

## The Secret Life of Walter Bitty

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*With of course all due acknowledgments to James Thurber and his magnificent short story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"!*

"You can't be serious, sir!" The copilot's voice cracked in ill-concealed fright, his eyes flitting in panic from the rows of glistening gauges before him to the handsome face of his companion. "Oh, but I am," that man murmured, his cool gaze never for a moment swerving from the sight of the jagged terrain rushing sickeningly up to meet them. "Serious as always, Beckert. Watch and learn – and for God's sake quit your idiotic bleating if that's all you can do."

"But- but we'll never make it-" "Shut it," the pilot, his grey eyes calmly regarding the windmilling altimeter before him. "Now, given the weight of our cargo, and given that the rate of deceleration is-" "We're going to crash!" wailed his terror-stricken copilot into the PA system. "We're all- we're doomed! There's no way we can pull up before impact-" And now in their ears came the thrumming *bbbvbbbvbbb* of the straining engines, screaming wildly as they struggled against the inexorable force of their crazy descent. Under the steely control of Captain Bitty they thrashed at the rushing air, against incredible odds somehow managing to slow the careening airliner's wild trajectory...

..."Here comes the airplane, honey! *Bbbvbbbvbbb*... Open wide for a yummy yummy in your tummy tummy!"

Walter blinked – and opened mechanically once again. Into his open, squash-stained mouth the loaded spoon sank, accompanied by the musical coos and laughter of the woman beside him. "Mmmm!" she squealed softly in mock enthusiasm. "Isn't that yummy? What a good *baby* you are!" She scooped another hefty load of the orange goop onto the rubbery spoon and raised it once more to the level of her messy-faced husband's silent gaze. "Now, only seven more spoonfuls, okay? You gotta eat all your food if you want to grow up big and strong!"

He sighed and shifted in his oversized highchair with an audible squish – before opening once more amid the excited buzzing sound of the airplane-spoon. Whatever. Mommy wasn't going to let him go until he'd finished everything, same as always. Though maybe if he was lucky and extra-good, maybe she'd give him a bottle full of strawberry milk before bedtime. His eyes slid closed as he gulped and felt stray dribbles of pureed squash drip down from his chin to his bib. No matter. Gulp and open and gulp and open. That was the way of things nowadays...

...The scream of metal grating on metal cut through the night, the roar of gunning engines vibrating with a *bbbvbbbvbbb* in the inky blackness of the tunnel. Two entire miles below the surface of the mountain they raced, side by side: the ominous Cadillac, swerving wildly, the puff and crack of gunshots peppering out its windows... and beside it the gleaming red of the secret agent's trusty motorcycle. It had been through hell and back – and it wasn't about to fail its masked master now.

Though the wailing blonde clinging to its rider's back didn't seem so confident. "You're going to kill us both!" she screeched, her voice only a shade more agreeable than the shrill scrape of the Cadillac's fenders against their exhaust. "Agent Bitty, you must be insane! For the love of god, please-" She broke off in a hysterical wail as a spatter of bullets passed harmlessly through the gas tank between his legs. And yet, those gloved hands only gripped tighter on the handlebars. That square-cut jaw clenched beneath the mask. And in his hooded expression there could be seen only one thing: sheer and unwavering determination.

"Can it with the hysterics, lady," he muttered, squatting low over the seat and kicking the cycle beneath him into a spin that took him in a full 360-degree loop around the Cadillac. "I'm focusing here. I'm not about to let these sons-o-bitches get away." His jaw ground tighter, the beads of sweat on his brow the only sign of the strain within. They'd poisoned him, too – the bastards. His gut was already in agony. And to make matters worse, now came the sound of his gas-starved cycle beneath him, gasping and backfiring in a staccato rhythm of *bbbvbbv- pppuhh! bvbvbbv- ppuhh!*. Yet still the hero clung on, knuckles taut, face drawn, the careening machine beneath him veering perilously close now to the revving Cadillac and the explosive sounds of gunfire...

..."Oooh, that's right! Who's a good boy for Mommy? Go on, honey – make a nice big boom-boom in your dipie for me! Yes, that's right... ooh, yes! Just like that, baby!"

Walter's eyes cracked open in his screwed-up, reddened face. There she stood above him, beaming down with all the sweet benevolence of a dog trainer coaxing her adorable pet through a special new trick. He let out a muffled groan as the cramps hit again, and a fresh wave of bubbling gas and liquid excrement sputtered out of his bum and into his already-loaded diaper. He panted then, eyes staring straight ahead, hands clenching on the carpet beneath him. Such a humiliating way to use the potty. Such an embarrassing position to be in.

And yet, receiving an enema from Mommy was nothing he hadn't done a hundred times before.

Still his Mommy urged him on, her saccharine-sweet tones dripping down into his ears through the haze of grunts and cramps. "Aww, such a stinky boom-boom! See, I *knew* my wittle baby needed to go! Get it all out, honey: all that icky poo-poo and gas. Better get it all out before your bathtime, okay? I don't think you want to go to beddie-bye with a stinky-winky dipie, do you? *Do you, sweetie-pie?*"

He groaned – and let another burbling fart splatter out into his sagging, thoroughly soiled diaper. No, he most certainly didn't. He'd just have to let it go. Let it all out, just like Mommy said...

..."Let you out? Are you crazy, man? Listen, Bitty – that airlock hasn't been used in ten months! It's suicide, I tell you!" The sallow-faced commander pushed himself off the abutting panel and drifted back through the air to the control panel. "See this? There's simply no other option. The hull is breached, and we're losing oxygen faster every second! We're going to have to abandon the station – if we don't die first, that is-"

"Quiet, you!" Astronaut Bitty, already clambering into the snug cocoon of his spacesuit, shot a withering glance at the blathering commander. "You may be commander of this space station. But I am its mechanic, sir – and I am not about to let it go down without a fight." The trembling hands of his female associate slid the suit up and over his shoulders, zippers closing with a *bbbvvvvvvvv* of melancholy finality. "Please, Bitty, please," she quavered – and from her eyes, blue as the waters of the Pacific sliding past beneath them, there sprang a solitary, salty tear – hanging weightless in the thinning air between them.

"I'll be back," he intoned briefly, with a wave of his massive glove – and then his handsome face disappeared beneath the gleaming orb of his helmet. "Yes- yes, you will," she muttered brokenly, hands wringing in desperation. "You must, Bitty. For me..." And as the heroic astronaut lumbered toward the airlock, slow and weighty in the bulk of his now-sealed spacesuit, she swallowed her tears and pushed off to help. Her hands thrust him forward, steering him, guiding the hero into the airlock that would either seal his doom or bring them all to safety...

..."Yes, that's right. Sleepy-time for a sweet little baby," came the voice – and Walter blinked sleepily as he came back to the waking world. "Go on, into your crib now. Nice and snug and safe for my darling little baby..." He stumbled forward and sank prone onto the crinkling mattress with a sigh from deep in his full belly, bulging with the heavy slosh of his two nightly bottles of warm milk. Every inch of his body, from his neck down, was encased in the soft warmth of his nighttime outfit. There were the triple-weight diapers – already wet – swelling thick and monumental between his splayed legs. There was the locking pair of sky-blue, cotton footie pajamas hugging his

entire body. And on both hands there hung the thick weight of the padded gloves his Mommy dutifully locked in place every night. "To keep her darling little Walter out of trouble."

He emitted a plaintive little moan as the *bbvbbvbbvbb* of the rolling wooden bars slid through the room and a soft metallic click reminded him that he was now locked into his crib until tomorrow morning. Through the bars that now surrounded him on every side hove the blurry face of his Mommy, beaming tenderly in at her captive baby. "Sleep well, Bitty Baby," she crooned, and in her eyes there gleamed mingled exhilaration and doting tenderness. "Have the sweetest of sweet dreams, baby. Oh, the wonderful things my darling little baby must dream..."

...And there he now lay: locked fast in his cryochamber, the warbling *bbvbbvbbvbb* of the locking mechanisms and the thermal evaporators echoing softly in his ears. But the hero paid them no mind, nor did he stir in the close confines of the capsule. He merely smiled his soft, rogueish smile... and closed his handsome eyes.

He was Bitty, after all: Bitty the explorer. Bitty the first man to board that fateful first voyage to another star – the first willing to endure the cryogenic sleep of interplanetary travel. There Bitty would remain, cocooned and locked fast in his months-long slumber. Bitty the intrepid. Bitty, the space-faring hero. Bitty, the handsome, the reckless, the most daring cosmonaut of his generation.