

## *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (Excerpts)

Written in 1939 by James Thurber

"We're going through!" The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down over one cold gray eye.

"We can't make it, sir. It's a hurricane, if you ask me."

"I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!" The pounding of the cylinders increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" he shouted.

The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of anything!"

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"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?"

"Hmm?" said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd. "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty." Walter Mitty drove on toward Waterbury in silence, the roaring of the hydroplane through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying fading in the remote, intimate airways of his mind. "You're tensed up again," said Mrs. Mitty. "It's one of your days. I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over."

Walter Mitty stopped the car in front of the building where his wife went to have her hair done. "Don't forget to pick up my shoes from the repair shop," she yelled. She looked at Walter and sighed. "You're not a young man any longer," she said. "Why don't you wear your gloves? Have you lost your gloves?" Walter Mitty reached in a pocket and brought out the gloves. He put them on, but after she had turned and gone into the building, he took them off again. He drove around the streets aimlessly for a time, and then he drove past the hospital on his way to the parking lot.

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In the operating room there were whispered introductions: "Dr. Remington, Dr. Mitty. Dr. Pritchard, Dr. Mitty."

"I've read your book on streptothricosis," said Pritchard, shaking hands with Walter. "A brilliant performance, sir."

"Thank you," said Walter Mitty. A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table, with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go pocketa-pocketa-pocketa.

"The new anaesthetizer is giving way!" shouted a nurse. "There is no one in the East who knows how to fix it!"

"Quiet!" said Mitty, in a low, cool voice. He sprang to the machine, which was now going pocketa-pocketa-queep-pocketa-queep. He began fingering delicately a row of glistening dials. "Give me a fountain pen!" he snapped. Someone handed him a fountain pen. He pulled a faulty piston out of the machine and inserted the pen in its place. "That will hold for ten minutes," he said, "get on with the operation."

Another nurse hurried over and whispered to Pritchard, and Mitty saw the man turn pale. "If you would take over, Mitty?"

Mitty looked at the uncertain faces of the two great doctors. "If you wish," he said. They slipped a white gown on him; he adjusted a mask and drew on thin rubbery gloves; nurses handed him shining

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"Back it up, Mister! Look out for that car!" Walter Mitty jammed on the brakes. "Wrong lane!" said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely. He began cautiously to back out of the lane marked "Exit Only," and he parked his car. He had arrived at the shoe repair store.

When he came out into the street again, with the shoes in a box under his arm, Walter Mitty began to wonder what the other thing was his wife had told him to get. She had told him, twice, before they set out from their house for Waterbury. Kleenex, he thought, Squibb's, razor blades? No. Toothpaste, toothbrush? He gave it up. But she would remember it. "Where's the what's-its-name?" she would ask. "Don't tell me you forgot the what's-its-name." A newsboy across the street walked by shouting something about the Waterbury trial.

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"Perhaps this will refresh your memory." The District Attorney suddenly thrust a heavy automatic gun at the quiet figure on the witness stand. "Have you ever seen this before?"

Walter Mitty took the gun and examined it expertly. "This is my Webley-Vickers 50.80," he said calmly. An excited buzz ran around the courtroom. The Judge called for order.

"You are a good shot with any sort of firearms, I believe?" said the District Attorney.

"Objection!" shouted Mitty's attorney. "We have shown that the defendant could not have fired the shot. He wore his right arm in a sling on the night of the fourteenth of July."

Walter Mitty raised his hand briefly and the bickering attorneys were stilled. "With any known make of gun," he said evenly, "I could have killed Gregory Fitzhurst at three hundred feet with my left hand." Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom.

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Walter Mitty hurried on. He went into a pet store. "I want some biscuits for small, young dogs," he said to the clerk. "Any special brand, sir?" *The greatest pistol shot in the world*, he thought a moment. "It says 'Puppies Bark for It' on the box," said Walter Mitty.

His wife would be done at the hairdresser's in fifteen minutes. He returned to the hair salon, found a big leather chair in the lobby, and he put the shoes and the puppy biscuits on the floor beside it. He sank down into the chair. A newspaper on the table next to him read: "Can Germany Conquer the World Through the Air?" Walter Mitty looked at the pictures of bombing planes and of ruined streets.

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Captain Mitty looked up and said, "I'll fly alone."

"But you can't, sir," said the sergeant anxiously. "It takes two men to handle that bomber."

"Somebody's got to get that ammunition dump," said Mitty. "I'm going over. Spot of brandy?" He poured a drink for the sergeant and one for himself. War thundered and whined around the dugout and battered at the door. "We only live once, Sergeant," said Mitty, with his faint, fleeting smile. The pounding of the cannon increased. Walter Mitty walked to the door of the dugout humming "Auprès de Ma Blonde." He turned and waved to the sergeant. "Cheerio!" he said.

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Something struck his shoulder. "I've been looking all over this building for you," said Mrs. Mitty. "Why do you have to hide in this old chair? How did you expect me to find you?"

"Things close in," said Walter Mitty vaguely.

"What?" Mrs. Mitty said. "Did you get the puppy biscuits? What's in that box?"

"Shoes," said Mitty.

They went out through the revolving doors that made a whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, "Wait here for me. I forgot something. I'll be back in a minute." She was more than a minute. Walter Mitty lit a cigarette. It began to rain. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore, smoking.

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He put his shoulders back and his heels together. "To hell with the handkerchief," said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and flicked it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the undefeated, inscrutable to the last.