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A History of Walking

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I THINK OF THE MANY WALKS there are in a lifetime, walking to school, walking home, walking through rainstorms and snowstorms, walking in the occasional desert, walking when the bus has left, walking up the aisle and back down it, walking away for the last time. Walking alone and walking together.

In an old photo, I walk together with my grandfather Sol. I am so small that the shirt I wear is made from two bandanas sewn back to back. My hair is black, thick, cut in a Dutch boy. Sol is wearing a short-sleeved cotton shirt with a bolo tie, his white hair swept straight back. Hand in hand, we walk along a road in the Sierra where he and my grandmother Ella lived then, tall old pines behind us. A very early memory, it has nothing in it but my grandfather and me, the fragrant heat of the trees and the walk, and his voice—I remember it still—calm and even, as he told me about the trees and about the round hollows in the limestone made by the Miwok people, grinding acorns with stones for food.

I was learning that a walk does not need a task, a destination. Walking is just a way of being together, a way to know each other. I would guess, with no data at all, that human beings are the only animals who walk just to walk, with the possible exception of the crows who show off up and down my front walk. The Spanish take the *paseo* to stroll through the streets together and see who is with whom and what they are wearing and what is new. Old couples still walk around the block at twilight as my parents did. We hike down rivers and up mountains, watching ahead for the next bend in the trail. When the pandemic began, this whole city turned out to walk and walk and walk, walking away their fears and their cabin fever.

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Nearly thirty years ago, I took my first few steps as a mother, walking a baby girl in my arms away from the infant room of the Changsha First Social Welfare Institute where she had spent most of her first nine months of life.

The woman who handed her to me did so gently, quietly, tears in her eyes, indicating with a little flip of her hand the curls at the nape of her neck, something special she wanted to show me about this baby who was newly mine. This kind woman knew not to scare the baby or make a fuss and so played peekaboo with her as I carried her away, my baby facing her over my shoulder. My little one, soon to be renamed Clare, was oblivious to the import of our short walk to the bus. I was as overwhelmed as I had ever been, but contained myself because I knew, like her caretaker, that a calm voice and a smile were what she needed for the long journey ahead, beginning with that first walk together away from the orphanage and thence from China.

I had learned her name, then Li Zhuo, only the day before and possessed just one inch-square photo of her serious little face glued to one sheet of scant information: her weight, her length, her "development"—poor—and her birthdate. In the first visit to meet her, the day before I returned to claim her, I clutched the photo in my hand and looked into each small round face in the baby room—simply furnished, two babies to a crib, a little coal stove in the middle of the room. Here was one asleep in the corner of her crib, here another sitting on the floor staring at us giant strangers, one tear rolling down her red cheek, one—was she mine?—rocking her little bamboo walking frame around the room with all the confidence of an empress. Make way, she seemed to mean, at nine months old, make way; I have places to go!

I surveyed the room again, watching the faces of these baby girls once more, one so tiny she must have just arrived, perhaps "brought to the police station" or "found in the railway station," as nearly all documents of such cases read. I looked at each one so hard that I still remember their faces now, all these years later. I thought she could be this little one asleep. She could be this one on the floor, so fearful and alone. Maybe that robust little girl trying to pry the bars of her crib apart.

But it was none of them. It was the baby girl in the bamboo walker, rocking her determined way toward me in her padded red cotton jacket, knowing before I did, that I was hers and she was mine. Li Zhuo was Clare Zhuo was Li Zhuo.

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Some people know how to hold a baby instinctively; others look as though they have just been handed a live weasel when a baby is placed in their arms. I thought I was pretty good at it. I had always loved my dolls and my friends' babies and my little niece and nephews. But it had not crossed my mind that most babies start out approximately the weight of a leg of lamb. My Li Zhuo weighed eighteen pounds, the size of a roast turkey for fifteen. Even though she was the kind of spider monkey baby who is springy and hangs on, she was not the starter baby with which most mothers begin. And I was the only one carrying her; she had no father then, and her grandparents were not nearby to hold her while I made dinner or took a bath or even sat down.

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So I had to learn how to walk with her, how to switch arms and shift weight and bend my knees to pick her up and put her down. Tendonitis and back spasms came with carrying her, but I could not resist picking her up and walking around with her. I was besotted, I suppose. I carried her everywhere, like a child with a beloved toy. I carried her in my arms for too many years for my own good, loving too much her arms wound around my neck.

After the carrying years wound down, we walked, and I learned to match my pace to hers. When Clare first learned to walk at fourteen months, we meandered along together, on the beach for that first mouthful of sand, up the block and back, stopping for leaves and cracks in the sidewalk, and around and around my parents' brick patio under their huge old elm tree. I got used to her running full tilt at me from daycare and then from school, bracing for the impact of her little and then not so little body and the coming home of it every day. I got used to her withdrawal from such demonstrations when she stopped at nine or ten. And then used to it again when she was grown and came home to me from far away, hurling herself at me in airports. By then, Isaac stood at my side, now her devoted father whom I had married when Clare was eleven.

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In the middle of my life, Clare left home, as children do, and my mother and father died. My parents had been my always, my friends, our champions when it was just Clare and me. It never failed to surprise me that my parents had grown old, but I learned to slow to their steps as they aged, walking my mother ten steps from her reading chair to the kitchen table, taking my father's arm when I picked him up for Mass every Sunday. After they died in their mideighties, I missed the need to offer my hand or my arm walking with them. I grieved for them. I sank. I felt that I could not live when my father died three years after my mother.

I cannot remember how I learned that I could walk away from the black dog of depression and endless mourning. But I started to walk, fast, every morning, to pound it out on the pavement at dawn, to walk my body and walk my mind, letting the sentences and faces and songs wander around in my brain until something was ironed out or soothed or lit on fire. I thought about my cheerful father, who alone among the twenty or so lawyers in our small town, had ridden his bike to his office almost every fair day, downhill to work and back up for dinner, in his summer suit. I thought about my cerebral and loving mother, who only let go of living when she could no longer read or concentrate on our faces. I met coyotes and wanderers and raccoons. I watched the gardens and the river and the silver windows downtown when the sun hit them. I told myself my own story as I walked and walked and walked, wondering at how my life had written itself.

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Little Isaac, my big baby grandson, his grandfather's namesake, struts into the world with the importance of

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a new walker, belly sticking straight out, an object in each hand for ballast (two empty seltzer cans favored above all others), and his eye on something ahead—the dog, a rock, a rose petal on the sidewalk—that he must first pick up, an exercise in concentration, and then examine closely. At the Lake of the Woods, I carry him down to the shore to see it for his first look, the water blue and flat in the sun, a mile across, the mountain at the far end, our longtime friend, some spring snow left on its peak. He is stunned and stares and stares. We sit on the bench for a while, taking it in.

Starting back up to the cabin, I put him down to see if he will walk with me. Usually a two-minute walk for me alone takes fifteen minutes for the two of us. He holds my hand as we climb over roots and scuff our sandals in the summer dust. He stops to reach the fir needles on a low branch, just one finger touching one needle. He picks up a rock and hands it to me. And then, so solemn, he hands me a very small pine cone. A woolly bear caterpillar comes across our path, and he stops as if a gate has been slammed down, waiting as it inches its bright and prickly body to the other side of the two-foot-wide trail. I feel that I could walk beside him, my serious little one, all the afternoons left to me, as we examine the world, two by two.

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Now I am getting old. I just have myself to carry in the mornings, the early e-bikers and running men whizzing by me in the semidark. I like my own pace. I am still happiest in my body when I am walking very early in the morning, on one of several routes that takes me out into open skies, out to the bluff over the Willamette. But I am daunted every morning, and I am afraid. I think, "I won't walk, I cannot walk, not this morning." Daily, I doubt that I can walk my three miles because my lungs are troublesome and breathing does not come easily. As I make tea and look out the window into the shadowy street, I write a drama in my mind: if I cannot find enough air, I'll founder out there in the half light and fall down on the sidewalk, and no one will see me because it is much too early even in this big city, and Isaac will find me gasping and blue, or maybe already dead, when he takes his walk later.

But while I am spinning this terrible story and worrying about my poor lungs, I am assessing the weather—raincoat, yes or no, sweatshirt, yes or no, regular cap or waterproof one? I am tying my shoelaces tightly, finding my phone and earbuds, and thinking about what to listen to—a book or music or some gripping podcast. Or maybe I will just listen to my own thoughts, reviewing history, thinking of the walks in the Sierra, through the streets of Changsha, on the trail to the lake, and the sober and dear face of little Isaac and our slow walks to the corner and back, he stopping at a breeze, a cat, a nasturtium.

I ready myself for my hour, my miles. I zip the phone and my inhaler into my pocket, set the timer, step out the door, press play, choose north or south, and go out to meet my certain death as happy as the baby crows in the neighbor's tree, squawking at the thrill of being newly alive. ※

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