

WHY'S WALLY

“ *I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world.*

— ALBERT CAMUS, *THE STRANGER*

THE SHIRT LAY on his bed. It mocked him. It compelled him to wear it, but he didn't want to. He hated the shirt. That and the stupid hat.

What if he didn't put them on? That was always an option, surely? He had some other clothes, didn't he? He went to his closet and was mildly horrified to see that it was stuffed with striped shirts, red and white bobble hats, and an assortment of jeans. How had his life come to this? He made his way to the back of the closet, and could find nothing but red and white stripes. Red and white. The jeans were all blue, the same style. Not even brand name.

Wally stared at the bedroom, morning sunshine angling in through the venetian blinds. The light reminded him of

Algeria, dry as the pages of a book. Wally had just finished reading *The Stranger* and it haunted him. He'd been to Algeria, of course. He'd been everywhere.

He had met Camus, too, during his time-traveling days. In fact, Wally had met him while the French philosopher was authoring his other famous book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

He remembered the conversation they'd had over cheap wine in a crowded Parisian bistro. "For me, chér Charlie, the only serious philosophical question is this: Is life worth living? The world is irrational, and yet... yet we yearn for happiness and the rational. Why? It is absurd. There is no sense to it. This is the heart of my thinking, Charlie. The absurd is born of our human need for reason and the unreasonable silence of the world."

"But don't you feel as though you're being watched?" he'd asked, not bothering to correct Camus about his name. It didn't matter where he went, everyone seemed to use the local version of Wally. In America he was "Waldo," in German "Walter," in France, "Charlie." Better not to make waves, to blend in. His instinct was to hide in plain sight, so he rolled with it, always.

"Watched?"

"Yes. Don't you feel like you're constantly being watched?"

"God?" Camus had said, a look of amusement on his face.

"God? What? No. People. That people are looking for you?"

"You mean the Nazis?"

"They could be Nazis, but not just the Nazis. I don't know," Wally had said. "They're looking for me, though. I'm not making that up. It's like they're searching for me."

Camus had thought about that for a moment, and smiled

warmly. He had grasped Wally's right bicep, squeezing it like an old friend. "Madness has a kind of freedom in it, though you are in a prison, nonetheless. It is another duality."

And then the crowd had started to thin, and it was time for Wally to go. When he was not absolutely alone, he couldn't be comfortable unless there was a crowd. He only felt safe surrounded by hundreds, or thousands. It was probably why he never worked things out with Wilma. Or her identical twin, Wenda, for that matter. Wally remembered the three of them together, that one night. But three, as it turned out, wasn't a big enough crowd for it to work.

Was Camus right? Was it possible there was nobody watching him? If that was so, then there would be a kind of freedom he'd never felt. He wouldn't have to be so circumspect. He wouldn't have to spend all his time trying to blend in with the crowd. That could get challenging, he'd found, especially in more exotic locales, times, realities... Wally wondered what Camus would have made of his stint in a dimension known as Clown Town. The place had been nightmarish. Apocalyptic. Everyone was a clown, and everything was shaped like a clown. Camus would probably have enjoyed the delicious absurdity of the place and time. It was one of the worst scenes Wally had ever found himself in, but if he had been wearing something other than his stripped shirt and bobble hat, those clowns would have ended up juggling with his skull. He knew it.

So the shirt had saved him on occasion, but it was, as Camus hinted, a prison. Like Meursault, the main character in *The Stranger*, Wally faced the rest of his life behind bars. Though unlike Meursault, his life could be very long.

Wally realized that he was still standing in his closet, naked except for his underwear and socks. Red and white

striped boxers and knee-highs, of course. His dresser was filled with them.

He walked to the window and opened the blinds. Outside he could see his yard. It was spring again, though he couldn't really tell you how long it had been spring. The trees were in bloom and bright blue forget-me-nots dotted the lush green grass. He could see Woof's tail wagging strongly enough to shake his whole back end, his front obscured by a bush. The dog had probably found a rabbit or some other creature, helpless, trying to hide.

Wally looked at the shirt and all his other clothes on the bed. When he put them on, and picked up the walking stick, he would be whisked away, as he always was. He looked out at the yard, dappled in the May sunshine, and realized that he'd never been in it. He'd never felt the sod between his toes.

He took off his socks. Slipped out of his boxers, and tried to open the window. It was frozen shut. He smashed the panes of glass with his fist. Naked, he climbed through, cutting himself in the process. Red stripes of blood wound down his pasty white legs, but Wally didn't care.

The grass felt wonderful.