

THE LONG WALK

We walked over cobblestones which had come loose. It was easy to get an ankle caught among the stones. It seemed treacherous. We continued on this perilous route. Alida would lean against me to prevent from falling over.

“We could switch streets.”

“We are good. This is almost finished. “

We wove our way further. The path was straight, but each step was haphazard. I could sense her instability. I did what I could stay upright. I was riding a wave that was moving back and forth. I did not want to submerge.

“We are almost out of this.”

For the moment, it seemed endless. More and more twists. This time it was more severe. Alida almost fell.

“Time to move?”

“I want to keep on.”

This was now a challenge. She would not give up. There was still a spring to her step. She would bounce along with a commitment to complete the route. She felt that she had no choice. She did not want to quit. She felt so close to a resolution.

“This is hardly the worst obstacle in my life.”

She was now sailing. She became one with the rocks. She molded her step around them. She was gaining traction.

“I don’t want to stop.”

She now moved from a sense of certainty.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“We have a purpose.”

I wondered if the only reason was to complete the walk.

Mr. Waters was a retired school teacher. He was taking the late bus home. At the back of the bus he noticed someone who looked familiar. He thought nothing of it. He wasn’t used to running into familiar faces on the bus. He lived by himself. There was a grocery store where he could walk. He lived near the library. He was visiting his sister that evening.

He had brought a book with him, but he didn’t feel much like reading on the bus. He stared straight ahead of him. The city looked so different at night. There were corners and crevices which spoke of danger. He needed to make his way home without incident.

He had led an uneventful life. He had been a good teacher. His student had liked him. But he had never taken any great risks. And he had never experienced any serious accidents. He had found a balance. Time crept on slowly, and his life meandered along its path. On a clear day, he enjoyed a brisk walk. He kept healthy. There were no serious complaints.

The presence remained at the back of the bus. He did not want to look back and stare. He was trying to concentrate on the matters at hand. If there was something to be concerned about, he would deal with it as it happened.

He knew where he was getting off. He concentrated on what was to come. Everything seemed incredibly simple.

There was that kind of clarity to his life. Everything had been so according to the book.

He was that kind of teacher. He traced a path for the students to follow. They could open their books and follow that line from page to page. It made complete sense.

Somewhere in shadowy room, someone had put together that text. When it sat on Mr. Waters desk, it was completely his. It finally spoke the truth.

The bus held to the same principles. It followed a schedule. The driver knew the map. He got to be familiar with every pothole. He knew the streets as if they were part of him.

Mr. Waters did not have the same closeness with the route. He was doing his best not to seem like a newcomer. He had taken the bus before. He sat back for the rest of the ride.

He felt that presence again. He couldn't let on. When he looked at the back of the bus, he saw that the individual did not have line of vision. He would have to move to stare into Mr. Waters's face. He did not react. He did not observe him at all.

That did not stop Mr. Waters from thinking what was happening. He felt as if he was watched. Someone was waiting for him to decide. When he did, this other person would follow suit.

Mr. Waters started to get a little tense. He refused to look back. If the other rider knew that he was looking, he would be prepared. He would be thinking about Mr. Waters. But this other individual had nothing to do with him.

Mr. Waters went back to the route. He needed to be prepared for his stop. He couldn't let the bus get too close, or the driver would just go on. He was making himself nervous. He needed to relax.

He sat back. He needed to learn the lesson of the present. He was getting too far ahead of himself.

The bus twisted, and he fell back. It was a long journey. The bus darted ahead. He again strained to stay sitting up straight.

The bus turned, and it turned again. Mr. Waters was doing his best not to get disoriented. He saw a landmark in the distance. He got prepared to pull the switch. It was time to get off. He gathered his things. He was a little premature. His anxiousness was distracting him. He gathered himself together. He pulled the rope. The bell rang.

"Stop requested."

He stumbled to his feet. He braced himself. The bus stopped, and he got off. As he left the bus, he could hear the back door open.

"Mr. Waters."

His heart skipped a beat. There was no way that anyone could have spoken his name.

"Do you remember me? My name is Tom. I was in your class. We need to talk."

Mr. Waters felt afraid. He grabbed on tightly to his things.

"We need to talk."

He repeated Tom's words.

"I was in your class. We have many things to talk about. This will be a long walk. But we both need it."

The student seemed young, almost too young. Mr. Waters was retired. This didn't seem to add up. He needed to listen.

"Sometimes, you were a very good teacher. You had your rules. But you were understanding."

“I am glad that you felt good about my class.”

Ned Walters was doing his best to placate the student.

“There are many things that I need to discuss. I always felt that you lived in another world. I did my best to crack that shell. But you stayed within your wall. You were difficult to work with.”

“Should I have been more understanding?”

“Do I make you seem frightened?”

“Should I be?”

“Think of me as an avenging angel. I bring bounty to the good. But I punish the wicked.”

“I have nothing to be afraid of.”

“I am a very dangerous person.”

“What do you need?”

“What do you need? You were the teacher. You had your rules.”

“I needed the rules.”

“You needed to feel safe. But I never felt all that safe.”

“You never said anything to me. I barely can remember you in my class.”

“Don’t you remember me sitting in the back of your class? I was passing judgement on you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I was peering deep in our soul. I was getting to know who you were.”

“Tell me what you learned.”

“Why should I tell you what you needed to find out on your own.”

“How was I supposed to do that?”

“You were supposed to care. Did you care?”

“I gave of my soul.”

“You did not give me enough soul.”

“Is that all that you need to know?”

“I need to know who you really are. I need to figure out who I am. What did you teach me? How did you make me less enraged. How did you point the way to freedom?”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“You were the teacher. That was your job. How were you able to lessen the pain?”

“I only had so much to work with.”

“You had the most important tool of all. You had the truth.”

“What was I supposed to do with that?”

“You are asking me that. On a dark street a little ways from your house. Do we need to stand in the brilliance of the streetlight for you to know. We are both living in hell. Do you want to know what it’s like?”

“I don’t understand.”

“What do you understand about America? About our truth and justice.”

“I realize that things are not always fair.”

“Not always fair. They have to be always true.”

“How is that?”

“You can only create fairness if you are honest. Have you always been honest?”

“What does that mean?”

“What have you taught us about equality? Beyond all men being created equal. How do we get our equality? Where is it available?”

“It is a concept.”

“What is behind the concept? The real, honest-to-goodness thing.”

“You are getting caught up in rhetoric.”

“What do you mean by rhetoric.”

“The way that things sound. Your words sound good. But you are not getting to the truth.”

“You tell me, Mr. Waters, what is the truth. I want to be able to eat my truth. I want to be able to breathe it. I want to be able to sleep with my truth. Can I do that?”

“You can take it any way that you need it to be.”

“I walk into the grocery store. I tell them that I want to eat with my truth.”

“Pay them the money, and you can walk out with a feast.”

“I do not have the money.”

“The truth can help you get there.”

“I watched a man pick something out the garbage today, and he ate it. What kind of truth is there? That someone threw some food away, and this man picked it out of the garbage. I never learned that in your classroom.”

“What was I supposed to tell you?”

“That the game was rigged. I hated that man for picking that food out of the garbage. I wanted some other way. He was denying his humanity. This is not what you taught me.”

“He felt the necessity of the moment.”

“But he failed the fundamental lesson of your classroom. He did not use his A to fill his basket. He scooped up a meal from a garbage can.”

“He could have succeeded in my classroom but failed later on along the way.”

“You did not teach it like that. I would have never done what he did. I would have stolen food before I did that. But he is part of your America. I never knew that from the way that you taught.”

“I taught you about poverty.”

“You never explained what would make a man eat slop from a garbage can. Other people had spit in there. They threw their rotten food in there. They had puked in there. But he made the food fit for his consumption. What the hell was that?”

“He wanted to eat. He let necessity take over.”

“We do not eat from trash cans. We are taught to wash our plates. We wash our utensils. We wash our hands. This man violated his dignity. It happens all the time. We let it happen. And we blame it on the man. His ability to fight off the urge has broken down. He can no longer protect himself.”

“Tom, what do you want me to say?”

“Tell it like it is, Mr. Waters.”

“He made bad choices. And those are the consequences.”

“You made loads of stupid choices. And we had to deal with them day in and day out.”

You never picked an apple out of a trash can and started to munch on it. If you had, one of us would have reported you to the principal.”

“Things happen. Our ability to discern gets eroded.”

“That is putting it lightly.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“You tell me. Tell me about the truth of eating from a garbage can.”

“We waste a lot of food.”

“What kind of human being are you?”

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“What did you teach us?”

“I taught you to be true to yourself.”

“You taught us to be true to you. Because you never had to think about eating from a trash can. That was truth to you, Mr. Waters.”

“What does that mean?”

“Your truth didn’t take account of the world breaking down like that. You had other options. You had friends. Loved ones. Bank accounts. You were always safe. Do you know how rats live? They look for garbage. They collect by the waste of our lives. Do you know that truth?”

“I don’t understand.”

“The stuff that we throw away can attract rats. You don’t pick up the garbage, the rats come. Do you know that truth?”

“How is that a truth? How am I supposed to teach you about the rats.”

“You don’t. It is not part of the history. It was taken out by the history makers because they didn’t want us to feel bad about our world. They wanted inspiring stories. About astronauts who never got close enough to see what life was like on earth.”

“You are confusing me.”

“You confused me for years. All your lessons about square pegs and square holes. None of it ever fit like you said it would.”

“I told you that you could revise.”

“Like going to mall for a new t shirt.”

“I have put up with a lot of shit in my life.”

“You never taught us that. You taught us about a lot of shit that we would have to put up with.”

“There are ways that you can learn how to say no.”

“Just say no, Nancy.”

“Tom, you are not taking me very seriously.”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Explain yourself better.”

“You make me afraid.”

“How is that?”

“You make us learn lessons, but you have not learned a thing.”

“You are a troublemaker. Let me go!”

“Go! But the walk is far from over. Go back to your classroom. Call on the principal.

Find the guard, and tell him that someone is making trouble. For once in your career, someone wants to learn.”

“What can I teach you? Get a job, Tom.”

“Next time, you see a rat grapple around the garbage, tell him to get a job.”

“You are mocking me!”

“You are mocking the world. In your world, there is no unemployment.”

“There is lot of work to get done. This work is far from perfect.”

“Are you going to pay me to do this work? Are you going to take my time and not pay me a living wage?”

“Work another job.”

“I do. I bleed for your, Mr. Waters. Will you accept my sacrifice? I am the kid in the back of the bus wondering if it’s worth robbing you. I look in that bag of yours. There is really nothing to steal. But I need a little more from you. I am here to take your soul. And there is a hell of a lot of soul for the taking.”

“I am lost.”

“I know. You are supposed to be Mr. Genius, the great teacher. But you are making me lost.”

“Beat me up, and take my wallet!”

“I’m not the rat gnawing on a garbage bag. I’m a stick up kid waiting to blow your face off. Where does this fit your lessons? Another go-get-a-job. Why is a coward preying on a helpless retiree. Am I looking for revenge? What do I want from you, Mr. Waters?”

“What do you want?”

“I want an honest-to-goodness lesson.”

“They used to punish kids like you. But now they are all permissive. They have laws against parents and teachers letting kids like you know the rules.”

“How do you teach us the rules? Have we come to this, Mr Waters? Who the hell are you?”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to blame me for failing to give me an education.”

“I taught you from the book.”

“What is the book teaching me? Who are you? What do you really know?”

“You are getting more confusing. Just an irrational rant so that you can do whatever you please.”

“Any discussion that takes more than one minute is a rant. Who are you?”

“I used to be your teacher. That is your claim.”

“You stood at the front of the class and made that claim. Then you proceeded to teach us about your truth.”

“What don’t you like? I completed high school. Then I went to college, and I got my degree to teach. What is wrong with that? Where did you fail in the scheme of things.”

“I failed because you needed someone to fail in order for you to succeed. For those few who made sense of the lesson, they could justify people like me who sat at the back of the classroom and questioned every word that you said.”

“You are running on!”

“I want history to be soothing just like you do! I want it to take me home with all the reassurances that you felt every day. You made the world right for truth and justice.”

“No court would ever exonerate you for what you plan to do.”

“Isn’t that what you taught me from the first day of class? I sat there, and you told me about the court of law. And I didn’t stand a prayer.”

“I never said it like that.”

“But you should have. It would have been more honest.”

“You haven’t given me a chance. Ever since we got off the bus.”

“What kind of chance do you want? Do you want to race me back to your place?”

“That isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Tell me, Mr Waters, what do you have in mind? What do you want to tell the school guard. That I am asking you some honest questions.”

“The classroom never works like that. We have a syllabus. We have to work through our lesson plan.”

“They have lesson plans in jail.”

“You are again mocking me.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Of you!”

“Instead, I am supposed to be afraid of you.”

“You are holding me hostage.”

“Go home now. Wait for the next kid at the back of the bus to accost you.”

“You are turning me into a victim.”

“That was our accusation from the back of the classroom. You never heard it.”

“You were acting like victims. History was opportunity.”

“For you.”

“You needed to quit feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Each time a corporation closed down a recalcitrant factory, it was because they were acting like a victim.”

“That could be.”

“How am I supposed to answer you?”

“Tell me a story!”

“Mr. Waters, you don’t like my stories.”

“They are all the same. Do something with the truths that I shared with you!”

“If they were great truths, I could do something with them. They were empty platitudes.”

“And you are doing the same with me.”

“You were my teacher.”

“And you never made something of yourself.”

“Because I was riding in the back of the bus. Isn’t there some history here? What have you forgotten?”

“I want you to come back to class and tell me about all your great accomplishments. You cured the sick. You invented something miraculous. You changed the course of mighty rivers.”

“I prepared myself so I could eat food that I picked out of the garbage. You taught me that lesson.”

“You really did feel sorry for yourself.”

“I really felt sorry for you, Mr. Waters, because you don’t know the difference.”

“I never ate out of garbage can.”

“No one in the world that you created did. What I saw is only the tip of the iceberg. In developing nations, there are armies of kids picking through the trash. And if they had our trash to pick through, they might feel blessed. That fact alone is a gross tragedy. How can you possibly relate to that?”

“I taught you about poverty.”

“As some abstraction. Not as I lived it. Not as I fought to resist it. In your world, it was all a product of the failure of the human will. You were poor because your will was not strong enough. And the children of the poor needed to make their will into steel so they could avoid the fate of their parents. Good job, Mr. Waters.”

“I told it like it is.”

“Tell me about the rats. Or the pigeons. Teach me about evolution!”

“What do you want to know?”

“About the man who beats in the skull of his victim. What prompts that cruelty? Or do you see it?”

“Animals.”

“Like the cornered rat.”

“You never feel cornered?”

“I feel boxed in now.”

“All you have to do is close your eyes, and this nightmare will go away.”

“How does that work?”

“You tell me. I am part of your consciousness that lingers on. Poof! And you make me go away.”

“Abracadabra, leave me for good.”

“I am still here. There are so many unanswered questions. You don’t really feel satisfied.”

“I showed you a great tradition. Special people who made something of their lives. The way has always been clear.”

“The game has been rigged.”

“You work your hours. You save your money.”

“Working more hours and saving more less money.”

“You adapt. The promise is still there.”

“You get to the top of the heap, and there are more people at the bottom. But they weren’t your stepping stones.”

“Are you bitter?”

“I did the math. I’ve been adding up all these numbers.”

“That is not part of my story. You stopped working.”

“How do you know that? Because I was sitting in the back of the bus. That’s why it’s there. It’s nice and spacious. And sure you get jostled around. Did someone bring the movie for today?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s all part of the lesson. We can watch it together. We are in it. It is our story. We are sitting together in a classroom. You know that a teacher can make or break a student.”

“Come out of the shadows Thomas Woodlawn. It’s time to live your life.”

“I’ve been trying to do that. I just want to learn the lesson. If I work harder and play by the rules, I get rewarded.”

“Sounds fair.”

“And I work harder than you, but I still don’t get rewarded.”

“You haven’t studied the lesson. Or you haven’t learned the lesson well enough.”

“Maybe it’s not in my makeup. Or I am spending too much time studying the other parts of the history.”

“I learned the handshake. I had the tutors. I took special classes how to beat the exam.”

“Did you really learn it?”

“I filled in the right answers. What more is there?”

“There is the deep understanding.”

“That wasn’t part of the course. That was higher math.”

“And that was not part of your curriculum.”

“The school told me to round off all those values.”

“One less student on the bus.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“How would you put it?”

“It’s not how much you work. It’s how productive you are.”

“I worked pretty hard.”

“I work smart. I have time saving devices.”

“Teach me some!”

“It’s too late. You’ve either graduated, or you’ve dropped out of school.”

“Teach me, Mr. Waters.”

“No one wants to watch that movie. You were supposed to learn before you left school.”

“I haven’t learned since I left school.”

“You are a hopeless case.”

“I wanted you to teach me hope.”

“I showed you the way.”

“You never taught me how to deal with the rounding error.”

“That wasn’t part of my class. I taught it right. You needed to learn it right. You could have worked at a fast food restaurant and saved you money. You could have bought your first house.”

“I bought a phone and some candy. I wanted to live it up.”

“You needed to save.”

“Only a few of us saved.”

“I told you how. You didn’t listen.”

“I wanted a life.”

“You needed to wait for later.”

“I want to live.”

“That comes later.”

“I don’t want to die like this.”

“That is part of history. This is an event. A movement.”

“I am more than a movement. I am a radical change.”

“I didn’t teach you that. What are you going to do? Bust more heads?”

“I am going to teach some heads. Dig?”

“What about those who don’t want to learn?”

“You learn by doing. By buying.”

“You have to sell first. That is the fundamental law. You get a percentage of what you sell.”

“What about your percentage. Game is rigged! You dig.”

“I can’t give you what you can’t give yourself.”

“That is a riddle, Mr. Waters. I want answers.”

“Get out of my face. I can’t give you anything more. You’ve got to damn well work for the rest.”

“I have been working. But you haven’t been noticing. All you see is me chilling in the back of the bus.”

“Let me see your face. I want to see if I really know you.”

“Look at me!”

“I have no idea who you are. You were never in my class. I bear no responsibility for your fate. Is our walk over?”

“Not until you get these streets paved. I am falling in the potholes.”

“You need to study the terrain. You need to be more careful.”

“I am still standing.”

“If I ran away now, could you catch me?”

“Do you want a foot race?”

“I want all of this to be over.”

“Are you going to try me? What do you expect to happen if I catch you?”

“You are going to take my stuff. You are going to beat me.”

“Is this the career that you taught me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is this what it means to be a desperate man?”

“What are you asking?”

“You run away from trouble.”

“Are you trouble?”

“You tell me. Tell me about the truth, Mr. Waters.”

“You are the truth. What are you going to make with your gifts?”

“I want a few more gifts. Take a little more time to teach me mathematics.”

“You can’t spend all your money in one place.”

“They are selling me everything that I need.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Beer, lottery tickets, and cigarettes.”

“There has to be more hope.”

“What are the odds?”

“What are you asking?”

“How do you make me lucky?”

“You don’t play.”

“I am playing with my body. I am playing with my life. I want to win!”

“You were not meant to win. I gave you the mumbling cure. You were in line. When it was your turn, I mumbled some words over you. Then you passed on. That was supposed to be your cure. Education and health all in one package. Take it and move on. I saved a miracle for you. Now, be miraculous.”

“I am having trouble being normal.”

“There is no normal.”

“There are no norms. What does that mean? You are the norm. Going back to your normal life.”

“Kill me now!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can’t take the suspense! Just kill me.”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“I hate this waiting game.”

“Are you waiting for your punishment? I have places to go.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I was a student in your class. I was just saying hello.”

Alida told me her story.

“I was a teacher. I taught the poor to have dignity. To believe in themselves. I could only hope that was enough.”

I followed her on her walk. We kept exploring the shadows. I observed the reflections of the light.