

MICHAEL BLOUIN

## **NOW. HERE. NOWHERE.**

*("now. here. nowhere." is an excerpt from Blouin's third novel which traces the stories of Walter and Renata, brother (living) and sister (deceased) who have lost their parents in a horrific automobile accident. The novel weaves this contemporary narrative thread with pioneer life in Eastern Ontario, prostitution in late 19th century Missouri, and the death of Jumbo the circus elephant in St. Thomas, Ontario just prior to the turn of the last century.)*

Most big adventures begin with a word.

In this case the word was “Walter”, and it was whispered in the slightly husky voice of a thirteen-year-old girl named Renata who had been dead  
three years,  
seven months,  
twenty-eight days and ...  
yes ...  
fourteen hours, and ...  
twenty ...  
three ...  
no ...  
twenty-four ...  
minutes.

“Walter,” she whispered.

She hadn't thought that colds would be possible after you were dead. But that was wrong—they were. This was her second cold of the Spring. She'd had five in the winter. Something, she guessed, about being insubstantial.

The wind went right through you.

Walter, as it happened, was at that moment thinking about the innocent bystander problem.

It wasn't the first time he'd considered it. In fact, as far as he knew, he'd invented it, or at least been the first to give it so much thought. He used to think about the many and varied thoughts his mind could produce and how sometimes it seemed as if his brain became overheated and feverish with all kinds of different thoughts, like his brain might just expand and explode sending

bits of grey matter, spatters of blood and brain juice and shards of skull spraying out in all directions, spattering and possibly injuring those close by. This was what he called the innocent bystander problem. What if just one of those people got a sharpened section of skull through the eye, piercing right through the jelly-like interior like a javelin? He, Walter, would deserve to die—after all, he had overheated his own brain, ignoring all the warning signs. But the innocent bystander ... that person had simply been walking past.

How could the universe possibly be so random as to allow that?

Most people didn't know that the eye was filled with a jelly-like substance. Most people, he'd learned from experience, didn't really care to know.

*Ou est-ce qu'on peut faire du cheval?*

(Where can I/we go riding?)

*Est-ce que qu'il y a de bonnes plages de sable pres d'ici?*

(Are there any good sandy beaches near here?)

Those were two things he'd taught himself to say if he ever got to Paris like he wanted. He wasn't sure exactly what use those exact phrases would be in the fabled City of Light. Probably you had to leave the city to go riding or to a beach. There was a big park though. Maybe there were horses there.

*oo es kon pub febr dew shub-val?*

That was how to say it. It was called phonetic spelling. It seemed to him it was also the way that you would write it down if an American was saying it. You had to say it then with a southern accent;

*oo es kon pub febr dew shub-val seel voo plate?*

"Walter," she said again, a little louder.

It was difficult to get his attention. Even if you were a ghost.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm still here ..."

"I know."

"You look scared," she said.

"I'm not scared," he told her.

"You should be."

\* \* \*

In the winter Jack would stand on the frozen pond behind the house and he'd sweep the snow off the ice with his boot and stare into the dark crystal. It was transparent and fragile but it held you up. It was just like life. Easy to break. What you had to be was careful. And he was very careful. He'd only recently realized that he could train his mind to avoid the subjects he preferred not to consider. There were so many of those—his mind was sometimes like a checklist. It would rhyme through a set list of things that could be wrong and put a checkmark next to the things he was vulnerable on. And those it would pick like a tongue at a chipped tooth. And he'd started to build a wall around the subjects he'd rather not have trotted out. It was working some of the time. He'd rather believe a beautiful lie, he thought, than a shabby truth. The last three years had taught him that. He crunched through the crust of snow back up to the house and made himself a cup of tea. The kettle on the stove. The white mug. The teabag waiting. The spoon. The milk.

Meticulous.

There was an order of things that made it all less difficult. There was a way to do things the same way each time that made the day easier to get through. The attacks still came. Routine made everything a little more predictable. It was good to be able to predict things when you could be attacked unexpectedly at any time. When you were forced, as he was, to live against your will in a completely arbitrary world. The little window over the sink. The red ring of the burner just peeking out. Soon the steam. There, the steam. Just as he'd predicted.

\* \* \*

"I've been trying to get your attention," Renata told him.

"Well, you've got it now," Walter said, giving up on the innocent bystander problem for the time being.

"Didn't you miss me?" she asked.

"Where have you been?"

"Behind the fridge mostly."

"What do you do back there anyway?"

"Not much, there's not much you can do behind a fridge."

"Well ..."

"It's warm there, that's why."

"Are you cold?"

“All the time.”

“Why?”

“I think it has something to do with not having a body.”

“I guess.”

“There’s nothing to keep me warm.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Did you look up ghosts in the library yet? You said you would.”

“They don’t have much, they never have much. They’ve got encyclopedias and National Geographics. They have a few books on ghosts but they’re not like you.”

“What are they like?”

“Scary.”

“I can be scary.”

“Not really.”

“You’ll see.”

\* \* \*

Walter walked with a purpose. It was an efficient way to get where he was going and it prevented anyone from paying any real attention on the way. There was a line from his locker to math class and one from his locker to the cafeteria. Another one to shop class and one to the bathroom. There was a line to everywhere and he followed it. The shortest distance between any two points. They were lit up like fluorescent paint on the carpet. As long as you looked down and kept going there was no reason for anyone to bother with you. And they didn’t, for the most part. Amber Douglas was a glitch in the equation. On Tuesday she was there by her locker watching him walk past. He could tell she was watching him even though he didn’t look up. Things stopped making any easy kind of sense when she was around. A ghost in the machine, but not like Renata.

“Different how?”

“I don’t know Ren, she just is ...”

They were sitting on the floor reading the comics. Walter was sitting on the floor. Renata was hovering a few inches above the carpet.

“Ya love her.”

“No.”

“Do so.”

He didn’t think that he did. He’d never even talked to her. You couldn’t love someone you’d

never even talked to, could you?

“Sure, it happens all the time in movies.”

“This isn’t a movie Ren, it’s my life.”

“Movies are based on real life Walter, everything in a movie has actually happened to someone, somewhere, sometime ... or at least something like it ...”

He didn’t see how that could be true either.

“The flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“What about them?”

“They actually happened to someone somewhere sometime Ren? Who? Where? When? I would think that dead people would know more than living people ... isn’t that how it’s supposed to work?”

Renata hovered silently for a moment.

“I don’t know how it’s supposed to work,” she said quietly.

“Well it doesn’t work like in the movies anyway,” he said, “... it doesn’t work like that ...”

“Those flying monkeys scare me.”

“Well Amber Douglas scares me. Anyway how can you be scared if you’re a ghost?”

She didn’t answer for a while. She hovered looking at Peanuts and Lil Abner.

“One day I was alive, the next I was dead. I’ve been scared ever since, Walt.”

She’d been calling him Walt ever since he decided to drop the W from his name and just be Alter. He didn’t know if there was more to it than that. Probably there was. There was probably some official process you had to go to an office for. It didn’t seem like the kind of thing you’d just be able to do on your own. There were probably forms you had to fill out and people you had to see. Ren refused to call him Alter, though, and he couldn’t think of anyone else he could get to use the new name. And the people in the office would probably want to know why and he didn’t see that it was any of their business why he didn’t feel like a Walter anymore. He just didn’t. His parents wouldn’t mind. They were completely dead. Not like Renata, who was still around and who never, ever cried. She looked like she might now though so he changed the subject.

“She has locker 1333.” he said.

“What?”

“She has locker 1333, that’s almost halfway between my locker and the shop class.”

“So?”

“Nothing, it has no significance, it’s just her locker number ...”

“Oh.”

But it stopped her from crying. He guessed that if he couldn't change his name to Alter he'd just go with Walt.

And on Wednesday Amber Douglas stood at her locker watching him walk past and she said

“Hi Walt.”

and everything changed. Again.

“Whaddya want?” she asked.

“What?”

“You heard me, what do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she said, closing the door of her locker and taking a step towards him, “what ... do ... you ... want? Everybody wants something. Why'd ya stop?”

“What?”

Walter wasn't doing well in the conversation. He was getting all the “whats”.

“Why'd ya stop? You never stop walking when you're walking. You always keep walking when you're walking ... till you get where you're going ... that's when you stop, only when you get where you're going ...” She took a step closer. “I've noticed that about you. Is this where you're going?”

He didn't say “what?” this time, though he wanted to.

She had braces, but in a good way. She was pretty. He hadn't noticed that before. He noticed it now. He was noticing it a long time. Longer than he should.

“What?” she said.

It sounded better when she said it, like it meant something. Like she knew why she was saying it. Her irises were quite large.

“What?” she said again.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

Well then. So they started hanging out together. It was the last thing he expected. He didn't like surprises, but this one was okay.

So far.