

## Walkers of the World

Every time he walked, he'd play the same game: as he approached another walker, he'd bet whether he'd get a nod and some form of verbal acknowledgment that he existed – even if it was just a hurried 'Hi' or 'G'day', or something equally throw-away. It was interesting to think about as he carried on with his daily exercise of ten or so kilometers between four and six a.m. He knew he could count on some regulars: like the woman in white, short and squat, who always looked like she was about to start running, arms swinging side-to-side, legs pumping, sweat cascading from her face, no matter what the temperature. She always gave a bright smile as she passed by and murmured something he couldn't quite catch. That didn't matter. What mattered was communication, however slight.

Without communication, we're nothing, he thought. Not even a person.

It was a sobering thought, as he trudged, looking at his feet while the sun began to creep higher, invading his vision. He pulled down the brim of his hat, and raised his face to look down the street: it was clear, nobody approaching through the morning glow. He lowered his gaze again, watching his shoes, watching for broken glass, watching for dead animals or rubbish, just watching – almost trance-like: left-right, left-right, left-right: see your life passing by.

His breathing was muted. He liked walking – not jogging. Jogging's for fools, those who just want to mash their metatarsals. The thought made his feet feel better: left-right, left-right, left-right. He was in good shape, and maintaining it with all the walking and other exercising he did, almost every day. He knew he was in good condition. He savored it, increasing the speed of his stride.

The world's in lousy condition, though, he muttered. Fuck, it always has been. He looked up: still clear on the road, all the houses quiet, no sign of any loose dogs. Dogs were always a pain in the arse, always barking as he passed by. You'd think that the damn mutts would know me by now, my sound, my smell, my appearance that hardly ever varied. One of the dogs

was wagging its tail, he could see. Guess it just wants to communicate too?

He shrugged, took off his hat, wiped his brow, then his scalp, holding the hat in his other hand. He narrowed his eyes: another walker was approaching, but the sun was bright. He reseated the hat, covering the golden orb with the brim again: it was *that* woman, another regular, the one he always tried to avoid. He grimaced as he continued walking, knowing that he was about to get, again, that broad grin, those enormous teeth, those flashing eyes as she walked by, mouthing the same thing every time: "Good morning! How are you?" And, as they passed, he'd be swamped by her overindulgent use of perfume that seemed to linger for fifty meters or more.

Brow furrowed, he pushed his eyes to the ground until the very last moment, only looking up – one must be polite, after all – as she boomed her overpowering greeting. He nodded, "G'day!" and hurried on, trying not to breathe until he'd taken another twenty-five steps. He would have liked to have said 'Can't you tone it down?' or 'Why d'you have to pollute the air for everybody?' or some other incisive riposte. But he didn't.

What's the point? he thought. Live and let live, and so forth.

He crossed a four-lane artery and decided to wander into the new housing estate. Progress, they call it, but it was good farmland until quite recently. Boxes, little boxes, all made of ticky-tacky went the old song from his youth. He looked grimly at the huggermugger scene: even at five-thirty a.m. workmen were all over; trucks bringing in roofing, bricks, cement; landscaping workers spreading rolls of grass; painters setting up their trestles. And noise. And rubbish bins. A complete mess. He watched the workers for a few minutes, the rising sun catching the light on their hardhats; sweat shone already on their faces and stained their shirts.

Poor working buggers, he thought. Like slaves, especially now in such hard times. Goddammed Wall St bankers, ruining the world's economy.

Shaking his head, he walked on, down the street for another five minutes, around a corner and then stopped at a cul-de-sac sloping down to the shore-line. Faintly, the sound of the surfing sea whispered, down below; and now, the tang of salt nourished his nose and his mind, bringing youth sailing

back again with a rush. He breathed deeply, capturing the moment, and again shook his head at the monstrosity at the end of the road.

All other houses in the development were what Martha called 'flat houses': the usual concrete slab and then just any one of hundreds of different 'architectural' designs for the modern family; and all equally bland. This one in front of him was not just different – it was subversively spectacular, even at this distance of a hundred meters or so. And trashy. And too big. They call 'em McMansions. Fucking eyesores.

Takes all kinds to ruin a world, he thought. And my views.

He grimaced, turned and retraced his steps back to his home. By the time he got there, he was sweating profusely. He took a shower and got on with his day.

His days had been that way for years, ever since he'd retired. The early morning was best; but, he'd walk sometimes in the evenings also, encountering a different bunch of walkers. At that time, best of all, he never met that annoyingly-perfumed woman who was always so effusive. He was thinking of that a few days later when he saw her again – swinging her arms, striding forth as though she was hurrying to get somewhere.

As if anybody gets anywhere when on a morning stroll, he wondered.

But, she was coming right at him, but still over a hundred meters away.

He crossed the road, and made a left at the next corner, quickly walked another hundred meters and made a right, still at a quick pace. He got to the park that cut through the estate, walked to the other side – about four hundred meters – and then took a breather at one of the park seats. He was wiping his brow as a shadow passed over him. He looked up to see her at the other end of the seat, standing. Her perfume joined them, swamping the air space. He gulped.

Oh, hello, it's you, she said. Her sunglasses blanketed her face. She sat. We've passed each other a lot, haven't we? She smiled, her large teeth gleaming.

At least they're clean, he thought. He gulped again. Yeah, I guess so. He wished he'd made a right first.

I usually come this way, y'know. She paused. But, I don't think you have, have you?

He chewed his lip, then shook his head. No, you're right. Has she been spying on me? Generally, I walk through the construction site – it's the sort of stuff I used to do. Y'know, before I retired. He took a quick intake, trying to limit the perfume. He stood, adjusted his hat. Look, I have to go. See you later.

With a wave, he quickly walked off.

Nice talking to you, she called.

Without looking back, he waved again. Damn, fuck. I wish some people would just leave me alone.

He missed a few mornings, held back by tending to Martha, bed-ridden for five years now. The medicines she took sometimes made her sick. Or maybe because she was always so hungry after such long sleeps? He couldn't tell, but he knew he had to wait until the afternoon to walk. Glumly, he knew that Martha wasn't going to get any better – just on a long, slow decline until the end.

Comes to all of us eventually.

The thought didn't brighten his mood that morning as he strode out, the crisp air hitting his face to remove all traces of sleepiness. It was still just dark, that period when day's promise must be paid. He looked to the east: a bluish-white line was now emerging from night's shroud. He kept his gaze on it and, as though watching a slow motion film, the first stab of sunlight blinked, faded, blinked again, then swept its way through the low flung clouds that looked like islands in the sun. Memories of tropical mornings cascaded like breaking surf through his thoughts. He walked, entranced, unseeing until he turned a corner and came face to face with her, and so close they almost collided.

Ooooh, that was close, she laughed. Her perfume arrived a moment later.

He gulped, took a few paces back and stepped to one side, attempting to miss the worst of it.

Ah, sorry, didn't see you coming. Sorry. He stopped, inhaled quickly.

No worries. No hits. No errors. She smiled. So, how've you been?

She was dressed casually: white pants, red shirt, soft brown leather jacket and gloves, a broad-brimmed hat, also white, and gleaming black knee-length boots that any drill sergeant would be proud of. Close up, he estimated her age as nearer fifty than forty.

A bit younger than me. And an expensive outfit too, he thought.

He smiled back. No worries. Awkwardly, he paused.

She waited, one foot forward, knee bent.

He motioned with his chin. I'm going that way, towards the construction sites.

Mind if I walk with you? She didn't take her eyes off his face. I live that way, don't you know?

No, I didn't. He shrugged. Okay, come if you want.

He stepped off the curb as she fell in beside him, easily matching his stride.

He glanced sideways. So, all okay with you?

She nodded. Oh, sure. I'm quite fit, as you can probably see. Don't get much sick at all.

Me too. He mentally paused. Then: You said you lived this way?

Yes – about half a kilometer passed the construction area here. She pointed vaguely.

Towards the beach area, he silently noted.

At least the sea breeze will dampen the cloud of gunk she carries. That thought made him feel better as they entered the new development with cranes, trucks, brickies, dumpsters, roofers, tillers, landscapers milling about in the usual organized chaotic way. The noise made talking difficult.

Goddamm mess, he shouted.

She shrugged and leaned in towards his ear. It's called progress. She looked at him. You're not against progress, are you?

'F course not. He pointed. But these fellas never get rich, slaving away, same sort of back-breaking work. Every day, and not much pay. A crooked smile broke across his mouth as he noted the rhyme. Ah, well, it's the way of the world: the rich get rich, and so forth.

Slaves? She smiled. Try looking at women for the last ten millennia.

He snorted. Don't start with that. No need to. He stopped and looked down at her. What I mean is, the system stinks. For both, male and female.

Well, as you say, it's the way it all works. Some make it, others make do, the smart ones make more. She smiled sweetly. But, as long as they all keep talking, why worry? What can you do anyway?

They'd gotten to the outer edge of the new development and stood, waiting for a break in the traffic on the four-lane highway. Across lay the slopes that lead to the beach area.

He wasn't sure whether she'd emphasized 'you' or 'do', and looked at her sharply. She was pointing, however, and missed his quizzical uncertainty.

I live just down there a bit. Want to have a look? She turned back to face him.

Oh, I know this area. He nodded. Sure, why not?

She led the way, quickly, across the busy road. He sauntered, taking his time, resting at the centre line as traffic blared past and drivers gave him the finger for invading their space. He ignored them all, keeping his eyes on the woman now turning and waiting, one hand on her hip.

As he stepped off the road, she said, Always take your time, don't you?

Oh, I dunno. I guess I just like to do it my way. He raised an eyebrow. So, which is your house, now?

She started walking; he fell in, beside her. Hands now in pockets, she kicked at the grass.

Next street. Last house down near the water's edge. She glanced up at him. It's a big house, the one some people would call McMansion. She grinned. You know – the type that the filthy rich have. Or are supposed to have. She pursed her lips and made a soft sound. It's nearly finished, except for some of the interior. Oh well ... soon, I hope.

A wisp of amusement flowed around his chin and mouth. Oh, yeah, I think I know it.

At the top of the street, he again looked at it a hundred meters away, down the steep slope towards the beach, squinting against the sun. The eyesore, shocking pink exterior in the morning sun, with a bleached-white roof that sloped to

cover a four meter wide concrete verandah stretching the entire, thirty meter width of the house and anchored at its scalloped extremities by crenellated brickwork rendered in orange stucco, each gap in the stucco barely a half-meter wide, looked like a garish Halloween-toothed horror show.

I wonder what the beach side looks like, he thought.

Aloud, he said: Not quite the mirador, eh?

Excuse me? Her brow puckered.

He pointed. That concrete verandah should be facing the sea, not the damn road. For the better view. He shook his head.

She sighed as she regarded the house. Well, that's Horace. He was only really good at one thing: making money. She looked at him. He designed it, you know; but, didn't live to see it. She looked down and away.

He inclined his head to her. Lead on, lady.

Over her shoulder, she said: My name is Jennifer. He stayed a pace behind as they walked down to the house.

Two slow and silent minutes later, she unlocked the massive gate and, leaving it open, strode to the now-visible, long white staircase that spiraled up to merge with the verandah. As she walked up, he stopped at the bottom and watched.

Thirty steps later and three meters higher, she turned to look back and down at him.

Do you want to come?

She paused, resting her body against the orange stucco, her feet slightly splayed outwards, buttocks resting on hands now pressed against the wall.

Inside, I mean?

She smiled languidly.

He looked down at his dusty feet, his much-too-well-worn jeans, his sweaty shirt, took off his hat and wiped his brow. He looked back at the open gate, then put one foot on the stairs as he looked again, up to her. He returned the smile.

Why not?