

Enjoy the Walk

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He loved walking at night. But tonight was different. It was cold. There was no wind to fear, but the air was laden with bitter droplets of moisture, biting into his cheeks like thousands of tiny fangs. He stuffed his red hands into his pockets, clenching his fingers into tight fists in a vain struggle to keep them warm. His head slunk further into the upturned collar of his hooded leather coat, breath escaping his lips as thick spirals of white mist.

Normally he would relish the chance to walk alone, to be surrounded by nothing but the distant thrum of city life far away, the gentle rustling of leaves and swaying of trees, and the thrilling conversation of his own thoughts. But, half way along his regular walking route the temperature had begun to plummet and now he longed to be home in his sanctum, out of the wet and the cold, wrapped in a robe and sucking in the sweet smell of steaming hot chocolate. The conversation in his head had mutated into a repetitive babble, capable only of commentary on what must have now been single-degree, stinging temperatures. The night was ruined.

Then he heard footsteps.

They were soft at first, just another tapping in a suburb full of unexplained bumps. He did not notice them, and if he did, he did not care enough to realise. But the steps grew closer, and soon he became aware that he was not alone on this frosty night. There was another figure out walking, and it sounded like they were not too far behind.

His heart quickened, but he swallowed a deliberately slow breath. No cause for alarm. Just footsteps. No cause for alarm at all.

Conversation in his head ramped from weather to strangers. Who was the individual behind him? They were both alone at night. It was dark. The streetlights cast a meagre orange glow on the black road. Visibility was poor. The houses were but black smudges against a starless sky. The trees were towering, wiry claws stretching out of shadowy garden beds. Their whispering was barely audible, like predators waiting to pounce on him. If he looked, the stranger would be a silhouette. And if the stranger looked, so too would he.

They were walking at a similar pace - not slow, but far from urgent. Was this another soul wandering the streets looking for their own thoughts, or someone else? Suddenly he felt like he didn't know where to put his hands. He wanted to remain casual, unalarmed, keep his fists stuffed in his leather coat, but what if he needed his fists? What if the stranger was more than a simple wanderer? All he could hear were those footsteps. The scraping of soft-soled shoes on pavement. No urgency. No weight. The same tapping as his own feet.

He released another slow, misty breath, his posture stiff with indecision but his eyes darting left and right. He felt the cold lump of his smartphone in his pocket. How long would it take him to call the police? Could he take a photo if he had to? Would the flash be on? Would it anger the stranger? Would the police even arrive in time to do anything? Or should he run? Could he outrun an attacker? He was tall, long-legged, but unfit. He could run fast, but not for long.

The stranger kept coming. But he kept walking. The gap never closed.

He was being ridiculous. This was quiet, out-of-the-way Auckland. What were the chances that the stranger walking behind him had sinister motive? Hell, he was a tall, hunched, hooded, black-clad figure himself - surely he was the one another stranger should be anxious about. To get nervous over footsteps was silly. His girlfriend would laugh at him if he told her.

Everything was fine. He'd be fine. He just had to get home.

He turned a corner, deciding to take a shortcut back to his own street. He wouldn't normally come down this narrow road but it would shave a

good twenty minutes off his walk. Even without a stranger on his heels, that would be preferable in the evening's sudden cold snap.

For a moment the footsteps behind him faded, a gnarled, overgrown hedge blocking the noise as he turned off the same road as the stranger. See? Nothing to worry about. He was just letting himself get consumed by his own worry. The only demons around here were the ones he invented. He was letting anxiety fuel his imagination.

Then he heard running.

It was the same soft-soled shoes, except now they were at a sprint. He heard them through the hedge.

His heart quickened again. His system flooded with the stinging rush of fear. He felt his breath catch in his mouth. For those first few moments, he froze. His feet rooted on the spot. He turned back to look at the corner.

A shadow appeared, skidding to a halt as it swivelled to look at him. It froze too.

He swallowed. Was this happening? What should he do? Again he felt the lump of his phone, the ball of his fists. He imagined the snap of a camera flash, the calm, serious tone of the emergency services operator, the feeling of a stranger's hands on his coat.

The shadow stared. He stared back. Was the wanderer holding his breath? He felt like his lungs were pouring out white musket smoke, but he could see no such fog in front of the stranger. Was the man waiting to see what he would do?

He unclenched and clenched his red fingers.

Then the silhouette started forwards suddenly, lurching towards him at another sprint.

For a vital few seconds he remained frozen, incapable of reacting. Was this seriously happening?

Then he turned and ran for his life.

The deafening thud of his feet slamming the pavement, of his heart beating at the inside of his chest, consumed his thoughts. He had barely run a few metres down the road before he started to feel a wheeze in his lungs, feel the burning in his thighs. His chest tightened, his body felt heavier. He couldn't keep this up for long at all. A life behind a desk hadn't been kind to his fitness. But he could still hear running feet behind him,

down the street. He couldn't stop. Although it sounded like he might be losing the stranger. Perhaps if he could just put a little extra distance...

He got to another junction and took the corner at full tilt, hoping to lose the stranger entirely in the next road. He'd wait all night in someone's garden if it meant he'd escape. And he wasn't too far from home, now. If he could get away, even temporarily, he could get home, lock the door, and never walk alone again. He promised he'd never walk alone again.

Shortly after turning onto the next road, he identified a garden that looked good for hiding in. It had a tall wooden fence, and the garden - although cloaked in a thick blanket of darkness - appeared to be dense with tall grass and bushes. He could barely make out the house itself, but it looked as though the dingy orange streetlights were reflecting off broken glass panes and cracked, disfigured weatherboards. It must have been abandoned. He'd never noticed it before, but then, he rarely came this way. For a second, though, he froze again, eyes darting to the other gardens along this sleepy street. If he waited in someone's property he might be able to get their attention and then, crucially, their help. But he was at the abandoned house already, and the running footsteps were gaining quickly. Too quickly.

His heart pounded.

No. He had to hide. Now. He turned sharply into the abandoned house's driveway and threw himself down into the grass. He hit the hard soil with an inaudible thud, knocking the wind from his knotted lungs. The tall, weedy grass enveloped him eagerly, ensnaring his clothes with tall, spiky fingers that stuck to his jacket. He lay still, focused entirely on breathing slowly, quietly, listening for the stranger. He tried to flatten himself on the grass, to be just another shadow in a garden of shadows.

Running footsteps turned the corner nearby and echoed through the neighbourhood as they approached. He swallowed, held his breath. The footsteps bounded towards him. They arrived at the driveway...

...and sprinted past it. He breathed out. The wanderer's heavy footfalls continued on a few more metres down the road. It sounded like they would keep going, putting more and more distance between the wanderer and himself. Then the noise stopped.

The neighbourhood fell silent.

He held his breath.

He waited.

The footsteps didn't return.

There was nothing.

He couldn't tell if the stranger was standing still out there or if he had moved on, stalking down the street in search of his prey. There was no tapping on pavement, no scrape of soft soles. He swallowed again, the noise of his own throat and the constant pounding of his heart the only things he could hear clearly.

Trees whispered.

Grass rustled.

Something metal creaked in an adjacent garden.

Still nothing.

Eyes jammed open, he pushed himself out of the grass, taking care not to make any sound. He had to look. He had to know if it was safe. He climbed slowly, so very slowly, to his feet and, remaining crouched low, took the first step towards the driveway entrance so that he could peer onto the road from behind the crooked fence.

He heard a shuffle behind him.

He spun. The stranger's hands smothered his mouth and gripped his jacket.

He was dragged bodily through the front door of the abandoned house, kicking and trying to scream. His voice could not escape the stranger's icy hand. He thrashed constantly, seeing that even up close, the stranger was just a silhouette. A dark, man-shaped space. A void. He kicked at the stranger again, trying to scream, trying to escape back out of the house before-

-the door to the house closed slowly, silently. It clicked shut.

And when the first rays of sunlight raked their way over the Pacific, the abandoned house was gone.