A Drop of Rain

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Abstract

Walter Baxter gently closed the book he was reading and placed it on the bookcase beside his chair. For a few minutes he stroked his chin and stared at his slipper-covered feet resting on the ottoman...
WALTER BAXTER gently closed the book he was reading and placed it on the bookcase beside his chair. For a few minutes he stroked his chin and stared at his slipper-covered feet resting on the ottoman. The room had become quite warm since he had turned up the heat, and now he felt uncomfortable. Walter loosened the cord around his robe and brushed the robe off his outstretched legs. It fell loosely at his sides and onto the floor, revealing a pair of white pajamas decorated with black colored pieces of a chess set. . . .

. . . An enormous battlefield lay before Walter's eyes. He knew it was a battlefield because it smelled hideous, and there were dead bodies lying around, and the land was divided into black and red squares for as far as he could see. He was a king, standing on a red square and feeling quite secure behind his three pawns and a knight. But diagonally to his left was an opening, and enemy forces were grouping on his front. A deadly enemy bishop, too cowardly to try to breach the wall of the three stalwart pawns and a faithful knight, made a dash for the opening. The wise king had foreseen this, and had strategically placed a castle on his left flank. At exactly the right moment, the castle swept down
upon the unsuspecting bishop, crushing him under tons of stone. But the enemy was more formidable than he thought. The heartless invaders were forming a vicious assault. The castle was seized, the walls torn down, and the enemy forces were charging the king, left deserted by all his subjects.

Walter snapped his index fingernail repeatedly on his two front teeth and gazed out the window. The rain had been falling since early morning. Six stories below, the congestion of traffic made a sharp contrast with the deserted sidewalks. How often he had wanted to do this—to stay home on a rainy day, sit in his big easychair in his pajamas, and read all day. Walter stopped snapping his fingernail and folded his hands across his chest, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. His eyes searched the room carefully, as though hunting for the cause of the sudden stillness. They swept across the mantel with its big chime clock, across the new stereo, and stopped on two pictures behind the sofa. The one on the left was by Gilbert Newland, a scene in upper New England in fall, in yellow, orange, and black. It had cost three hundred dollars. The other was an original by Charles Kupish, exhibiting in bright orange, red, and black, a view of Manhattan from the air at sunset. This one had cost five hundred dollars. Walter considered them a stupid waste of money. But Ruth liked them, and since it was actually her money that bought them, Walter had no objections. He did, however, think them revolting. His eyes continued around the room, skipping quickly over the organ and the potted plants, coming to rest on a heavily draped window across the room.

The first gong shook the room. Walter felt his muscles tighten as he gave a short start... bong, bong... eight, nine, ten.

“Ten o’clock,” Walter said out loud. He picked up the book he had been reading and flipped through the pages until he found the line he was looking for.

“... and there are no conclusive proofs by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep.” Walter dropped the book into his lap. Amazing, he thought, that at that very moment he might be dreaming instead of actually being awake and conscious of what was happening. And to think that all his memories might also be just a dream! Indeed, he
might even be another person at a different time and in a
different place. The idea intrigued and depressed him, and
the more he thought about it, the more troubled he became.

Walter Baxter swung his feet off the ottoman and stood
up. The book fell to the floor with a faint thud. He went
over to the phone, picked up the receiver and dialed a
familiar number. It rang once. Twice. Three times. A sharp
click, a short pause, and:

“Good morning, W. S. Baxter Enterprises.”
Walter snorted into the phone.

“Hello?”

“Ruth dear, how are things down at the office?”

“Walter? Walter darling, where are you? I was wonder­ing
if you were ever going to come in. Mr. Lippencott called.
He wondered why you hadn’t come to the meeting at nine
o’clock. And Mr. Paxton called. He wants to see you today.”

“Ruth, honey, call old Lippencott and tell him I’m sorry
I missed the meeting. Also tell Paxton I won’t be in today.”

“Walter, where are you?”

“I’m home, where it’s warm and dry. I’m in my pajamas,
which is how I intend to stay the rest of the day, just watch­ing
it rain.”

“Walter?”

“Yes?”

“Walter darling, are you ill?”

“No, no, of course I’m not. That is, if I’m awake and
really existing, then I’m not sick. However, for all you and
I know, I may be deathly ill someplace and sometime and
just dreaming all of this. Have you ever thought of that?”

“Thought of what, Walter?”

“That what is happening now, that what you and I are
experiencing, might be happening only in a dream. Isn’t it
amazing?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Just think! What you’re doing now might be just a
dream, and the you that exists now is only a product of the
mind. Have you ever thought of that, darling?”

“Frankly no, Walter. And I find it too terribly depressing
to even think about. Walter, I have loads of typing and filing
to do and Frank is buzzing for me to come into his office.
Why don't you take a hot bath and have Margaret make you a cup of tea. You know how it relaxes you. And stop reading those books, Walter. You know what Doctor Jacobs said about your reading them."

"To hell with Jacobs."

"Good-by, Walter."

Walter never answered but carefully placed the phone on the cradle, walked over to his chair and slouched down in it. Walter heard a door open and turned to see the maid, who was setting the vacuum cleaner on the carpet.

"Why, good-morning, Mr. Baxter. I didn't know you were still at home."

"I was beginning to wonder if you were here, Margaret. It's been so quiet."

"Oh, I don't usually get started till nine or ten. Then I just go like sixty!"

"Margaret?"

"Yes, Mr. Baxter?"

"Margaret, why don't you go home?"

"Pardon, Mr. Baxter?"

"I said, why don't you take the day off and go home or someplace and leave me alone. I couldn't bear to hear that racket this morning."

"Oh, I didn't know you were sick, Mr. Baxter."

"I am not sick! I just want some peace and quiet for today. So put that thing away and go home."

"Yes, Sir." Margaret put the cleaner in the nearest closet and turned to leave.

"Good-by, Margaret. Say, Margaret..."

"Yes?"

"Have you ever thought...that is...have you...oh, well, nothing. Nothing at all, Margaret. Good-by."

"What is it, Mr. Baxter?"

"Good-by, Margaret!"

"Good-by, Mr. Baxter."

Walter heard the maid shuffle around in the kitchen for a few minutes before she left. He walked over to the phone, and instead of dialing asked the operator to get the number for him. The phone on the other end rang once.

"Good morning, W. S. Baxter Enterprises."
“Ruth darling, how are you?”
“Walter! I happen to be very busy in your office this morning and your vice-president needs my assistance. So if you’ll excuse me, I don’t have time for games.”
“Ruth?”
“What-is-it, Walter?”
“How’s your father?”
“Walter! How dare you! Now stop it this instant! I simply can’t stand that and you know it. And I fail to see anything remotely funny in it. Don’t you have any respect for the dead?”
“Ruth, I was just thinking of something.” Walter heard a long sigh.
“What?”
“I was thinking — I was thinking how nice it would be to gather all of one’s friends together — you know — high school friends, college friends, relatives, war-time friends — gather them all around you, and before you had a chance to say good-by to them — for you know how sad good-bys are — to just simply die. It would be the perfect way to go, wouldn’t it?”
“Oh, no! For God’s sake, Walter, quit reading those books!”
The loud “bang” as Ruth hung up wasn’t heard by Walter. He replaced the receiver and walked over to the window. It was still raining—a sort of misty rain now. Walter leaned his forehead against the cool glass and peered through the mist at the street below. Some kids were on the sidewalk playing catch, seemingly oblivious to the weather. Walter’s breath steamed the window so he could no longer see out. But he saw another group of boys, one of which was himself, playing ball in a big, green pasture on a sunny spring day. The happy sounds of childhood, the wonderful open country, the trees and streams — they all came back in that little patch of steam on the window.
Walter lifted his forehead off the glass. A big smile was on his face as he strode briskly across the room and made a telephone call.
“Good morning, W. S. Baxter Enterprises.”
“Ruth darling, I have wonderful news.”
"Walter, so help me if you don’t stop this utter nonsense I’ll not answer this phone again. You go ahead and lose customers!"

"Darling, I’m going home!"

"Please, Walter!"

"No, I mean it — absolutely. You know Jacobs has been telling me to go to Bermuda again for a rest. Well to hell with Bermuda, I’m going back home to Iowa for a few weeks. Out where there’s lots of room, fresh air, green grass, and happy children."

"Why, Walter, that’s a marvelous idea. I think it will do you worlds of good. When do you plan to go?"

"Right now!"

"Oh, Walter! You know you can’t do that. You have to get your things in order around here, and there are some meetings that you’re supposed to go to this week as well as next week."

"Ruth?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Would you care to go with me?"

"Walter, honey, you know how I detest going out west. It’s boring just to think about a ranch — or a farm — whatever they’re called. I’ll go to Bermuda later on."

"I wish I could go as a kid again."

"What’s that, Walter?"

"I said I wish I could go back as a kid again. You know — like it was twenty-five years ago."

"There you go again, dear."

"I’ll be right down to the office."

"Well, I’ll probably be out for lunch with Frank when you come. He wants to discuss some reports with me. Good-by, Walter."

Ruth hung up before Walter could say anything. He lowered the phone to the cradle and for a long time stood beside the desk staring at his hand resting on the phone. Then in a slow, deliberate movement, he picked the phone up in both hands, stepped back from the desk, grimaced, and gave a sharp pull. The wire snapped and Walter dropped the dead, useless instrument on the floor and bit his lower lip.

He walked back to the window and looked through the
Sketch

gathering fog at the street below. The rain had stopped and on the sidewalk a little boy stumbled and fell. His father reached down, picked him up, and examined the skinned knee. The boy clung desperately to his father.

Walter turned away and stared across the room at the organ. He could see a big, tan-skinned man sitting at an old piano, and around him were sitting two boys and a girl. He was singing a song that Walter would never forget. It was a story of an old, white-haired man who lit the streetlamps in the evenings a long time ago. Now he lit the stars in the evening and shut them off in the morning. After the nightly song—or story—the tan-skinned man would take the children into the bedroom and tuck them in and kiss each one good-night. Walter remembered that the man’s whiskers were always rough.

Walter went to the kitchen phone and called his office.

“Good morning, W. S. Baxter Enterprises.”

“Frank, let me speak to Ruth.”

“Walter, she’s very busy right now, and…”

“Goddamn it, Frank, you put her on the line and do it quickly!”

Walter heard a click, and for a few seconds he thought Frank had hung up on him. Then another click sounded and his wife answered.

“Yes, Walter?”

“Darling, I love you very much!”

“Walter! For God’s sake, I’m busy. I can’t play games. Honestly, a person would think you were four instead of forty.”

“Ruth, darling, let’s have some children. After all, we’ve been married five years, and we aren’t getting any younger you know. I’d think that at thirty you’d want to have some children. And besides, I…”

“Walter, this has gone far enough! You know our agreement: no children! I simply detest the little creatures and I can’t stand the thought of ever having one. Furthermore, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it. What you need darling is to take a good, hot bath.”

“Crazy.”

“What’s that, Walter?”

“I said crazy. Like I’m beat, just plain beat.”
“Walter I think you’re going wacky. Good-by!”

Walter did not hear the last sentence, for he had hung up and walked into his bedroom. He opened the closet door and began looking through his suits. Only the best one would do for this occasion. He selected a dark-blue serge, his best tailor-made suit. Walter dressed quickly, put on his light gray raincoat and went to his study. He opened the second drawer down on his desk and pulled out the pistol. It was an old hammerless .38, and Walter only had two shells for it, which he put in the cylinder and snapped into place. He stuck the gun in his raincoat pocket and left the apartment.

Outside, the fog was getting thicker and the rain had completely stopped. Walter stood on the sidewalk deciding on a place to go. The waterfront on a foggy day seemed ideal. The nearest taxi stand was across the street and up a half block.

Walter Baxter was cautious when he stepped into the street between the parked cars. He continued walking as he looked to the right. But before he could turn his head to the left, a drop of rain struck his forehead, causing him to look up.

The car was going fast — too fast for the fog — and Walter heard just a faint screech before the impact.

March

by Bruce Butterfield

Iron-gray sunless day,
Opaque coat of clouds,
Tree bodies dark with wet,
Sidewalks cold with wet,
Grass without the smell of grass,
Puddles thick with spongy mush,
(The umber rot of Autumn’s regal leaves)
Dusty, scattered scabs of snow,
An unkempt sepulchre without a corpse.