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The Secret Life of Mitty Walters

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THE SECRET LIFE OF MITTY WALTERS / A RESPECTFUL TRIBUTE TO JAMES THURBER
They called her The Rose of Viet Nam. Small, plain, selfless, she tended the wounded and dying.

“You've got to get some rest! Ninety-six hours without sleep is too much to ask of anyone!” exclaimed Nurse Bardot. She anxiously turned her blue eyes from Mitty Walters to young Dr. Renshaw.

“Somebody's got to do the job,” said Mitty Walters wearily. Then, with a faint, fleeting smile, she tore still another strip of cloth from her tattered uniform. With it she gently bandaged the damaged eyes of a Negro paratrooper.

“Mitty,” protested Dr. Renshaw, “the Cong will be here in a matter of minutes. You must leave. God only knows—”

War thundered and whined around the hospital and battered at the door. There was a rending of wood, and splinters flew through the room. Mitty paid no heed, scarcely taking note—indeed—of the adoration in Dr. Renshaw's voice.

“There, are you comfortable?” she said softly. The soldier nodded gratefully. To Dr. Renshaw she said, “Sir, my place is here with the boys.” She moved calmly toward the next casualty.

Nurse Bardot pressed her voluptuous body against Dr. Renshaw in terror. Clinging to him, she wailed in a cowardly voice, “Oh, what will the enemy do to us?”

Dr. Renshaw coldly disengaged himself from the trembling beauty. Turning his back to her, he said, “Thank God! Thank God that The Rose of Viet Nam isn’t afraid to face Hell!”

“Have you got a clean shirt ironed for me?” rasped Mr. Walters. “Did you iron yesterday like you said you were going to?”

“Hmmm?” said Mitty Walters. She looked at her husband, in bed beside her, with shocked astonishment. He seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange man who had yelled at her in a crowd. “Well,” he repeated, “did you?”
Mitty Walters rose from the bed in silence, the sound of Dr. Renshaw's voice fading in the remote, intimate corridors of her mind.

"You're tensed up again," said Mr. Walters. "It's going to be one of your days." He sat up in bed and scratched himself. "I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over. You're not getting any younger, you know."

Mitty Walters studied the ironing board which was permanently stationed in the dining room. On inactive duty, it supported a variety of books, pencils, toys. She grunted as she stooped to insert the iron's plug into the wall socket. She must get busy on those Canadian Air Force exercises first thing tomorrow morning.

From the bathroom, where he was running all the hot water down the drain in trickles as he shaved, Mr. Walters recited, "You know I need a clean shirt. A clean shirt and a hot breakfast every morning." He added, as he always added, "You seem to get some perverse pleasure in frustrating me."

Mitty yawned and ran the iron back and forth over the stubborn creases in the white garment. She absently noted that the artificial roses on top the TV were getting terribly dusty looking. She thought I must buy some clean ones the next time I get to the dime store.

"Are you awake in there?" brayed Mr. Walters.

"I don't need to see Dr. Renshaw," said Mitty. She finished ironing the shirt just as Mr. Walters hurried by. He seized it and sprinted toward the kitchen.

"No coffee? Well, I'll grab a cup downtown." His shoulders sagged. He gripped his briefcase with white knuckles and started for the back door. He stopped to check. "What," he said, "are you going to do today?"

Mitty considered. With three small children to play with and plenty of stimulating housework to choose from, what would it be? Diapers? Woodwork? Floors?

"Why don't you take down the ironing board if you're not going to iron?" suggested Walters. "Whatever you do, don't go back to bed." From beyond the slammed screen door he snorted, "You could start picking up the pretty mess in the dining room."

... Mitty Walters' party table was picture pretty. A sheer woven cloth laid over pink fabric served as background for a rosy centerpiece and rose-tinted china. Behind the bowl of pink roses (some thirty or forty of them in varied sizes and species) spread a trellised wallpaper. Pink roses ran rampant across the wall, matching perfectly Mitty's lipstick and fingernail polish.

A midnight supper, kept warm in copper chafing dishes, reflected the exquisite taste of a woman whose thoughtfulness, warmth, and generosity had made her Washington's most talked-about hostess. Her affluent guests uttered cries of pleasure as they entered the elegant dining room.

"Everett," said Mitty, "you're still far to weak to sit at table. I'll have Bentley bring in a chaise lounge from my sitting room." Everett sighed contentedly.

Mitty was wearing a sliver of dress with halter neckline, a silvery fishnet, covered all over with paillettes. Who—in this roomful of brilliant, wealthy people—would guess that this composed beauty was the mother of thirteen children? She had planned the menu and prepared the dinner. She had made her gown and had arranged her own shimmering coiffure.
Dinner over, Mitty gaily waved everyone into the drawing room. There, Ambassador David Renshaw pulled Mitty into his strong arms. “My dear,” he said, “I haven’t had Blueberry Sally Lunn since I was a boy in Virginia. It was excellent.”

“An old family recipe,” Mitty murmured, slipping ethereally from his embrace. She ignored his open adoration by giving her attention to Perle. Perle squealed, “Darling, is it true that you’re doing a cookbook entirely in blank verse?”

“Yes,” Mitty admitted modestly, “I hope to give a fresh approach to cookery by means of imagery and metaphor.”

“I hear,” interjected Ladybird, “that you grow your own prize roses.”

Jackie couldn’t resist interrupting. “Mitty, when do you find the time to do all of these clever things?”

The mother of thirteen replied quietly, “If I can’t find time, I make time.”

“It’s nearly time for them to be here. Haven’t you got those pies in the oven yet?” Mr. Walters glowered at the chaos in the kitchen and nervously helped himself to a spoonful of pie-filling from a bowl perched on top of the refrigerator. “What’s this doing up here?” he growled.

“It’s up there so the kids can’t reach it,” said Mitty. She gripped the rolling pin and marched forward into the foray. Mitty knew there must be some way to flatten the pie dough so that it wouldn’t stick to the table in the shape of an enemy map.

Var thundered and whined around the wooden table as she scraped dough from the rolling pin, picked off the fingerprints, and fired them at the garbage can. Forming a grimy ball in her hands with the remains, she resumed the battle. This time the dough assumed the shape of an archipelago. She hurled the archipelago onto a menacing pie tin. The pie tin gleamed victoriously through the frayed dough. Mitty raised her floured hands above her head in surrender. The kitchen was oppressive with the silence of defeat.

“Aw,” said Mr. Walters, “I give up. I’m going down to the store and get some spumoni and cookies. Throw that damned stuff out and jump into your blue dress.”

The prisoner of war remained tight-lipped. She stood thinking, “The blue doesn’t fit me anymore. Nothing fits. The zippers won’t go up. I don’t have a thing to wear.”

Mr. Walters misconstrued her silence. He said, “No use sulking. The blue dress will have to do till we get the taxes paid. Then I’ll buy you a new outfit.” As he slammed the screen door, he remembered to interrogate the prisoner, “Did you make that appointment with Dr. Renshaw?”

“I forgot.” Mitty was visualizing a cardigan over the blue to conceal the open placket. If she kept her arms crossed all evening, the company might not notice the inner tube of flesh gathered around her middle.

“I will not wear this ridiculous blue,” hissed Mitty Walters. Erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, she stood before the six-way mirror in the house of Dior.

“But,” begged Yves Saint Laurent, “if you do not model the blue gown for Dior, our entire season will be a fiasco!”

Mitty shrugged her lovely shoulders carelessly. She picked up a magazine and casually studied her perfect profile on its cover. A delivery boy
entered with a box from the florist. A little seamstress, upon a gesture from Mitty, opened the box. She grasped at the perfection of thirty-six long-stemmed roses. “Where shall I put them, mademoiselle?” she breathed reverently.

Dropping the Vogue, Mitty drawled, “Put them in the trash. Roses bore me.” So saying, she lit a cancer-free cigarette and inhaled.

“Surely you jest,” protested Saint Laurent. Holding the card before him he cried, “These flowers are from General de Gaulle!”

“Mitty Walters does not jest,” said the indifferent mannequin. “Nor does she accept roses from crusty old tarts.”

Cigarette smoke wreathed her provocative breasts as she tore the gossamer blue from her slender body. “Take this impossible thing away! Find something else for me.” She tossed her thick raven hair, then commanded the little seamstress to hold out one hand, palm upward. She casually snuffed out her cigarette on the flesh of the obedient serf. “That for old Charlie. I go now for my sitting. David Renshaw is painting me. Le artiste.” She slouched fashionably to her dressing room. Turning dramatically in its corner, she said softly, unpredictably, “Find me a dayglo pink. Find a pink. Find me a dayglo pink and I will save your fashion show.” Then she was gone.

St. Laurent sighed. “True, she is cold and inscrutable, but no one can model clothes like that one.”

The little seamstress, whose hand was truly smarting, said, “And did you ever see such a tiny waistline on any woman?”

Mitty finished the eleven minutes of Canadian Air Force exercises guaranteed to give any woman a trim waistline if done faithfully for sixty days without eating. She stood in her nightgown. As long as she was down here in the basement anyway, and as long as she was barefoot, she might as well fill the old Maytag and do yesterday’s pail of diapers.

A rubber hose extended from the hot water faucet to the washing machine. There was a sizeable leak in the hose. Mitty did the washing each time in bare feet rather than soak her Oomphies.

On several occasions Mr. Walters had told her to have the hose repaired. Or repair it herself. Or get a new washing machine. In any case, don’t bother him with such trivial matters.

Mitty had read in an Ann Landers column that in such cases a wife should simply summon the plumber, tell him to do the job, then present the bill to her husband. “That’s all well and good,” said Mitty to the Maytag as she stuffed it with Infants Wear, “but Ann Landers doesn’t have to live with my husband after the presentation.”

Upstairs, in the living room, two of the Walters’ kiddies could be heard mirthfully shaking open cereal boxes in time to the bongo rhythm of Desi Arnaz. They were zestfully following the fifth episode of I LOVE LUCY in its fourteenth rerun. The baby was sleeping in her basket in the bedroom, gathering strength to urinate steadily for another twenty-four hours.

Mitty bent over to remove the broomhandle, which had fallen sharply across her vulnerable toes. She leaned the broom against the furnace and bumped her head against a water pipe as the dustpan’s corner struck her shin. She pushed back her fine, straight brown hair from her eyes and sighed.
Back at the Maytag, Mitty clutched the length of rubber hose in one hand and watched it feed hot water into the old dog. In her other hand she clutched a newly-opened box of Tide.

Suddenly, upstairs, the telephone screamed. The baby woke and screamed in terror. The other children shrieked with delight. Mr. Walters stood in the kitchen bellowing. "Mitty, where are you?"

Mitty relaxed her grip on the rubber hose and turned toward the stairs. The hose flew from her hand and directed itself at her feet. She let out a howl of pain and jumped two feet into the air. The box of Tide accompanied her, then descended into a torrent of hot water. Mitty leaped to one side and stood, entranced, watching the Tide rise in her basement.

Upstairs, the telephone shrilled on. A glass object crashed to the floor. The bowl of artificial roses being knocked off the TV, perceived Mitty. Oh, if only I could write it all down, all of it, if only I could write.

... "Aesthetically," quoted Mitty Walters aloud to herself, "I consider this collection of short stories to be Mitty Walters’ most impressive achievement. Special, sparse, magnetic, the best of it haunts the mind, moving on a dark tide, like an ice floe down river." Mitty sat in her study at the townhouse appraising the New York Times Book Review section. Furious, she threw aside the paper and turned to her typewriter.

"So that’s all David can say about THE ROSE OF VIET NAM." She inserted a fresh sheet of paper into the typewriter. "Ice floe," she said. "Indeed." Angrily, she pounded in caps the title of her latest story: A CELLAR OF ROSES. "Ice floe—need he patronize me?" she said.

When the telephone rang, Mitty deliberately sniffed at the Carmen rosebud which Sarah had placed on her desk this morning. It rested in a graceful vase in its niche near the typewriter.

"Miss Mitty," said Sarah, the housekeeper, "it’s Mr. David." Sarah felt sorry for the handsome, tall, dark man who had so long worshiped her mistress.

With the studied poise and elegance which had made her America’s richest woman writer, Mitty Walters stylishly raised the telephone to her ear. Sarah stood in the corridor with Bentley, the butler. Together, they listened unashamedly through the door.

Mitty spoke in an icy voice. "David dear, this is the ice floe." Sarah turned to Bentley. "What do you suppose is eatin’ Her Nibs?"

"I think," said Bentley, "that Miss Mitty wants to be something more to Mr. Renshaw than a book review."

"But the poor man’s been sendin’ her a rose every single day for over a year now," cried Sarah. "Ain’t that true love?"

"Some women," replied Bentley, "aren’t content to have a man’s flesh and blood. Some women want his entire rosebush."

"If ya ask me," said Sarah, "Miss Mitty has got a pretty good clutch on all three. . . ."

"I said all three of them are hollerin’ their heads off up there. What in the hell are you doing down here?" roared Mr. Walters. Mitty stopped thinking and the soapsuds in the basement rose up out of the misty study and surrounded her again. "Things close in," she muttered vaguely. She pushed through the suds, which made a faintly derisive whistling sound against her wet nightgown.
"What did you say?" said Mr. Walters, starting up the stairs. "What were you doing down there?" he demanded.

"I was thinking," said Mitty. "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?"

Walters turned around at the top of the stairs and stared at her. He said, "I'm going to take your temperature after I get a towel and wipe you off." He looked at Mitty closely. "Sit down there. I won't be a minute." As he headed for the linen closet, he said to himself, "I think she's out of her mind."

Mitty stood in the middle of the kitchen. The cool, flowered linoleum felt comforting to her scorched feet. Thoughtfully, she stared down at the flower pattern. A faint, fleeting smile played about her lips.

... Mitty Walters stood in the limelight, flowers heaped at her feet. The audience continued to shout BRAVO and applaud wildly until Walter Kerr came onto the stage and stood beside her. He motioned for silence. The din ceased abruptly.

"Tonight," commanded Broadway's hypercritic, "let's say it for Mitty Walters! Out of her mind, exquisite, appetizing, alarming, seductive, irresistible, and—from now on—unavoidable!"

Proud and erect, every inch a star, Mitty Walters received the thunderous ovation with tears in her lovely eyes, her heart full of gratitude for Producer David Renshaw who had made all of this possible, her feet gloriously bruised and burdened by dozens and dozens of American Beauty roses...