

6. A NEW IDENTITY

I have gone through the worst ordeal with Alea. Nick feels that I need some cheering up. We meet at a café to renew our old games. We will write our mystery stories together.

He recalls my time with Alea, “Now you have nothing to gain and everything to lose. What would you do to get what you want?”

“If I couldn’t get it with what I have, I’d work for it.”

“Work for your chance to hang around with her on a more permanent basis. What if you couldn’t afford her?”

“What are you saying?”

“What if you couldn’t keep up with her lifestyle? How desperate would you get?”

“That’s really not in my nature.”

“I don’t think that we can be all that sure about that.”

He is interested in my idea of the perfect crime. He feels that I am implicated somehow in Alea’s disappearance.

“She didn’t just go away on her own, did she?”

“Nick, I didn’t do anything to make it happen.”

“She was your perfect victim. She has disappeared because she never existed.”

“All this talk about acting without motive presupposes that we do things for no other reason than the kicks. We get our kicks and that’s that. So there’s no reason to expect that there’s any further consequence. We get what we want. And then we go elsewhere. But even a hedonist comes back to the scene of the crime.

“So all altruism, all your concern for your fellow man is based on a regularity of satisfaction. You just keep going back to the honey pot.”

“Nick, that’s not my way of thinking. That’s yours.”

“You get close to someone, you leave your traces. Some evidence that you’ve been there. Even to get nearby means that your molecular structure is somehow in the vicinity.”

Nick has somehow enticed Cheryl, one of my students to show up. Cheryl has an angelic smile and a cherub’s cheeks. She wears her blouse strategically open and is in a pair of tight capri pants. She is probably planning to extort a higher grade out of me. I avoid certain scandal and embarrassment after I see her floundering around dead drunk on the dance floor. She has brought two flunkies with to do her dirty work. This includes scoring coke in the bathroom.

“I don’t really like doing drugs,” she proclaims. “They just help me drink more.”

She feels like she is trying to get over the hangover that she calls life. She is living an overdose of privilege and she is not going to come down tonight.

“Nick, what stupid impulse of yours drove you to invite her here tonight?”

“I thought that the teacher finally needed to be tested by one of his students.”

“You probably should have picked another candidate. I seem to be passing with flying colors.”

“She still has one asset on her side.”

“I’m glad that you stopped counting at one.”

“Doesn’t she just ooze of sex?”

“I’m going to have to pass on that one.”

“Always the guilty one. You don’t even sin and already you have a red face.”

I wonder if Nick is advancing another step in his study of the human psyche. I guess he feels that he has to bait the trap before he can truly observe the subject in action.

Cheryl wants you. I try to explain to him that I am only interested in Alea

“There is no Alea as far as you are concerned. I made her up. I gave her a script, and she learned it just for you.”

“But she learned it so well. It has to be part of her nature.”

“Think about what she was saying. She was one psychotic bitch.”

He really was trying to make a fool out of me.

In the meantime, Cheryl has made it back over to our table with more antics to supplement her performance of earlier in the night.

“Come on, Professor Simpson. Let’s see you shake your thing on the dance floor.”

“I think that Nick and I are pretty satisfied just watching you from here.”

“I could be your private dancer if you’d like to walk on the wild side.”

I protested, “I think that I’m having enough trouble just crawling on the wild side.”

Nick chimed in, “Maybe if you gave him an arm to lean on, he might be more amenable to your proposition.”

One of the jokers figures that it is his cue to do some marching music so he again peels her away from the table. I watch her on the floor. There seems to be such ease to her movement. She tugs at the pants to make them seem even more skin-tight.

“Don’t you want me, baby.?”

She glances back at the table and then shook her head to the beat. Her hair swings around and is swirling around her head. She is laughing.

“Wallace, don’t you want to be part of that.”

“Are you asking me do I want to get in line?”

“I think that she would ditch those clowns if she knew you were serious.”

Hopefully, they’ll stay glued to her so I don’t have to consider that option.”

She is staring at the table and giving us a smile. She makes these pointing motions with her fingers as she suggestively sways her body. I want to turn my head, but Nick moves me to turn back to the dance floor.

“Youth must be served.”

He seems to be pushing me in her direction. She still wants me to come over to the dance floor. I haven’t even started to talk to Nick for the reason that I came here.

“I don’t even have the motive.”

“Nick, I need to bend your ear.”

Cheryl can only be leading me to some incriminating territory. Nick is enjoying this. He is getting back at me for all my mischief with Alea.

“I thought that you were going to cheer me up.”

“Cheryl is a trip.”

“She is one more complication.”

“Alea is an illusion.”

I believe him for a while. As the memory fades, I wonder if it has always been about my belief. I saw a girl in a café. I just made up a life to go along with hers. I needed something to

make it happen. A catalyst. I had my story. My desire. From seeing her just that one time, I put myself in her life. For my effort, I was able to experience all this wonder. Now I can only feel the massive let down. Is there nothing that can help me out? Nick is throwing Cheryl at me. What is his motive?

She finds a wallet in an empty house. She is helping a friend to sell some houses. She has to go by and take a look at a couple of the places to make sure that kids are not getting in there. Her friend says nothing about the wallet.

The wallet is the perfect opportunity. It is a new identity. The face looks enough like hers. None of the ID is reported missing. She is able to use it as she pleases. She will move to a new city and claim a different identity.

"Alea, that sounds like a good name."

Now her name is Alea. She leaves Michigan and heads for DC. She has all that she needs to escape her old life.

"I can't die if I'm not really alive."

She feels invincible.

I am trying to get over a lost love. I am drinking alone. I do not want to give in to my melancholy. I try to nurse the same drink for most of my life. She is sitting next to me. She is a bit of a pest. I can tell that has no money for drinks. She has got herself in a nasty pickle. She has made herself a little drunk, and is not short on the bill.

"Sir, could you help a lady out of her misery?"

"If you were truly a lady, you would not have got yourself in this mess."

"Oh kind sir, you know what the taste of the fine liquors do to calm an aching heart. And if I have calmed a little, I want to calm a little more."

"I don't look like a bank."

"But you do look like a man with a heart."

I question whether her style is working. But it is entertaining.

"How much is the bill?"

"At this point, it is forty dollars. But I suppose I could share another drink with you."

There does not seem mercy sufficient to grant her another drink. But I consider letting her have another.

"What is in it for me?"

"I can't promise anything, but one never knows what the magic of the night has in store."

"I am not really that gullible. Or that lonely."

"You don't look like anyone is going to rescue you tonight."

"I am not really in the mood for rescue if you think that is what I need."

"Did she hurt you?"

"It's not that. I'm only reflecting on lost possibilities."

"It's better to think about present opportunities."

"You can't be your present if you're not your past."

"I don't know what the hell that mean, but it would make more sense with another drink."

She is now sitting at my table. Her heavy perfume is taking me over.

"What is your name, kind sir?"

"Wallace Simpson."

"I thought that was a girl's name."

"Wallace. Like Wallace Stevens."

"Who's that?"

"Never mind! What's your name?"

"Alea."

"No last name."

"I don't know you at this point. I don't want you looking me up in the phone book and stalking me."

"You're going to invite me over to your place and you're afraid that I'm going to stalk you."

She appears to choke on her drink, "My place?"

"I don't kiss and tell."

"And I don't kiss on the first date. And this isn't even a date."

"I'm paying for your drinks. What do you call it?"

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"I'm not really doing much of anything. You've done most of the work yourself."

She slaps me, "Now we're even."

"I don't think that makes us even."

"What would make us even?"

"My culture and my upbringing prevent me from getting more explicit."

She smiled at my humor. "We could be here all night."

"They'll probably close at 2."

"We could go somewhere else."

"Would that make it a second date?"

"Depends on whether I walked or you carried me there."

My heartache seems to be passing. She is energetic enough to make sadness take a quick exit. When the bar closes, she tells me that she wants to take a cab home.

"You forget that you didn't have any money for drinks."

"I'll duck out on the cab before I have to pay."

"You could come with me. I could give you a ride."

"Then I'd have to tell you where I live. I still can't trust you."

I want her to trust me. To let me come with her.

"You want to kill me. I can tell that you want to kill me." She points at me.

"You asked me to pay for your drinks."

"You were the only one who could help at that moment."

"So who is going to get you home. The last that I heard cabbies run pretty fast in this city. And they can be mighty mean if you stiff them. Some of them are armed. Why they could do the trick for you."

"I didn't say that I wanted to die."

"You just said something about being immortal. I didn't understand what you meant."

"I'm already dead. I told you that. I can't die?"

She must have really drunk a lot"

"I'll give you a ride before you pass out in the street."

In my car she starts playing with her breasts as if she is going to expose herself. I wonder what is the purpose of her show. I know that I need to get rid of her. If Cheryl is trouble, then she is a world of delights. I need to bail out before I get implicated.

“You’re not going to come up.”

“You told me earlier that you were afraid of me/”

“I could give you some taming upstairs.”

“I feel pretty tame already.”

“You’re not saying no to me.”

“I’m really saying later. A rain check.”

“I’m not a thunderstorm. Take it while you can get it.”

I park the car and walk up to her apartment. It seems hardly live in.

“This is the right place.”

“Of course it is. I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“I didn’t think that you were.”

“Why did you come up?”

“You were so insistent.”

“If you don’t want to be here, you can go.”

“I want to be here. I’m not sure what you’re expecting.”

“Let me change.”

She comes back in gym shorts and a t-shirt. She is barefoot. She crosses her legs and sits on her couch. I sit across from her.

“What do you want to do?”

“You have some movies that we could watch.”

“Nothing new.”

“How about some drinks?”

“I haven’t gone shopping in a while.”

I’m not sure what to say. The silence is uneasy.

“We could play a guessing game.”

“Alea, you could tell me what you’re really doing with me.”

“If you want to leave, the door is open.”

“I didn’t mean that. I’m just not sure what you want.”

“Do you want to hang around?”

“Yeah”

“Do you want to have sex with me?”

I look at her.

“Wallace, I’m teasing you.”

“It’s hard to be teased this late at night with that many drinks in me.”

“I told you that I wasn’t going to sleep with you. We could do other things.”

“Like what?”

I am expecting her to come up with strange sex games.

“We could tell ghost stories. Come sit next to me and cuddle.”

This seems like a good beginning. I take her invitation and sit next to her/

“Wallace, have you ever seen a ghost?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Really.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve seen a ghost. I see someone, and they remind me of someone else that I have known. Like you. You remind me of a girl that I used to know.”

“Did you love her?”

“I think that I did.”

“I could be that girl for you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It would be as if we had a head start to love.”

“You would really do that.”

“For a while. I could pretend. It could be like a game.”

“You would really do something like that.”

“I would do it if it pleased you.”

“I think that human nature wants more than to be pleased. We want a challenge.”

“I could give you a challenge.” She meant it. I could see it in her eyes.

“You’d have to make love to me now.”

She laughs, “I thought that you were serious.”

“I was. Not about the sex. But if you want to play along.”

“Where do we start?”

“I want you to meet me for dinner.”

Alea already looks like the girl in the wallet photo. She dyes her hair and has it cut so that she resembles the picture even more. She even buys clothes to complete the transformation.

“You look remarkable. I didn’t think that you had such style.”

“Every girl has a swan inside her ugly duckling.”

“You were hardly a duckling the other day.”

“You know what I mean.”

I am mesmerized at dinner. I want to kiss her.

“No touching. This is our first date.”

I reach under the table and put my hand on her knee.

“Where did you get the money for all of this?”

“A girl has her resources that she can’t reveal for fear of compromise.”

The next time that I see her she has a new Jaguar. She takes me to a palatial home.

“Is this your place?”

“Yes, now it is. Do you like it here?”

“It’s wonderful. How can you afford it?”

“I have my ways.”

She wants me to move in with her.

“I’m not going to be here most of the time.”

“It is closer to the college. But I’m not sure.”

“I’ll hardly notice that you’re here. It’ll be the perfect place to get your writing done.”

I agree to bring some of my stuff over. There is a great back yard. I sit and read during the day. My book is going well.

We eat dinner at night when she comes home. It is pure bliss. When she disappears for a

few days at a time, I wonder what is going on.

“You’re not having an affair, are you?”

“Would I invite you here, and then go off with someone else? It makes no sense. I could have covered my tracks better if you had stayed in the city.”

She seems to be right. I really can’t question her about it anymore.

In the middle of the night the phone will ring. If I answer, nothing is said. It is getting stranger. Perhaps, she is setting me up.

She looks more and more like the girl in the photo.

“She hasn’t taken over your identity?”

“Why would you say that?”

“You said that you were new here. There are always these calls.”

“Telemarketers. They want to talk to the woman of the house.”

She has a bizarre sense of humor. I can’t tell why she wants me here. She’ll be away for such long periods. She offers such little explanation.

“You can just say that I’m off my head.”

I say little.

I wonder why the next morning I am greeted by scissors hurtling into my pillow followed by her cackling laugh. She misses my head by inches.

“I was just teasing you.”

“What would you have called it if you actually made contact? Friendly fire.”

“You really have no sense of humor.”

“I *really* don’t.”

Later that day she explains that she had no intention of hurting me. Just putting the fear of the lord in my heart.

“I guess you’ve made a believer out of me.”

From this point forward, I feel like my life is just an out take from the movie *Psycho*. That night I ask her, “If you want me to leave, I can just go.”

“You’re fun to have around.”

“But you’re hardly around.”

“You seem like you can entertain yourself.”

“That’s not the point. You wanted me to move in here.”

I want to stay for time being. She is pleasant company when she is around. I don’t try to figure out her mystery. It’s not my place to ask where she gets her money. I do wonder.

“No one is trying to kill you, Alea?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Sometimes when you have this much money, it’s ill-gotten gains.”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“I just wanted to know.”

“No harm in asking.”

“Just don’t stab me for asking a stupid question.”

I join her in the bedroom later on that evening. She is lying on the bed naked, her toes curled outward—she is a ravenous little animal. I thoroughly satiate myself.

“You must think you’re wonderful.”

“What do you mean, Alea dear?”

“Like you’re some kind of super hero—you’re shit!”

“What?”

“You’re boring. That’s why I go away. You don’t take any chances in bed.”

“What do you mean? It’s pretty strenuous as far as my experience goes.”

“You could push the edge. Maybe tie me up. Be a little more aggressive.”

She is trying to convince me to strangle her on video.

She explains, “It’s a game. None of it is real.”

“It sounds a little sick to me.”

“You’re so conventional. You take a risk, and you can really feel new things.”

“You’re enough of a risk. You’re hardly ever here.”

“I’m not going to hang around unless you give me something a little better.”

I don’t want to perform for the camera. I feel it will be a distraction. I feel too much distance from her already, as if it’s all a sport.

She throws her hands back as if she is getting ready for passion. She appears to surrender herself to reckless abandon. In fact she is telling me that she is restless.

“It’s not as if you’re all that thrilling.”

“Are you taunting me or hinting that you want someone else?”

“I want you to show me what you’ve got.”

“I’ve been doing that.”

“It’s not enough.”

Her adventuresome spirit is getting the better of her. That’s how she motivates herself. I don’t want to accept her challenge. There’s nothing in it for me.

I wonder if this is all part of her change in identity. The house, the car. She’s no longer down to earth. She is attracted to the outre. It’s all part of her good fortune. It’s come so easily to her that her only way to have a grip on reality is to increase her sense of risk. She courts disaster because it makes her seem alive. I don’t have enough to lose. I want to play along, but none of this is natural. I’m hardly decadent enough.

I really saw myself as a passionate type. She makes me feel cold. But she is the one who is attracted to sexual discipline. She’s taken the romance out and replaced it with submission to authority.

There’s no connection to reality here. The house is like a Hollywood set. I don’t know where she gets her money. She never does any work. And she has these weird sexual appetites. I have no part being here. I can’t leave. I feel pathetic. I am waiting for something to happen. Perhaps a disaster. Anything.

“You know that you’re going to have to kill me.”

“What are you talking about?”

But the scenario is becoming too obvious. I am being set up as a jealous husband.

“The only problem is that I have no money.”

“Insurance always pays well.”

“You don’t have a policy on me.”

“We could arrange it.”

“No, thanks. Things were better when you were an artist.”

I miss my life with Nick. She is starting to feel oppressive. I want something more than the smooth surface. I want to break through to the depths.

“Wallace, if you want depravity, I can give you depravity.”

“You’re acting melodramatic. Next thing, you’ll throw yourself in front of a car.”

“I believe in love. Romantic love?”

“You have to cut yourself to have fun. You know pleasure. Not love.”

The next night she appears to have been affected by my advice. We are sitting at the dinner table.

“I thought that you’d enjoy candlelight.”

“It’s very evocative.”

“It’s like a meditation. It helps make things clear for me. I’ve been thinking about who I am, Wallace. I really feel that my life is empty. Maybe that’s why I’ve been drawn to strange entertainment.”

“When we do extraordinary things, it make us feel like we have special powers. Then we crash down to earth and realize what little we really have.”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

I am not sure what I can do to help. I wonder how deeply she has been affected by her escapades. I want to know more.

“Where do you go when you disappear?”

“I need to get away. To be by myself.”

“But you invited me to live here. I could have stayed in DC”

“I know. I know. But I wanted you here.”

“Do you still want me to stay?”

“Of course. Just be patient with me.”

I can tell that she isn’t going to tell me much more at this point. I need to be happy with her avowal. It is a first step.

At the same time, I fear that she may be trying to throw me off guard. She is planning something. I need to be ready for her.

“I have decided to enter treatment. I need my peace of mind.”

I am sympathetic with her decision. It catches me by surprise. I had thought that she was going to do something more extreme. She is trying to rein in her impulses.

She explains the program, “I have to be away for three weeks. Take care of the place. I’ve made sure that all the bills are up to date.”

She drives herself to the facility. She tells me that she will need complete isolation for the three weeks.

Alea had left an emergency number. The alarm messes up and we end up resetting the code. The company needs her approval. They call the mental health center. She is not there.

I call on my own. They tell me that she was there for a few days. I need to investigate. She has been using this as a front all along.

It doesn’t make sense. It’s not as if she’s going to give me the house. If she is using the house as a front, I could be in danger of being arrested. I’d like to call the police, but I don’t want to make more trouble for her.

I debate whether I should drive up there. There’s really no point. All they know is that

she left on her own volition. I am prepared for the worst. And it does come to pass. I learn a body has been found in a house in Michigan. It has been identified as Alea. It matches the picture in the wallet. Relatives are contacted for a positive identification. The cycle seems complete.

I still have doubts that it is the same girl. What is going on? It all seems like an aborted plot. She was trying to set me up. I didn't fall for it. And now there's the body in Michigan. It would have made more sense to complete the plan in Virginia where our house is. It seems that I am the fall guy for all of this. But there's nowhere to fall.

I take a plane to Detroit and rent a car. The house where she was found is in the Detroit suburbs. I go to the local police station. I don't want to say too much. I tell them that I knew her when she was visiting Virginia. I say nothing about the house. A detective briefs me.

"We've given all the information to the family. She was found in the house. You know all about that. She seems to have died of natural causes. She had a respiratory condition."

He looks at me and continues, "I assume that you were intimate with her. I guess that you knew about her condition."

"We planned to get a place together. She was going to move to DC."

"No one knows much about that. She lost touch with her family. She was found in an empty house. The real estate agent found her. She was trying to arrange an appointment and just let herself in. Those houses are supposed to be locked, but occasionally the agent will forget to close it up. That's what our investigation showed. She must have had a reaction to a cleaning fluid or something else in the house."

It is all meant to look as innocuous as possible. I look at her picture. It is the same picture that Alea carried with her in the wallet. But it is not the same girl. I still say nothing. I don't want the police to suspect anything.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wallace, that we couldn't have given you happier news. I know it took you a while to find out what was really going on. It's too bad."

Alea has found the perfect way to disappear. She has a double. Now that the double is dead, she can do whatever she wants.

It turns out the house in Virginia is owned by a corporation. It retakes possession, and I move back to my place in DC. The anti-climactic aspect of it all messes with me. I have little to go on. Little has turned into nothing.

"Wallace, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing great. Where are you, Alea?"

"I really can't tell you that now."

"So what are you up to. Aren't you afraid that the police are tracing my calls?"

"You didn't tell them. You wouldn't dare. Not after the tape that I have on you."

"What tape?"

"Our vicious games."

"You forget that I never took the bait."

"Oh, you did. Just don't try to find me."

None of this makes sense. Am I trying to forget things that actually went on.

I meet Nick for dinner.

"I told you to stick with Cheryl. She would have been a lot more fun. And you wouldn't

have all that guilt hanging over you.”

“What is this tape that she has on me? I don’t think that we did anything that unusual.”

“They can do all kinds of things with editing.”

“It will never stand up in court.”

“But it could influence an investigation. I wouldn’t take that chance.”

“What chance? I don’t even know where to find her.”

“But she’s warned you to keep away.”

“All I know is that they found a body in Michigan. They say that it was in the house for quite a while.”

“I wonder if they moved it from another location.”

“Nick, you always wonder about things like that. By the way, how is Cheryl?”

“I haven’t seen her in weeks.”

“Maybe we need to get her out tonight.”

My adventures with Alea seem like they never happened. I believed it was real while it was going on. But I always had my doubt about her motive. It still isn’t clear to me why she set me up, but didn’t follow through. I also wonder if she killed that girl. That would be too much.

Nick admonishes me on another night, “You said that you wanted an adventure.”

“I was only creating an intellectual puzzle.”

“The intellect is always grounded in the real. Beware!”

“Advice from the master.”