Walking Home  
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*The time is late evening, in the early fall of 1955. GERALD, a young father-to-be, is leaving his office.*

GERALD:

*(On telephone.)* I’ve got another hour’s work. Claire: I said I’m sorry. I know the time. No, don’t pick me up, I like the walk. I’ll be home in an hour. I don’t want you coming out – it’s late, you’ll get a chill, you’ve got to take care. I’ll be home by eleven. But don’t wait up for me OK?

*(Puts the receiver back in cradle.)* Yeah, lay your sleeping head, my love. *(Sighing.)* An hour.

(*The door opens; street ambience up. This is a weeknight in the city, so there’s not much traffic – no sirens, very few pedestrians.)*

*(Locking the door.)* One hour. Night slinks over my city. My shingle rocks back and forth in the quiet breeze – Gerald Harvie, Accountant. The day has been full of industry but now it’s falling quiet… Our cars are garaged, our doors locked, milk bottles glint on stoops, quarters shining on their bottoms. My neighbours are turning, tucking in, faces rinsed, eyes shutting… My Claire, so uncomfortable, hauling her flannelette bulk up the stairs, creaking onto the bed, stoically waiting for birth. Claire, hoping for the sound of my steps.

One hour. My chosen city: a fantasy magazine cover. A Saturday Evening Post fantasy, by day.

At night… Claire waits for me in the west. Choose. West or east. East, west. Choose. One hour. Chosen: the dark side of town. Where darkness is a blanket that muffles and smothers innocence. Where darkness caresses a hot, quivering fringe, where dark wraps ragged edges and makes alleyways electric with possibility. When, from under the heavy buildings and from around the safe corners, the rats begin emerging, only a few, yes, but rats, slyer because of their isolation, eyes nervous, shot with excitement, peering through the sleepy dark for their kin.

No. Claire: her troubled face on my pillow, breathing my remembered scent, willing me back to her. Concentrate on her, Gerry! Think of my child growing in her, Gerry! Think!

Claire. Claire half-joking. “I took you for better and I took you for worse, but did it have to include this city?” We’re unpacking. Claire and I, starting our new life. Claire’s brave but she’s already missing her friends. Me? I’m only feeling relief. It puts spring in my steps and I’m running from truck to house with boxes; running, I’m that relieved to have made it safely to this Rockwell fantasy. Until I look up in the arching elm and see a rat. Did they stow away in the truck?

“Look!” She cries. “The squirrels are grey here!”

I manage to keep busy for six months, because busy minds don’t turn down alleys. Don’t come alive when darkness comes. Don’t roam streets. Busy minds travel west in precise lines, home to Claire.

And Claire, her belly rising as gently as the hills surrounding this city. Claire lies west.

*(Pause.)* I go east. There. The first battle’s lost. I lose every battle in this war, always have. When it gets dark I only want to lose.

“Why Ashburnham?” She says. “We don’t have any relatives there! You don’t have any classmates!”

“It’ll be better when we start having children. Trust me Claire.”

Trust me. We have to go where I’m handcuffed to the centre. Where I know my steps are watched, my every stumble enumerated, where the watching of my neighbours holds me.

Except even here I can break out. There are secrets here too; these cities smash you in the face with the dark knowledge they pack.

*(Sound of traffic, or footsteps.)* Listen. I’m alone. I have these sidewalks to myself. But look again. Look harder. There’s more here. Look through the dark long enough, things start to move. The things you want, you see them start to move.

I hear everything. I can see a million miles in the dark, I can smell this city, smell every drop of sweat off every loin, yes… I walk further, and every step is more exciting than the last. This is my real home – these night streets.

If you could only see me.

*(Sound of the street; a car passes.)* I keep walking, my skull peeling back, my brain’s a convertible, the night wind whipping it alive, danger whipping it alive; this is what it’s like to really live. I walk on. To a window, a yellow square in the black. I stop and listen. A typewriter is clacking through the black, coughing and clacking, then a plume of smoke seeps out the open window. Heck Munro.

Heck Munro. Some nights I stand here and look up at your window and wrestle: west, east, go in? If I go in, we’ll share cigarettes and bad coffee, and talk about my Claire and your editorials and our golf games, and one time you’ll even tell me you wish you had a son just like me. And eventually you drive me home – I can hardly refuse – and that saves me, for a night.

Maybe tomorrow. This is tonight. I’ve got better places to go. Heck’s light is on but I’m not going in there tonight. The sidewalks pull me along.

*(Sound slowly builds. Park-like noises. Twigs, thuds, perhaps the squall of a cat. Leaves. Heavier breathing and words now coming out in a stream.)*

Pull me east. Pull me east, away from Claire, pull me to the park. To the park, dark breath of green; exhaling slow and clear and dark, sound receding, sounds of city sliding off behind the trees. Twisted path. Curve. Curve and dip. Duck for branch. I walk in darkness. Down through the ravine. Up through the ravine. Knowing each dipping branch, each blocking log, knowing, knowing all these things and letting myself be pulled along.

Branch brushes face. Scratch. Blood? How do I explain blood? Blood on my handkerchief. Then: ground hard as I cross the green, soft again as I slip into the trees.

Dirt breathing out. Exhaling. Carcass of rotting animal.

Snap of twig. Fallen leaves. Leaf rustle. Squirrel? Rat?

Glow of cigarette. Then dark. Then glow. A shape. I come close. No. No. No. I back away.

Freedom: to belong, to exist. To hit a great long drive…

Strength: to be a husband, a father. To leave here. To turn away, turn home, walk home to my Claire, walk west to my Claire, to shut her reddened eyes with kisses, to walk home to her. Yes. Yes. I can do it.

No.

I turn downtown again.

*(Sound of city again, increasing, and becoming bus terminal sounds. Muffled announcements of buses leaving for various destinations. Buses idling. Footsteps in foreground.)*

There is another place. There is something I need and something I want and I know where it is.

Smell of bus, lingering smells of bus and crowds; people leaving town, good people leaving town, good people returning, destinations announced, good people greeted, people ignored, names called out, people walking through crowds unnoticed. In the daytime. And now me, my steps ringing across deserted pavement, almost no one here now. Almost no one here.

*(Greater bus terminal sounds now. He’s there. Door opening, door shutting. Quieter now. Footsteps descending.)*

I’m inside. There’s a door. I open it and walk down the stairs. I walk down the stairs until I reach the bottom and now there are two more doors. I am drawn to one and I go inside.

God forgive me.

I am here now. Are you there?

I have crept into the bowels of my city. I have crept here and now I stand and pretend and hope. I catch his gaze, then I look away. I look back, look away, look back and now I am no longer even in my body. I have fled that prison and I am flying a thousand, a hundred thousand miles above this green and pleasant town. I am looking back at myself walking over to my fellow human and I’m only feeling this incredible freedom and this great, overwhelming rush of liberty and, finally, finally: power.