

The Speckled Snail

Walter Croggin tamped his Meerschaum pipe, took a puff, and stared out his living room window at Ankeny Street below, where wet cobblestones and fading twilight were merging with the neon glow of commerce. It was Saturday and soon the restaurants and bars would be bustling with people.

Walter felt wistful. Now in his mid-eighties, twelve years ago to the day he had reluctantly closed The Speckled Snail, his antiquarian bookstore, and retired. Once considered the savviest book dealer in Oregon, for over forty-five years he had engaged in the honest activity of buying and selling literary first editions, Americana, and other rare print artifacts. He had worked hard, built a business, raised a family, saved, and invested, eventually purchasing the bookstore building. Not bad for a wood cutter's son from Astoria. The store's space, a rustic wood-beamed shell located directly beneath his dwelling, was now a chic dress boutique.

On most days, Walter's close proximity to old memories was a blessing, but not today. The continuous rain, heavy drops glancing off wavy glass, had channeled his thoughts into pools of discord. Man is never satisfied, his father had said many times. He hadn't understood back then. But now, with nothing left to settle, his effort expended, his body weakened, the vague restlessness that had pushed him inexorably forward for decades felt heavy.

Walter's pet iguana Matilda scratched his pant leg. He reached down and stroked her scaly head. She was hungry, so he set down his pipe and went off to feed her. She hissed and clicked. On his way back to his chair, he detoured to look for his first edition of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which he liked to thumb through when he felt blue. Written by John Kennedy Toole and posthumously published in 1980, the novel had been modestly received until the author's struggle and the story's antihero, Ignatius J. Reilly, captivated the literary world's imagination and enshrined it as a 20th century classic. It was Walter's pride and joy.

Walter peered into an oak bookcase. Where was that darned book? He searched and remembered showing it to his grandson Tyler on Wednesday and found it under a stack of newspapers in the

kitchen. How careless. He picked it up and caught his breath. The imprint of a ballpoint pen, a hard uneven swirl, marred the dust jacket. He anxiously inspected the hard cover. It was dented too, debossed. Walter stared in disbelief and fought back anger. Tyler's four year old son, Nicholas, had visited that day too. Walter remembered showing his great grandson the book and tapping Ignatius's Sherlock Holmes cap with his finger. He and Tyler had then left the boy alone in the kitchen to color. How stupid. Once worth several thousand dollars, *A Confederacy* was now irreparably damaged, worthless, meaningless.

Walter felt sick. He gently ran his fingernail over the edges of the swirl and remembered the book's last owner, a fusty down-on-his-luck University of Portland professor. Walter had offered five hundred dollars cash, a huge sum at the time. The man balked and haggled. He needed money to get married.

"Look," said the man. "You'll just turn around and sell it for twice as much next month. All you guys are the same. You're users. Shysters."

Walter knew that the rarest books were also the most volatile in value and he knew his limits. He had offered to call around for competing bids, but the man begrudgingly accepted the offer, pointedly counting out each fifty dollar bill one by one. Still, the accusation stung Walter. *User*. He wasn't a pawn shop. He preserved fine books and literature. He ensured they went to good homes. He saved them.

Walter tucked *A Confederacy* away in the bookcase and rubbed his forehead. Rare books were almost exclusively sold on the Internet now, a soulless, bloodless exchange. The days of pouring over wish lists and phoning book scouts and re-tipping illustrations were long gone. Also gone was his antique book cart and the comforting sound it made rolling over a wood plank floor, an echo of Ignatius J Reilly's hot dog cart traversing the streets of the French Quarter. Or so he often imagined.

Before Walter turned in, he checked on Matilda, who was resting in her cage in her bedroom. He misted her and she stretched and preened. They enjoyed a set routine. She required ten hours of restorative darkness each night and he required the same amount of sleep. Sometimes he could hear her at night, wrestling with her prehistoric past.

"Good night, Matilda," said Walter. She blinked and stared. "Rest well."

In his bedroom, Walter clicked on the bedside Tiffany lamp, unbuttoned his suspenders, and removed his rumpled white shirt and tweed pants. A photo of his deceased wife Becky stared back from atop the bureau. After raising their two sons, she had returned to work as a pediatric nurse and passed away early in retirement. He wondered what advice she would have given him about the day, the book, and Nicholas? He crawled under a quilt comforter, one of Becky's many contributions to the world, reached over, and clicked off the lamp.

Walter slept fitfully, waking to listen for Matilda before lapsing back into fuzzy dreams of Ignatius and Becky on the flooded streets of New Orleans, slow drag rising and falling while crypts and dogs on doors floated by in dirty water. When he awoke, he remembered it was Sunday and that Tyler and Nicholas would be stopping for a visit again, which triggered a hot anxiety that later culminated in spilt milk and an uncharacteristic kick that sent Matilda scuttling. He needed a primer for confused grandfathers. Ignatius had his mother. Matilda had him. And he had nobody. He considered begging off, but Becky wouldn't have stood for it. Dodging hard issues was not their way.

After he finished his breakfast of black coffee, hard tack, and smoked salmon, Walter cleaned up the dishes, fired up his pipe, and waited in the living room listening to his tired heart beat.

When Tyler and Nicholas rang, Walter met them on the street and suggested a walk. The fall sky was bright and clear. They strolled past Lovejoy Fountain and the Old Armory and under the Burnside Bridge and through Chinatown, calling out to Nicholas when he raced ahead. At the park blocks, they sat and talked and Nicholas played. Walter pointed out buildings in the Pearl and recalled their histories – a car dealership, a button factory, a purveyor of flour – all transformed. He remembered when Powell's book store had come to town, around the same time *A Confederacy* was published, and how it had taken Portland by storm. Luckily he had already established himself as a niche player.

Finally, Walter mentioned the book. Tyler was aghast.

“What can we do? Can it be restored or repaired?”

“The cover and binding can be rebuilt, but its market value is nil.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Tyler. “We should talk to Nicholas. Make him understand.”

“No,” said Walter. “He’s too young.”

Nicholas ran over and clamored into Walter’s arms. “Play with me Pop-Pop!”

Walter hugged his great grandson and birds chattered and bikers whizzed by, four abreast, obsessively hogging the street. Nicholas sat, waiting, his round cheeks pink, a thin skein of snot forming in a nostril. Walter appraised the eager person in his lap, his great grandson, and found him flawed and praiseworthy and forgivable. Mistakes will be made. More than you will remember.

“Man is never satisfied,” said Walter.

“What?” asked Tyler.

“That’s stupid,” said Nicholas.

“Nicholas, stop it. Pop-Pop is talking.”

“It’s just something my father used to say,” said Walter, quietly.

Nicholas jumped off Walter’s lap and tugged him toward a pile of fall leaves and they played, Walter grasping and Nicholas escaping and laughing and returning for more. When they were done, Tyler helped Walter back to the bench and asked about a hot dog vendor who used to frequent Ankeny Street. Where was he now? What was he now? Walter didn’t know.

On the way back, they walked more slowly and when they got to Walter’s building they paused under the dress boutique’s green-striped awning and looked in its window and Walter told Nicholas about The Speckled Snail. The dress boutique was softer and brighter and more colorful than the bookstore and a trim iPad occupied the old cash register space. Simple hand-written shelf talkers tied the businesses together, thought Walter. You explained things, convinced people to try something new or different or inventive. Touch this fabric, open this book, feel this pattern, look at this illustration, find yourself someplace new. He hadn’t been a user. He had fed imaginations.

Tyler held up Nicholas so he could get a better view and the boy whispered, “Cool. Pretty.”

Upstairs Walter handed Nicholas a package wrapped in the same brown paper he had used to mail books around the country.

“This is for you to open when you’re ten,” said Walter. “Your dad will keep it until then. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Nicholas, solemnly handing the package to Tyler.

“Can Matilda come over to our house to play?”

Walter chuckled, “Maybe someday.”

That evening Walter changed out Matilda’s cage. He was talking to her more often these days and wondered if Tyler had noticed. Matilda watched from the corner of the room, her parietal eye sensing the slightest changes in light and dark, an unnecessary survival mechanism in captivity, but essential in the wild. She wouldn’t be around much longer. He wouldn’t replace her. He was still amazed she shed and replaced her entire skin every ten days.

“Go on. Go to bed,” said Walter. Matilda blinked, eased into her cage, and laid down.

Walter found his living room chair, sat down, and filled his Meerschaum with his favorite Virginia blend. Ankeny Street was dark on Sundays, except for a few back room glimmers. He lit the pipe and puffed and thought about *A Confederacy’s* original owner standing at the altar, nervously kissing his bride, not knowing what he had given up. Smoke swirled. Walter leaned forward and listened for his old book cart and heard it rolling across the floor downstairs, a steady rumble, the faint sound of peace.