know that she is even here in Washington? She may have been visiting. Of she came here for a meeting, but she lives in the surrounding community.”

The photo really shows little beyond her image. It offers no place reference. I have to put together my argument from her expression. She is amused. She knows how to entertain herself. She seeks an audience. I try to ignore her invitation. I turn over the picture. But I can still see that inviting smirk. She is asking me to come along in her adventure. This is just the opening. There are more treats promised if I play along. I let the smile speak for itself. She turns away from me just as I become more involved. She would claim that the interest is all on my part. So

I accord her affirmation. She is in it for herself. So be it if I want to play along. She is appealing me to go along.

She stares at me. She gives everything to the display. She wants my complete attention, no distractions. She bubbles over.

I have nothing to go on. You can't break a photo down to its parts. Each part is only an expression of the whole. She is so inviting.

If the photograph really engages my interest, I will decide to follow up. This is the intent of the person that sent it to me.

Her blonde hair sparkles. She has a healthy glow.

Sun glow.

She is lost somewhere in the crowd. The design of faces and shapes surround her. I can only see this mass of color and movement. As the crowds become larger and larger, they swallow her up.

At this moment, she has probably escaped the multitude. She is sitting in a restaurant eating. To have isolated herself, she has needed to become part of the public. To take on an identity that she shares with everyone. In this collective, she is now apart from that whole. That should make it both easier and harder to find her. She has habits that can be seen by looking at the picture. But she also knows how to blend in. She is lost in the mosaic.

I am convinced that she lives in DC proper, not in one of the surrounding suburbs. Her look says that she needs the constant challenge of the urban environment. She lives by her image. This means that she creates the necessary effort to sustain her social position. She is part of the crowd. But she is not lost in the crowd.

Others must know her. She retains a level of celebrity. The camera shot of her is posed. But there is a natural quality to it as if she does this all the time. She does not have the contours of a model. She is more independent. But she is someone known to the camera.

I am sure that she haunts the Adams Morgan area. This may make her a little too trendy. But that is part of her style. She wants the crowd to like her. I will probably find her at a gallery opening. My work seems to be much simpler than I originally thought.

I look for a copy of *City Paper*. I head for a café and sit down. I open the newspaper to gallery openings. It is late Thursday night. I locate four openings for tomorrow that seem appropriate.

I have my work cut out for me. I look up from my newspaper. The area is bustling. I watch a woman in a white dress cross the street. She has tight curls, blonde curls. She rushes to her destination. I have started out looking for the woman in the photograph. I could change my focus. I could approach the running woman.

She is now sitting at the café next door. I catch her eye. She smiles. I have picked her out of the crowd. No one else has told me to search for her. This is all of my own volition. She has her chair slightly turned away from me. We can still see each other. It is obvious that she is waiting for someone. She is late. But her rendezvous is even later. I assume it is a man. If it was a female friend, she would have been less concerned about the time. She is having an affair with the man. She is afraid of losing him to his wife or his lover. She didn't want to be late. She is in a panic.

She looks over to me to make sure that she still has it. She is afraid that the man is not

coming. But my glance reassures her. It tells her that she is wanted. By tilting her chair away from me, she is telling me not to approach her even though her looks are working to draw me in. I want to be bold. I know that I have time. He will be much later. He is playing with her emotions. He knows that she will wait for him. He is testing her, trying to see how long she will wait. I want to break her concentration. I need to take the time while I have it.

“I know that you’re waiting for someone. Let me get you a drink.”

I am being very forward. I have crossed over into the other café. I have my newspaper in my hand.

“Are you looking for an apartment?” She is looking down at the markings on my paper.

“No, I’m going to a gallery opening tomorrow. Actually a few of them.”

“I really can’t have a drink. I’m waiting for someone.”

“I know.”

“You’re not following me.”

“Not at all. Someone as lovely as you doesn’t wait in cafés by herself.”

“I’ll take that as a complement.”

She looks up at me. She has beautiful blue eyes.

“My name’s Wallace. What’s yours?”

She is bashful. She looks down.

“Sandy.”

“Let me get you that drink.”

She lets me sit down, but she is guarded. She knows that her man is coming soon. Since he is late, he might use my presence at the table as an excuse not to come close.

“Are you an artist?” she asks.

“No, I’m a writer.”

“Novels?”

“Mainly technical writing. I know that it doesn’t sound glamorous. But it lets me live around here.”

“I live in Alexandria. I work here. But I live in Alexandria.”

She is acting very friendly. She is using me to help build her confidence. She doesn’t want to give me too much leeway.

“I’m originally from Tucson, Arizona.”

“How do you like Washington?”

“It’s too cold for me. And in the summer just too humid.”

“Have you been here a long time?”

“Since I graduated from college. That was five years ago. I have a good job. I want to move some day. Not soon.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m an interior designer. I work for a firm in the city.”

“That sounds intense.”

“They are a great firm.”

I wonder if her man works with her. She seems very involved in our conversation. I wonder why she has allowed herself to be taken by this man.

How does Sandy differ from the woman in the photograph? Sandy has an air of

sophistication. But she is somewhat overwhelmed by the city. My candidate is nothing like that. I want something from Sandy. She has drawn her surety from me. I want her to offer me something in return.

“The man that you’re waiting for is never going to leave his wife.”

“Are you following me?” she is a little perturbed.

“You were in love in Tucson. What happened?”

“I grew. He didn’t.”

“But you loved him. That wasn’t enough?”

She is speaking frankly to me.

“He loved me at a moment that I sparkled with youthful vitality. It made him seem vital. He said that he loved me. But he admired my admiration of him. When I started to lose that feeling about myself, I couldn’t give him as much. He found someone else that could.”

“That sounds pretty heavy. How did you figure that out?”

“Years of analysis. I knew that I couldn’t stay in Arizona. But I didn’t want to break up. It worked up all for the best. Randy never really grew with me. He would never appreciate the city like I do.”

“But you hate the climate.”

“It’s my consolation. I think about moving to Phoenix or LA. But I’m here for now.”

She is fidgeting. She is nervous.

“So you’ve become one of us.”

“What?”

“A DC resident.”

“Yes.”

She wants me to leave. But she is still absorbed by the conversation. I find her very approachable, maybe too much so. She wants someone to lean on, someone to protect her from what she knows about herself. Her man does that for her. She wants to ask for more. That is only more heartache.

“Do you go to art openings yourself?”

“I try to go with some friends from work. I like to get out. It’s easy when you work every day to just roll up in a ball at home. When the weekends come, you spend all your time just trying to catch up. I hate it like that.”

“So you push yourself.”

“Something like that. I try to go to the gym at least twice during the week. And I rent a lot of movies when I can’t get out.”

Her man is worldly. Well to do. He offers her a promise that she cannot get from her own life. It gives him the chance to put aside all the drudgery of his domestic life. He can imagine himself in all these exotic locales. He holds out that romance for her.

“He’s really late.”

“He usually comes on time.”

He is making her wait. They have reached a crisis. But he does not want to let her go. She is too comfortable for him to let her go. He makes little effort.

“How can he meet you so late in the evening?”

“His wife is visiting her mother.”

“What an opportunity!”

“We’re going to have a great weekend.”

“Is he going to take you away?”

“A friend has a boat. We’re going to do some sailing on Chesapeake Bay.”

“We’re going to have some great weather.”

She doesn’t want to miss her opportunity. She looks at her watch. I need to hold her on. I need to keep her interest.

“Have you ever traveled overseas?”

“I studied French. I know Spanish. And I took some French courses. I was going to major in languages. But interior design seemed a better choice.”

“So you’ve been to France?”

“I wanted to go. But I could never make it over there.”

She still has dreams that her man will take her there. She is anxious. She looks at her watch. I have sustained her interest up to this point. But she wants to get going. All she can do is wait.

I think about the woman that I am searching for. I could forget about my effort. I could concentrate on Sandy. I feel that I have already figured out her mystery. But she is still captivating. She has traded her dreams for her wait. For now this seems like something permanent. Even if she gets over this one guy, there will be others who put her in the same situation. She has lost her ability to ask for more.

I enjoy her company. She is a delightful conversationalist. Tender care and she could reawaken that part of her that is now somnambulant. She orders another drink to take the edge off of her impatience. Her makes her seem more sexy. She moves her bare leg close to me. She shakes her head with an air of carelessness. She feels very physical at that moment. No worries can distract her from that feeling.

The longer that I can keep her involved in our conversation, the less likely that he will show up. I want to try out my theory.

“Maybe you could come to the galleries with me tomorrow.”

“I’d love to but I told you about my plans.”

“If the weather turns bad or something else goes wrong, you have an open invitation.”

“I’d love to see some new art.”

For the time being she strikes a pose that might be best captured in photograph or on canvas. She is trying to escape a thoroughly mundane life. I imagine her face on my photograph. I must find a way to further delay her friend.

“Do you want another drink?”

She is already taking the express out of here. Sandy has been successful at distracting me from my proper course, just as he has derailed her from whatever plans that she has for herself. She can’t really think that anything will ever come of her affair. That is its appeal. She is in tail spin. But it is fading faster than she is. How can she stop? Would I be afraid of offering what she needs? She is holding back waiting for something.

“I’m going to be really blitzed by the time he gets here.”

“Let’s leave. Call him on your cell phone from somewhere else. Tell him that you got hungry and didn’t want to wait.”

“I couldn’t do that!”

Sandy, you can do whatever you want to do.”

But she couldn’t. She was waiting for something more. She was hesitant. While she is distracted, I pull out the photograph. Anne’s photograph.

“How do you know that my name is Anne.”

“I don’t. But that’s what I’ll call you to preserve your anonymity.”

Anne has a flower in her hair. I did not notice that Sandy also has flower in her hair.

I look at Sandy’s lips. She has just applied lipstick. I want to kiss her. I see myself melting with her. She is looking into my eyes. She will not look away. I touch her hand. She holds it there for a while then pulls it away.

“I better go. Let you wait for your date.”

Sandy is upset, “Don’t go. I don’t even know that he is coming.”

“It’s still his night. I’ll make you a deal. If he doesn’t show, be back her tomorrow at 7.”

“Done. It’s a deal.” She shakes my hand, and smiles as I get up to go.

When I am home, I realize that I have forgotten my photograph. But my copy of City Paper with all the galleries is with me. Maybe Sandy picked up the photo. That is all that I know about her, her name.

I waste most the next day. I am too anxious about seeing her at the opening. My Anne. The first two openings are not really happening. They are full of friends of the artist. I really can’t strike up a meaningful conversation. The work seems rather ordinary. I decide to take a break at the same restaurant as last night.

As I get closer I notice a familiar face. Familiar face—it’s Anne.

I take a few steps back. This is the strangest thing. I cross the street so I can see her without her noticing me. I am sure that it is Anne. This is such a strange coincidence. I don’t want to approach her. I’m nervous to approach her. Why was her picture sent to me in the first place.

“Hi, I’m Wallace. I had your picture.”

“Where did you get my picture? Off the internet.”

“No, someone sent it to me.”

“That’s a likely story. You seem like some kind of psycho.”

I need to be more clever if I want to approach her. I find an empty place at the restaurant.

A waiter approaches me, “Just one for dinner.”

She doesn’t look up. I look over at her.

“Wallace.”

“Anne?”

“Anne, I’m Sandy. Don’t you remember?”

“You’ve changed your look.”

“I thought that I’d try something new. Do you like it?”

She redid her hair like the girl in the picture. Even her clothes seemed different. More youthful.

“You look great.”

I didn’t know what to really say.

“Have you eaten?”

“I was waiting for you.

“What happened to wonder boy?”

“He called after you left. He couldn’t make it. His wife was sick.”

“No, super getaway weekend.”

“Not this time. He did promise a rain check.”

“Nice of him.”

“I’m here for you.”

She gave me a big smile. I couldn’t get over the change.

“Were you following me?”

She laughed. “What are you talking about?”

She looked nothing like Sandy.

“Are you sure that you’re Sandy?”

“Who else could I be? Are you going to go to those other gallery openings?”

“It’s already getting a little late. The first two weren’t that special.”

“I want to do something different tonight. Maybe see a band at Black Cat.”

“That sounds like fun.”

I can’t imagine the old Sandy being very adventuresome. Her shoulders are exposed. I am staring at her.

“What?”

“You look great.”

She blushes.

“I’m glad that you like it. I got ready for you.”

I am lost in her eyes.

“Don’t say a thing. Just let me be her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kiss me and forget yourself.”

She looks so much like Anne.

“Are you playing a trick on me?”

“What are you talking about?”

I am with her in her apartment.

I kiss her on the ankle. I run my hand along her leg. I kiss her behind the leg. Her perfume intoxicates me. I melt in her arms and float inside of her.

I wake up with her beside me.

“Do you love me?”

The question is premature. I answer with a kiss. We sit together at breakfast. I have found her. I don’t want to lose her.

“Do you work today?”

“I’m going to take the day off. Do you want to meet me for lunch?”

I agree to see her early afternoon.

Everything has happened so fast. Is this how it was meant to be? I had taken advantage of Sandy’s situation. Now she had taken advantage of me.

This time she will be waiting for me, not for someone else. Can I forget about my Anne. My Anne was only a phantom. Sandy is real.

She is waiting in the park. The spring sun showers her. I am overwhelmed by her presence. She seems to be pure light. I fall in her arms.

“Do you like how I look?”

“You look wonderful.”

She lives by how she looks. And she looks perfect. Even when we go back to her place, she still shines with the light of the sun. I fade into her light. I move in the transparency of the air. We sway together.

We meet for dinner. I am famished. I dig ravenously into my food. I finally feel that I am home, that my search is complete.

“There’s something that I forgot to tell you.” Sandy gives me a strange look.

“What, my dear?”

“I sent the photo.”

I ask her to repeat herself.

“I found the photo that you left.”

I listen closely but I am still not sure that I have heard her right.

“I want you to take a photo of me.”

“I didn’t bring a camera.”

“I have one in my purse.”

The lighting is the same as in the original shot that I left at the restaurant. It seems like this is all a game. I take the picture, and look at the result in the viewfinder.

“I’ll print it and drop it by your place.”

She has to work the next day. She tells me that she will be unable to see me that evening.

“I’ll get the photo by for you.”

I get to the restaurant. It is Friday night. Sandy has promised to meet me if her date stands her up. She is not there. I still have two more galleries to check out.

The gallery options have discouraged me. But I need to follow my hunch.

I arrive at the third gallery. I am amazed. I see her in the window. It is Anne. She is taller than I thought.

“Are you following me?”

“I thought that you might be here.”

“I didn’t ask you to come.”

“Someone sent me your photo, Anne.”

“How do you know that is my name?”

“I assumed that it was you.”

“So they told you to meet me here.”

“I figured that out on my own. I knew that you liked art. You were in DC for the weekend. Where else would you be on a Friday evening?”

“OK, you found me. Now you can leave.”

“I didn’t come all this way for you to send me off without saying something to me.”

“What do you want me to say? That I love you. I don’t.” She is adamant. I am trying to convince her to listen.

“Don’t you have any feeling left in your heart?”

“I’m seeing someone.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s supposed to meet me here. He’s late.”

“I’m supposed to meet you here. Someone sent me your photo.”

“I sent it to you. I wanted to see what you would do. You came. You embarrassed yourself. That was my intention. Now you can leave.”

“That seems like quite a lot of effort just to embarrass me.”

She was getting angrier, “You’ve pissed me off. It was my way of getting back at you.”

All kinds of things are going through my head as I get to the fourth gallery. Someone tried to get in an argument with me at the third opening. She claimed that I knew her. That I had come to meet her. I even showed her Anne’s photo to indicate why I was even at the gallery.

I finally arrive at the fourth gallery. Everyone is about to leave. I don’t see Anne there. It’s been a great idea, but it didn’t bear fruit.

“I’m glad that you came here. I know you, don’t I.”

“Wallace Simpson. I don’t think that we’ve ever met.”

“Do we have mutual friends?”

“No. I read about your opening in City Paper. I love your work.”

The artist is very persistent.

“We’re going to have drinks afterwards. I’d love to have you come along. Wallace Simpson. Where do I recognized that name? You write mystery novels.”

“Yes, I do. I didn’t think that anyone really read them.”

“I love to read when I’m working. It helps me get ideas. I paint sort of the same way that you write your novels. I start with a puzzle.”

I am trying to concentrate. But I am distracted. I came here for a specific purpose.

The artist is still talking, “I want you to meet my wife after she comes out of the bathroom. She’s doing her make up.”

I feel cornered. The artist is so nice. Under normal circumstances, I would feel welcomed by his invitation. Now it seems like a bother.

“This is my wife.”

I have to turn to look at her. It is the girl in the photograph.

“Hello, my name is Andi. I’m Tom’s wife.”

I am lost in my gaze.

“Wallace, Wallace.”

I snap out of it.

I ask her, “Have we met before?”

“Honey, I said the same thing to Wallace?”

I take out the photo. I look on the back. It’s an invitation to an opening. This opening. It’s addressed to me.

“Wallace, that’s one of my photos. It’s over here.”

He pulls me over. It is a photo of Andi. I wonder how he got my address.

“We probably have mutual friends.”

Andi does not take her eyes off me as I walk through the gallery.

“My husband told me that you’re Wallace Simpson, the mystery writer.”

“I’m mainly doing technical writing now. I’ve lost my touch for mysteries.”

We look at each other from across a bar table.

“I love to read. I have a really great imagination. Don’t you think so, Wallace?”

“I really think that it’s hard to tell just by looking. But I could write a story around you.”

“That sounds like something that my husband once said to me. I’ve modeled for his paintings.”

“I didn’t see any tonight.”

“That was a few years ago. I don’t know if I have what it takes anymore.”

She caught me staring at her. She was fishing for compliments.

“I think that if I was married to you, I’d never take my eyes off you.”

“You know that I’m not a very good wife.”

“What do you mean?”

“I really can’t stand in his shadow.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“He’s such an accomplished man. I have to let him have his due.”

“Whatever you say.”

“I know I’m saying a lot. I’m a little drunk. I’m not the best companion when I’m drunk.”

I glared at her.

“I’m not going to rip off your clothes. I just let my eyes wander,” I listen to her talk. She is hypnotic. What is Tom doing?

“Where did Tom go?”

“He’s at the bar doing shots. He trusts you.”

“He’s barely met me.”

“That’s why he trusts you. He usually surrounds himself with people that flatter him. He found you different.”

“How did he find me?”

“You showed up at the gallery.”

“But how did he know to send me an invitation.”

“The gallery does that sort of thing. You’re probably on some list. A donation that you made. Or a friend may have left your address.”

I had felt special when I received the photo. Now I am only lost in the crowd.

“Don’t feel bad, Wallace. I find you sort of cute.”

“That seems like a consolation prize.”

“I’m saying that I wouldn’t mind sleeping with you.”

I try to ignore her comment. I want to change the subject.

“Do I shock you? I’m only saying what you’re thinking. You want to fuck me. Like a dog in heat. I could smell it on you from the moment that I walked up and introduced myself. A lot of men feel that way about me. But you are more obvious. In a way, it makes you more pathetic. But that’s why you’d be a good fuck. I wouldn’t have to give up much. You don’t have that much to give.”

“I can get you another drink.”

“I’m fine. You’re just being polite. You think that I’ve had enough already. But I can see you working away inside that head of yours. Trying to concoct the perfect mystery novel as

we speak. You're looking at my legs. You feel them rubbing together with you inside me."

"I really should go."

"You haven't got what you want. What you wandered the city all night to find. I sent you that invitation. I knew that you would come."

I wonder what I am supposed to do next.

"Wallace, I'm your mystery girl. The one you'd travel across the country to find. Only you had to travel across the city. On a beautiful spring night you found me. But there's one complication. I'm with somebody. What would happen in one of your mystery novels. You'd have to do away with Tom."

"You could complain of a headache. He'd send you home in a cab. I could meet you in an hour. We wouldn't leave together. It wouldn't seem suspicious at all."

"But I wouldn't be home when he got back to our house."

"I could meet you at your place."

"To have him surprise us together. You don't want to have a murder so soon in the story."

"You've got me stumped. We could wait for a better time."

"You're a pig. I know your type. You want to hump me right here, right now."

"If you know that I'm a jerk, why don't you just tell me to go?"

"If I told you to go, I wouldn't have my fun. My husband had his opening. Now I want some eye-opening of my own."

We smile. I look deep into her eyes.

She makes up an excuse. She leaves the bar. I will catch up to her.