

“Ah, yes. The Brooklyn Daily Times,” Mr. Griswold commented, “I know the paper. Total rag. Not worth the cost of the paper it’s printed on.” Walter was about to defend his current employer, but Mr. Griswold rolled right over his objection ...

Hey, Walt



David Woodruff ©2018

Walter climbed up the long marble stairs, clutching the finely worked iron hand railing. Walter had been in many such buildings, especially during his tenure as a reporter for the *Long Island Star*. They always made him feel, uncomfortable. There was a formality about them, a cold cruelty of lawyerly style exceeding the inhumanity of the horrors of he had witnessed during his service as a medical orderly in the Union Army. Climbing up them not only drained the soul but mocked the spirit.

At last, he arrived before an ornate door. The opaque glass had the names, *Park Benjamin, Sr. and Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Publishers* painted on its surface. The door groaned as if offering a warning to the author as Walter opened it. Upon entering, he was greeted at once by a youthful man in the outer office area. He wore an egg-shell white shirt, its fabric stiffened as if pressed with too much starch in a Chinese laundry. His trousers were of the variety which had never seen a tailor's needle but had been made by machine. They fit him about as well as could be expected based on their origins.

"May I take your hat, sir?" The young clerk asked.

Without saying a word, Walter meekly passed his hat to the clerk.

"Mr. Griswold will see you now," the boy explained, pointing the way down the hallway. The hall was slender; hardly wide enough to let even one person pass. One side was blank, but upon the other was a selection of narrow doors all set in a wall where the upper portion was the same milky glass that graced the window in the outer door. The clerk showed Walter to the fourth door down this claustrophobic corridor and waved him in.

Once the door opened, Mr. Griswold jumped to his feet, circling around his desk, he grabbed Walter's hand in a death grip. Shaking his arm vigorously, as if half expecting the arm to be attached to a mannequin and fall to the floor as a result of his violent pumping. Mr. Griswold wore a finely pressed Brooks Brother suit from Saville Row. His cravat was held against his shirt tightly with a ruby stick-pin. He was clean shaven in the style of the lawyers that worked for the banks of Wall Street. His nose was sharp enough so if he laid down in the office, some clerk might mistake it for a nail and start posting messages upon it.

"Walt, Walt," the old publisher beamed, "thrilled to meet you."

He motioned Walter into a seat and returned to his desk chair. He shuffled some papers to one side and looked deeply into Walter's eyes.

"Walt, I like your work, I do" Mr. Griswold started out, "But we're going to have to make some changes."

"Well, I ..." Walter started, but the publisher cut him off as if lecturing a child polishing his shoes.

"You got some questionable stuff in here Walt. Very questionable stuff." He practically scolded his visitor. "Some of what you've got in here is ... well, it's downright obscene. That's what I would call it. One of my reviewers called it ..." He rummaged around the papers on his desk. "Let me find it here, I don't want to misquote him. Ah, here it is. He says that your work is *trashy, profane and obscene and that* ... well, he goes on to call you a pretentious ass, unquote."

"Well, I ..." Walter began but got no further.

“We’re going to have to work on that. Pretentious doesn’t sell Walt,” the publisher continued, “You want your books to sell, don’t you?”

Mr. Griswold waited for a response, but just as Walter opened his mouth, he launched right back into pontificating. “Course you do. Tell me Walt, your books selling? Making a good living, are you?”

“Well,” Walter mumbled, “I’ve had to take a journalism job with the *Daily Times* to make ends meet.” He said sheepishly.

“Ah, yes. The *Brooklyn Daily Times*,” Mr. Griswold commented, “I know the paper. Total rag. Not worth the cost of the paper it’s printed on.” Walter was about to defend his current employer, but Mr. Griswold rolled right over his objection, “You see that’s what I am talking about right there. You’re going to have to rework this stuff if you want to sell a million copies. Clean it up for one.”

“Rework?” Questioned Walter.

“Yes, specifically dumb it down for the general reading public,” Mr. Griswold picked up another piece of paper, stood and circled around the desk. Approaching Walter, he sat down on the corner of his desk and leaned in toward the writer.

“Walt, you use too many adjectives,” Griswold declared with the certainty of a ship’s captain ordering a change in direction. “You know what I’m talking about?”

“Well, I ...” Walter attempted a feeble defense.

“Dilution, Walt, dilution,” The publisher lectured, “If you use too many adjectives you dilute the earlier ones. It’s like pouring milk in your coffee Walt. Do you know what I mean? You can’t have a cup of black coffee if you pour milk into it, now can you?”

“I prefer mine with a bit of cream and sugar,” the author tried to relate in a quiet tone.

“Your work is a little high-handed Walt,” Griswold remarked, “remember 75% of the population of the United States barely got a 5th-grade education. They drink a gallon of whiskey a month. If they’re not dirt farming, they’re sowing buttons on shirts for 25 cents a week until their fingers bleed. They don’t want to read ... let’s see. What was it? Ah, here it is: *Conceived out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism—personifying in unparalleled ways the medieval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, with its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation)—only one of the “wolfish earls” so plenteous in the plays themselves ...* Mr. Griswold took a breath and finished, “no factory worker is going to understand this.”

“Well, I ...” Walter blushing started again.

“No, I tell you it’s just not going to sell copy, Walt.” Mr. Griswold continued, “No factory worker is going to lay down his hard earned money on the phrase ... now, where is it?” He looked determinedly at the paper in his hand, “Ah, here it is ‘ultraism and officiousness.’ Even I don’t know what that means Walt. And I’ve been around the block a few times I can tell you. Do *you* know what that means?”

“It refers to the ...” Walter started.

“No, of course, you don’t,” the publisher cut him off and finished the sentence for him. “We going to have to clean this up.”

Walter sat frozen in his chair, stunned.

“Now you go see my man out there in the outer office, he’ll help you clean this stuff up, Walt. You’ve got some real problems here Walt, yup, real problems. Mr. Smyth, he’s the man you’ve got to talk to, he’ll help you clean up some of the rough spots.”

Walter held his finger up to interject, like a student trying to ask a question of a truculent professor, but Griswold ignored him and continued on.

“Yes sir,” the publisher announced, “You’ll have to dumb this down for your audience so we can sell it to the masses.” He pulled Walter out of his seat and led the astonished author toward the door. “Oh,” Griswold stopped him at the door, “and it’s toward not towards ... have Smyth fix that for you on your way out.”

The old publisher grabbed Walter’s hand and gave it another vigorous pump as he inched him toward the door, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Whitman ... very nice to meet you.”