

Uncle Walter's Year  
Tales From Walter Elliott  
Episode 1-January  
by Daniel Williams

MUSIC: Theme

F/X: Footsteps and door opening.

WALTER: Hey-come on up. How you doing? Take a seat. I know it's cold, but the burner is on, and that fancy coat of yours sure looks warm enough. (Rubbing hands) Urhhh- January is brutal, you know-with Christmas gone, and all the bright lights shoved in dark boxes, while the wind sweeps across the ice and circles the house, waiting to slap my face every time I stick my head out the door.

WALTER: It's always bitterly cold in January, here, close to the lake. That wind whips in from the arctic, lashing at every creature in its path. 'But the snow is soooo pretty,' my mother used to say. Sure, it looked ok, I guess, for half a day. But the excitement soon wore off after the first snowball fight caused my woolen gloves to turn my fingers to numb agony. After that, the empty landscape held nothing for me. And the cold ice scared me.

WALTER: It scares me still. Especially if I pass a pond or small lake frosted with ice. I'm not talking about the vast sheets of ice on Lake Huron that slow down the freighters and trap fishermen in their boats; I'm talking about the type of ice that makes you want to try and break it with stones and rocks; the type of ice that dares you to test its thickness with your steps; the type of ice that pressures you to go get your skates.

WALTER: I've not skated since I was a kid.

WALTER: I must have been ten, maybe eleven. It was at the turn of the decade, the sixties moving into the seventies, back when there were no mild winters.  
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WALTER: Each one was as cold as the last, with temperatures so low that icicles plumed up your nose before you'd even shoveled three yards of snow down the front path.

WALTER: It was on such a cold day that Annie called on my sister. Annie lived a quarter mile down the road. She was the same age as my sister, two and a half years older than me, though Annie went to a different school to us for some reason we never knew of. Her family had moved up two years earlier from the big town, Huron City. Well, it was big for us, and Annie had the swagger that town-folk had.

WALTER: She was athletic, confident, with hair the color of burnt sugar, raspberry freckles, and eyes bluer than the lake in summer. If I'd been a bit older, I might have actually known what my feelings for her were.

WALTER: She was magnificent. She climbed trees faster than anyone, even my brother, who was two and half years older again. Fearless, she would swim in the great lake through all the seasons, track raccoons in the woods, and no one could keep up with her when we all ran through Old Bartholomew's bean field.

WALTER: On this day, she'd turned up with the winter sun glistening with excitement in her eyes, and over her shoulder, held by red, faded laces, hung a pair of old Canadian maple ice skates. "Hey, Jessie" she said to my sister- who was really called Jackie- but Annie called people the names she chose for them- "Hey Jessie, get ya skates-the ice is waiting for us."

WALTER: Jackie didn't need asking twice. She ran inside leaving me staring at Annie. "You can come too, Wally," she said. I liked how she called me Wally. Everyone else used Walt, or Walter. It made my cheeks feel warm, even through the cold.

WALTER: I didn't have skates of my own, so I grabbed Henry's, my brother's, even though they were too big and made blisters like bubble gun bubbles on each heel.

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WALTER: "Where we going?" Said Jackie as we headed down the track that ran north-west from our house. We knew every creek, pond and river within biking distance from our home. Every field, wood, hill and meadow was our kingdom back when being outside was preferable to anything as dull as being indoors with the folks.

WALTER: "Let's go to Decker's Mill, " Annie said. Me and my sister looked at each other, but said nothing. "What's that look for? Said Annie, "you know it?"

WALTER: "No one goes to Decker's Mill," I said. "That's what I heard," replied Annie. "No one goes there, so we won't have to worry about it being crowded."

WALTER: I stopped, even though I didn't want to be left behind. Decker's Mill lay abandoned, some mile and a half from nowhere. It used to be a gristmill, but no one from my family had any memory of it turning.

WALTER: "Keep up Wally," said Annie, and my sister just sighed. As we walked, I could feel my stomach swirling. I wanted to speak, but I didn't want the adventure to be over, plus, being the youngest kid, I was used to no one listening to me. I'd gotten into the habit of staying quiet, even when I was right, to save the embarrassment of being ignored.

WALTER: I kept quiet as long as I could, until I spoke without knowing it. "Let's go somewhere else, Swanson's Pond, or Grandma's pool-even the Black creek will have ice on it-and it's not deep!"

WALTER: "You don't have to come," said my sister. But I did, I did have to come-we were with Annie! "It's not a good place," I said.

WALTER: Me and my brother had visited the mill three summers back. He'd heard from a friend that it used to be good for swimming, though no one went their anymore. I could tell why. The water was black as tar. You couldn't gauge it's depth as it reflected so little light.

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- WALTER: 'That things deeper than than Mr Harrison's giant silo," my brother had said as we'd tried to peer in. The I saw something moving down there, and I stood stiff, as if it were watching me back.
- WALTER: I told my dad I thought I'd seen something not right there, and Dad then said something about 'Indian burial grounds', but my Dad said that about everywhere we went, to try and keep us from straying too far. There must have been some Native American burial grounds around here somewhere, but my Dad would be the last person to know where they were. And I didn't need any tale to keep me from going back.
- WALTER: "What do you mean it ain't a good place?" Annie said, snapping me from my thoughts. "I.. .I don't know, " I said trying to think of a neat argument back at her. "It just ain't a good place. That's all"
- WALTER: Annie bent down a little, so her face was level mine. "Decker's Mill will have the best ice," she said, "And no one goes there to scuff it up-it will be perfect, like it had been frozen, just for us." And she winked at me.
- WALTER: I walked beside Annie, listening to her talk about a sturgeon she had seen while swimming in the summer. "So beautiful-it looked so old like it had been in the lake a million years." She said. "And it was as big as an alligator!" "Weren't you scared?" said my sister, and no one bothered to answer her question which would have been seen as rhetorical if any of us had known what that meant back then, and like that question, I refrained from any more suggestions about skating elsewhere lest they were treated with the same rhetorical silence, and anyway, I didn't want them to go without me.
- WALTER: We stopped at a junction where the dirt road turned even dirtier, and I realized Annie didn't know the way. I knew my sister sure as hell didn't and I could pretend I forgot and we could go to Swanson's Pond after all.

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WALTER: But Annie was waiting, not stopping, and we were joined by more kids carrying skates. There were the twins, Diana and Davey, Bony Tony, and Francesca, the only kid we knew whose family wasn't from our state. I kicked the frozen turf. Bony Tony would know the way to Decker's Mill.

WALTER: They'd heard that Annie was going skating and didn't want to miss The fun. I'm sure if we'd been able to connect with friends as instantly as kids do now, near fifty would have been there, because, well, because it was Annie, not that I think Annie would have bothered with phones herself.

WALTER: I knew we were getting close to our destination when the trees started to block out the light, even though their branches were bare. The twiggy skeletons entwined to keep us travelers on the path, a path that lead us to half a gate post that was all that remained of the entrance to Decker's Mill.

WALTER: "I reckon we can still get to Swanson's lake" I found myself saying. "What you saying?" Said Davey. "Wally here thinks Decker's Mill ain't right," said Annie. "I don't reckon Walter's right," said Diana, who everyone called Dee-dee. "Leave him be," said Annie.

WALTER: Davey and Bony Tony raced ahead to get there first. Annie waited, counted to five. "Only fair to give them a head start," she said before tearing after them.

WALTER: By the time we'd caught up with the others, they were already getting their skates on. The ice did look perfect, just as Annie had said. White, smooth, with an untouched carpet of white velvet snow. Perfect; except for an area right in the middle the size of that circle they have at the center of a basketball court. This circle had no snow. It was bare, black, ice.

WALTER: I didn't want to put my skates on. Maybe if I kept by the edge, they would somehow understand what I knew, what I had seen beneath the ice back  
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WALTER: in that summer. Only after Annie kept yelling at me to come did I find myself out on the pond, spending the first twenty minutes picking myself up off the ice while the others moved around with varying degrees of success and grace. Everybody avoided the patch of bare ice in the middle.

WALTER: "Come on Walt," Bony Tony would say as he picked me up for the fourth or fifth time. "You gotta bend ya knees, trust yourself. Watch Annie." And we did, we did watch her, but then I'd been doing nothing much else since we'd got there.

WALTER: She moved across the ice as if the skates were part of her. It was like watching a swallow race across the sky, with nothing to stop her changing shape or direction as she danced and moved as free and easy as dreaming.

WALTER: It was one time while I was trying to get back to my feet after folding like a new born foal again, that I felt a strong arm hook in my elbow and sweep me upright. "Here Wally; don't be afraid."

WALTER: I know it was my feet in Henry's skates, as I knew it was my limbs that were moving, but all the while we skated, I was just an extension of Annie's world. She was stronger than I'd imagined, and so, so sure, so certain in each muscle she moved. In what I wished had been for ever, I moved across the ice with Annie feeling like I was connected to the whole of creation, and that nothing, nothing could ever, ever be hard or difficult again. She led me across the pond, moving in and out of the others like they were shadows. We etched petals with our blades as if the pond had been just as she'd promised me it would be, that it had been frozen- just for us.

WALTER: "Race you Annie!" said Davey breaking my reverie like a punch in the guts. I crashed to the ice as Annie took up the challenge and sulking, I watched as Annie beat them all, one by one. Only my sister came close to her, and that, I suspect, was because Annie let her, being she liked my sister so much.

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- WALTER: Eventually we all stopped to take a breath. Francesca had brought food, these little Italian buns with saffron and fennel that lasted less than a minute. I took one bite. My stomach could take no more such as it's churning at being at the Mill. No one had water. Back then you could survive without being permanently hydrated, apparently.
- WALTER: It was too cold to rest for long, and Dee-Dee was the first to get back on the ice, making for the center, getting closer to the dark ice.
- WALTER: "Dee-dee! Stop!" I shouted "It's dangerous there!" "Stop worrying," said Davey and we all skated toward Dee-dee and ended in a horseshoe shaped group around the center of the circle of bare ice.
- WALTER: I was opposite Annie and could see her staring into the dark pond. I didn't dare look down. I was scared it would draw me in, down into its silo depth, down into the cold black tar where something was waiting. But even I couldn't look away for ever when the talk started.
- WALTER: "Looks frozen," said Davey, "just not as much as the rest of the pond." "I wonder how thick it is?" said Di-Di as she took a step closer.
- WALTER: "No," I shouted. The other's started to laugh. "Jackie, did you have to bring him," said Davey. My sister said nothing. "I brought him," said Annie, which stopped Davey from saying any more. Dee-dee stepped back and said "You go Francesca, your the lightest." Francesca looked around the group and when no one spoke, she tip toed forward on the edges of her skate with my sister holding on to the hood of her coat.
- WALTER: The ice creaked. Francesca stoped. She took another step, and it creaked some more. "It's holding up," said Davey, and then Bony Tony broke wind which set off everyone laughing-except me.
- WALTER: "I bet you could jump it, Annie," said Dee-dee, "jump the black ice circle."

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WALTER: "Oh no-it's way too far," I said. But no one wanted to hear me. "Hey-That's easy for Annie, " said Davey. "Annie could do the olympics, I'm sure. You gonna do olympics when you go college Annie?"

WALTER: "Who said I'm gonna go college?" Said Annie. "Don't need to go college to go olympics. Don't need to go to college for nothing." "You gonna jump or what?" Said Dee-dee.

WALTER: Annie got up and circled around all of us and ended back where she started. She smiled. "Of course I am," she said.

WALTER: As a murmur spread through the group, I went up to Annie as she tightened her laces. "Don't do it Annie," I said. "I'll be fine," she replied. As she stood, I put my hand on her jacker collar and gripped hard. "Hey now Wally, what you doing," she said, looking at me. I could see my reflection in those eyes that were now light blue from the reflection of the snow. "Don't jump," I said. I felt my voice choking. "Please don't jump."

WALTER: "Now don't you worry, " said Annie, as she tried to prize my fingers off. I spoke as tears tried to leak out. "You do this jump Annie, and I'll go jump with you, and I won't make it across that black ice." She let go my fingers. "Now you ain't gonna stop me jumping Wally, are you now? I'd hate for this to be the last time I came skating with you just 'cause you're a little worried about me. I got people waiting-now go join the audience."

WALTER: I let go of her collar.

WALTER: Annie got Bony Tony to make a mark in the snow as close to either side of the black circle. This gave her a start and finish point which would show her success to the watching, and adoring, crowd.

WALTER: She skated twice around the edge of the pond and practiced jumps as she went.

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WALTER: She got so fast that when she jumped straight up, her motion took her forward to a spot that looked so much further than the width of that black circle. But I don't think I'd have felt any less sick if I'd seen her jump the length of a football field.

WALTER: I stood next to my sister while everyone except me started to clap in unison. "Clap your hands Walter," said David, slapping me in the back, and my hands joined in, out of time with the others. Annie performed a couple more laps of the pond, treating us to skips and jumps, and then a pirouette on one leg, that even to this day, is still the most beautiful thing I have seen in my whole life.

WALTER: As the clapping reached a chaotic crescendo, she broke from the edge of the pond and headed for the dark circle of ice that covered the waiting blackness beneath. I think my heart was either beating so fast or it must have stopped completely, because whatever state it was in, I didn't recognize it as mine.

WALTER: I watched. I saw it. We all saw it. We'd never seen her skip a beat, lose her footing, or miss a single branch before, but on that day, that freezing cold January day, the tip of her skate crossed the line Bony Tony had scratched, crossed it barely a couple of inches, but just enough, just enough that when she pushed off with all the certainty of the sunrise, the thickness of the ice was less than she'd allowed for, and instead of providing her with a springboard to leap high into the cold air, it cracked like thunder beneath her with a boom that would wake me from my dreams for many months to come.

WALTER: My sister yelled. I covered my ears. Davey and Bony Tony ran as fast as they could without falling. A crying Francesca fetched a bare fallen branch that was nearly twice her height.

WALTER: Annie was splashing.  
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WALTER: She splashed like we'd seen her so many times in the lake, but for once, and probably for the only time in her life, she was not splashing from choice.

WALTER: Di-Di and my sister held Francesca's legs as Francesca slithered on her stomach. She thrust the branch as far in front as her tiny arms could manage.

WALTER: 'Come on Annie, please, Annie,' Davey cried out, His face red with tears. Bony Tony took off towards the road, screaming for help as he ran.

WALTER: I lay on the ice, trying with the others to push Francesca nearer. "Annie, Annie!" Davey kept yelling, or was it me? Was I yelling too? It was hard to know. It was just so hard to know. I got nearer, and my hand was so close to hers, but Annie's fingers looked all a blur they shivered so fast. "Annie!" I shouted, and this time, I knew it was me calling. "Annie!" But Annie's face was losing its shine. "No-No!" She hollered, "no-no!" as her cheeks turned pale purple like the winter sunset. "Annie-stop! Please stop!" I yelled. "It ain't right Wally," she said, "It ain't ain't a good place." Her mouth stayed open. Her lips turned the color of blueberries. Her lake blue eyes reflected the grey of the darkening sky. Then her splashing stopped.

WALTER: A scream from my sister shook the trees, and by the time the echo had receded, a couple of men who'd been out shooting pheasants and had heard Bony Tony, were beside us, with bigger branches and much longer arms.

WALTER: It seemed like forever until I heard the siren and then felt my mother putting a blanket around me while I watched my dad holding my sister who was crying so hard her body shook like a rattling gate in a storm.

WALTER: I wore the best clothes we had for the funeral. My sister, Dee-Dee and Davey, Bony Tony and Francesca, well, they all sat on the same pew in church. I sat with my parents.

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WALTER: I was still angry with them for not listening to me. Angry with Annie; angry with myself. I promised myself never to go unheard again.

WALTER: The coffin seemed so small. Too small for Annie. None of us stopped crying the whole day.

WALTER: We stayed in the rest of that winter.

WALTER: My sister still has Annie's skates. Her parents wanted her to have them. Me? Like I told ya, I stopped skating. "But you could be good if you practiced," my parents had said, trying to ease my out of the state I was in.

WALTER: But even if I practiced hard and long, hard and long enough enough to get to the olympics, nothing would ever compare to that day, out on the frozen pond, when Annie took my arm and I became one with her and the ice, and I moved through the world as Annie did, in a way that I've never come close to since.

WALTER: There's not a January goes by when I don't think of her.

WALTER: I'm sorry, I didn't keep a track of time! It's going to get dark soon, you should, you should be going. But please, come again. Next time, let me know where you got that coat. I need a new one. It's not much warmer in February you know.

WALTER: Take care out there, and drive safe. There's black ice on the road in temperatures like this. And listen to me-I only speak when I know something. And keep warm. Please, keep warm. Remember, nothing ever grows when it's this cold; but it can die. See you soon.

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