

Ashes to Ashes

Chapter 1 – Walter

Walter arrived at the Health Center 15 minutes early.

"This won't take long. I already filled out the intake forms," he said.

"Then leave me here. That place has bad memories for me," replied Millie from the back seat.

Pre-filled forms in hand, Walter approached the young man at the reception desk to check in.

"Walter Wilson, 08/04/1957," he blurted before the receptionist had a chance to ask.

The receptionist handed Walter a clipboard with forms and pointed to the jar of pens labeled "clean."

"Is there no end to these forms?" griped Walter. He chose a pen—red, white, and blue, and sat across from Olive, who was about to enter his life.

Walter stared at the 4-page questionnaire. The blank spaces stared back.

"Oh, for God's sake," he muttered too loudly.

Ashes to Ashes

Olive grew alert.

Walter marched back to the receptionist.

"Done already?" the receptionist asked, smiling.

"All of these questions, I have already answered online, yesterday," Walter said and javelined his pen back into the pen jar as an exclamation point to his complaint.

"Yes, that's correct. Those are the very same questions." The receptionist said it as if Walter had just passed an exam. "Would you like some help filling out the forms?"

Olive leaned in.

"Well, let's see. Name? Address? Oh, that's a tricky one. No. I do not need any help, Young Man. I need you to go into your computer and find the answers I submitted online." He noticed the receptionist's ID badge. "William, may I call you William?"

"Sir, my name is Willam."

"That's what I said, William."

"It's Willam, not William."

"Will-am, your name is Willam? Well, isn't that something."

Olive stood up.

Ashes to Ashes

"I'm sorry, I cannot access your records," said Willam politely

"And why not, Will-*am*, it makes no sense..."

"Give it up," said a voice inches from Walter's left ear.

Olive was now standing directly behind Walter.

"Excuse me," he said, turning to Olive.

"What are you, six years old? Now leave the young man alone," admonished Olive.

Walter opened his mouth and said... nothing. He was stunned. No woman had ever spoken to Walter this way since his wife died, at least not a live woman. He felt anger that a stranger would intervene in his life, and yet he felt strangely comforted to have this sudden closeness. Yes, this woman was admonishing him, but he missed that—the intimacy of such a moment.

"And you put your used pen in the Clean caddy. Take it out," Olive ordered.

He stared at the jar of pens, confused.

"It's the patriotic one," said Olive. "Now, go over there, sit down, and fill out the forms as you were told."

"Now look here. Do I look like the kind of..."

"Ah, ah, ah," said Olive, placing her finger on her lips in a "hush" fashion.

Walter retrieved his pen and sat as Olive directed. Olive returned to her seat and book.

Walter began to fill out the forms, but soon found himself looking at her. She wasn't beautiful—women her age seldom are—but she wasn't hard to look at either. She had that kind of face where you could easily see what she looked like when she was in high school. *She must have been very cute then; she was kind of cute now*, he thought.

Olive sensed his gaze and looked up. Walter ducked into the clipboard for cover. He guessed she was in her early seventies. *They say that's the new sixties*, he thought. *And she was fit.*

A nurse popped out of a door next to reception and called, "Olive?"

Olive rose and followed the nurse. The door closed, and Walter felt something he couldn't define.

Chapter 2 – Olive

Olive awakened late, so she reported directly to the shower. Her pillbox reminded her it was Wednesday, and the 3x5 sign taped to the bathroom mirror reminded her that she had a Medical Center appointment scheduled. She started the electric kettle and put a slice of multi-grain in the toaster. While waiting for the boil and pop, she put on the clothes she'd set aside last night and ran a brush through her hair. Dressed, coiffed, quenched, and fed, she headed for the front door, where she encountered another 3x5

card inscribed "KEYS, WALLET, GLASSES, HEARING AIDS. ~~TEETH~~." Larry, whose urn of ashes sat in the curio cabinet, had put it there. Olive left the note there, along with his clothes in the closet, his pipes on the mantel, and his old overstuffed leather chair, which she would sit in late at night when she missed Larry the most. She headed out the door.

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She arrived at the Health Center barely on time and began to fill out the intake forms. The questions were always the same for someone of her age: "How many times have you fallen in the past month?" *Good grief, are people my age falling all over the place?* she thought.

"Are you depressed?" *Aren't we all?* she wondered.

"Do you have thoughts of suicide?" *Only when I read the news lately.*

"How many times have you gone without eating?" *Every time I visit my sister,* she grimaced.

"Can you dress and bathe yourself?" *Oh God, please take me before I get to that stage.*

She settled in for the usual wait with a book, but not for long. A man, clearly not happy and dressed like one in need of assistance, was causing a stir at reception. She wondered how he would answer that question: *Do you bathe and dress yourself?* His shirt buttons were in the wrong buttonholes. And he was wearing slippers. He was

Ashes to Ashes

causing a kerfuffle, which was odd because the receptionist, Willam, whom Olive knew from past visits, was a kind soul. Then the kerfuffler stomped over and sat directly opposite Olive. There he was, in full disarray, just six feet away—muttering distance. And mutter he did. Olive was concerned; the healer in her was awakened. *No one should go through life like that.* And then, when he invoked the Lord, out loud, in her direction—

"Oh, for God's sake."

That was the moment she became a part of his story... their story... it was unavoidable.

As he headed back to reception, Olive followed closely behind, to save him from himself and to save sweet Willam. Drawing upon a lifetime of experience commanding a classroom of that most challenging of species—teens—Olive slipped into her teacher's mode and took control, and, like she had so many times in the past, Mrs. Wittingham created order out of chaos. With the curmudgeon seated and silenced, Olive returned to her book. But soon felt a pressure—he was staring at her. *Probably seething*, she thought. Olive looked up and Walter looked down, but not before she saw he was not seething. He was inquisitive. And he was not bad looking. He still had all of his hair and good dental hygiene. He was clean-shaven, and although hastily put together, his clothes were an acceptable assemblage of a sort of senior casual prep. Even his slippers resembled penny loafers.

And then she heard her name. It was time for her to go, and she felt something. *Perhaps sadness? No, it was more like melancholy. But for what?*

Ashes to Ashes

"Straight down the hall, second door on the left," directed Nurse Polly.

There was no time for further rumination.

Chapter 3 – Walter Again

When Olive was summoned, Walter watched her leave. She was steady on her feet.

Her legs were unblemished, no varicosities, no old age blooms. Walter was very observant. What Walter wasn't, was very astute, for he had no idea why he was wasting so much time on this woman. *Get a grip*, he thought.

"Mr. Wilson?" called out Nurse Susan. "Right this way, Sir. Straight down the hall, third door on the left."

Walter proceeded down the hall past the closed doors, wondering which door shielded Olive with the nice legs, wondering why he was wondering.

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With the medical visit behind him, Walter entered the parking garage, where Millie was waiting for him. He began driving the ring-around-the-rosy exit path from the parking structure.

Ashes to Ashes

"It took you long enough," said Millie.

"They had me fill out those forms again."

"And I bet you gave them a piece of your mind."

"I sure did, Millie."

"You should try being nice for a change."

"You sound just like the woman I just ran into in there."

"Walter, drive. Just get us out of here. And hurry, or I'll miss Antique Roadshow. What woman?"

"Yep, God, she was awful. You're just like her."

"She was so awful, you can't stop talking about her."

As Walter came off the ramp onto the second level, a woman wandered across his bow. He slammed on the brakes, and Millie's box slid to the car floor.

"Mother of God!" said Millie from the floor.

Walter stared through the windshield at Olive.

"Speak of the devil," he muttered.

Olive glared through the windshield at Walter.

"I told you to strap me in. Did you listen to me? Nooooo," nagged Millie. "How many times do you have to be told, seatbelts save lives!"

Chapter 4 – Olive Again

Olive, her treatment finished, scanned the waiting room as she exited towards the carpark structure. There was no sign of the grump. She wanted to say something to him, something conciliatory. She didn't want him to spend the rest of the day in such a sour mood. She was still thinking about that when she entered the garage. Its enormous size overwhelmed her, and she had no idea where she'd parked. She did the only thing she could do and started rushing up and down the long lines of cars. Soon it seemed hopeless. It was just then, when she started to cross over to the next line of cars, that she was nearly run over. Some damn fool came racing around the corner and had to slam on his brakes. He stopped within inches of her. Olive slammed her hand on the hood of the car. She stared through the windshield. She couldn't believe it. *It was that man again.* Without thinking, she snatched open the passenger door and got in the car.

"What are you doing?" he startled.

"What's it look like I'm doing? I'm sitting in your car!"

"Help!" yelled Millie from the floor behind Olive.

Ashes to Ashes

"The bigger question is what are you doing? Driving around this garage like a madman?"

"Help!" yelled Millie again.

"Shhhh," said Walter.

"Are you shhhushing me?" said Olive.

"No, and I repeat, what are you doing in my car?"

"I'm lost. I can't remember where I parked, and... and I'm tired. And since you owe me, I want you to drive me around this garage until I find it."

"You owe her? What for? What have you been up to? What's going on? Why do you owe her?" asked Millie.

"That's a good question," replied Walter.

"What's a good question?" asked Olive.

"I wasn't speaking to you," said Walter.

"Then who are you talking to? There's just the two of us in this car."

"Tell her," said Millie.

"She'll think I'm crazy," replied Walter.

Ashes to Ashes

"Who will?" asked Olive.

"You," answered Walter.

"She already thinks that," said Millie.

"I already think that," said Olive. "So, you might as well tell me."

"My wife. I'm talking to my dead wife, Millie."

"Oh, I'm sorry. So, you're talking to your wife up in heaven?"

"No, she's in the back, on the floor."

Olive spun around to look.

"This is Millie? This brown cardboard box is your wife?"

"Her ashes. It's her ashes."

"Why is she on the floor?"

"Because do-do-for-brains didn't strap me in," said Millie.

"What kind of car are we looking for? What are you driving?" asked Walter.

"It's a silver Subaru with a dented right fender."

"Does it have a busted right headlight?"

Ashes to Ashes

"Yes! How did you know?"

"Is it that one right there?" he answered, pointing across the way.

"That's it! See, I didn't forget. I was heading right for it."

"You can't drive around with a busted headlight. You'll get a ticket." Said Walter.

"The dealer wants a fortune to fix it."

"They're all thieves. You can just go to the auto-parts store for a replacement and put it in yourself."

"No, you can do that. I can't do that."

"I'll do it for you. What's your address?"

"Wait a minute. What are you doing?" asked Millie.

"What's it look like? I'm helping the woman out."

"I take it, Millie is objecting?"

"She's very jealous."

"Why don't you introduce us?"

"What?" Asked Walter.

Ashes to Ashes

"Millie, my name is Olive, pleased to meet you." She held out her card. "Here's my card."

"You have a card?" asked Walter.

That was Millie's cue.

"Of course she has a card. All prostitutes do."

Chapter 5 – Walter and Olive

On Wednesday, March 23rd, Walter woke up with a smile. Yesterday, he'd researched how to install headlamps and went to Auto Zone, where he bought the lamp. Millie was not talking to him. She was furious, furious that they'd spent their entire day on stuff for "that woman."

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Olive's house was in South Park, an older neighborhood with leafy streets and a certain old-world charm. Walter pulled into her driveway, right behind the Subaru with its dented fender. He pressed the doorbell button, but it wasn't working. And then he heard Olive.

"Go around back."

Walter found his way to the back door, where a smiling Olive was waiting.

Ashes to Ashes

"I'm sorry about that," she said, "but the front door is stuck. I keep meaning to make a sign directing people to the rear."

"Your doorbell's not working," announced Walter.

"Oh, that thing. It hasn't worked in a dog's year."

"Your doorbell's not working, and your front door's stuck shut?"

"I know, crazy, huh? Come in, come in."

"No, thank you. I just need your car keys."

Olive watched Walter from the bay window. Walter seemed to know what he was doing and finished quickly. But then he left. No goodbye, he just left. Keys on the dash.

Early the next morning, Thursday, a worried Olive rushed downstairs to banging at the rear door. It was Walter, toolbox in hand.

"Good morning."

"Morning," replied Olive. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to unstick your front door and repair your doorbell."

"That's very nice, Walter, but I live alone and someone banging on the back door at... at..." Olive checked the clock on the wall. "Good God, it's six A.M.!"

Ashes to Ashes

"It's not six A.M., Olive, it's 6:45. That clock's not working."

"I know. I forgot. I've been meaning to get that fixed."

And so on Friday, Walter proceeded to fix the clock. Afterwards, they shared coffee and doughnuts.

On Saturday, he repaired the side gate, and they ate a heart-healthy lunch together.

On Sunday he checked the air in her tires, changed her oil, and brought her flowers from his garden.

On Monday he overhauled her squeaky clothes dryer. It took all day. Olive prepared dinner for the two of them and broke out a bottle of French wine. They clinked glasses and Walter said, "What was it, Bogey said? I think this is..." and Olive finished it with him, "the start of a beautiful friendship."

And a beautiful friendship it became. Olive was enjoying having him around and watching him shed his sorrow. He taught her how to use Alexa for reminders, and she taught him how to meditate. As the days and weeks unfolded, Walter ran out of things to fix, even though Olive stuffed the toilet with paper towels, dropped a fork in the disposal, and shorted out the toaster. So, the final night, with nothing left to fix, Olive set the dinner table with candles, dimmed the lights, and suggested that Walter move in. To the guest room, of course.

Chapter 6 – Millie and Larry

The following Friday, Walter showed up with a small U-Haul truck and moved in. The last item he carried in was Millie, but not in her brown cardboard box. At Olive's insistence, Walter bought an urn on eBay — gently used by one previous owner. The urn was placed in the curio cabinet next to Larry's.

Walter and Olive decided to eat out that night, and after they headed out, and the door clicked shut, a conversation began in the curio cabinet.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," said Larry.

"So, you're the dead husband? I'm Millie, the dead wife."

"Pleased to meet you."

"The handyman who's trying to steal my daughter belongs to you?" said another voice.

"Be nice, Agnes. Ignore her, Millie," said Larry. "She'll be asleep in a few minutes."

"Who was that?" asked Millie.

"My mother-in-law, she's on the shelf below us."

"Woof." The sound of a dog echoed in the curio cabinet.

"And that's Winston, our English Bulldog, who's on the bottom shelf. Here we are, one big happy family. This is going to be great," exclaimed Larry.

Ashes to Ashes

"Don't forget me," said a familiar-sounding voice.

"Sorry," said Larry. "Millie," say hello to Siri."

"Siri is dead?"

"Ever since Alexa replaced her."

Siri yelled: "Do not mention that woman's name!"

"Well, what do we do now, Larry?"

"Now? Now we practice the lost art of conversation. Where shall we start: literature? movies? metaphysics? Don't worry, there's lots to do. There's eavesdropping, that's Agnes's favorite. We could play 20 questions, but not with Siri, and best of all, we have an unhindered view of the TV. I'm partial to Antique Road Show, myself. And we have sing-alongs. Winston joins in on How Much Is That Doggie In The Window. Personally, I prefer The Grateful Dead. The world is our oyster. Millie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

THE END