

Three Sheets, to the Wind

By Kevin Daiss

I.

Walter's sleep was uneasy, and he was visited by specters of the Councilor in the shadows of his room—in the dusty recesses of his mind.

He had to meet his troubles with a smile and shake hands with his enemies today, but he was unable to get out of bed at his usual time for breakfast. In fact, it wasn't until the woman who lived across the hall from him came and knocked on his door that he even stirred from his bed. Walter peered through the peephole in his doorway and saw the woman shadowed by two large-framed, well-built men in crisp white linen suits. They were looking up and around the hallway as though some secret entrance to Walter's apartment existed just beyond their line of sight. Walter was startled, and he called through the door, "Mrs. Gruffstrainer, I'm so sorry to have alarmed you; I'm quite alright, I just overslept and missed our Wednesday breakfast."

She looked at the man standing beside her, then hollered through the door back at Walter, "I wasn't worried how you were doing, Walter. But these two men seem to care a great deal about how you are doing this morning. Won't you let them in, now, so that they can leave me alone? I've got my animals to tend to, you know."

"Yes, of course, just let me unlatch the door."

The two men burst into the room with such violence that Walter barely had time to remove himself from their path as the two visitors whirled about the room, touching nearly everything, lifting items up, turning them around in their grimy hands, and setting them back down in a different place. Mrs. Gruffstrainer left to go downstairs, forgetting about her kittens in her apartment, and clambered out the front door. Walter quickly forgot his annoyance at her for being unable to shoo these men away, and he began to reproach them gently—with growing force as he became frustrated at their apparent deafness—until he lost all of his patience and puffed the rank air and sweat from the previous night out of his blowhole all over the white linen suit of the man who couldn't stop touching everything.

"Forgive me, sir, but what is the purpose of this? You have come in quite rudely, and I demand an explanation."

The one who missed the brunt of Walter's blast responded, "We're here to issue you a new identity."

“But I didn’t make any such request,” said Walter.

“That may be true,” replied the other man, wiping off his suit, “But have you considered that your identity may not be living up to its full potential? We’ve been sent here especially to inform you of a possible breach of identification on your part, and based on the reports we’ve seen of your whereabouts recently—especially at night—you may need to change it quicker than you think.”

“But I don’t want to change it at all. I am Walter, and I am not going to be anyone else.”

“Very well, very well. You may keep ‘Walter’ if that is what pleases you. In fact, you may be encouraged to remain ‘Walter.’ It would certainly not harm you in the least.”

“Then why are you here telling me to change my identity?”

The other man, who had been silent for some time now, grew agitated. “Do you misunderstand us? Clearly you must. It couldn’t be simpler, really. You are Walter, and you need to change your identity, because you committed a serious breach of identity, and you may remain Walter as long as you like, but you must still change your identity. It’s quite simple. I don’t understand how you cannot understand us. Need we speak more plainly? Let me ask you this: Do you or do you not work at a bank?”

“I used to, but I don’t anymore.”

“Then the answer is a simple ‘no.’”

“But I used to.”

“Irrelevant! You are not a bank employee anymore.”

“No, I am unemployed.”

“He just doesn’t understand,” said the one man to the other, completely ignoring Walter and rudely speaking over him to address his colleague. “No, he doesn’t,” replied the other man to the one.

“I do understand, though. You want me to change my identity because something has happened at the bank and it could put me in serious jeopardy. Why didn’t you just come out and say it? But of course, you couldn’t, for that would constitute a breach on your part. Very well. Have you a new name for me?”

“Walter.”

“Yes.”

“That is your name.”

“Yes, but what name should I choose as my alias? I’m frightfully bad at these kinds of cloak-and-dagger things.”

The men spoke over the whale to each other again, saying, “See. I told you. He’s an imbecile. There’s no way he could have lasted this long on his own.”

Walter was now becoming annoyed at this developing habit of theirs. "Might I speak to your immediate supervisor?"

"No. We'll be back in a few days' time to check your progress. Have a good day, Walter."

The two men left, forgetting to shut the door to Walter's apartment behind them. Walter noticed only after their departure that the one who had been fondling everything in his home had actually been replacing it. The tennis racket Walter had just purchased was gone, and in its place were a swimming cap, goggles, and pair of swimming trunks that he knew were not there before because he did not know how to swim and therefore had no purpose for them.

After dressing, Walter called to Mrs. Gruffstrainer, who lived on the second floor, from which she kept a watchful eye on the street outside of the building. She was to go to the market that afternoon, as she nearly always did, and Walter wanted to accompany her, in order to get one fleeting chance to ask her about what the visitors from that morning had intimated to her before ransacking his apartment. She would not allow Walter to go with her, however, saying that it was better for him to go see about the business that the men spoke to him about. From her statement Walter learned that she had been listening in on their conversation—so maybe she wasn't so trifling, anyway. At any rate, Walter decided that he ought to go down to the courthouse, or the police station, and get to the bottom of the meaning of the disturbance that greeted him that morning.

Pulling on his hat, for it was raining outside, Walter began walking in the direction of the clump of government buildings that sat at the western end of the town, furthest from the sea that lay to the east. He had forgotten his bus pass in his aggravation and hurry to leave his apartment, and he didn't want to waste the money on a cab ride that would only probably aggravate him yet more. So he walked. The rain felt nice to him that morning, and he rather enjoyed the chilling effect the water had when the wind gusted in his face. The buildings at first were puny, two and three-story apartment houses, owned by gruff, sweaty men, and maintained by their sweet-natured, ill-tempered wives, but as Walter walked on the buildings began to crumble and decay until the two and three-story apartment houses were no longer owned by those wives and husbands, but rather by those that had considerably more money—and could thus maintain a proper distance so the stench of pestilence couldn't overpower one's runny, powdered nose. Walter took note of the change and thought to himself how he would have permanently avoided this unpleasantness if only he had been somehow more useful in his position at the bank so that he could have only been moved to a new position as opposed to terminated completely. But here he was, and here he walked, until the rain began to lighten and the sun began to peek curiously around clouds the color of

gutter slush in the winter.

Presently, Walter came upon a large, grassy mall, lined with conifers and zigzagged throughout by walking paths. At each end of the mall was a large limestone and granite building, capped with a dome flanked by scaffolds and workmen. The two buildings on either end were nearly indistinguishable from each other and the men and women entering and exiting them reflected this uniformity in the extreme. On the long edge of the mall, facing Walter, was another building of limestone and granite, but it lacked the dome of the other two; however, it compensated for this deficiency with large columns that were actually quite taller than the building itself. For this reason, the columns sat several yards in front of the steps leading to the main door and produced the effect of a coward's protective cronies shadowing their less-formidable comrade, intimidating all opposition into terrified silence. Having no idea which building to enter, Walter stood awkwardly tapping his fin on a nearby tree trunk, shaking down loose branches in the process. He was on the point of turning back and walking home again when he saw a flash of white in the sea of black suits that surrounded him; it was one of the men that had been in his apartment that morning. Walter hurried up to him, waddling around people as best he could and avoiding hitting anyone with the loud expulsions from his blowhole.

"Sir!" Walter cried.

"Oh, it's you," said the man in his white linen suit, taking a bite out of a tuna salad sandwich.

Ignoring this, Walter continued, "It's quite fortunate for me to have run into you like this. After this morning I was at quite a loss as to what precisely to do about my identity, so I decided to come here, you see, but now I find that I am yet again at a loss for I know not which building would render me new identification."

"Your identification? Neither I, nor my associate, said anything about your identification."

"But you did. Don't you remember this morning?"

"Yes, distinctly, I remember it. Nothing was said appertaining to your identification. Though, if I recall—and I do—you were quite insistent upon being called Walter."

"Because that is my name, sir."

"But now you want a new identification?"

"Precisely, I'm so glad you understand. So which building should I enter?"

"You can go into that one there," he gestured with his mostly-eaten tuna salad sandwich toward the building with the columns in front of it, "but I don't think they can much help you with a new identification. You can go into that one there, though."

“Well, I shall certainly try. I suppose I have more faith in our government than you; I do not think it misplaced, either, though I am not an arm of it as you are. I thank you humbly for your help. Good day.”

Walter turned on his fin and left the man there, idly munching the remainder of his sandwich and wiping his dirty fingers on the lapels of his white linen suit. Though the rain had stopped, clouds were again gathering in the distance, ominously brooding together and leaving a circle of sunlight on the mall. Walter took notice of this development, and put his hat into his fin as he climbed the steps around the columns on his way into the building. Before entering the door he took a look back at the scene outside. It was difficult for him to discern much due to the columns blocking most of his line of vision, but it appeared that the man in the white linen suit was still standing in the same spot as he had when he was speaking with Walter; it even seemed to Walter that he was attempting to peer around the columns and see if Walter had gone into the building yet. Thunder clapped ahead, and the rain returned, crawling slowly across the grass as busy workers scurried for shelter, holding their briefcases and jackets over their heads. While looking at the commotion, Walter lost sight of the man in the white linen suit, whose presence disturbed him—but it was most likely because of the events surrounding their initial meeting that caused this disturbance. Still, Walter waited a few moments before going inside the building; he didn’t want to get too wet, however, so he hurried in once the rain had made its way to where he was standing.

Inside, the light was dim and Walter could see the dust particles floating in the air. A group of men went by, all coughing loudly—and how, with the dust being so overpowering in the foyer. The group of men appeared to be following behind a woman, who kept turning around to hush them with her slender index finger held upright against her lips. But her stern expression would mutate into a softer one, and her lips would curl upwards into a gummy smile that showed all of her teeth. When she first held up her finger to quiet the men, they would all stop walking, but continue coughing; it was only when she smiled her toothy smile that they would stop coughing and stare directly at her. Evidently, Walter must have been staring, for the woman came over to him and said, “We’ve been expecting you! This way, please.” Walter had no idea that he was expected, though he should have expected something of this sort to happen—they had been able to find him at his house, why not know what he looks like as well? A whale’s privacy cannot be taken too much for granted, to be sure.

Walter silently followed the woman, and the coughing men loudly followed him. They came to a large, somber-looking corridor, and the woman turned to hush the men, but this time instead of smiling she put her finger down and elicited a cough of her own, which was so light that it was nearly inaudible and certainly hardly enough to frighten the men off as it did, and they ran quickly in the opposite direction.

She then motioned to Walter with her finger to come hither, and he came close to her. “My name is Clarissa,” she said, her voice more firm than Walter would have thought based on the kind of cough she produced. “I’m frightfully sorry those men pursue me as they do. I hope they didn’t bother you too much. I’m glad you came, however. I’ll show you to my office, now.”

“Thank you,” said Walter.

“You know, you’re one of the first we’ve had to take care of in this fashion,” said Clarissa, matter-of-factly.

“Oh my, I didn’t know I was a special case.”

“I didn’t say it was special; I just said we’ve never really had to do this sort of thing before. I do apologize again for those coughing men. I suppose it can’t be helped, their coughing that is, because of the amount of dust in the building, but all the same it is rather obnoxious.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Walter, who was put off by Clarissa’s apologies. He viewed it as a sign of weakness to apologize on behalf of others. Walter remained standing in her office, even though she sat on the desktop, which was clear of any semblance of ever being used for work. The desktop unnerved Walter, for he had never been able to keep his desk even remotely clear while at work in his office in the bank, and he wondered what kind—if any—of work Clarissa did that her desk could remain so immaculately clean. Walter was thinking all of these things to himself as he only half-listened to Clarissa’s words. Her voice was actually quite soothing; it washed over him like a warm milk bath and certain tics in her voice, inadvertent rises in pitch, or a strangely emphasized word here and there gave Clarissa’s voice an exotic, luxurious feel. Walter had almost completely stopped listening to the precise words and was more listening to the sounds when he realized that Clarissa had taken him by the fin and was stroking it gently, cooing to him yet more.

The timbre of Clarissa’s voice combined with the pressure of her hand gave Walter a peculiar sensation, and he exhaled deeply, stale spray emitting from his blowhole and dribbling down his back. Her miraculous slender finger rose to her lips as she stopped talking and dropped Walter’s fin. Meanwhile, Walter noticed that the room had gotten brighter, and a camera had extended downward from an aperture in the ceiling. Lightning flashed in Walter’s eyes, and Clarissa was no longer visible. Walter stumbled backward, nearly tripping over the chair that was directly behind him, as he had never bothered to sit down.

“We appreciate your cooperation. Please wait in the foyer for an officer to issue your identity card.” Clarissa escorted him halfway to the door of her office, and as Walter turned, bewildered by what just occurred, she held her finger to her lips, and pressed them gently there. Walter’s eyes opened wide and

watched her finger slide off her lips, crossing her abdomen to rest on her hip.

Back in the foyer, Walter re-entered the throng of businessmen passing and got out of the line when he saw a man in a white linen suit. He knew not whether it was the same man as before or the other from the morning or another man entirely unknown to him, but Walter was feeling recalcitrant, so he strode directly to the man and juted his fin into the man's walking path in order to hold him in place for a moment. The man in the white linen suit smiled wide, and warmly, paternally, placed Walter's fin back at his side. He held out his own hand and pressed into the whale's fin an identity card. Walter took it brusquely and glared at his bewildered picture. It must have been taken inside Clarissa's office; he looked intoxicated. To the left of his photograph were his name, Walter W., and his address. Everything was correct, and this irked Walter a great deal.

"You said that I could get a new identity here," Walter accused the man.

"I said no such thing."

"Then one of your associates did. No matter, you all represent the same branch—that much is clear by your dress; no others here are in white linen."

"While you have the general—"

"What is the purpose of this new identity card, then, if it has my same name and correct information? I understand the physical aspects of my personage cannot be altered for the sake of a new identity, but surely a pseudonym or a false address could be given, if the situation in which I find myself is really quite as grave as your associates have led me to believe." Walter was nearly spitting the words, and vitriolic acid flew from his protruding tongue as he articulated the word, associates.

While Walter was speaking to the man in white linen, another group of coughing men hurried past, and Walter demanded to see Clarissa again. He began at first by insisting that he see her once more, but then dove in under false pretenses, hoping to persuade the group to lead him to her office in order to take his picture again, for it had come out blurry to him and he didn't want his identity to be confused with anyone else's—though that was very unlikely anyway as Walter was the only cetacean resident of the town that he knew. He abandoned the man in white linen and began following the coughing crowd, harrying them with questions, admonishments, and demands, but to no avail. He was closer to the door now and the same group of coughers that had greeted him upon entry was approaching from the opposite way. Caught between the two groups of men coughing in black suits, Walter was pushed outside of the building. Falling down on the top of the flight of stairs, Walter saw the last bit of sun setting behind the columns that remained vigilant in front of the building. He composed himself quickly, brushing off the dirt

that stuck to his skin, and pushed on the door. It had been locked behind him. Walter was sure that the men inside were all having a good laugh at the foolish whale that came to get a new identity. Feeling as if he had been the fool in an elaborate joke, Walter walked down the steps back into the mall. The air was settling into its damp nighttime coolness, and Walter began walking the long walk back to his apartment thinking on what a waste the day had been. He had managed to learn nothing as to why he was accosted that morning, he had been issued the same identity again instead of a different one, and he had failed to see Clarissa a second time that afternoon—his last disappointment was particularly acute because it was a desire of his to see her one more time before leaving the building, whether the visit was a friendly one or not. Swirling pessimism occupied Walter's consciousness the entire evening, and when he got back to his apartment he kicked Mrs. Gruffstrainer's cat to the side of the stairwell before repairing to his apartment and falling asleep in his street clothes, dreaming of distorted versions of the day's events.

II.

Walter W. was a very distressed whale.

He had been several years into his position at the bank, and, without any discernable reason, he had been let go. He poured most of his energy into working at the bank. His office was modestly but fashionably furnished with a rich cherry desk and chairs wrapped in deep burgundy leather, and he would arrive around nine and leave well after most of the other employees had gone home—usually around seven or eight. He had a good friendship with the nighttime security guard since he began his day when Walter ended his. After leaving the bank, Walter would normally go to a certain restaurant and sit at the bar, chatting with the two female bartenders there and making jokes with them.

But this particular Friday Walter had not gone to the bank at nine, and he had not left around seven or eight; in fact, he had barely stirred from his bed all day, and it was only at the imploring of a good friend that he bothered to stir about at all. He had been jobless for nearly two whole weeks, and he was still too devastated to begin searching for new work. He was not fit for work other than the position he used to hold at the bank. Begrudgingly, he put on some of the only freshly laundered clothes he had, which was his former work attire, because it had ceased to be of practical purpose since he had been released from his position, and so it had gone unworn. He made a drink of tonic water and gin and gulped it down. Since he had lost his job, he had also stopped going to the restaurant where he would talk to the women behind the bar. He had paid one visit to the restaurant since his firing, but the incident was too troubling for him

to risk repeating it at a later date, and he had found it easier to just stop going, which in turn led to his taking to drink at home, late into the evening. He was recounting the incident to his friend, now, at another restaurant that had been pricey for Walter even when he was gainfully employed.

“Distinctly, I remember one of her friends, and her, talking hurriedly, and catching quick sideways glances at me, as though there were a stain on my shirt and they were too embarrassed for me to let me know of it,” said Walter W.

Walter sat across from his closest friend, the esteemed Councilor to the Magistrate, at Le Mange. His friend, the Councilor, had invited him to dinner as part of a streak of goodwill, levied with concern for his longtime friend. His concern was apparent, as his probing questions were relentless, being interrupted only by the restaurant staff. The Councilor knew that Walter’s job at a prominent local bank had recently been terminated; it was a position he had held for not quite twenty years.

“I remember it—wholeheartedly did she look at me with such contempt,” Walter continued, “that I felt a shudder rise within me. Such malice cannot come from my having committed just one single faux pas in pleasant company. It can come only from complete, total disdain, which had been fostered and cared for, looked after and fed, for quite some time. I’ve seen the look given to greedy holders while they, who are so accustomed to being the swindler, become the swindled. I’ve seen young children give that look to their parents when denied some trifle or object of desire, as if the children had held their parents in contempt for bringing them into this world for the sole purpose of causing them to be uncomfortable throughout their entire life.”

Walter stirred his drink as he paused to draw a deep breath before continuing: “I’ve even seen that look on the faces of men and women as they exit the lavatory, hands still wet and freezing cold. But to see it coming from her, well, that was too much. I remember how she used to look at me with such tenderness. Did you know that the first time I went to the restaurant she said she was afraid to pour my drinks because of my size? She’d never served a whale of my stature, I suppose. But ever since that first time we’ve become the closest of friends. She used to have my platter ready for me when I would arrive. She used to offer me greetings with such enthusiasm—I could positively drown in tears just thinking about it now.”

The Councilor consoled Walter, reaching across the table to pat his fin.

The Councilor knew that his friend had been given to drink, and this night Walter was being especially generous with the libations, buying one or two for the Councilor every time he ordered yet another. The Councilor amiably accepted these gifts, but kept himself rather dry, as his friend was imbibing

quite copiously.

Walter ordered another drink for himself—dry gin on the rocks, with a twist of lemon. He gripped the newly-filled glass between two enormous fins and exhaled sharply through his blowhole, ejaculating spray fifteen feet behind him into the maître d’s small kiosk near the entrance to the restaurant. Gazing into the ice cubes, he drew a rattling breath. The misty fog appearing around the top of the frosted glass reflected in his eyes. After he had sat reticent long enough, he downed the drink in one long swallow.

“My friend, dear Councilor,” he said with a slight hiccup between phrases, “let me tell you how I came to this pitiable state you see before you now: I was, admittedly, doing a bit of carousing one evening when I perchance bumped into our mutual acquaintance, Mrs. Freshburne.

“She ran to me—I’ll spare you my hyperbole, friend—and positively gushed about her latest success, some literary piece, naturally high culture, naturally. Of course, it has been public knowledge for quite some time that I had been in a spot of hot water, you will...”

Walter stopped his narrative when the waiter approached again, wanting to refill his glass. He held it out, but the Councilor covered it with the palm of his hand and glared at Walter. Walter then disposed of the waiter with an urbane smile, exposing his row of massive comb-like teeth.

When the Councilor covered the glass, the waiter merely said, “Of course,” and feigned a curt bow before leaving. The Councilor smiled at the waiter like a father smiles at the successes of someone else’s son. He looked from the waiter to Walter and his expression softened some; as he had advanced in years, he had also grown more compassionate. The Councilor’s smile turned into a hearty laugh as he beheld the whale seated across from him. Walter laughed as well, thinking he may have missed some joke. The waiter began to laugh too, and all three of them laughed for a moment at the absurdity of it all. The Councilor stopped laughing first, then the waiter, then Walter, still chortling between phrases, said “Oh, what a pleasure it is to laugh, is it not, gentlemen?”

When Walter’s comment sunk down unnoticed, the Councilor issued forth a decree that the present night was a remarkably handsome one, and he urged his friend outside to walk and continue their discourse. Exiting the restaurant proved difficult for Walter, though. One of his flukes nearly demolished a table adjacent to the fireplace, which thankfully lay dormant at the time, and he caught a busboy with the same fluke as he wheeled around to apologize to the waiter with whom he had laughed earlier. Spewing smiles and apologies, Walter only made himself more of a nuisance until the Councilor retreated from the lobby back into the dining room to retrieve him. At this, though, Walter protested with a shrill blast and some spray out of his blowhole. It took several minutes to tidy the mess, but, eventually, Walter met the

outside air while leaning heavily on the Councilor's arm.

"I'm so sorry, dear friend," said Walter, "as soon as I stood up, my head began swimming and I acted rather boorishly." The Councilor waved his hand at a downward angle so that Walter knew to drop the subject and forget the fiasco as soon as he could.

"These things happen," insisted the Councilor, "and they're quite unpredictable."

To ease the transition from indoors to the outside air, the Councilor produced two fat, stubby cigars from his breast pocket. He examined them both and took one for himself. He offered the second cigar to Walter, and together they eagerly chewed off one end of his own cigar and took each a match, struck it on the brick façade of the post office that was neighbor to the restaurant, and happily lit their cigars.

Walter and the Councilor walked for several minutes in silence, each looking upward to where the barren late autumn treetops met the sky, with the twigs and branches bouncing mercilessly off one another in the penumbra hanging around the treetops and rooftops of the various stores, and, later, houses, lining the street where they were walking. The scene seemed to stay the same; repeating patterns of trees and bricks and often-flickering amber light blurred together and became indistinguishable from one another. It lent the evening a heady surrealism. The liquor had a noticeable effect on Walter's gait—he was ambling close to the curb and would occasionally stumble off into the gutter below, dampening his thick blubber and grunting as he heaved his great massive body onto the level terrain. Each time Walter stumbled downward, the Councilor stopped walking and turned ninety degrees to his left, facing the whale head on. He did not offer his walking stick or even his hand out to his friend. He did not make any exclamation or inquiry into the whale's ability to walk. He did not display any overt emotion on his face. He merely turned toward his friend and gazed steadily at him until he was level on the sidewalk again, at which point he would begin walking forward again, tilting his head slightly back to look upward at the meeting place of the trees and the roofs and the sky.

After some time walking and puffing their cigars, Walter and the Councilor came to a part of the road that tunneled through a low mountain on the outskirts of town before reaching the seashore. They paused to extinguish their cigars and peered into the tunnel. It was dark inside, with lamps cutting into the darkness every few yards, creating light like a drowning person's gasps for air when they bob at the surface before going under. Not far into the tunnel, the road begins to rise upon a steep incline. It is most unusual, and very inefficient for a tunnel road to climb such a steep angle, but the two pioneers forged onward, growing weary as they rose. In the sections of darkness, Walter would cry a low song, reverberating throughout the space until the intermittent light caused him to become self-conscious and stop. In this

manner, the two walked on for a few more minutes.

By now, Walter's inebriation had subsided—most of it had left his body via the profuse amount of sweat dripping from him—and the usual after-effects of some unknown, hurried guilt mingled with shame were setting in. He knew that he had not been overly garrulous at the restaurant, and yet he felt as though he had betrayed some rich secret of his.

The tunnel he and the Councilor were in only trapped the humid night air, making it stale and swampy. Walter's perspiration stuck to him instead of evaporating. He looked to his friend, whose face was reflecting the faint glow of moonlight peeking through the opening at the end of the tunnel and from the top of the mountain. Walter clapped his fins together and exhaled loudly to get the Councilor's attention. The Councilor turned back to face Walter amidst the darkness.

"My friend," began Walter, "I know I made it seem as though my troubles began with that woman, and I wish to correct my error forthwith: The woman was not my trouble, merely the nearest and most visibly manifest scapegoat for it. My troubles really began when I started to daydream what it might be like to return to my roots—my homeland, if you will allow the phrase, incongruent as it is with my origins. I've never known my family, and for this I have, I suppose, always felt some sort of lack in myself. I know I've lived a full life with great accomplishments, but a large part of me would forego the acclaim I've received throughout the years at the bank if only I could have a 'normal' family of sorts.

"I began these romantic musings shortly after my position at the bank became, to put it politely, compromised. It is no secret now that it was a deliberate attempt to oust me. I was set up!" He emphasized this last point with a stern blow from his blowhole. "It was like swimming in quicksand I tell you. At any rate, those men have tried for too long now to tear me asunder. My friend, you agree with me, I can tell, that I need now find my origin and get back in some kind of communion with my true nature.

"For too long I've been a part of this world, this town, this place here. It is suffocating me. My eyes are bulging and my lungs are filling with water here as I drown in the murk and muck of routine and desperate, bloodthirsty business. You've known me nearly my whole life; longer than I can remember. What would you recommend? You are much wiser than I, and you're not prone to rash action. I don't want to overstep my boundaries, but I feel I must redefine them in some way or another. Should I let these feelings pass from me, or act on them as I see fit?"

As Walter was speaking, he and the Councilor had continued their walk and reached the end of the tunnel, where they stepped outside on top of the mountain. The cool freshness of the air was a welcome respite from the clammy interior they had traversed prior. The beginning of their walk was a great distance

behind them now, and the moon shone brightly overhead. Here, away from the diffusive effect of the streetlights and the decaying brick buildings, the eerie light of the moon made shapes on the shin-high grass—shadows cast and metamorphosed between different aspects of the terrain. Turning around and looking beyond the pathway into the tunnel, they could see some of the town; a light here and there, and the deep, thoughtful blue that civilization marks upon itself when it is deposited in a valley of lighter shades of the same color. It was as though the buildings, or the people in them perhaps, were absorbing the light from the surrounding country and using it for their own benefit. There was something soporific and sinister about the silhouette of the town when viewed from above.

Though most of the buildings were flat-roofed, a few—some churches or schoolhouses—had spires, and it was these that gave Walter a violent impression of the town. The silence around him only enhanced the voyeuristic feeling he got from observing the town at such a distance. Shivering as the droplets of sweat evaporated from his skin but were not replaced, Walter tried to imagine the valley without a town there, but he couldn't. He closed his eyes, but the lights — though faint — were still luminescent enough to engage his retina and create warm spots of color on the insides of his eyelids. The taller buildings threatened the dividing line on the horizon of valley trees and stark mountain ground. They were competing to climb the opposite slope from which Walter sat, perplexed and troubled by his observations of the town at night. The roads that stopped and turned to gravel and then dirt before reaching the sea-shore were the only bits of the town that Walter could erase with his imagination; perhaps because they faded so gradually into more natural paths, or perhaps because they disappeared before assaulting his eyes. His head began reeling, and he groped about the ground around him for something to help him regain balance. Walter sat upon a stone and turned from the town to look at his friend. The Councilor's breathing was more pronounced in the thinner air atop the mountain, and he looked statuesque standing with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the town. The moonlight fell into the deep, time-worn wrinkles on his brow and around his eyes.

In this moment, the Councilor grew to be incredibly tall, and his torso became more spherical as his height increased. His arms and legs lengthened considerably, giving his body the appearance of a gnarled old tree whose trunk had split into three distinct pieces: The two thin, precise branches extending outward in sharp angles and decreasing in size, and the robust branch striving more or less upward and remaining of constant diameter until exploding into a million infinitesimal pieces at its apex. The giantified Councilor cast an oblong shadow behind him down the mountain. Walter saw all of this happen, had been seeing it slowly happen, and did not intervene.

Moving with the litheness of a sylph, the Councilor folded his arms around his body and crouched down until he was squatting and hugging himself. He spun around slowly, carefully, so as not to disturb even the tiniest blade of grass beneath him. He took one foot and dug it into the soil until he was ankle-deep in the dirt. Then he took his other foot and stood on his toes. The pressure from his above-ground foot on the other caused a sickening crack to sound where his joint popped loose in the ankle that was dug into the ground and broke maliciously.

He twisted the one leg around the other until he was well-knotted but still firmly rooted in the ground by the broken ligaments that became more a part of the earth and less a part of his body. As gracefully as they had moved before, his arms unfolded from around his body and reached outward from his torso, straight so that a board could be laid flat across them. He stood perfectly erect now and inclined his head to the ground, seeing Walter on the rock. The body of the Councilor formed an unoccupied cross on the mountaintop.

“Walter, sit down,” said the Councilor, “A long time ago, before you came here, and probably before you were even born, this mountain was very different. I am very old, you know, and have seen the changes made to this land. At one time, the town rested upon this mountain. It was not as densely populated, but the small community was a thriving one. The town itself looked quite different, actually. Back then, there were no street lamps or garish neon signs. There was no need for them. Atop this mountain it was misty nearly every morning, and the water vapor nourished the vegetation enough to grow well and support the small community in their needs for food and soil to work. The people were self-sufficient; no merchants came with goods from other lands on the sunny afternoons atop the mountain. The sea lay just beyond the field at the foot of the mountain, but few went for want or need. Walter, I tell you, even the architecture was utilitarian in its purpose. Flying bulwarks and decorative pillars adorning the faces of buildings were unseen and unheard of. The houses were simple—devout, you might call them—and after they were through serving their purpose, they were reconfigured for another use. It was a simple, fulfilling time. I don’t mean to over-romanticize the mountaintop. There were problems as well. But amidst those problems there was a convivial sense of betterment that caused the townspeople to persevere.

“Then, after the harvest had turned out to be less than anticipated one year, the people were bewildered. They had never experienced such hardship, such drought. A group of men arrived on a ship. These men were beastly and clever. First, they had been responsible for poisoning the soil before their arrival. How it was done, even I am not sure; my rank does not permit me to know such things, for I am permitted to know that which is necessary to the execution of my office and not a bit more. At any rate,

they had been educated according to the standards of ruthless gentlemen. After arriving, they convinced the people of the town that in order to survive any more famines that might come they would need to relocate into the valley below. The valley, they claimed, was full of richer soil that would produce more fruitful harvests in the coming years. These men also had new seeds to plant in the valley's soil; these seeds would make life more pleasurable for the townspeople, and would turn each day into a new sensation. Fearful and afflicted, the townspeople acquiesced to the strangers' demands and made preparations to move into the valley. They packed their meager belongings together and deconstructed the houses, barns, and stores they had built. The final night before the move was made, however, the strangers betrayed the townspeople as they were all sleeping in a circle around their belongings in the center of the town."

Walter was so enraptured in the story the Councilor was telling him that he took no notice of the change in the Councilor's appearance. Where the Councilor's head had been tilted toward him, it now lolled from side to side and his previously rigid muscles were slackening, giving the appearance of a melting plastic statue in the hot sunlight.

"In the middle of the night," continued the Councilor, "they descended upon the town from their ship which lay at rest in the bay. Families were systematically separated and slaughtered. Some of the strangers didn't want to participate in the destruction, and their fate was worse than the innocents from the village. Those strangers that couldn't bring themselves to be willing participants were forced to fight with each other and some animals until the death. Eventually, the animals were then eaten as well. One instance I recall involved a man, swollen-bellied and beating violently at the flies that buzzed incessantly around his head. He had lasted for quite some time against the others and against several wild beasts, but he was fatigued and delirious. His body had been pushed quite beyond its limits, and he was clawing ferociously at the air and then at his own flesh. His eyes became bloodshot, and as the accordion music filled the air of the makeshift arena, an entire crowd cheered him on as he scratched at his bulbous stomach. He scratched until the skin broke and the blood began to ooze out of his pores. Some say that he was biting his lips off and eating them to sustain his strength for his own destruction; I cannot vouch for the veracity of such reports, but I cannot deny their possibility either. After hours of scratching, clawing, screeching cries, and bleeding, many of the spectators had fallen asleep or moved on to the more entertaining diversions that will take place only in the late nighttime hours. Shortly after the last spectator had left, the crazed man had finally scratched until he could reach three fingers inside his abdomen and extract bits of his intestines and his stomach. He ate pieces of himself, vomiting and consuming and

vomiting again until he fell down dead.

“The red stain of blood painted the trees, and the acrid odor of burnt flesh permeated the air. After the town was decimated, the strangers moved into the valley to build a more modern, proper city. This is the city you know, Walter, replete with the conveniences of brick, alcohol, cigars, and money. The founders of this new town tried to build a tunnel through the mountain in order to reach the sea again, but their best engineer miscalculated and their tunnel opens now where we stand—on this mountaintop—where the town once stood. Superstition keeps most from coming here, but, Walter, in your case it is part of where you need to be if you ever want to find your origin of nature. I know all this because I was here—I was there—and you came as a mere infant stowaway on our ship of strangers. Walter, look around at the air here, it is time; depart from me.”

The Councilor lifted his head back up and looked toward the sea. Walter placed a fin on the leg of his esteemed friend. The Councilor stood rigid, alone against the lightening sky, and quit breathing. Looking at the stain of the city on the otherwise unblemished land, Walter felt a compelling urge to retreat into the tunnel again and descend back into the life of comfort he had grown accustomed to and forget about everything the Councilor had told him.

III.

Over the course of Saturday, on more than one occasion, Walter gathered some clothes, one or two volumes he could read without growing weary of them, some toiletries, and other personal effects into a large brown leather duffel and began in earnest toward the site of the tunnel and the mountain. He would, unconsciously at first, but later with a growing awareness, trace the route he had taken with the Councilor. Invariably, however, something would present itself as an impasse, and Walter would resign himself back to his room in a building the color of volcanic ash. After carefully unpacking his duffel, making sure to place each item that had been packed in its proper place, and arranged just so, Walter would have to consider seriously whether or not he had packed them and began walking or whether he had simply imagined the whole thing; he would then go the bathroom and ease himself slowly down into his bathtub and soak until he felt completely relaxed. This ritual took so much vitality from him that at the end of the day he took to his bed and his fins melted away as he lied back on his bed each evening. In that semi-conscious state experienced before drifting off to sleep, when the mind is most susceptible to impression, he felt a gentle rocking motion, not unlike the sensation of sitting idly in a playground swing with the wind pushing from

behind, or the feeling of being adrift without any oars in a small rowboat. Swinging gently, he would close his eyes and let the thickness of sleep consume him.

Walter's listless, gentle falling into disarray was slightly interrupted on a Sunday morning as Walter arose to greet the blue light politely skirting around the half-drawn curtains of his room. He was lying awake but still and thinking about the day's activities, pondering over whether to go to the café for breakfast or stay in his own house and eat. He had just decided that he would rather go to the café this morning since the business regulars would be at home, and he should adjust to a new schedule as a free whale, unfettered by business concerns and the rigmarole that became steady employment. He should, after all, embrace his state of being from time to time so that he may learn to enjoy it instead of dread it. But before even getting out of bed, his door shook with the violence of a knock that could only belong to the hand of one of Walter's visitors from earlier that week—the men who dressed only in white linen suits, despite the weather and all other practical reasons to avoid such attire.

Walter didn't bother getting out of bed; he merely shouted that whoever was at the door could come in. He looked as the door flew open as it was impelled by much force and continued until it hit the wall behind it, leaving a small indenture in the drywall. Walter also didn't bother with pleasantries, but rather asked in an accusatory tone, "What the devil are you doing here on a Sunday?"

The man, who was by himself this time, though Walter could still not discern one from the other, didn't bother answering Walter's question and instead chose to nose about the room until he laid eyes on the swimming paraphernalia that had been left during the previous visit by the men in white linen suits. Seeing that the goggles, cap, and swimming trunks lay untouched he turned to Walter and finally said, "We are checking on your progress—that is all." He looked quickly about the rest of the room and then went back to the door, grabbing it gently by the handle and leaving the whale's room. Walter remained in bed for the duration of the man's short visit, but now he got up and noticed once more the swimming gear that had been left in his room days earlier. They made him angry, though, and he kicked them violently and shouted a few curses at them. Grabbing his coat and hat he threw open his own door—making the dent in the drywall yet larger—and started off in the direction of the city market, where he intended to buy some fresh produce and meat so that he could cook a good, decent meal for himself that night, since it had been quite a while since he had treated himself to something as rewarding as that.

Walter didn't notice that Mrs. Gruffstrainer wasn't around, as she usually is on Sunday, and for him that was probably a good thing, seeing as he wasn't in the mood to bother with anyone whom he deemed frivolous and inauthentic. The man coming to his home once again had upset Walter, and as a

consequence he was impelled into action that was unusual for him—and if he really was under some kind of surveillance, then it would seem even more out of the ordinary for him to go to the city market. Just like the last time those two men came into his home, he went to the western, government area of town, now he found himself headed for its northern center, where he used to frequent the pubs in the evening after work but had scarcely been seen since his last night with the Councilor and since he had been relieved of his position at the bank. Twice now the men in white linen suits had caused Walter to act in ways that were not ordinary for him. He seemed impulsive, and he loathed that lack of design in his movements. And now he couldn't help but think that somewhere, someone was watching him as he strode confidently down the avenues, murdering the lifeless shrieking pavement beneath him, and consciously humming a jaunty tune so that passerby knew just how happy and polite he was. That unnamed someone watching him at some undisclosed distance was probably amused at the banality of Walter's life, but Walter still couldn't shake the notion that those men in white linen were meant to impel him into action of some sort; if he sat still long enough they were sure to crop up yet again and force him to move somewhere, regardless of the propriety of that particular action at any given time.

To be in the city market on a Sunday morning was a task unsuited to Walter's girth and cumbersome movements. He couldn't wheel about like the people on their bicycles and roller skates, and he couldn't move as quickly as the skinny people that inhabited this part of town. But he pressed onward through the thick crowd of the market hoping to find some good ingredients for his dinner. At the moment, he was also thinking of Clarissa a great deal. Her voice that felt like warm water hitting his back and running down until it made a river streaming from his fins into the gutter in the street was echoing in the way the crowd moved. Walter heard her voice a few times in that crowd, but the body it went with did not match Clarissa's body; her's was more silken, and the bodies that Walter saw with her voice were not as supple as her's—they were either too old and encrusted with age and bitter experience or they were too young and therefore much too firm, inflexible in their movements and gestures. Clarissa's body, in Walter's mind, was like a uniquely shaped garment that reacted to the heat of the wearer, or it was like a kind of boat in which Walter could rest and rest and not look up or down but out to anywhere knowing that he would remain where he was and the waves would push him precisely where he needed to go.

A busload of older people went by, all of them with cameras around their necks and broad-brimmed hats pulled low on their heads, shielding their eyes from the sun that had barely risen. Walter halted, let the bus pass, and then moved forward into a small shop that was completely open at the front. A sign outside the front of the shop announced a cooking demonstration that was to be taking place shortly, and

Walter decided that he would loiter about and see the demonstration. He waited, and within minutes a short man in plaid, skin-tight woolen trousers jumped onto a small wooden platform adorned with a fake Persian rug. He held up a gleaming knife in one hand, smiled, and held up a leather boot in the other hand. He should have waited to smile, Walter thought, but then the knife went sawing through the boot, and the crowd cheered. Without uttering another word, the man took a large melon and held it up just like he did the boot. The same swift motion of his hand, and half the melon fell to the ground, where some starving street urchins scooped it up and began gnawing at it in a group of three. The man continued cutting things in half with the knife, which was impressive to the people amassed around, but Walter couldn't see the relationship this sharp knife had to cooking outside of the ease through which one could cut things. But a cooking demonstration ought to involve some actual cooking, thought Walter as he moved deeper into the heart of the market in order to find some more information on cooking, which was gripping him with increased intensity the more he pondered the subject. The more Walter thought about cooking the more he disdained that man with his knife. More from a misplaced sense of superiority than anything concrete, Walter began to hate the man with the sharp knife. He was not a real cook, and couldn't produce a quality meal if he had nothing but the simplest of instruments at his hand. Walter felt placated by the thought that he would be capable of producing a delicious meal without the aid of gimmicky modern appliances. Soon, he began introducing himself to people as "Walter, a cook," and the people to whom he said this believed him readily and asked his advice on all manner of topics from the use of exotic spices to the right amount of caviar to put on a cracker. Walter knew none of the answers, but the people asking didn't know this, and so he answered with alacrity. He had begun to gather quite a large crowd around himself at one point, outside of a bakery, and thought to himself that this sort of thing wouldn't be so bad to do each weekend. He could become a sort of advice-giving cook at the market—though if his lack of actual experience ever became apparent, his services would be rendered hysterically useless. Musing on this, Walter began telling some people in the crowd about him that he would return next week to answer more questions and that they would all simply have to wait. Until then, he must gather the ingredients necessary for his own culinary masterpiece to be prepared that evening. With many disgruntled murmurs, the crowd dispersed, and Walter was free to roam about once more.

Some distance away from the section of cooking shops and displays, Walter found a sports memorabilia shop. The inside walls were covered with different flags, pennants, posters, and signed jerseys of various clubs from a multitude of sports. There were glass cases with more expensive items set on rotating plastic pillars, and the items spun ceaselessly underneath a ring of tiny suns that beat down

eternally upon them. There were framed magazine covers and newspaper pages that displayed joyous celebrations, or riots in some instances, commemorating some important victory or another. Walter stood perplexed in the center of the shop and kept turning around like one of the items inside the spinning glass cases. He was trying to remember some of the instances that these items represented. He could remember vaguely some summer night many years ago when a baseball team had won a major victory and several houses were set on fire as a result of the celebrators. Would anyone really want to buy a piece of that memory? Of course, the answer was contained all around him.

But then, thought the whale, what would be the significance of that item? Would it not be a part of another memory—another time entirely? The original instance, which is now permanently extinct, is only recreated in the buyer's mind, meaning that the original instance is mostly a subjective experience. In order for the original instance to become fixed it must undergo some process of objectification. Walter crinkled his lip trying to figure out who would be so masochistic as to re-create subjective experiences in order to make them objective and therefore able to be purchased by the public—as though public sentiment were like a doughy bread that just needs to be kneaded before being set in the oven to become a permanent shape. At once, Walter began scanning the interior of the shop in search of a particular item that he had seen as a young whale. He gazed around and around until finally his eyes fell upon the shelf lining the wall behind the cashier's counter. As his eyes became more accustomed to the panic of the room, he felt a sense of euphoria as he gazed at his object of desire.

"How much for that netting?" asked Walter.

"It's not for sale, sir," replied the clerk.

"Then why is it in the store? That's quite misleading, you know."

"Perhaps you ought to just buy a poster, or perhaps a signed picture of your favorite player."

"Where did you come by that netting, anyway?"

"The fishing supply store may be able to suit your needs, if you want some netting. Otherwise, you'll have to leave here, as you're taking up quite a lot of room just standing there."

"But it is that netting, in particular, that interests me. How long have you had it?"

"Who are you? What's with all the questions?"

Walter stared at the man behind the counter, pondering whether he should tell his name to him. There couldn't be much harm in that. In fact, Walter pulled out his new identification card to show him along with his name. "My name is Walter," he said as he held his card out to the man.

The man behind the counter grabbed Walter's card and looked between it and the whale for a

feverish moment. “This isn’t really you,” he said, tossing Walter’s identification back at him as though it were a piece of moldy bread.

Walter took his identification and stomped angrily out of the store, purposefully knocking into a large framed picture of a crowd dancing brutally in the street outside of a football field.

Once again outside in the open air of the market, Walter felt ashamed of the way he had acted. While he had been right to be angered, he should have refrained from showing it so openly. He thought of his unseen pursuers as he tried to blend into the crowd of people yet again. Foolish actions on his part would be his undoing, and if he could remain calm and collected at all times he would not need to worry so much about whatever problems were coming from his doppelganger—for it must be a doppelganger that was sullyng his reputation and forcing him to procure a new identity. Walking toward the opposite end of the market from which he entered, Walter heard the familiar voice of Mrs. Gruffstrainer before he could see her over the tumult.

When he did get closer to Mrs. Gruffstrainer, Walter called out to her several times in a friendly hello, but she didn’t acknowledge him—not even tacitly. She was busy with her wares, paying careful attention only to the most promising of prospective clients—the ones who would surely make a purchase—and brushing aside other gawkers like crumbs of cake that had become smitten with her nightgown.

There was, standing next to Mrs. Gruffstrainer and attached to her by some kind of leather leash, a very handsome man, who was quite tall, perhaps over six feet—certainly not under. His hair was dark and smooth; it was very sleek in the light of the market and almost looked like a plastic cap. Gruffstrainer’s man was the color of a new brick, and just as symbolic of strength, power, and indefatigable longevity. He was in the sun, where he belonged and from which he came, newborn of the light. Such a beautiful person, when placed next to Mrs. Gruffstrainer, produced a comically grotesque effect; his natural magnificence overcame and overshadowed Mrs. Gruffstrainer’s rudimentary physical appearance and made her seem to be the one attached by a leather leash, as though a wild dog put up for show. The only way that Walter or anyone else standing in the market knew that the handsome bound man was the object and Mrs. Gruffstrainer the subject was that she was the only one making a controlling fuss with her foghorn of a voice. Walter couldn’t take his eyes off the man, though, and he managed to relegate Mrs. Gruffstrainer’s hoarse shouts to background sound while he was focusing on this near-perfect specimen of humanity. Though he was bound he was still so natural. His nose was rising and small, and his mouth was so finely shaped by those turned lips that mark a great natural specimen of physical perfection that Walter scarcely

could contain his glee at being allowed the privilege of even looking upon such an individual. Then he forgot to block out Mrs. Gruffstrainer's voice and learned that she was selling the man to the highest bidder.

Quickly, Walter gathered his fins together and used his size to his advantage as he pushed himself to the very front of the crowd. He screwed his face up in frustration and blew a quick shot out of his blowhole, injuring whoever happened to be standing directly behind him at the time.

"Mrs. Gruffstrainer," he called, "I wish to bid on this man. What is the minimum?"

"Oh, hello, Walter!" screamed Mrs. Gruffstrainer in a voice that was more masculine than that of the Councilor. "We're up to three thousand! Isn't that splendid?"

"But I do not have three thousand to bid."

"No matter. I doubt that whoever bid three thousand has three thousand to bid."

"Then why did you allow such a bid?"

She looked over him, to the rest of the crowd, and shouted: "Do we have four? Four—anyone—for this fine example of beautiful man before he falls? What say you, now?"

While she was shouting, many scoffed loudly and shouted derisive comments back at her, goading her into her next series of actions.

Walter had become so transfixed by the man's vigor and physical flawlessness that he shouted out for two thousand, which was his entire savings.

The crowd inadvertently laughed at the stupid whale for his cry of less than the current bid. Walter was not accustomed to auctions such as this, however, and he blushed a mighty shade of blood red. Mrs. Gruffstrainer, however, seized an opportunity when she saw one, saying, "Why, the whale has a point! If we can't ask four thousand from you poor sods, why not go to two thousand for just the torso?"

The crowd cheered a demoniacal chant that Walter had never heard, and the man looked steadily out at them.

Mrs. Gruffstrainer produced a large knife from her brassiere and chopped the man's ear clean off. The crowd cheered yet more, and Walter stood horrified.

"One hundred!" shouted Mrs. Gruffstrainer.

"I'll give you three!" replied the voice of a woman in the crowd.

"Sold!" And Mrs. Gruffstrainer threw the man's ear to the woman in the crowd.

Next, she chopped off the lower portion of the man's leg and asked five hundred for it. The bids reached nine hundred, and Mrs. Gruffstrainer threw the leg of the man by his chiseled, hard calf muscle

out to another woman in the crowd. Things continued in this vein for another hour, with the man being systematically chopped apart and sold to the highest bidder until Mrs. Gruffstrainer had made considerably more than she had asked for his whole body.

The ravenous crowd had purchased every last bit of the man. The platform on which he had stood with Mrs. Gruffstrainer was covered in blood and chunks of strewn, discarded flesh. The jewelry that had adorned his regal head was also there on the platform, sitting alone as a testament to the ineffable greatness that had been imputed him. Breathing in massive heaving gasps, Walter left the crowd as they were, salivating over their newly purchased eyes and lips, and walked through the back alleys to avoid seeing many more people; he had witnessed quite enough to know that he belonged to some other strata of society.

The light had all but gone from the market now, and he dragged his own body back to his room and crawled back into his bed where he slept. When he woke up on Monday, he would begin searching in earnest for a new job—one that could keep him out of the grasp of too many people, like his bank job used to do. He would search for government work, he sleepily decided, for that was the work best suited to reclusive, genteel folk. It was true enough, also, that a government position would give him yet more mobility within the identity trouble he had found himself entangled in recently; government employees are naturally invested with a silent authority that articulates itself through unseen gestures and signatures on obscure documents.

Clarissa's hands flashed through Walter's mind, and he fell asleep, dreaming of climbing up a steep hill with the Councilor, but at the top the Councilor turned into Clarissa. He had to get back there.

IV.

After looking for a job on Monday, Walter was delighted to procure a position as a postal carrier. He woke up on Tuesday eager to enter his first day on the job under the supervision of Mr. Marshall, whom he was quite looking forward to meeting and learning from. Walter put on his uniform with pride, and though it stretched a bit too tight across his back and was a bit too loose toward his bottom he still thought that he looked quite impressive and important. Should those men in white linen suits accost him today, thought he, they will have to answer to their own superiors in the government for molesting one of their ilk.

The moon hadn't yet set when Walter reported for duty to Mr. Marshall. He was wide awake,

however, even after losing sleep to anticipation and nerves. Their first task was to gather all the mail into their satchels and begin their route so that the business section of town may receive its mail before the slums, where work isn't as important and therefore news can wait to be heard. The two struck out at a brisk pace, and Marshall narrated bits of his own personal story to Walter interspersed with tips to make the job of a postal carrier easier. Marshall's largest problem seemed to consist of run-ins with protective domestic animals and the men and women that owned them; for some reason, few people took pleasure in the sight of the postal carriers—perhaps because more bad news was passed through the mail than good news. After a little more than an hour of walking and delivering mail, the pair took brief respite at a coffee house on the edge of the business section of town before venturing into the slummy apartment buildings and housing projects.

The barista took their orders for breakfast, Walter getting tea and a baguette and Marshall ordering two raw eggs with milk, put into a blender, and served with a glass of wine. The odd breakfast somehow suited him, thought Walter, since Marshall was built strong, with shoulders nearly twice as wide as his waist, which was cinched tight by a shining black leather belt. Marshall's face was worn by deep lines and tanned into a hard, cracked brick from years of walking in the sun delivering the mail. His lips, it seemed, could only curl into a snarl—never a smile, but also never a frown. Marshall's entire presence was one of violence and epic fatigue. When he spoke it was always in short bursts, and all the stories he told Walter were neither funny nor sad—they just were, and they usually hit listeners, Walter included, with the effect of a broken tenor singing alone on the stage as part of a pitiful encore as the rows of theatre patrons empty quickly and loudly.

Marshall downed his glass of milk and eggs in one gulp and without swallowing drank his wine too. The breakfast commingled in his mouth, and he frowned as he swallowed hard, moving his Adam's apple up and down like a buoy in the ocean that has been sent reeling by a tanker. Walter felt like he shouldn't waste time and quickly ate his breakfast as well, hating that he couldn't read the paper as he ate like he used to behind the closed door of his office at the bank. But he could read the paper on Sunday, when he needn't report to work—for there was no mail on Sunday—and he could read the paper in the afternoon. Besides, this job would do him much good; he was getting rather flabby sitting all day at a desk pushing paper and pen around like the toy trains of a little boy, constantly moving about but never going anywhere.

On their way out of the café, the pair saw Clarissa, and she stopped to kiss Marshall on both cheeks. She introduced herself to Walter, who took her hand gently into his fin and said, "But surely you

remember me from the other day in your office. I know it would be quite a while before I would allow myself to forget you. I'm Walter, of course; I'm a postal carrier now."

"Pleased to meet you, Walter," she replied.

Walter thought she must be putting on airs, but he decided not to labor the issue any more than he already had by the tone in his voice when he told her his name again. Marshall clapped his hands together, startling both Walter and Clarissa saying, "Well, ought we sit here all day long and play coy games together? We've work to do. Clarissa, you may come with us if you like, but I doubt you would."

She wrinkled her nose at him, and smiled at Walter as she said, "Wouldn't I?" Silently, she strode in front of Walter and behind Marshall as the three of them walked the path of Walter's delivery route. There was no more conversation between them; Marshall only muttered curses under his breath from time to time, Clarissa was silent as ever, and Walter was understanding just how out of shape he had got to be from working at the bank as he sweated and heaved under the relatively light strain of his mail load. He nearly forgot to deliver some parcels as he was so distracted by Clarissa's form in front of him, and he certainly felt buffoonish huffing and puffing as much as he was. He wanted to impress her, so that she might remember him. In fact, he was hoping that the café on his route was a regular morning stop for her so that he would have reason to ingratiate himself even more into her daily routine. In this way, he hoped to become at least a little bit indispensable to her.

Presently, the road full of nearly identical houses, all of which were painted a pale blue color—like light filtered through gauzy curtains—was interrupted by a yelp and a gurgling shout. Marshall was red all around his mouth, and there lay at his feet a medium-sized dog with blood-matted fur on its neck. Marshall's eyes were wide, and Walter noticed for the first time that one was hazel and one was brown. This unnerved Walter as he surveyed the dog on the sidewalk. It was most certainly dead, and how Marshall ever could have killed it that fast was a mystery to Walter. Clarissa appeared unmoved by the whole experience, but Walter was completely aghast. He sputtered out of his blowhole and knelt down close to the dog for a moment before straightening back up and towering over Marshall, who remained poised for battle as though this dog was just one in a legion of aggressive enemy canines unleashed to kill him. Walter couldn't find words to say as Marshall wiped the blood from his teeth and looked back and forth from Walter to Clarissa.

"Well, don't just stand there; do something!"

Walter fell back slightly. He had no idea what to do. But the command was directed towards Clarissa, who was already bending down and lifting the dog into her arms, cradling it against her bosom. She was

still silent, but her hands moved like they did in times past, in her office, and soon Walter was concentrated solely on the movements of her fingers. The head of the dog lay limp against her body, but she was working at the matted fur with her fingers, pushing and pulling and directing bits of it this way and that way. She didn't look at either Walter or Marshall as she said, "You didn't know what he wanted." She didn't look at either Walter or Marshall as she pulled the skin back over the wound that Marshall's mouth had made on the throat of the dog, and she only looked at the dog as she set it back in the grass where a bowl of water was. She took the water and laced beads of it on her fingertips, caressing the snout of the dog and pressing her fingers again into the area of matted fur. Then the dog's tongue came out and lapped up some of the water from her hands, and he rolled over onto his side. Marshall looked upset, but Clarissa held her fingers to her mouth and pressed her lips against them slightly, quieting whatever rage Marshall bubbled with at the moment. Walter still couldn't stop watching her fingers, and he barely noticed that the dog was walking around normally now, unhampered by the wound on its neck; Walter didn't know if it felt no pain or if it ignored the pain—it wouldn't have mattered either way.

There were no more dogs on the route, and for this Walter was glad, but Marshall became increasingly antagonistic as the day wore on. Every few houses he would turn around and scream obscenities at Clarissa, who always remained silent. These outbursts terrified Walter, and he was glad that he would not be working with Marshall after his training. Once, after Clarissa was silent during an outburst, Marshall threw his bag to Walter and stalked off to the opposite side of the road, going the way they came. He punched every single mailbox in his path, either denting it or knocking it completely to the ground. Clarissa turned around then, and held Walter's fin.

"He hates you," she said.

Walter was so excited by her speaking to him and holding his fin that he had barely understood the words she spoke.

"I hate you, too. But that is unimportant, because you aren't like him," said Clarissa, letting Walter's fin drop pathetically to his side. "Don't be hurt, though. My hate is nothing. His hate is everything. He hates what he does not know because he can only know through violence, and he hates what he does know because he had to destroy it to learn it. That is why Marshall bites the dogs when he sees them; it is all he knows of them, for he can't get past that stage first to know greater things about them. That is why he controls people, and things. It is so that he can know them for a brief time before he either destroys them or destroys the part of himself that knew them. Don't take it personally that he walked away today; it was his only option."

“How do you know all this?” stammered Walter.

“Because I touch. But I have all of my senses to touch with.”

She closed her eyes when she said this, and Walter didn't want to interrupt her with all the questions that she was arousing in him. Clarissa walked over the grass and pulled a black bird from a tree like it was a piece of fruit. She held it up for Walter to see, but he only got a quick glance at it before she covered it with both of her hands. Walter had seen that the bird had a broken wing, though, and when she uncovered the bird after a minute or two of prodding, it flew to the wires lining the street and perched and sat, as though upon a bust of Pallas. The bird whistled at them once, and then flew back to the tree from which it had been plucked. Clarissa inclined her head towards Walter, who fumbled with the strap of his mailbag trying to get closer to her. But she held out her hands to him and took his fin in her fingers again, silently asking him to stop and assuring him that she would follow for the time being. So Walter kept about his route, delivering the contents of his bag and of Marshall's, which he had picked up as well; he still hoped to advance within the postal service, and working double-duty on his first day would make a good impression with those who are in charge of such advancement.

Several blocks from where Marshall bit the dog and Clarissa healed it and the bird, was a man in white linen pants, shirtless, on his front porch, smoking a large cigar and rubbing the thick black curls that adorned his naked chest. He took the white linen shirt that was laid across the back of his chair and put it on, leaving the front open. He looked like a tourist in the summertime, prepared to parade up and down the skinny beach without ever touching the water. He nodded to Clarissa, then looked directly at Walter's eyes and said, “Hello. Walter the banker.”

Walter was shocked, for some reason, that he should remember him. “But I am not an employee of the bank anymore,” he said, inhaling so that he and his uniform grew with his breath.

“You never were,” replied the man in white linen, “but I wouldn't expect you to know that.”

Walter remembered his initial meeting with the men in white linen, and knowingly said, “of course I knew that. I was never a bank employee. That much is clear—especially since I am a postal carrier now.”

“No, you're not,” said the man in white linen indifferently, and he began to button his shirt.

Walter was a bit put-off. “Yes, for you see, here is a parcel for you. It doesn't have your name on it, but it shows this address—and it appears that you live here quite alone,” said Walter, though there was really no way of being able to tell if the man lived alone or not, and Walter realized this mistake almost immediately upon its utterance. So he dashed beside the man, talking hurriedly as he went by, excusing himself and saying, “But of course it is my duty as a postal carrier to ensure the safe and accurate delivery

of every item. I would be a poor carrier if I didn't at least do that much. So let me just peek inside here a bit and make sure that it is solely you living here by yourself so this parcel doesn't go to the wrong recipient. You won't mind, I'm sure."

Walter was speaking from behind the closed screen door, on the inside of the house, as he had moved with inhuman agility and left Clarissa and the man in white linen outside. The room was tastefully furnished, with little excess clutter. In fact, there were no books, albums, photographs, or artworks to be seen in the living room. In the kitchen, where Walter hastily moved to next, there was a fresh-baked loaf of multi-grain bread cooling on the countertop next to the sink and an open bottle of milk with drops of sweat running down the side of the glass bottle. By the side door, next to a pair of white sneakers, Walter saw his tennis racket and a white terrycloth headband that was stained black in a circle on the inside from sweat. Walter stammered out to the living room, where the man and Clarissa stood in an embrace, "Yes, yes, you are most alone here. I will leave the parcel by the door for you, and if you could please just sign this form stating that you received the item in good condition from your carrier—me, naturally—I can be on my way."

The man moved only to take the package and place it on the countertop next to the bread and milk. He took Clarissa by her cold thin fingers and used her to push Walter out of the house. He stared definitively at Walter and said, "I will not sign. Leave here before I have you revoked."

Walter knew that he had aggravated the man, and didn't pause to think about how he could be revoked. The man was clearly bluffing; he didn't really possess that much authority. But Clarissa did stay with him, hugging his side and playing with the few dark curls that surfaced from beneath the buttons on his white linen shirt. He turned to her and started whispering as Walter moved to the sidewalk and kept easing on down the road, looking at the pair of them together and feeling sick—as though he could vomit at any moment. They treated each other like shiny new toys.

Walter was through with his route for the day, and he couldn't bring himself to return to work the next day or the day after that. He officially quit working as a postal carrier on the first Thursday after he began. Walter informed Marshall of his failure as a postal carrier, and Marshall looked hard at him, eyes watering and bloodshot.

"You were never a postal carrier anyway."

Walter hung his head in humility. He deserved a little berating from Marshall for being such a disappointment, and he would stand a certain degree of it. But after a while Walter held up his fin and said, "You are correct, and now I must leave."

Marshall said, “The dogs will come back to me now. All of them.”

V.

On a foggy Sunday morning Walter woke up talking to his old friend, the Councilor: “I know it seems daft, but I rather believe that I have some kind of special calling—that I am in some way marked. I cannot continue much longer in my current habitation, dear friend. I am afraid I’ve no other choice but to forsake these things I have here and begin my life’s true journey. Thanks, of course, be to you, for helping guide me up that mountain so long ago.”

After eating a large breakfast, Walter got dressed in comfortable traveling clothes, all the while talking to the Councilor: “The only way I can get away from these people—this situation I find myself in—is to go somewhere entirely new and start afresh. The problem I’ve always had is that I remain in one place for too long. My roots become established, and you know that I cannot be the master of myself if I am mastered by my location and all it entails.” Here, Walter broke off his speech and looked out of his window. He saw men and women walking hand in hand along the sidewalk, some alone and some pushing strollers with warm infants wrapped tightly in soft, downy blankets to protect them from the blustery outside air. Walter took a cue from their dress and put on an extra layer, ready to shed it should the air turn balmy as he ventured out of town and toward the mountains, then the seashore.

He left his apartment later that morning and purposefully left the door slightly ajar in case the men in white linen suits came back by to harass him further; in finding the door ajar, Walter hoped they would allow themselves in to have a look around to find his house in a very orderly state and thereby assume that he had gone out for the day with intentions to return—but Walter knew he had no such intention. By now the fog had cleared some and a slow, dense rain was falling. Walter splashed in puddles and had a gay time sloshing about. His duffel had been left at home, and his movements were unencumbered—almost graceful—as his fins tickled the grass poking through cracks in the pavement. He felt light and leapt into the air, crashing down into another puddle of water and sending it out and up as he displaced it. Grinning wildly, his eyes shone brilliantly, like fresh, wet paint glinting in the midday sun. Walter played dizzily for some time in the alleys and gutters.

A silent, unobtrusive affirmation of purpose was offered Walter during these first few moments of his journey. The fresh drink of rain was invigorating and intoxicating. He felt as though all his senses were sharper, keener than before, and at the same time he perceived life as a blur of motion both

inconsequential and of great and awful weight. To his own eyes, his movements were slow and the rain was also moving much slower than it ought to be. He had traced a rudimentary path through some grass and could still see his body—with him no longer so definitely attached to it—moving to catch up to where he was now. His walking, then, became also like a game that was being played in order to procure the favor of his path. He was not choosing where his fins would fall, but rather it seemed that each step was carefully plotted ahead of time.

While it was raining, the sun came out. Now that the demure beauty of the rainfall became accentuated by the warmth of the sun, Walter began to feel drowsy. Perhaps his excited state had caught up with him, or perhaps he was feeling the fatigue of incalculable days spent interminably as one of various certain stages of life. But he marshaled on, ever on, toward the mountain where he knew that he could search out something else for himself. Walter would finally either cease to be or become; each fate would be better than the concurrent identity he felt existing as a whale and as a citizen of the town. For Walter, those two things were becoming mutually exclusive, and he couldn't function as one within the other.

However, before long, because he was so very sleepy, he determined to take a brief rest and then continue. He came upon a house nestled between two much larger buildings. Since he was getting fairly soaked through, and he was so tired, he decided to stop and knock to see if anyone was home. He thudded on the door with considerable force, for the rain created such a racket in the background as it splashed into puddles in the streets and got splashed out of those puddles by the cars and feet of others that he was afraid no one would hear him inside, or they might mistake him for a rather rude gust of wind.

The door of the house creaked open, and it was so dark just inside the doorway that when it was shut behind him Walter could not see anything at all. When his eyes adjusted he saw that he was standing in the foyer of a large room. It seemed that the house only contained this one room, however, as the only other door was immediately opposite the one he had just entered from and it most assuredly led outside. A furnace burned to the left of him, in the corner, and to his right was a bathtub filled with steaming hot water. The humidity from the tub was stifling, and a man dressed in an oversized terrycloth robe beckoned him to the side of the tub.

"What brings you to our door, friend?" asked the man, disrobing and lowering himself into the tub—his skin reddening with the touch of the water.

Walter conveyed his desire to dry for a spell and rest his weary fins. At this, the man in the tub merely nodded, and one of the three women in the room—all young enough to be his daughters—moved

hastily to stoke the furnace, so that their new acquaintance might dry a bit faster. The other two women sat on a long wooden bench that ran the length of the back wall, save a breach to make room for the back door, and resumed the mending they had been interrupted from. It appeared that each was making one leg of a pair of trousers, for the man in the tub most likely, and they were going to meet in the middle. Indeed, that was the way it appeared to Walter, so that he questioned their method, saying, “Ought you to collaborate so? Look, you have constructed them of entirely different materials.” His comment had no immediate effect upon either woman.

“And there,” he said, “you have made them much too long, much too long.”

But the two women worked diligently until, alas, they met in the middle and joined the two sides together. The man in the tub rose from the water, his skin wrinkled, soggy, and the color of mashed strawberries. He embraced the two women, squeezing the one on the left hard into him by the small of her back. He let her go, but held fast to the other one, who he now pinched at the shoulder, and held up the pants like a proud new father, admiring and afraid to handle too roughly. The ruddy-colored cloth wasn’t particularly handsome, and the seams seemed crooked to Walter as he sat watching the naked man hold up the pants. The steam may have been disrupting Walter’s vision, though, and he had already felt socially awkward enough in that room with the naked man and his three women.

Though he didn’t show it outwardly at all, Walter felt a smug sense of satisfaction when the pants seemed more than three feet too long. But the man, dragging his pants behind him, hurried over to a cupboard that stood just a few feet from the furnace. Paint chipped and fell to the floor as he opened the door and removed stilts that were about three and a half feet long.

Flabbergasted, Walter wondered if he were the butt of some joke. There was no way these people could know who he was, though, and they knew nothing of his problems with the government concerning his name. His wrinkled brow and small, squinting eyes betrayed his emotions, however, and seeing his bewilderment, the man from the tub began explaining the necessity for his stilts. He began thus:

“I am one who is very focused on the goal; that is, I can always see clearly where I am going. When I was much younger, much, much younger, I was a sailor. Many years sailing coastlines had taught me to always remain looking straight ahead where I was going—my destination. I wouldn’t become involved with the other rascalion sailors if I remained focused on my destination; and similarly, they would be indebted to me upon our arrival to wherever we were going, for while they were pillaging I was mapping. But that was long ago, and after leaving the ship and coming to this town, I began to notice that things to the left or things to the right piqued my interest slightly more than that which lies ahead of me. I became intrigued by

sidelong glances, and much to my chagrin I became like those sailors I had looked down upon from my perch in the crow's nest. I knew not to allow myself to engage in idle fantasy, but repeatedly, these things on the side grabbed my attention and held it fast. Naturally, after so long, I gave into my desires, to put it in such blithe terminology.

"I made a detour and began to move toward what seemed so much more interesting. But a peculiar thing happened: My digression became dull. I was not treading virgin soil, and I was not interested in my new destination; it became as dull as all the rest. Now, in fact, and it must surely sound like the speech of a madman, but my prior destination, the one from which I so stubbornly turned away, seemed more interesting. It was then I realized that wherever I go, the options of elsewhere are infinitely superior.

"Of course, I couldn't remain in one spot, never moving at all, which was the most logical solution to my quandary, so I devised the use of these stilts in order to elevate me above where I am going to. By raising myself above it, I am quite able to arrive at my intended destination while also retaining a view from a distance so that my destination is continually renewed—made more interesting than my stopping point. It wasn't long before I ceased looking to the wonders around about me and only gazed upon that which was below me, for there was I truly going with a real purposefulness."

Walter considered what the man said, and observed, "But then you are at a disadvantage. Do you not ever fall?"

"Never do I fall!" the man bellowed. He added, "You could learn from me, for it seems that you too are going and coming but you do not know where or why. Is your problem you or your location?"

"Neither," responded Walter automatically, but he did not realize the implication of what he said until afterward, and he spoke the hasty addendum: "Neither, meaning that I am not inherently problematic, but my location is only a product of my own perceptions of it. So problems of location are still problems of the self. In which case, I can only answer that neither is my problem."

The man nodded gravely and turned to the side to spit out a large, yellow, bubbling glob of phlegm and blood. "So you think, but that's what I do too," he said. And then he moved to a table and grabbed an apple to put in his pocket. Remaining doubled over at the waist all the time to avoid bumping his head on the ceiling of his house he hustled Walter outside. The rain had stopped, and the air was sticky with the moisture of the afternoon.

"You will walk with me," said the man, confidently rising to full height on his stilts.

Outside now, Walter recalled that night not too long ago when he had his unusual walk with the Councilor. In the daylight, however, he felt as though the whale on that walk was an entirely different

whale—one capable of understanding what it was to be a whale. From whence he came, and to where he was going. Perhaps it had rightly been the alcohol affecting his disordered thoughts that evening. But this walk now, forced upon him—though no less so than the one with the councilor—seemed a wicked perversion of that walk. Walter knew not whether he respected or reviled the man on the stilts. He wondered how he could go from a life at sea as he claimed to one as dry as this land here. But he did have his bathtub, which was well-used, and he did invoke the spirit of the ocean with his salty gestures and creaking bones that drew themselves skyward like the rotting masts of storm-battered ships left long idle in port.

Though Walter was sober this day, he still felt as if he were stumbling along, an adversary to real purpose; and next to him the man upon his stilts striding comfortably at such a great height. The Councilor, too, had reached a great height just before his death. Walter pondered whether he should rise up like that whenever he died as he wiped the sweat from his back with a monogrammed handkerchief. Or, conversely, should he disrupt the still of the deep in his death? The rising tide would carry him over the shores he so longed to visit, and the slow grab of the waves would paw at him playfully, first, then with more force, until he was wanton in their grasp, sucking on the milk of the sea that lay open to him.

Walter forgot he was walking with a partner and turned a corner abruptly to glance back beyond his tail to see if the stilt-man was still aright.

“Keep going forward—I can see you at quite a distance,” he shouted to Walter.

Meanwhile, Walter quickened his pace, continually looking back to check for the stilted man. Even when Walter lost sight of him, he heard the man yell, “Yes! Yes! Running is a good workout, my boy! Keep at it, and I’ll keep watch!”

Walter’s size kept him from moving very quickly, and it was quite impossible for him to outpace the stilted man. The stilted man was smiling broadly and squinting in the sunlight, wiping sweat from his brow. Walter turned another corner and didn’t stop when the road turned to gravel, and then dirt, and then trail covered with grass and weeds that rose more than six inches high. Then he stopped and glanced back again.

His pursuer stopped where the road turned to gravel; the ground was too uneven for him to continue. His smile lowered into a grimace, and his eyes narrowed.

“You must turn back!” he shouted. “You cannot continue on your present course, my boy. Don’t you know that is where you came from?”

But Walter did not hear his cries. He could see the wondrous, churning ocean now. He moved toward

it greedily, and the smell of the saltwater seemed to heighten his senses. Busily shedding his clothes and dismantling his shoes he splashed into a breaking wave. The foam burned in his eyes with joy and it was so cool, muddy, and beautiful. The whale had reached his destination, and his origin, at long last.

Somersaulting, Walter rolled and laughed in the sand and then washed it off in the water. His breathing became shallower as his excitement grew, and small puffs of air emanated from his blowhole at irregular intervals. His frenzied movements became even more erratic when he felt his breath shorten and not return. The stilted man, from his great height, could see a considerable distance, and had thrown the apple that he had been carrying with him and landed it in Walter's blowhole, where it became stuck.

Walter moved closer to the water and lied down on his stomach so that the waves would crash onto his side and wet his face on the way in and on the way out. With each wave touching him his fins tingled a bit. It was like the peculiar sensation of one's limb coming alive after slumber, but he knew it to be the opposite—his fins were sleeping after a long, hard time working.

All of his senses were focused on the water. His eyes became wide and glassy, and he could no longer distinguish between foreground and horizon. The colors before him blended together until only lightness and darkness were discernable from one another.

As his vision wheezed and gasped in bloody shouts, his hearing became more acute. Some grandiose conductor had begun making the same slow motion with his hands over and over so that the rhythmic breathing of the ocean dominated Walter's senses above all else.

Walter could no longer breathe, and he interrupted the ocean's exhalation as his body curled into the water. The ocean water lapped at his face like a loving dog, and it left some foam to cling at his body as it retreated.

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