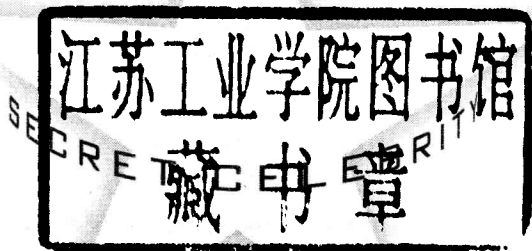


Secret  
Celebrity

Carol Wolper





*Carol Wolper*

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Carol Wolper is a screenwriter and the author of the novel *The Cigarette Girl*. She lives in Los Angeles.

★ ALSO BY CAROL WOLPER ★

*The Cigarette Girl*

*a c k n o w l e d g m e n t s*

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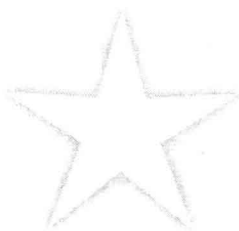
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## *chapter one*



I'm sorry. I hate lists. You probably do, too. But sometimes there's no other way to put it. So here it is—my “Are you having an interesting life?” checklist for people who live in L.A. and work in Hollywood. Or, with slight adjustments, for anyone else.

1. A secret passionate fling with a notorious lover.  
(No points for a public fling.)
2. A feast-famine-feast existence. (No points for all feast, no points for all famine.)
3. Time spent with one of your heroes (a director?) who proves to be boring.

4. A fascinating conversation with someone (FedEx guy?) you previously disregarded.
5. Access to a philosopher king who is not the leader of any cult . . . or agency.
6. At least one, but no more than three, formidable enemies.
7. At least one special project that's as compelling as a passionate fling with a notorious lover.
8. An ongoing friendly dialogue with your dark side . . . or Jim Morrison's ghost.
9. One friend who can unfailingly make you laugh even when that special project gets put into turn-around.
10. Enough temptation to keep things interesting . . . but not as much as can be found on location.

In the summer of '99, I did a lot of thinking about an interesting life because I wasn't having one. I don't know what I was having. A lull? A second reckoning? A slump? Disenchantment? It made sense. I was right on schedule. I was thirty-five years old. I'd put in ten years working in the business, always behind the camera. Writer. Set decorator. Producer—on a low-budget film and two music videos. And, most recently, aspiring director. Ten years was about what it took to go from feeling sporadically invincible and optimistic, to looking at people who felt sporadically invincible and optimistic as if they were in hyper-denial. This lull of mine wasn't



helped by two issues that preoccupied me. I was obsessed with how obsessed people can get with celebrities. And on a more personal note, I was obsessed with this question: Can any girl in Hollywood trust her girlfriends not to fuck her boyfriend? Sadly, I was beginning to think the answer was probably not. Make that definitely not if the boyfriend's famous.

I did everything I could to bust out of the lull. I tried numerous solutions to shake things up including a homeopathic remedy that temporarily turned my skin yellow. I never expected to find the lull antidote at the Centerfold newsstand on Melrose and Fairfax. It was an unlikely place for a breakthrough. Jammed with newspapers and magazines, the place felt no bigger than a shack. It was also an exceptionally hot day. Hot and humid, which is not the way it's supposed to be in Los Angeles in August. Or ever. What are we, in Guam? What's with this humidity? As I stepped out of my apartment, I remembered that thunderstorms were in the forecast. Not that I would have minded one. Bring it on. Maybe a little electricity would shock me out of my coma. As it turned out, I didn't need a bolt of lightning. Instead, a name did it. That's all. A name. And the thing is if it wasn't for William, I wouldn't have stuck around long enough to even hear it.

William, also known as Magazine Guy, works the Centerfold's 6 A.M. to 1 P.M. shift, Tuesday through Saturday. He works the register, usually with his radio tuned to KCRW's "Morning Becomes Eclectic," a show that debuts cutting-edge music. He usually wears black jeans and a T-shirt, his blond hair always adorably messy. He

looks like he could have been a fine-arts major at Cal Arts, but in fact did only one year at UCLA. He dropped out to play drums in a band that had a decent run on the local club scene before going bust a few years ago. We'd gotten to be casual friends because I stopped in to buy magazines at least three times a week. I'm an addict when it comes to this stuff, which would make sense if I believed anything I read. I don't. The only thing that I take as truth are the sports scores. Everything else is just bullshit, spin, more hype, and propaganda. So why the addiction? I guess I want to keep track of the changes and nuances of the fake world I live in. As does William. We quickly worked our way up from "Have a good day" to chatting about the headlines. The guy knows how to get my attention.

"Is that a price tag I see hanging from her pussy?"

William was checking out the cover of one of the weekly tabloids. The headlines announced the recent engagement of an actress and her new boyfriend, a troll-like, European, self-made billionaire. The photo showed the two of them at some New York hot spot. I took a good look at the tabloid cover, at the actress's bad plastic surgery. Eyelids pulled so high, her face bore a look of perpetual surprise. "My God, look at her. She hardly looks human anymore. She's beginning to look like an inflatable doll."

William shrugged. "A very expensive inflatable doll. She stays married to this guy for just one year, she'll walk away with millions."

"Yeah, but she'll have to fuck him for a year," I said as I handed him the stack of magazines and newspapers

that would feed my fix that day. A young guy brushed past me on his way to the music section. He went right for a copy of *SPIN*.

"Dude, check out the Afghan Whigs article," William called out before turning back to me. "Twelve dollars and sixty-eight cents."

I threw down a twenty.

"You want a bag for that?" he asked.

I laughed. "You usually only offer one when I buy *Penthouse Variations*."

"SOP. Standard operating procedure. Girl buys smut, we offer camouflage."

As William handed me my change, the guy perusing *SPIN* chuckled.

"You reading about the Whigs?" William asked.

The guy nodded. "You see them play the El Rey?"

"Yeah. How about that?"

The guy rolled the magazine and held it up to his mouth like a microphone and started to sing. "Come on, come on, come on little rabbit, show me what you got 'cause I know you got a habit." He wasn't a bad singer but he didn't continue. "Love that song." He smiled as he unrolled the magazine.

"Reminds me of something Richard Gault might have written," William said.

And there it was. That was it. The name that changed everything. *Richard Gault*. Not a particularly poetic name. It didn't roll off the tongue. It wasn't a movie-star name. The Gault being too close to fault to play in a town that believes in laying the blame elsewhere—no matter who pulls the trigger.

“Richard Gault. My God,” I gushed. “I haven’t thought about him in years. He was the greatest.”

“Whatever happened to Richard Gault?” the young guy asked. “Hope he doesn’t turn up on VH1’s ‘Where Are They Now’ show.”

William lowered the volume of the radio, a sure sign he was into the conversation. “I don’t think VH1 gives a fuck about Richard Gault. His last and only record came out in 1975 and only sold three thousand, one hundred and fifteen copies. And his two movies were brilliant but did no business.”

“Three thousand one hundred and fifteen,” I repeated. I was astonished. “You know how many copies it sold?”

He shrugged and continued. “And since he never got fucked up on drugs or had some big sex scandal they could use for one of their behind-the-music things . . .” He shrugged again.

The young guy finished the thought for him. “No one gives a fuck where he is now.”

The three of us grew silent, the way you do when you realize you miss something that until that moment you didn’t know you missed.

“How old would he be now?” I asked.

“Fifty,” William replied.

Suddenly the young guy got serious. “He’s not dead, is he?”

“No,” William said with conviction. And William would know. He’s the authority. He’s Mr. Information Man. Then looking at me with a smirk, he added, “Impressed you even know who he is.”

"Know? Growing up, I wanted to be him."

"You must have been a precocious kid. Twenty-five years ago? What were you, five?"

"You were five," I guessed. "I was ten." Then I paused, thinking, Fuck, I just told him my age. But I couldn't dwell on that. "How did you hear about Richard Gault?"

"A few years ago, a friend gave me a cassette of his album. You can't hear it and not get interested."



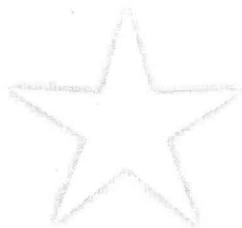
AND IT WAS right then that I got my big idea. I grabbed my magazines. I think I said, "See you later." But I don't know for sure. Remembering Richard Gault shook everything up. What if? What if? What if? I thought excitedly as I headed outside. At the doorway, I almost bumped into a girl who was dressed in exercise clothes and carrying a cup of Starbucks. She wasn't so much in a hurry as she seemed distracted. I could tell William perked up at the sight of her by the sound of his voice. "Hey, Jennifer," he said. "What's going on?"

I made a mental note to ask William if this was the girl he'd been telling me about. But I couldn't concentrate on that right now. What if? What if? What if? I kept thinking as I unlocked my car, tossed the magazines on the passenger seat, and got inside. I turned on the ignition and put the air-conditioning on high. Adrenaline was ripping through my body. It had been a long time since I'd felt this way over an idea. It had been a long time since I'd even had an idea. And it felt like

forever since I'd had an idea that didn't make me feel like a total sellout who was one step away from trying to become an inflatable doll with my own troll-like billionaire.

So I did what you're never supposed to do in Hollywood. I picked up the phone and called my agent, thinking my excitement would excite him. It didn't. And by the time I hung up I didn't care what he thought because I knew with or without his help, my life was about to get more interesting.

*chapter two*



Thirty-five years old. Yes, I'm thirty-five. But I'm an L.A. thirty-five. In other places thirty-five generally means you're a grown-up. A lot of thirty-five-year-olds have kids. A lot of them have teenagers. They have serious jobs. They have life insurance. They can fill out the whole questionnaire. When asked who to call in case of an emergency, they have an immediate answer. But I'm not that kind of thirty-five-year-old. In Los Angeles you can be thirty-five and still find the Afghan Whigs more important than front-page news. Here it's not unusual to not feel or act grown-up. To not have kids. To have a job you're serious about rather than a serious job. To still think you're going to live forever.

And to be so unsettled that your “in case of emergency” person changes from week to week.

Living this way makes me, and people like me, a target for a lot of criticism, most often from people outside L.A. Real grown-ups look down on us as narcissists stuck in adult-escence. I was once accused of producing music videos that had no socially redeeming value. What?

But don't get me started on critics and how their reviews should come with a disclaimer. In this case it should have read . . . “I'm pissed off that my low-paying job requires me to spend eight hours a day in a cubicle watching other people have fun in million-dollar videos.” And even though I have a couple of hideous cubicle jobs on my résumé, that doesn't keep me from wanting to take the critics on—which is further proof that I'm not a normal thirty-five-year-old.

Shouldn't I have more important things to fight over? Yes, I should. But I can't deny my get-even fantasy. I'd line up all those people who have criticized my life and work for being trite and say to them, Okay, let me explain something: The first seventeen years of my life were hell. I lived at the crossroads of depression and violence. All the grown-ups were like characters in a Eugene O'Neill play and every guy under twenty-five was a character out of *Reservoir Dogs*. Only not as cute.

Listen up, critics, you want me to get real? I've been real. It's overrated. You want me to make a contribution to society? Here's my contribution: Go west. Have fun. That doesn't mean I'm into a senseless life. I like sense. I like meaning. I just think you can get those things while walking with a light step and maneuvering with



a delicate touch. Having lived through seventeen very dark, very long South Boston winters, I have great appreciation for L.A.'s almost endless summer.

Which is probably why I married my now, soon-to-be-ex husband. Met him six years ago, when he was twenty-five. We met on vacation up at Big Bear. One glimpse and I was hooked. They don't breed creatures like him in my hometown. His blond hair, sparkling green eyes, olive skin, and irrepressible zest appeared to be some blessed mix of Connecticut WASP and Mediterranean mojo. (I was close. His father was Pasadena WASP, his mother upper-class Italian—New York by way of Milan.) His two great talents at that time were skiing and smoothly popping open champagne bottles. I used to watch him fly down the mountain and think if he can do that, he can do anything. No logic there, but that's what love does. As for the champagne, he always ordered the best, generally on someone else's credit card. It was the first time in my life champagne didn't give me a headache. Quite the opposite. Even the next morning, I still felt all bubbly and happy. It was the first time in my life when the "what ifs" weren't worst-case scenarios.

My husband was like a Xanax for me. Any residual depression I'd been carrying around from my South Boston days was gone. *He made me laugh*. It felt good. It made me feel alive. He got me to believe the good times could indeed roll on and on. He delivered the right message at the right time. What can I say? I ended up marrying the delivery boy. And I do mean boy. I should have been tipped off when I discovered his favorite tooth-