

DOUGLAS WATSON

---

*THE ERA OF NOT QUITE*

The sun shone, if only to be polite, on a town whose residents were all indoors murdering, by one method or another, the hours of their too-short lives. It was five minutes past noon on a Wednesday during the Era of Not Quite. Soon it would be six minutes past noon.

At nine minutes past noon, Hal Walker emerged from his sagging bungalow on so-called Fourth Street (it was really the town's fifth street). In his hand was a single red rose. Hal came down off the bungalow's front porch and stood on the sidewalk, letting the well-mannered sun warm his skin. He slapped a mosquito dead against his neck and smiled. It was a fine day on which to risk everything.

Everything, in Hal's case, was not much. Although he had a bungalow and a great many books, Hal had no friends, family, lovers, admirers, or even detractors. Also, he no longer had the first half of his life. He did, though, have a job with the local telephone company, deleting from the telephone directory the names and phone numbers of people who had died. It was not a very demanding job. The town had the same per capita death rate as other towns, but it was a small town, so there were relatively few deaths on any given day. Hal spent most of his time at work reading books. He would read almost any book that had a good plot and/or made him laugh and/or conjured up images of the sea. Hal had never glimpsed the sea, but he lived in quiet awe of it. It was vast and moody, according to what he'd read. He liked knowing it was out there.

Lately Hal had been reading novels by Samuel Beckett. Hal was shocked to realize that he, Hal Walker, had been living like a Beckett character—someone waiting around for life to begin or end. Hal didn't want to be a Beckett character. He wanted to be happy.

At ten minutes past noon, Hal set off on foot toward the town library, red rose in hand. He was going to tell the town librarian, Eileen Gallagher, all about the great thing that glowed inside him like a very bright light, i.e. his love for her. And then—who knew?

As he cut across the Unitarian church parking lot, Hal thought about the last time he'd seen Eileen. It had been yesterday. He, Hal, had been about to leave the library when Eileen had said, from behind the circulation desk, "No Beckett today, Mr. Walker?" She was dressed in her usual, nearly conservative way, and she smiled a smile that did not, Hal felt, quite exclude him. No one had ever smiled at him that way before—no one except Eileen.

"No," Hal had said in answer to Eileen's question. Then, blushing, he'd hurried

home, where he'd spent the rest of the day rehearsing all the things he should have said—things he would say today.

At the corner of Second (really third) and Maple, Hal stopped to admire a bed of daffodils. They looked so nice in the sun, so sharply defined, so much themselves. Each flower was unique, Hal supposed, but to his eye one was the same as another. And of course they would all end up the same: they would become new dirt.

Hal looked at the rose in his hand. What a shame that love required the murder of flowers. Or did it? It seemed to, in books, but perhaps in life it didn't. Perhaps love didn't require anything outside itself.

What if love doesn't require *me*? Hal thought.

As he continued on his way to the library, Hal thought about the Era of Not Quite. According to a book he'd recently read, the Era of Not Quite had been running continuously since the dawn of human history. Human history, the book said, was a little more than halfway over. So was the Era of Not Quite.

Crazy stuff, Hal thought.

At nineteen minutes past noon he stood before the entrance to the library. Only now did it occur to him that he might not be able to speak with Eileen alone. It was a public library, after all.

He needn't have worried. The public was elsewhere, doing the same things it always did on Wednesday afternoons (and with the usual lack of gusto).

Hal went through the door but paused again in the foyer. A vein in his neck was twitching. Would Eileen be able to see it?

A poster tacked to a bulletin board on the wall advised Hal to "READ!"

"I do read," Hal said—and jumped at the sound of his own voice, which he hadn't heard since answering Eileen's question the day before.

Hal considered the rose in his hand: the plush red folds, the desperate thorns. It was not a subtle thing. It was a hell of a thing to give to a woman you barely knew.

Maybe, Hal thought, my plan is not such a good one.

But then an image arose before his mind's eye. It was an image of himself in the future—himself lying alone in bed, unwashed, malnourished, diseased, loveless, known by none, forsaken by all, and, to boot, nearly dead.

Hal shuddered. To pluck up his courage, he pricked his thumb with the rose's nastiest-looking thorn. It hurt, but only a little. A single bead of blood welled up and jiggled there on his trembling thumb like some kind of liquid ruby. Hal brought his thumb to his mouth and sucked the ruby back into himself. Then he put his wounded hand in his pocket and, holding the rose in his other hand, shouldered through the double doors into the main room of the library.