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DROWNING

Zachary Shearer

Upon leaving his church of five years, First United Methodist of Evanston, IL, Walter imagined himself spending Sunday mornings drinking tea and reading novels that explored love, life and morality, but that was not the case. Instead, he restlessly moved around his apartment, cooked too much food, and watched reruns of M*A*S*H. The novels that he did pick up from the library remained in a bag next to his bed until they were due back, at which point Walter returned them untouched.

At first, Walter felt this was a fine way of spending his Sundays—it was just like having a second Saturday. He let the stress from his work week at the printing shop slip off him, and did as he pleased without worry. But soon, his apartment turned small and faded on those lonely mornings. He tried to cook to keep his mind occupied, but one can only eat so much chicken curry, so his fridge filled up with deteriorating food that left an odor each time he opened the door. M*A*S*H episodes lost their appeal as well, each one blending into the next, Hawkeye making the same cracks over and over again.

One such Sunday, as he hunched over his coffee table, Walter ate a bowl of rice and beans that seemed a little too grey. After five or six bites, he noticed the rice and beans become a tasteless mash—which was to be expected from his cooking, but in this particular instance it was more of a numbing sensation, in that his mouth held responsibility for the lack of taste rather than his dreary food. As he pondered this peculiarity, the numbness spread from his mouth out to his ears and then down to his ankles—stopping just before his toes. Looking around his apartment, it seemed as it always had: small kitchen adjacent to the small living room containing a tv, poofy red couch, and the coffee table, but a greyness had settled over everything, like a fog somehow snuck indoors. Only Walter's toes escaped the numbing and the greyness, so he wiggled them frantically as they were his only grasp on reality. He felt that if he were to lie on the floor and push down, the apartment would disintegrate into an ocean of grey nothingness and he would become an inconsequential jellyfish floating along. This appealed somewhat to a tired Walter, but instead of lying down, he let his head fall into the bowl of rice and beans. To his surprise, his face didn't fall into an empty void, but a soft warmth pressed against his face and a few rice grains moved up into his nostrils. Perhaps, he thought, this was what

food poisoning was like; perhaps this was not the impending collapse of reality. But he remembered his cousin Morgan eating a bad chicken burrito and puking all night at his sleepover, and Walter didn't feel the least bit nauseous, so it probably wasn't that. Face still in bowl, Walter decided it was time he found himself something spiritually reassuring to do on Sunday mornings.

As a child, after telling him off for eating too much, or splashing other children during his swim lesson, Walter's mother often said to him, "Body, mind, and soul, dear. Keep them healthy and you'll do alright. Just look at your father." Walter then looked to his father, a goateed man in a green cardigan, who would nod and sip his coffee with a quiet reverence that only a man of strong body, mind, and soul can have. In Walter's memory, his father was always bright, without the least bit of grey about him. Walter thought he wanted to be able to sip his coffee with colored satisfaction too, and a healthy spirit seemed to be the only thing in his way.

The most straightforward route would be to join a new church. Walter looked up a few different congregations online: Catholics, Presbyterians, Unitarians, each one sporting a website with smiling faces and a signature Bible verse scrolled across the top. Despite the enthusiastic webpages, Walter decided against returning to Christ's domain for the same reasons he left First United to begin with: too much devotion was required. Too many requests to go on men's retreats in the woods, or be an usher every fifth Sunday, or to even just chat at the after service coffee hour. Walter wished for a quiet Sunday lecture that reaffirmed some inkling of cosmic certainty. That was all he needed, and that was all he wanted.

Of course, there was another reason for his deciding to leave First United, which was his growing infatuation with the pastor's wife Connie. She was a red-faced, big breasted woman who had a strong laugh, and every Sunday would say to Walter, "Well, Walt, are you feeling wonderful today?" and he always did feel wonderful just because she asked. Soon though, he found himself lingering too long in her end-of-service goodbye hugs, peeking down her blouse during prayer time, and fantasizing about clandestine coat room meetings. Walter always fretted over such occurrences, yet any attempts to temper his

feelings just made them worse. When Walter lost sleep over thoughts of her and subsequently shambled through days dead tired, he knew he had to leave. If he were to start attending a new church, the chance of another Connie situation arising seemed slim but, still, Walter didn't want to risk it. He needed another option.

Walter decided to ask his ex-girlfriend Abbie for advice, so he called her up and they made plans to go for a walk along the lakefront.

"You should start coming to my book club," said Abbie upon hearing of Walter's search. "We meet on Sunday mornings."

Walter remembered Abbie's book club from when they dated two years ago. They would both return from their respective Sunday morning assemblies to meet for lunch. Abbie told Walter about the various characters in her group, all of whom were in their mid-twenties, sexually liberated, and donning some variation of the name Christina. Walter responded with tales of the eager, repressed gentiles at First United. A few times Abbie arrived at lunch, tipsy from morning wine and ready to sexually liberate herself, only to find Walter in a state of dismal prudence from that morning's sermon. Their relationship only lasted three months but they remained friends.

"I'm not sure if I'd fit in with your book club," said Walter. "Besides, I don't think romance novels lead to a healthy soul."

Abbie, never one to take a slight without returning the favor, said, "Well, sexuality can provide spirit if you have the ability," and then refused to provide any sort of helpful response for the rest of their walk along Lake Michigan. Instead, they appreciated the crash of the waves, the gulls overhead, and the forgotten comfort of each other's presence.

The silence of their relationship was, except for a few devastatingly quiet moments, what Walter liked most about Abbie. Their evenings spent sipping tea and holding hands; they were his ultimate comfort. It was the same comfort he found building sand castles on the beach as a child with his father standing knee deep in the water face to the wind, and his mother reading a book next to him. The same comfort he found in Connie's arms.

This silence stood in strong contrast to their moments of intimacy. Walter valued Abbie's strength and straightforwardness, but in bed, those aspects of her character left him shaken, often quite literally. She'd straddle him and pull at his hair, working her way into a greater and greater intensity, which Walter could only uncomfortably marvel at.

When they reached the end of the trail and decided to part ways, Walter gave Abbie a brief hug and then stepped back to look at her one last time. She shifted her weight and placed her arm on her hip.

"I miss you," he said.

"I know, Walt," she said, and smiled. "If you really want to find some spiritual fulfillment like your father, maybe you should get a new girlfriend."

"Only if she's a guru," Walter called back to her as she walked away.

On Wednesday afternoon, right before closing time, Walter's manager at the printing and graphics shop he worked at informed him that he would no longer be employed there.

"We've been considering terminating your position for awhile now," his manager said while fiddling with a green dinosaur figurine on his desk and making no eye contact with Walt. "And recently, your work has been, well, terrible."

Walter thought back to his recent days at work and couldn't disagree. Before he had left First United and his mind was focused only on Connie, his work became both visibly shoddy and slightly erotic. While working on a poster design for a local pottery club's charity auction he had neglected to include any ceramics in the image, but the phrase "hand molded clay breasts" worked its way in. After he left First United, his work had initially improved, but recently it devolved into a minimalism that didn't speak too well to the everyday patron's graphic needs—lots of red triangles placed askew on a white background. This was likely a symptom of the rice and beans attack and his unhealthy soul. That he would be fired for sub par work was of no surprise to Walter at all.

So, Walter thanked his manager for his time and gathered his things from his desk into a cardboard box. Before he could leave the shop, he began to feel the heat of the

stares of his four ex-coworkers: Dan, Andres, Mark, and Meg. They had been good co-workers in that they mostly left him alone. But they were also bad co-workers in that Walt liked none of them and they never asked him to join them for lunch. Walt didn't think he would miss this place too much.

As Walter left the shop for the final time, Dan approached him.

"Hey Walt, I'm sorry about how all this happened."

"Shut up, Dan," said Walt and he let the door slam behind him.

Ten minutes later, he sat down at a corner table at Maxie's Cafe and ordered his first drink in four years, a glass of Veranda Merlot, 2010, Napa Valley. As he took careful sips of the wine and sifted through the cardboard box of his things that sat on the table in front of him, Walter decided that figuring out his spiritual needs, his soul, his inner psyche, was of utmost priority. He remembered his father nodding to himself in his green cardigan, and wished he could call him and ask him what to do, but a strict nursing home and a bad case of Alzheimer's prevented that. Walter felt his hand start to shake as he lifted the wine glass to his face and hoped that it was only jitters from being fired.

The next day, before he could get started on a new search, Walter's old pastor, Jeff, stopped by his apartment with Connie for an unannounced visit. Walter wore sweats and was in the middle of another episode of M*A*S*H when he heard a knock on the door and Jeff's voice.

"Walt, son, we've come to say hi."

Five minutes later, Walter sat between Jeff and Connie on the puffy red couch as a kettle of water for tea heated on the stove. Pushed up against him, Connie wore a tight, dark cardigan and smelled of fruity shampoo. Jeff put his hand on Walter's knee and squeezed, as a father would.

"We noticed you haven't been in church recently," said Jeff.

"We were worried about you," said Connie.

Walter nodded, and tried to think of an acceptable response to their concern but all he thought of was the way Connie's knee pressed against his and how wonderful

that felt. He was also very much aware of the tight grip on his other knee that Jeff had, a grip that seemed to only get tighter with time. Walter, while being quite literally squashed on the couch, felt as if he was being pulled apart by the opposing forces of desire and respectability. Thinking back to the rice and beans fiasco, Walter wished he was in that space again, floating away from all the pressures. However, Jeff and Connie were keeping him firmly anchored in reality at the moment: Jeff's arm tightened around his knee and a smile widened on his face; Connie's smell and brief touches grew more intoxicating. Walter felt, like a balloon blown too large, ready to burst. After a few moments of desperate silence, the kettle started to whistle and Walter excused himself from the couch to prepare the tea.

"We stopped by to make sure you were doing alright," Jeff said from the couch.

"You are doing alright, aren't you?" Connie asked.

Walter poured the tea out carefully into the three blue mugs he had received from his mother a year before her death and considered telling Jeff and Connie all that had been going on. He imagined himself explaining the over eager churchgoers, the bowl of beans and rice, how he got fired, and even his feelings for Connie. He imagined they'd react with sympathy and grace. Jeff would stroke his beard, employ a few choice Bible verses, and give Walter a good firm handshake. Connie would blush and look away and say, "Well that's not exactly wonderful, Walt, but we forgive you." Walter wanted to tell them everything and have the heavy weight, the one that seemed to sit on his shoulders day in and day out, fade away for at least a little while.

Walter walked back out to the cramped living room, balancing the three teacups on a tray, and he felt his hands shake as he did so. After placing the tray down on the coffee table, Walter straightened up and looked Jeff in the eye.

"I'm afraid I can't attend First United anymore," he said.

"And why's that, son?" asked Jeff.

Walter made the mistake of turning his gaze to Connie then. He saw the way her cardigan outlined the curve of her body, the way it left just a tiny white skin showing underneath her collarbone. He felt the familiar flutter in his heart as she smiled softly up

at him. For a second he was entranced.

“It’s just that I, um, I…” he said. Walter felt as if the tiny devil and angel of morality each sat on a shoulder, both pulling him downwards.

“Go on,” said Connie.

“Yes, what is it, son?” said Jeff, who stood up and put his arm around Walter, “you can tell us anything.”

“It’s just that I,” said Walter, and he felt the embrace of Jeff and the heart-sinking fear that came with it. He felt his confession disappear and an instinct for escape take over.

“It’s just that I’m gay,” Walter said.

“Oh,” Jeff said, and pulled back his arm.

“Well,” said Connie, blushing.

“I know it’s hard,” said Jeff. “But sometimes we need to work to control our desires.”

Walter turned red, kicked at the coffee table at his feet, and still felt trapped. He supposed he was in too deep at this point.

“I know,” he said to Jeff, looking him in the eye. “It’s just difficult with you being around sometimes.”

“We should probably go,” said Jeff.

Walter just nodded and showed them door, breathing freely again only when they were well away.

That night, Walter once again had trouble sleeping. He lay in bed, twisted up in his sheets, and thought of Connie. He imagined them together—her laying next to him on the bed. He felt her leg press against his, as it had that morning on the couch. He imagined her say, “Wonderful Walt, just wonderful,” while she played with his hair. And then, Connie turned into Abbie who chuckled and pulled at her own brown hair and curled her bare leg around Walter’s.

“You remember how we used to swim together?” she said, mouth pressed up close to his ear. He remembered the green swimsuit that he got her for her birthday because she always complained about the unflattering stripes on her old one; and how it mesmerized

him as she leapt from the diving board. She splashed up next to him, and told him, “I love the suit,” and then, “I love you too.”

Walt realized that maybe she was right at the end of their walk, maybe he did need a girlfriend. But maybe not a new one. Maybe he just needed his old girlfriend.

“That sounds nice,” said Abbie next to him, and she started to hum softly, sending Walter off to sleep.

Walter formulated his plan to get Abbie back the next morning while still in bed and still wearing his sweats. It was so simple at this point, and Walter laughed at himself for not realizing it sooner. His problems hadn’t started because he stopped going to church, they had started because Abbie broke up with him. Walter remembered the day she walked into his apartment holding the ring box he had hidden in his car. Their differences hadn’t seemed like much of an issue to him then, just something that could be forgotten and ignored in a corner until they eventually disappeared. He had bought the ring one week before, a wavy gold band set with a small diamond.

“Who’s this for?” Abbie asked.

“For you,” he said.

She stood in front of him, and tears swam from her eyes. Walter couldn’t tell if they were good or not, so he remained standing where he was, a deep well forming in his stomach. Abbie put the ring box into his hands, still closed.

“I’m sorry,” she said and walked out.

They talked on the phone later that night. Walter fought back tears as Abbie argued her way into a greater and greater frenzy until she just hung up, and Walter didn’t have the heart to call her back.

Walter’s fascination with Connie started soon afterwards, maybe three weeks, maybe four. Walter realized his feelings began when Connie had taken him into her arms one Sunday, after he had shared his break-up during prayer time and sat crying in the pews. Her smile made him smile and he felt he could fall asleep against her chest.

But she was just a reaction, Walter decided, a replacement. And that replacement

was what caused all of his troubles. If he could just have Abbie back, then all would be better. She was the real deal. The person who swam with him and could sit for hours at tea with him. Who could make him healthy. And as for their differences, Walter was aware of them now. They were a something that Walter could strive to overcome; a source of energy that he might pull into himself. With Abbie in his life again, everything would be fine. Walter stretched out his legs and got up from his bed with a smile on his face. Everything would be alright.

Walter invited Abbie out to dinner at a place called The Lucky Platter. They served spruced up diner food, lined their walls with modern art, and stuck aluminum foil balls to the ceiling as decoration. It was a popular restaurant, so when Walter and Abbie were seated, the waiter led them to a claustrophobic two-person table in a nonexistent center row, surrounded by laughing urbanites in booths. Waiters and bathroom-goers brushed past their table every few minutes. After three or four passes, Abbie growled, “You’re excused,” to anyone who hit their table.

Walter kept a wooden box in his lap. It was something he’d made in wood shop back in high school—simple and square. For the past eight years or so, it had sat in his closet holding an assortment of forgotten knick-knacks. Now, he held it with sweaty palms and hoped it would save his life, something his high school self never considered when measuring out the board lengths, and fitting in screws.

After they had their drinks delivered, water for both, Abbie kicked his shin and nodded at his lap.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” she said, “What’s the box for?”

Walter paled and shrugged. He felt the same instinct for escape he’d had when Jeff pulled him close the previous day. But here, in the restaurant, he was hemmed in and there was no way out. He took a long drink of water before he answered.

“This box is my life without you,” he said, and then placed the box on the table, swung open the crooked hinges, and revealed an inside that was empty and free of knick knacks. Abbie stared.

“I lost my job,” he said.

“You lost your job? At the print shop?”

Walter nodded. “And I can’t sleep, and I don’t have a church to go to anymore. You told me I should get a girlfriend last week. You were right. I need you back, Abbie. I’m worthless without you. And, I’ve changed too. We can make it work. It’ll be better, I promise.” Walter heard the desperation in his stomach creep into his voice, so he stopped talking.

Abbie sat for a second, and then took her own, long, slow drink of water. She tapped her fingers on the table and frowned. A waiter walked past and bumped against their table.

“So, that box is for me?” said Abbie.

“Yes,” said Walter.

“I’m sorry,” said Abbie. “Things haven’t changed, Walt. And I can’t just be a band-aid for you. I think you should get some help. Get a psychiatrist.”

With that, she stood up and walked out of the restaurant and Walter could do nothing but watch and hope that he could somehow dissolve into the floor. A waiter came to the table and asked if Walter would be staying.

“Yes, I’ll stay,” said Walter, before ordering a bottle of the first wine on the list, and since they didn’t have rice and beans on their menu, a bowl of chili.

Later, Walter curled his toes in the soft sand on the shores of Lake Michigan, reveled in the dooming buzz of wine, and wrote his last words down on a piece of paper torn from a notebook. They came out scratchy and indecipherable but he still scribbled them furiously. When he was finished, he fit the note into the empty wine bottle he had taken with him, and shoved the cork back in as far as it would go. He let the bottle fall to the ground with satisfying thunk against the wet sand.

As he swam out farther and farther from shore, he began to laugh at his grotesque reversal of the message in a bottle scenario. Some unfortunate person would find him washed up on a shore and his story would be far far away, left on the shore. Stroke after

stroke, he propelled himself away from everything. It was time to let the weight that sat on his shoulders the last few weeks pull him down, to escape into the grey ocean that he couldn't find in the bowl of rice and beans. He was too tired for anything else.

Eventually, he couldn't see land anymore, only the stars in the night sky and the dark, dark waves washing around him. He felt a chill take over his senses and fill him up, replacing the warmth of the alcohol. He began to shiver. He began to sink, and he supposed this was the time to let go.

He felt his head submerge, and the water close around him. He blew air out into bubbles and felt himself sink into the lake. His lungs began to empty of air and life started to fall out of him. Then, a panic set in. He kicked and pushed himself back to the surface of the lake, gasping for breath.

Walter sucked in air and looked up at the stars. The weight slipped off his back. Oxygen rushed through his body. He felt like an idiot. Of course he couldn't actually kill himself, he didn't even know why he bothered trying. The note he left in the bottle on the shore was terrible as well, just drunken blatherings. This was stupid, Walter thought. He was stupid.

He realized was cold and wanted to get to shore, so he could dry off and sleep.

Walter started swimming in the direction of land. His limbs were heavy and he wasn't sure he'd make it.