

## THE FILMMAKER AND THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

*Peter Obourn*

*New idea:* It's based on this guy, Walter, in my building. I don't know his last name. He works at night—a sweet guy. I bet I can get him to do it, because I think he has sort of a crush on me.

*Opening scene:* Night—empty city street—zoom in on illuminated digital clock, orange numbers, reading 4:59 a.m. (I know clocks usually don't say "a.m." or "p.m." but *this* one does). As we watch, it flashes to "5:00 a.m." A bus pulls up to a bus stop in front of the clock, and a man gets on—Walter—he carries an old-fashioned metal lunch pail. As we ride the bus with Walter, we watch the night city go by slowly. After work, he is the only passenger, and the bus pretty much the only traffic. We pass another bus going the same direction, and Walter sees himself reflected in the window of that empty bus. The buses are side-by-side. His reflection pulls ahead and drops behind as if there were another Walter travelling in the night. The only other living thing

we see is a solitary dog—maybe a stray, certainly a mongrel. We close in to note there is no collar. This dog is free—independent, outside the system, yet somehow tentative and cautious. Somehow, all this has to be conveyed in a few seconds. Maybe it's in the dog's eyes. It runs—long legs, tawny under the streetlights—alongside the bus. As the bus speeds up, the camera, now in the bus, stays on the running dog, who fades away, not able to catch up. The bus stops at the Ambassador Apartments. We watch Walter from the bus as he enters the dimly lit lobby. *Blackout.*

## §

“You're quiet this morning,” said the bus driver, on the ride home at 5:00 a.m.

I was thinking about the woman in my apartment building, wondering when I would see her again. I hadn't seen her in two weeks—fifteen days actually. I see her when I come home from work, just getting up, coming down for her morning paper. Sometimes we chat, so I know she is some kind of filmmaker, so I thought maybe she was somewhere doing that. Her name is Mary.

We rode—only the two of us, the driver and me—in silence while the bus stopped twice and started again. “How come you stop at every stop?” I said, “At this time of night, no one gets on or off.”

“You do,” he said, then smiled, shook his head, and gave me a look in the rearview mirror. “You know I have a schedule. You know I have to stop at every stop.” It was a stupid question and I shouldn’t have asked it.

Along the deserted street, a dog was studying a hydrant—maybe a stray, certainly a mongrel. The bus stopped. The dog and I looked at each other, and the bus started again.

I was so out of practice in the game of conversation. I liked to talk to Mary, but I always struggled as to what to say to her. I guess I connect better with animals than people. I said to the driver, “I like to watch the city go by.”

“Depends on your point of view,” he said. “When you sit where I sit, it’s not so much going by. It comes right at you.” Then I looked forward and saw what the driver saw. The city was coming right at us.

As I got off at my stop, the dog trotted up, panting—a gentle creature. I reach out a hand. The dog barked, backed away, then followed me as I walked home.

*Second scene:* Night again on the city streets.

*Zoom in on dog:* Same dog from first scene—the dog follows Walter as he walks, but not too close. The dog keeps a cautious distance. Walter stops at an all-night coffee shop. The dog waits or hangs around, and is still there when Walter leaves the coffee shop. Walter holds a Styrofoam cup with a cover, and steam rises from the little hole in the top. Walter tears a piece from his doughnut and tosses it to the dog, who desperately snaps it up and swallows in a second.

*Production note:* the dog of course, is Walter—a stray, a lost soul—a creature of the night—a little afraid, shy. One senses he needs people but holds himself apart. Human relations are hard for him. He is gentle, approachable, but when one approaches he backs away.

Tomorrow I'm home and determined to talk to Walter.

## §

As I got off the bus, I went up to my apartment and turned on the TV. I had taped *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* off TCM. The movie ended, but I had to stay awake, in case Mary was back. At seven-thirty I went down to the lobby, and there she was, in her robe and fuzzy slippers.

“Hi, Walter,” she said as she picked up her newspaper. “Long time no see. How are you?” She smiled. “Work last night?”

I nodded. “I’m good,” I said. “And you?”

“Just got back,” she said. She didn’t say where she’d been, but she was back. She asked me if she could ask a personal question. I nodded. “What do you do—your job, I mean?”

I looked at her, smiling at me. She was actually interested in what I do. “I’m a night watchman,” I said.

“I was hoping for that answer, Walter,” she said.

I told her I sat in the guardroom of the office building all night watching twenty-six television screens connected to twenty-six cameras, and in all the time I had worked there, I never saw anything—never saw anyone enter or leave—nothing, ever, on any of the television screens.

She asked me how I could stand to do that. I thought a moment and then said, “Well, actually, it’s kind of soothing.”

She smiled again and then she said, “Walter, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about. A project. A film project.” Then she asked me about the city at night, and we talked for almost ten minutes. Mary went up to get dressed to go to work, and I tried not to think of her getting dressed.

## §

*Production notes:* Walter has committed to the project.

*Notes on Walter:* Quiet, nice—night watchman—on that thin blue line that separates our world from the dark world. I want the film to walk that line. He’s a bit of a mystery—assumed he was some sort of working-class background, something like that, but this morning he asked me if I understood Stonehenge. And he told me he taped *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. It’s one of his favorite movies, he said, and he said “movies” not “films.” He said it was soothing to sit and watch twenty-six television screens and never see anything happen. He doesn’t talk much, but he used the word “detritus.” “When you work at night, you are part of the world’s detritus,” is his quote. Intriguing. Should I have him say this in the film? Yes.

## §

She is making a movie of the city at night. A *film noir*. Dark lonely streets. Streetlights. The nocturnal world—a movie of my world. Maybe I’ll find out who I really am.

## §

*Scene notes:* First scene has been shot—about a minute long, after cuts. The city at night. Walter walks through the streets at 5:00 a.m., and I walk

with the camera—behind him or beside him, sometimes I walk backward, facing him. There is sound—sounds of the few cars that go by, a couple distant sirens, but mostly, quiet, empty streets. We walk slowly. It's cold enough to see his breath under the streetlights, which gives the scene a noir look. Sometimes you can see my breath in the frame, which adds atmosphere, makes the air itself palpable, but you never see me. I film in color but it will look like black and white because of the lack of natural light. Some mystery. Some tension. Where is he going? We never find out. *Blackout*.

*Production note:* Haven't found a dog yet. Walter says there's one around here. After the shoot, after dawn, we were looking for the dog, and Walter asked to take my picture. Made me pose. He wanted the dawn's early light, he said, not behind him, or backlit, but off to the side. Slanted light he called it. He said he liked my scarf.

## §

I now have two pictures of her, one in front of a brick wall and one in front of a stone wall. Her hair is the color of some of the seams and facets of the stone—the color of wheat—silky in texture. Her cheeks—her skin—from pink to cream, the colors of the brick if you added light and smoothness and

life. She always wears a scarf that seems carefully chosen. “You seem content—happy in your life,” she said to me.

“Does that surprise you?” I said.

§

*Scene:* Last night we shot again—as we walked through the park—my voice says, “Tell me about the night.” Walter walked without talking, through the park without my responding. There is silence for thirty seconds—a long time in a documentary—as if time has stopped while Walter keeps moving—outside of time—as if the night in the city is outside of time. Then he speaks, “I can remember as a boy being afraid in my bedroom—afraid of the shadows. As I grew older, I remember some nights I would walk home in the dark through the streets of my town. For some reason those walks are vivid in my memory. I cannot picture my school or my friends, but I can picture the streets I walked at night—up Walnut Street, down Main Street, across the park by the war memorial—and then around the corner. I could see the lights at my house and, as I tell you this, I can feel it again—see it again, how glad I was to see those lights. Sometimes, in bed I relive this memory, and it makes me feel the quiet. I think that’s when I usually fall asleep, just when I see the lights of my house.” His voice is soft, natural, like talking to a friend, just right.

## §

Mary and I had several filming times together—all at night. She planned them and told me when they would be. That was a good time—before the shoot. I liked to think about being with her—anticipating—thinking of things I was going to say to her.

One night when we were filming, I showed her the all-night coffee shop I go to. The stray dog that I see now and then was there, and Mary was excited and started filming the dog. We tossed it doughnuts. Mary laughed. It was fun.

I wanted to go back there with her, to ask her to go back and have coffee after we were finished shooting. But when I was with her, I was uncomfortable—nervous the whole time. I didn't know what to say. The wonderful thoughts in my head stayed there or would probably come out like nonsense. I couldn't even say, *Let's have coffee*.

## §

*Production notes:* Found my dog. Walter took me to an all-night coffee shop and there it was. Not what I had hoped for, but it was a stray and it works. The dog knows Walter, which is good because it enabled us to get some shots of the dog following his bus. Just as I imagined it. We feed the dog doughnuts, and now it waits for us at the coffee shop.

One more scene to shoot.

§

She came to my bedroom this morning and filmed me going to bed at seven in the morning. As I lay in bed when she finished, she sat next to the bed on the chair where I arrange my clothes for the next day. I wore pajamas for the scene, even though I sleep in my underwear. It was dark in the room, but she did not pull up the shade.

She told me that was the last scene. We were finished shooting. The project was over. "Tell me about yourself, Walter," she said. "Where you from? How did you come to be here?"

There's not much to tell, so I said, "I have no history. I'm just here now."

She looked at me and smiled. "I see," she said. "There is no backstory. There's just Walter in the here and now. Is that right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Okay," she said. "I'll leave you to sleep now, Walter. Do I say good night or good morning?" She smiled and left me, and I closed my eyes and thought of myself walking down Main Street, turning the corner and seeing the lights of my house.

§

*Scene:* Walter's apartment. The early light of dawn flows in the window. The apartment is neat—everything in its place—a couch, one upholstered chair, and only a few books, evenly piled on a coffee table, —kitchenette—table with two chairs. It's clean too. His bedroom has a single bed, a nightstand, one wooden chair. Apparently, his favorite color is brown, maybe his only color. The bathroom is tiny—the bed made neatly made—tight corners. Walter goes the window and pulls the shade down and the beige curtains together. A shot of a straight wooden chair in the bedroom with his clothes precisely arranged for his day, which begins at 1:00 p.m. The room darkens. He pulls back the covers, climbs into bed, and pulls the covers over his head. *Blackout.*

## §

She was gone for thirteen days, and when she came back, there was no more filming. One morning I asked how our movie was coming, and she said come on up and see for yourself. Her apartment was filled with clutter—books and magazines everywhere, unwashed dishes, about a thousand pillows, all over the place, most everything was red or orange, bright colors. Her bedroom door was open, and her bed was a mess. She moved some things off the couch so I could sit facing the TV screen. She fiddled, turned the lights down. There

was a bedside light on in her bedroom, and a silk nightgown or robe tossed on the bed. Lavender.

“This is the premiere, so we have to have wine,” she said. She poured me a glass of wine and sat next to me with her own wine and, at 7:00 a.m., we watched the film of me at night.

“So, what do you think?” she said. “Walter in the here and now.”

I told her it was very good. “It’s part of me,” I said.

“There’s more?”

I nodded.

“Of course,” she said.

It was good—sensitive—all about the night. The interesting thing is that the star of the film is the stray dog that hangs around the coffee shop. Mary is there, too, in the movie, but we never see her except maybe her shadow and a couple times we hear her voice. (She says that the dog was her idea.) The dog sort of makes me think of her—aloof. It won’t come near me. I mean, it comes near but not too close. I think maybe she sees the dog as herself. That’s the kind of thing filmmakers do, and it gives the film meaning and depth. She said she thought I looked content with myself, which maybe I am, so I wonder if

she is projecting onto the dog. I wonder if she's not happy with herself. She doesn't seem sad, but she is alone. She lives alone.

## §

*Last Scene:* I don't like it. Walter's day ends at dawn. So what? I don't like the ending where he goes to bed at dawn. I don't think that's who he is. But who is he? The part of his day when he gets up in the afternoon is the beginning and it's not interesting. He leads sort of a backward life or reverse life, but so do a lot of people. That's not a story. That's not a documentary. Not the way I see it. The viewer must come away with an idea of who Walter is—a stray, a lonely guy, but not just a lonely guy—something more. I don't know. Something. What I have is good, but I need one more scene, at least.

## §

I didn't see her again for several days. It was getting closer to the day when the sun came up directly at the end of the street. Our street runs directly east to west. We are four blocks from the river, so it's almost like looking toward the end of a long tunnel. The sunrise shifts a little bit north or south every day, and the next day I knew was the day when the sun would come up directly from the end of the street. If it was a sunny day, it would be spectacular.

Mary was in the lobby when I came down that morning to see the sunrise. She looked up at me. I told her I wasn't going to bed quite yet; I had to see the sunrise. "It's going to be quite something today, I hope," I said.

"Okay. I'll bring my camera."

I walked out into the gray pre-dawn.

In five minutes she joined me. "You seen my dog around?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, "he's around." I pointed but not at the dog. I could see an orange glow four blocks away. The sun was just rising over the East River, like a huge orange coming over the horizon. Then, in a matter of seconds, the street was filled with blinding brightness as a shaft of light shot down the street. The pavement turned from gray to golden, as the sun filled the space at the end of the street like fire.

"Wow!" was all she could say. For two full minutes we stood in the soft explosion of sunshine and then, just as suddenly, the rays were blocked by awnings, street signs, and traffic lights.

She turned. "You knew that was going to happen," she said. "How did you know? Is that why you asked me if I understood Stonehenge?"

"Did you catch it," I said, "with the camera?"

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably not. You know, shooting into the sun.”

She paused, looking down at the camera in her hand. “I need that on film. This has to be in there. This is the missing final scene. I suppose I’ll have to wait a year.”

“For this street, you would,” I said, “but sunrise moves every day or so from block to block.”

We walked together into the apartment lobby. She was about to pick up her newspaper when she said, “Yeah,” looking at me as if I were a genius, “I bet it does.” She smiled. “You say you have no backstory. I like that. At least I think I do. I mean, you haven’t been in jail or anything like that, have you? I know you haven’t.”

“No, I haven’t,” I said. “You?”

She smiled. “Well, that’s sort of a long story. Want to hear it?”

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s go have coffee.”

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