

THE STORY OF WALTER

by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

WALTER - a quiet man; a single father

ANNA - Walter's 7-year-old daughter

CHRISSY - a kind woman; love interest of Walter

CHORUS (1-2 actors):

- SCHOOL KID(S)
- NED - a clerk at the DMV
- CUSTOMER(S) at the grocery store
- a THERAPIST
- CARL - a neighbor
- A LITTLE BOY at the DMV
- LARA - a girl from Walter's childhood
- A WOMAN at the DMV
- A SERVER
- MISS TIPTON - a teacher from Walter's childhood

TIME

Now

SETTING

Walter's house

Also...

a DMV waiting area

a grocery store

a restaurant

a therapist's office

SCENE 1 - WALTER'S HOUSE - BATHROOM

Lights up on WALTER staring at himself in the bathroom mirror. He stands motionless, lifeless, holding a hairbrush. HE sighs. Another moment passes.

NARRATOR

Walter was a man of science. He knew how to repair space modules and calculate the speeds of solar winds. But terrestrial conundrums were alien to him. Still, he believed that if he could learn the reasons for crying he might eventually find a moment of actual peace. But today was not that day.

ANNA walks huffily into the bathroom with her hair half-done. SHE yanks the hairbrush away from WALTER and hands him a different hairbrush. WALTER takes a deep breath and begins again. ANNA scowls at WALTER in the mirror, wincing in pain as he tries to brush her hair.

ANNA

You don't do it right, what are you doing?!

WALTER

I--

ANNA pushes his hands away and hastily fixes it herself. SHE then stomps out of the bathroom, leaving WALTER to once again stare at himself in the bathroom mirror.

NARRATOR

Walter stared at his reflection in the powder room mirror.

WALTER

Hmm...

NARRATOR

He noticed that the mirror was only a fraction larger than the ones on the new telescope, except this one was dusty and everyone knows there's no dust in space.

ANNA stomps through the living with her backpack and out the door without saying goodbye.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He heard the front door slam.

DOOR SLAM.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Then quiet. And then a most *extraordinary* idea. That one day a woman would see him. And not cry. Or maybe only at happy things like babies and puppies. And that she would stay... the staying part was *key*, he thought.

WALTER walks to the window of the living room and watches ANNA join her friends on the corner to wait for the school bus.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Walter stood at the window of his unfurnished living room and watched his daughter saunter off toward the grouping on the corner. Each day he kept count. Would she turn and wave this time? It depended on her mood, he had deduced. Except that sometimes between the time she bounded down the stairs and reached her crowd of adoring fans on the corner, her mood would somehow miraculously lift.

ANNA is seen laughing and joking with her FRIENDS near the bus stop. We can see she's telling a story about her hair. SHE occasionally motions in the direction of the house.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He chose to accept this as a random occurrence vs. growing indifference and was determined to not take it personally. He knew that she knew that it comforted him when she made a point to look back over her shoulder. She knew he would be standing there because he was always standing there and no matter the importance of other things or distractions that might threaten this ritual, until the bus rolled out of site, he would still be standing there because he never wanted her to make the point of looking back only to see him not standing there. It was a strange paradox and the logic tripped him up at times. In order to see her disappointment, he'd have to be standing there to witness it. And if he was standing there to witness it, then the disappointment of him not being there would be a non-issue. And so it was his overly active imagination about things involving the breaking points of a 7-year-old girl that kept him awake at night. The thing he knew for sure, was that if one of them were to have a broken heart, it should be him, because -- and not to insult her experience level, definitely not -- when it came to broken hearts, he'd simply had way more practice at it.

During the following, ANNA and her
FRIENDS board the school bus.
WALTER watches on, hopeful.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

So, he had decided that it didn't even matter if she smiled or stared plainly at him from the corner or even from the bus window: so long as there was 'something,' it would be enough. And if, by some measure of good fortune, she were to also wave at him in the process... he would sail all the way through lunch.

The bus arrives. ANNA boards the
bus with her friends. The bus
departs.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

In fact...when he really sat and thought about it... it was *remarkable* how little he would settle for. These days.

SCENE 2 - ANNA'S BEDROOM - LATER THAT DAY

WALTER is busily decorating,
arranging garments on hangers.

NARRATOR

Later that day, Walter began moving Anna's things into the master bedroom. He transferred her clothes from the smaller room down the hall. It was right to give her this space, he thought, with the enormous windows and the private bath. He wanted her to feel at home here. He wanted her to feel special. And he didn't mind the small room anyway. It was easier to think in there. He carefully arranged her stuffed animals along the hope chest and hung her clothes in the enormous walk-in closet. This made him happy. It made him sad too, to think he'd missed so much of her life. He remembered mountains and mountains of tiny white things in the days before Anna's arrival. Diapers and onesies, paper thin nightgowns and marshmallow rows of cotton socks. Her clothes now, he thought -- now that she was old enough to have some opinions on the matter -- seemed like an act of defiance. He carefully matched each garment with the appropriate hanger. Boldly patterned sundresses, a purple trench coat, zebra printed leggings, red overalls, green velvet pants, and a bright yellow slicker. With every item being its own unique size and length, he could find no logical way of sorting them -- a discovery that vexed him to no end -- and so he decided to go with the only rational solution. He arranged them by hue. This seemed right. And for a moment, her things were hanging up right beside his own, which, curatorially speaking, ran the entire spectrum...a staggeringly comprehensive and formidably inert study... of the color brown. The juxtaposition of his clothes against hers summed up his entire world, he thought, most notably as it pertained to women. His standing objective, after all, was of course to attain the slightest thread count known to man in the most highly forgettable tint. The combined strength of such an assemblage, at least in nearly all of his preliminary tests, rendered him utterly invisible to most women, asshole children, and door to door canvassers.

WALTER stands back to admire his handiwork.

WALTER

Yes.

ANNA enters the house.

WALTER CONT'D

(Calling.)

Anna?

WALTER enters the living room to greet ANNA.

WALTER

Hi.

ANNA

...

WALTER

How was school?

ANNA

Fine.

WALTER

Did you have fun today?

ANNA

I'm hungry.

WALTER

Oh, okay, I made some soup, you want some soup?

ANNA

Fine.

ANNA sits at the table. WALTER prepares dinner.

Any homework?
WALTER

...
ANNA

Anna?
WALTER

Huh?
ANNA

Any homework?
WALTER

Daddy, I just wanna not talk, okay?
ANNA

...
WALTER

...
ANNA

Okay.
WALTER

Silence.

WALTER sits at the table. THEY eat in silence. A pang of grief... of loneliness... washes over WALTER. ANNA notices but does not let on.

WALTER (CONT'D)
(Pushing through.)
Hamburgers? For tomorrow?

ANNA
(Flatly.)
Sure.

WALTER

Good.

More eating. More silence.

WALTER shakes a bit of pepper into his soup.

WALTER CONT'D

Needs pepper.

ANNA nods. SHE takes the pepper shaker and sprinkles some on her soup.

WALTER breaks open a pitiful package of saltine crackers and pours a few of them out onto a sad paper plate.

ANNA takes a tiny bite from one of the crackers. WALTER takes three crackers and crushes them all at once into his soup. ANNA finds this humorous but does not let on. ANNA takes her cracker and crushes it up in a similar manner but WALTER does not notice. SHE takes another cracker and crushes it into her soup, and again WALTER does not notice.

THEY eat. More silence.

WALTER pours ANNA a glass of juice.

ANNA

Thanks.

WALTER CONT'D

Welcome.

WALTER pours himself a glass of juice.

Pause.

WALTER
We could watch TV later. Dancing With the Stars?

ANNA shrugs.

The CLOCK CHIMES in the hallway. It is 4PM.

WALTER (CONT'D)
Four O'clock.

A bit more silence.

WALTER (CONT'D)
I was thinking we could go to the pet store this weekend. See if we can find a friend for Bumpkin?

ANNA nods.

WALTER (CONT'D)
Would you like that?

ANNA nods.

WALTER (CONT'D)
Okay. Then, we'll go.

ANNA finishes her juice and pushes her food away.

WALTER (CONT'D)
All done?

ANNA nods.

WALTER CONT'D
(Tidying up. Ad lib.)
Done with your crackers, there?

ANNA nods.

WALTER

So... I have a surprise for you.

ANNA stares blankly at WALTER.

WALTER CONT'D

Can you guess what it is?

WALTER motions for ANNA to follow him to her bedroom. HE opens the door and SHE enters the room. ANNA looks all around.

ANNA

You did this?

WALTER

...

ANNA

Leave my stuff alone!

ANNA pushes WALTER out of the room and slams the door in his face. WALTER stumbles back, shoulders slumped. ANNA begins crying and throwing things around the room. WALTER walks out onto the porch and pours himself a shot of whiskey.

NARRATOR

Out on the porch, he could breathe. He opened his journal, the one he bought when ANNA arrived. It was meant to help him remember the important things. And it felt good for a while, the notion that for the first time in his life, he actually had something worth writing about. But the pages had somehow filled with all of the ways he had failed her. And these were not words he needed to read twice. He felt himself in that state of numbness...

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

when the life is mostly drained out and in its place are fragments and torn off pieces of answer-less questions, compressed into every crack and pocket of his body.

WALTER AND NARRATOR

This is how I will die,

NARRATOR

...he thought.

WALTER

(A realization.)

I will never be any happier than I am in this moment...

WALTER takes another shot of whiskey. HE stabs at the journal with his pen until the pages come loose and then takes them over to the grill. HE lights the pages on fire, sending them off into the night.

SCENE 3 - DMV WAITING ROOM - A FEW WEEKS LATER

Lights up on the interior of the DMV waiting room. A LITTLE BOY and his MOTHER sit near WALTER in ugly folding metal chairs. The boredom has reached *critical mass*.

NARRATOR

Walter sat at the DMV tapping his expired driver's license against the side of his seat. He thought back to four years ago when he was here last to have his license renewed. It was at this moment he realized he was wearing the exact same regrettable tan-colored button down as the one from before. He looked up to see a young woman staring at him. Had she read his mind? Was it that obvious?

WALTER imagines what the WOMAN might be thinking:

WOMAN

That shirt? Again? Really?

WALTER smiles at the WOMAN but her expression doesn't change.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He smiled at her, weakly, but her expression did not change, and he understood that she was not, in fact, staring, but simply lost in thought. He tried to reconcile the opposing logic. At once, the confusing idea that a woman would chose his face for any activity at all, passive or otherwise, and the all-affirming observation that she had chosen his face as the stopping off point for a daydream about something so flatly uninteresting that she'd forgotten she was staring in the first place. His life. In a nutshell.

WALTER clears his throat. The WOMAN rouses and looks off in the direction of the overhead display.

SHE looks down again at her ticket,
sighs heavily and then closes her
eyes.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He may as well be wallpaper.

NED, a clerk, calls out a number.

NED

(Calling.)

Thirty-Nine.

WALTER follows NED to the picture-
taking area.

NARRATOR

Walter went and sat in front of the white wall. He handed the clerk his old license and paperwork. He straightened his back and raised his chin as instructed.

WALTER

(To NED. Perplexed by his
lifeless demeanor.)

Do you see me?

NARRATOR

The clerk focused the camera and clicked twice.

Now the SLO-MO SOUND OF 2 CAMERA
CLICKS accompanied by two flashes
of bright light. Time slows to a
crawl.

Walter moves in real time, but NED
and everything else (including the
customers) now move in slow motion.
WE hear the loud SOUNDS OF CLICKS
AND TAPS of various office tools
(e.g., a stapler, a rubber stamp)
hitting the paper and desktop as
NED preps the photographs. WALTER
looks around the room.

HE sees the WOMAN who is now asleep
and SNORING LOUDLY in slow motion.
THE LITTLE BOY scissors his legs
and makes FARTING SOUNDS from his
arm pit.

NED

(In slow-mo. Pointing.)

Over there.

WALTER

(Returning his attention to
the NED.)

What?

NED

(In slow-mo.)

Over *there!*

WALTER

(To NED. Not hearing.)

What??

Time returns to normal.

NED

(Back to regular speed.
Coldly -all business.)

Over there; we'll call you when it's ready.

Pause.

WALTER stares at the NED who has
now moved on to laminating the
license from the previous customer.

WALTER

(Reading from NED's name
tag.)

Thank you. *Ned*. Is that short for something? *Ned?*

NED
(Flatly.)

Just Ned.

WALTER
(Softly.)

Okay.

NED does not look up but continues
his tasks.

WALTER CONT'D
You're very good with people.

WALTER moves to a nearby area to
wait for his card.

NARRATOR
To feel utterly insignificant, Walter knew of no place better
than the Department of Motor Vehicles. Here you could be
ignored in all sorts of ways, with new ones being invented
all the time. He looked around at all the sad empty faces.
Not a single person was happy here. Except... for one.

THE LITTLE BOY, who is now sucking
on a lollipop, smiles at WALTER.

WALTER
(To the little boy.)
Do *you* see me?

LITTLE BOY
I see you! You look like the UPS man!

WOMAN
(To the little boy.)
Let's go.

The LITTLE BOY hops off with his
MOTHER, shouting.

LITTLE BOY

(Exiting.)

UPS! UPS! UPS! UPS!

WOMAN

(Exiting - overlapping.)

Shh, hush, stop jumping.

Transition: WALTER in the driver's seat of his parked car, DMV parking lot.

NARRATOR

Walter sat slumped in the driver's seat, staring at his new license and its impressive anti-counterfeit detail. Polycarbonate card body. Laser engraving. Tactile text. The previous color headshot now replaced with black and white, somehow rendering him, if possible, even more invisible than four years prior. He imagined the long queue of people standing in line to steal his identity, only to politely "pass" upon further scrutiny.

WALTER runs his finger over the photograph...

WALTER

Vanishing...

WALTER slips the card into his wallet and looks up at his reflection in the rear-view mirror.

NARRATOR

Was there ever a time when he wanted to be seen? Third grade, he thought. Ms. Tipton.

WALTER day-dreamily stares in the direction of "Ms. Tipton" (who is played by the NARRATOR).

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

How pretty she was in her long linen skirts and cardigan sweaters.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He never knew the scent she wore, but he'd decided it was roses. He would raise his hand for any reason and sometimes for no reason at all. And she would look at him and smile.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

(As Ms. Tipton.)

Yes, Walter?

WALTER

(As young Walter. Blushing.)

Nothing. I forgot the question.

SCENE 5 - WALTER'S HOUSE - KITCHEN

WALTER and ANNA at the kitchen table. Once again, they eat in near silence.

WALTER

Is your food ok?

ANNA nods.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Good.

Silence.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Something on your mind?

ANNA

...

WALTER CONT'D

You can talk to me. Ya know?

ANNA

...

WALTER CONT'D

...

ANNA

It's just...

WALTER CONT'D

...

ANNA

You're sad a lot.

WALTER nods. HE tries to hold in his emotions, but it's no use. ANNA reaches her hand out and puts it on WALTER's hand.