

ORIGINAL WRITINGS

LITTLE BY LITTLE

Isaiah Beiter, O.P.

There sat a silver cigarette case in a drawer of the small table next to the bed. It bore two sets of fingerprints. Many machines had also touched the case—or one great machine, perhaps—and it had been carried briefly by a gloved hand, from one conveyor to another. Machines do not leave fingerprints.

The silver case also bore three letters: R. A. W. One set of fingerprints belonged to these letters, and the letters belonged to the man in the bed, Robert Walters, still under the thin blankets. He used to look at trees and fields and all sorts of green and living things. Then for a while he could see the yellow buzz in the ceiling. Now he saw nothing, except in sleep. But Robert could hear the beeping machine beside him. Its job was to keep a rhythm, telling his soul to stick around. It had another job, too: to make a loud sound and let his soul know it was time to leave. But Robert's hearing was already starting to fade.

Robert was in third grade. He watched his mother open a little paper pack of white candles. She took out half the candles and set them in a neat circle along the edge of the cake; he was ten years old. There was cheering and a song, and he made a wish and blew and blew as he knew how, but one still burned. His face was

red and he changed his wish. Then his mother blew out the last candle.

Later, he heard Jack's mother ask, "Was that a trick candle?" "It wasn't supposed to be," Mrs. Walters said.

Robert woke up and pressed a button on the side of his bed. Gloved hands came and lifted him up, walking his cold socks across the smooth, plastic floor. Gloved hands brought him back to bed again, and in the dark he was ashamed.

He stood on the high-dive at the Elks for the first time. He wanted to climb down, but they were all watching. The peeling, green spring-board cast him up with a *twung*, and at once he was a galaxy in empty space, turning slowly with two arms outstretched. He looked, and he saw the tops of the cars in the parking lot and the tips of the trees and the roof of the snack stand, and maybe his mother would buy him an ice-cream sandwich once he came back to earth—gravity was already working on that. He held his breath, and in an instant, with nothing between, he was In! And then he came up, gasping.

He lay proud and poolside on the plastic reclining chairs, warm in the sun. He let the tender red light work through his eyelids, and he waited, but not for anything in particular. He was still lying in his wet trunks when the gloved hands came in to clean him.

"I'm sorry," he said, for he was ashamed, but he wished he hadn't said it. A soft voice had come into the room before and taken his hand and chirped: "If you're sorry for your sins you'll be let to live forever," as if what killed everyone in the end was unrepentance. Living forever was about the last thing that Robert wanted.

The gloves' voice sounded like she had just been crying, or as though she wished she had been. He thought of Virginia and

home. He saw the unmade bed and the cluttered little table. He heard the baby screeching and Virginia speaking softly to him. Alan grew quiet, but still whimpered. Virginia paid Robert no mind, and no sound either, except for a “hey.” He had been at the office since eight. Now he was home and weary, and there was no beer in the fridge and no attention left for him, and he was angry. Virginia ate in silence again. Then Robert heard her put Alan to bed.

“Goodnight,” she whispered in the dark.

He was in his wet trunks on the floor. The gloved hands lifted him and set him in a little swimming pool.

“I’m sorry,” he managed, “I tried.”

“Don’t try,” responded the gloves.

Alan was going to be sent to Ashworth Academy. Robert was steel. Alan, thirteen years old, wasn’t keen, and Virginia despised the idea, but Robert knew best. He saw Virginia crying and realized he’d been yelling. “Well, you weren’t listening,” he remarked. He cared about his son. The boy would have the best schooling that his father could buy.

Robert was home again. It used to be only the important companies that took computers, and their contracts were thick. He could see them signing with dark black ink. Today it was all Jacks and Toms, and he was just tired—tired of driving and grinning and compliance.

He heard the door close. Had Virginia been here? He couldn’t remember. He couldn’t remember much anymore. But he could remember Virginia in her green dress, in a white bed with her eyes closed.

The beeping was only getting faster and louder. "I'm sick!" he moaned, and he coughed. Gloved hands were trying to wake him.

"I'm tired, Virginia," he complained. "Would you turn it off?" He was crying. The alarm clock was shouting at him, but Virginia was looking with waiting eyes. "Good morning," she said, and he could see in her face that she had woken long before him.

"Let me sleep. Turn off the lights, Virginia." The beeping quieted and slowed to a whimper.

The cigarette case had never been opened, and there was a small, clean paper package underneath it, with twenty cigarettes inside. Alan had known they would never be smoked. His father would never step outside again. Maybe they would be taken away by gloved hands. But this little white pack had made his father smile for a minute. Robert Walters had kept his smile well-preserved for many years, so it shone then like it had when he saw the candles in a neat circle on his cake.

The machine cut on, cut off. On. Off. Robert didn't hear the On or the Off. He just heard the beeps, one after another, the violent vibrations of a thin membrane in a little cone. There were other beeps beyond the door, keeping other souls around. He heard them between the *click* of opening and the *click-tap* of closing. Most boats died when their onboard motors stopped working. Some died when they ran *smash-bang!* into another boat, or a wall, or anything else. But some sat in a hard garage until their hulls rusted out. Waiting—for what?

He saw Virginia weeping again, and he didn't know why. Her tears were small and quiet and somewhat distant, as if she knew they went unheard. The baby was screaming and wouldn't stop. Robert didn't know how to make him stop. He just wanted

to rest—he should have been asleep a long time ago. He was half-crazy, but strangely far from anger.

“Why are you crying, Virginia? How can I make him stop? Help me!” She looked at him, and his heart walked into the wall. Her hunched shoulders, thin hair, wrinkled forehead—her quivering hands.

It only happened once.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

The beeping stopped. Robert was quiet, holding his breath. The beeping had stopped. He pressed the button. Nothing happened. The water came closer and closer. He called, but he had no breath left. He pressed the button so Virginia would come. “Help me . . . I don’t know how,” he whispered, quiet and still under the thin blankets.

The sound was On. On and fading. No gloves were on her hands.

Alan took the glasses, the golden watch, and the cigarettes with the case. He offered the cigarettes to a nurse passing by. “Oh thanks, but I only smoke Pall Malls,” she replied with a wave. So Alan left the little paper pack in the drawer. He looked at the silver case, putting new fingerprints over his old ones. He explored the initials, carved into the surface by a hundred tiny strokes. He opened the case for the first time, and it was smooth, shining, untouched except by the machines that made it. He closed it again. He put the case in his breast pocket, shut off the yellow light, and slowly stepped outside.

Br. Isaiah Beiter entered the Order of Preachers in 2014. Before joining the Order, he received a bachelors degree in philosophy from the Franciscan University of Steubenville.