

## The Silents

The mayor and treasurer stood hand-to-shoulder with a district schoolgirl as she cut a long blue ribbon, signifying the public library's reopening. They crouched, nearly level with the girl, and laughed before the cameras and the noise.

Twenty days later, Walt went back to work. He was seventy-eight years old and took a job at the library's circulation desk. He had spent the past year and three weeks as a conscript at the nearby Senior Living Center. The home. He'd been ten years retired.

His first day as an administrative clerk saw him approached by a younger man. The man wore a long tweed overcoat and asked him how to access the file directory on the library's computers.

To Walt, these words felt out of place, or out of order. He apologized to the man before turning to find someone who could help.

"Hello?" he called into the guest washroom, standing with a foot in the doorway and another on the tile.

"Hello?" someone called back.

"This is Walt. I'm trying to find someone who can help me with a computer problem."

He felt a hand graze his shoulder. "Mary," he said.

"Walt, step out of the bathroom," she said.

Mary was an archivist who doubled as library manager. She was pregnant, and forty years his junior.

He backed out of the entryway and let the leaden door swing back to place. "Walt, what's going on here? Do you need to sit down?"

Her hand did not leave his shoulder while she spoke.

That night, the tweed coat man came back, this time to return a pile of books. He wore heavy boots that made him look taller and thinner than Walt remembered. The man stood over the help desk to find Walt perched on a wheeled chair behind it.

The man heaved an armful of books onto the desk before thanking him and carrying on.

"Good day," Walt said, flashing a smile.

He eyed the stack of hardcovers from top to bottom and counted six in total. Carefully, he pulled one from the top with both hands. *Giovanni's Room*. He placed the remaining five in the black milk crate by his feet.

Opening the book, he skimmed the synopsis from the dust cover: "...a drifter who lands upon Paris to rekindle an old, unforgotten flame. *Giovanni's Room* explores the contours of identity and self amid place and displacement. It is a cultural landmark for those desolate souls who yearn..."

He flipped to the back. There were blank pages at the end of the book. He paused to question the utility of blankness at a story's end.

Walt tore the final page lengthwise, from edge to pale edge. He laid the yellowed page flat on the desk and began to write. He wrote steadily until the page was heavy with sunken ink.

I wish I could decide what words do and do not get spoken. What stories do and do not get told. But you already have. And you have left me powerless and weak and I am now old. Ain't that a bite? I'm much too old to be this lost, without a second pair of waiting hands to clench. For this I have nobody to blame but you.

He signed the letter under a false name and slipped it underneath the inside dust cover. He looked around for cameras or watchful eyes.

At eight o'clock, he punched out and walked through the glassy atrium and into the snares of early spring in northern Ontario. He listened to the rock salt crunch under his shoes as he stepped heel-first in the cold.

He pulled himself, piece by piece, into his four-door pickup. Its green paint bubbled around the wheel wells, evidence of coming rust. It growled to a start.

A few minutes passed while he sat in the driver's seat, letting the car warm and the frost thaw from the windshield. The wipers streaked runny condensation across the glass. Dewy blues and greens marbled the sightline, resembling cheap watercolour paints or gasoline.

He sat on the couch cushion that laid on top his seat. He craned his neck over the steering wheel. He pulled out of the parking space, sputtering onto the open asphalt. He crawled onto the boulevard, cautious in the dark. There was a dusting of snow on the road. His tires tread through it, tracking parallel arrows in the white.

The sound of music forced its way into the vehicle. It sounded digital and foreign and it made the five-seater cabin feel crowded. The tune died before he realized it was his cell phone causing the noise.

He fished through his jacket pockets. Only once the phone was in his hand did he register that the car was still in motion, gliding in silence toward opposite lanes. He cranked the wheel the way alarm clocks are set, how the needle whirls round.

Walt's phone was sounding off again. He slowly rolled onto the roadside.

"Hello?"

It was Laura, the warden from the home.

"Laura, can you give me a hand?"

She sent a housekeeper, Ryan, out to search for him. He found Walt's truck slumped halfway on the curb halfway from the home. Walt kept quiet as he

shuffled into the passenger seat, freeing the space behind the wheel for the younger man.

“How’re you doing there, Walt?”

Two thumbs up.

He drove Walt’s truck the remaining couple blocks. Walt made sure to mention that the clutch was going, and that the wheel was getting stiff, and that he ought to grip it tight.

Laura called him a cab to work in the morning. Wanting a new start, he wore a blue bengaline vest and a navy bow tie. Ryan slid Walt’s socks up papery shins. He laced Walt’s shoes. He had a cheerful domesticity to his way of moving about the world which Walt admired greatly.

At work, guests were slow coming, so Walt’s day began with cleaning the bookshelves by row. He started with FICTION AA-AS. The AARONs, the ABBETTs, the ARTHURs. He used his damp cloth to wipe the cherry wood beneath each book. His knees wobbled whenever he bent down to reach the bottom ledge.

Walt made it to CA-CR before noticing him. The younger man who’d asked about the computers stood at the opposite end of the shelf, browsing through books whose authors’ names were CHANDLER and CHEEVER and CHILD and CLINE. He drew from the shelf a white paperback but returned it before heading off for someplace else.

Walt coolly eyed the shelves where the man had stood. He scanned for the white book and found it. *Opium...* COCTEAU. He dropped it in his inside vest pocket and walked back to the circulation desk.

He sat down in the desk chair and threw away his now-dry cloth. He laid the book on his lap and turned to the back. He found no empty pages, though there were many with illustrations only. He tore one out and scrawled on the reverse side.

Where have you left me? I’ve missed you for so long since you said you were going. I thought you meant home. You left me here to starve, didn’t you? To waste and rot until I am no more. We must keep quiet about such things because they cannot be spoken about. After all the admiration I had for you I cannot imagine it. Because it is carnal evil. Evil in its most suiting flesh. You can do better by me. You can come back to me. while I still have remains for you to find and a soul for you to salvage. While I still have evidence of my existing before it

Walt’s head lifted from the page. He crumpled the unfinished letter in his hand. A woman stood at the far side of the desk, her knuckles rapping on the desk. She asked where to find books on cassette.

Later, Walt reopened the book to its middle. He unfurled his letter and flattened it between two pages before closing the book. He then placed it in the

milk crate between his feet with some ten or twenty other books waiting to be reshelved.

As the days passed the library started picking up. Each day saw more visitors than the day before, so Emily took over desk duties while Walt kept to cleaning. This tired him. Often he would ask to sit by the entrance to hand out pamphlets and talk weather or politics with anyone walking slow enough.

This new position soon became permanent and with it came the regret of no longer being able to enjoy much time alone. His bathroom breaks became longer and more frequent. It was in a bathroom stall, on his fifth day of work, where he wrote his third letter on the back of a pamphlet.

Me again. I'll cut the crap. You think our friendship was disposable? And to go and blab around about that? That's close, buddy. Right on, you. You can be such a sewer. And I'm on to it, on to you, always have. If you want to ~~fade on out go ahead, but know I always remember these things. They stick forever, unlike~~ forget it

There was little room left on the sheet, so he stopped without finishing. He folded the letter and put it inside a video gaming magazine he found on top of the photocopier. He returned it to the rack where the other issues were displayed.

By the second week, most his time was spent passing out handbills informing guests of the week's programming. He kept a wheeled cart next to his chair for guests to leave their returned books. He would flip through them on the quiet days. And on those very rare days when guests would trickle in like water from worn taps, he would stray from the page and stare through the sliding entrance doors, looking for the world and wondering what it remembered of him.

On busy days he printed handbills. There were stop-limits on the number of copies that could be made at one time, so supply often ran low. Mary taught him how to create a print order on the library's copier. He liked the machine. He found computers to defy common sense, but the copier was beige, familiar, and bowed to his touch.

By his tenth day of work, the small talk about weather and politics began to wane. That day, the tweed coat man walked through the entrance doors. Walt unclenched his shoulders and extended a handbill while he composed his opening line of conversation.

"Some weather."

The man gave a nod and an exhalation that stood in, Walt supposed, for laughter. He pulled a small paperback from his coat pocket and placed it on the wheeled cart beside Walt's chair. The man refused the handbill and continued on his way, while Walt, with each further step, felt of no particular use to anyone.

Walt's fourth, fifth, and sixth letters were penned on notepad tear-offs brought in from the home. One morning, Ryan gave him a stack so newly-peeled that the

glue was still drying on their backs. Walt was grateful for Ryan, he felt proud of him for performing so well at his job.

The fourth letter was written in the morning's cab.

Come back. At the least you must tell me where you have gone. First I didn't bother asking or making how I felt so apparent but I am a more cynical man now as time runs thin. I am so deeply torn by the possibility of you never coming back or telling me where else to go, such has been my reliance upon you.

The fifth letter was written in the guest bathroom.

I want you now to be here. Without our babies. In the dark, maybe at the old ravine. Its so bright where I am these days. You would hate it. And I would crave you as I do. Your muscled arms. Those ticklish hairs on your neck, though we never touched did we. Isn't it such a pitiful thing? That we never touched. That you never came home to find me waiting as if to say 'what kept you'

The sixth letter was written in the evening cab, by the passing flicker of streetlights.

It's been all day u can com e home nuw its getting too late t dont keep me like this u know things are diferent now, we went our opposite ways but these things dont last do they. Funny how I drive down this road now but it is the same one we once did yet darker

too dam dark

All three letters found homes inside the dust jackets of children's novels whose authors' names began with R. He took care the next day to make sure they returned to their proper shelves.

It was then that Mary started checking on Walt. First at noon that day, and then twice again before close. She brushed his arm at the photocopier, chatted with him in the coffee room, and put her hand on his back at the water cooler.

In the weeks that came, Mary shadowed Walt more attentively. He no longer sat by the entrance; she moved him into the main lobby, into a more open space to carry on under her watch.

It became rare that she would ask Walt if he needed help. She grew into the role of Supervisor in the sense of the word that Walt once understood when he was a younger man, and he appeared no less content.

Why was I so naive to think that I'd let this all slide?  
Remember in the nursery, when you pushed me onto ice? How you laughed? I always thought that meant a little something more to you, like you were crying out for me to join you and take pleasure in the kind of boyish kicks we got back then.  
You may be glad to know you've pushed me back again, back onto that unforgiving sheet of ice where I cannot find my feet

From then on, letters were written in the cover of the evening. He wrote under bed sheets, with his bowing body supported by pillows against headboard, greeted only by the outer noise of wheeled carts and walkers over carpets.

Work was picking up, and Walt became increasingly tired and slow-moving at home. He rang Ryan for increasingly menial tasks. Often to heat his tea, sometimes just to talk. He felt himself retreating, a feeling that soon became immovable, fixed in place.

Let me start over. I know I haven't been very civil about any of this. I can get so emotional you know. Always such an actor. but don't worry about me, no, I've come to terms with you not coming back. I just hope that wherever you are you're happy with yourself and that you know I'm in a better place too. like today, today was fantastic. I gave up and ran. that's right, I ran to our spot under the overpass. nobody told me I couldn't. because no one was there. And I screamed. and there was no one to hold me back or tell me not to. because I'm a free man. I have everything I've ever wanted here. nothing keeping me from being happy like I always thought I'd be. sometimes I just wish you'd believed that it were possible. You know? well anyway I hope you take this all well. I know it can be hard to hear that others are thriving without you. but believe me, I'm thriving. this is the best I've ever felt. i've left, and like you I'm on the move. Moving on to bigger things, new places. There is still time for new beginnings, believe you me. although I wish the very best for you, I hope I never see you again. You will never be what I had hoped. You are as old as the days we spent under the sun. Those days I cannot forget so I will remember you by them, those old days, and I'll keep them with me. so do not bother remembering me, because I've forgotten you already. do not speak my name because I have forgotten yours by now. do not come finding me because Ive lost you at last, and what is left is more perfect than what you ever were or could ever be

On Walt's last day of work, Mary asked him to take out a trash bag. She told him it needed to go to the dumpster out back across the lot.

Tasks like these were normally reserved for the part-timers, though she and Walt were the only staff on lobby duty. Mary was fast approaching forty weeks of pregnancy. She was told not to move much, and to carry nothing, by doctor's order.

She told Walt that if he couldn't do it he shouldn't bother, that somebody else would be in the next morning.

"No sweat."

Two thumbs up.

He found the bag slumped against the emergency exit doors. They were unlocked and windowless, airbrushed with symbols of little white men running someplace safe.

Walt propped open the doors. He gripped the bag's plastic tie with both hands and pulled. Though it moved, it was hopelessly heavy.

The bag, lumpy and misshapen, slid out the door and onto the salted asphalt. Walt dragged it inch by fighting inch over the rocky pavement for some time, letting the bag follow his steps as he lumbered on.

He was halfway across the lot before he noticed the bag lighten. With his next step he felt it lighten more. He turned to find the bag torn and its contents spilled across the cool, wet tarmac, leaving a small trail leading to where he stood.

They were books, most of them. Some magazines. Around thirty in all.

They were familiar to Walt, because each of them had at one time housed his letters. Each one of them.

Walt glanced down by his feet where a book lay on the ground, its white cover dampened. Turning it over, he found no letter inside. He picked up another and again found nothing. And another.

There were no letters in any. They had been removed.

He tried to put them back into the torn bag. He tried to carry them in his hands, in his arms.

"Hello?" he called silently to anyone.

He wept, he howled.