



Walking Sweet Dee

AD WEST

LIKE MOST SUBURBANITES, I live in close proximity to many other white people. But I don't know them. Partly because I'm ashamed of where I live, ashamed to be part of a history of white flight into suburbia. Mostly though, I don't know anyone because I'm a terrible neighbor. I've spent most of my time inside with the curtains tightly closed, jumping behind them (literally) to hide when the doorbell rings. I did this long before the CDC suggested sheltering in place might be the safest choice. I'm a trendsetter.

My therapist doesn't seem to understand this. She keeps mispronouncing "trendsetter," saying something that sounds more like "mild agoraphobia" when I tell her how I become overwhelmed in grocery stores by the lights, sounds, and people until I want to run out crying. The panic attacks started in 2020. My therapist

and I have discussed the many reasons I may be avoiding the outside world—other than a worldwide global pandemic threatening to kill us all, as if that isn't enough. I was fat-shamed as a kid, and my mom used to force me to go on painfully long bike rides during which people would shout at us from their car windows. Plus multiple sclerosis messes with my senses, making noisy settings and fluorescent lights difficult to handle for long. Whatever the cause, I stopped going out unless it's absolutely necessary.

I don't like that some small seed of fear found its way into my belly and planted itself, shot its poisonous roots into my spinal cord where it merged with the nerves that branch out throughout my body, immobilizing me, keeping me from being the person I want to be. There are many things I want to change about the way I'm using this life and this frail body: how much I exercise,

what foods I eat, the number of words I write daily, the amount of attention I give my partner. But I haven't been sure if change is possible. Can adults really change? Significantly? Certainly not our personalities, which seem to be cemented early in life. But what about our behavior? I've been trying my whole life to be more consistent, less prone to procrastination, more comfortable in my body, more content with where I am. I set New Year's resolutions and I'm excellent at keeping them—for an average of three weeks.

During the shelter-in-place times, I tried watching Ted Talks and reading books about motivation, learning how adults successfully change ingrained behavior. I had some successes but just as many relapses. I needed help. So, like most other middle-class Americans, I sought therapy. After being on multiple waiting lists for months, I finally met someone who wanted to help me help myself, which is how, in an attempt to overcome my trend-setting agoraphobia, I committed to taking my Great Pyrenees, Sweet Dee, on a short walk any day it isn't pouring rain.



I live north of Seattle. Our city is known for how much it rains. Most major cities have an environmental personality. It's always windy in Chicago, foggy in San Francisco, smoggy in Los Angeles, humid in Atlanta, and polluted in New

York. These are carefully perpetuated stereotypes designed to discourage more people from moving into these already overcrowded areas. And there are far too many people here on the land the [Coast Salish](#) people once democratically inhabited. I've lived in other cities where the land to people ratio was significantly higher than it is here. To the gods we must look like ants, crawling out of the hills on either side of Lake Washington, fanning out across the earth.

My therapist suggested that I start by walking in my suburban neighborhood for ten minutes a day. If that went well, add a few more minutes, maybe even walk all the way around the block. I agreed to this "reasonable" plan, thinking I might be able to go weeks without having to leave the house. Sanctioned. Without guilt. Canceled due to rain. After all, it rains constantly in Seattle.

Nope.

January, February, March—gray skies often, full day of rain intermittent to rare.

That's how I find myself, on the penultimate day of March at 4:00 p.m., looking out the front picture window of my three-bedroom bungalow, taking note of the pale blue sky, the cotton-ball clouds, the deepening green of a lawn springing back to life, and the full bloom of our trembling Newport plum. It's time. I hear Sweet Dee start to whine behind me.

We adopted Sweet Dee when she couldn't cut it as a rancher in Texas. At least, that's what I assume happened, although the Great Pyrenees Rescue Society didn't say so specifically. She was six months old and fifty scraggly pounds when her original people sent her away. Maybe it was because she was born with a hearing disorder, undiagnosed by our veterinarian, but when I call her in from the yard, sometimes she can't hear me; sometimes she just continues to go about her business, chatting with strangers passing by on the sidewalk or smelling each blade of grass individually. Maybe we got Dee because her original people realized the love of this world can't be trained out of her; there's too much fun to be had breathing fresh air and chasing birds to worry about keeping track of livestock. Six months old and already fired from her first job, yet somehow, it didn't crush her spirit like a COVID-related job loss seems to have crushed my partner's.

There have been moments in the past three months when I was tempted to give up on our walks. Once, early on—I'd say about three weeks in—when we still only walked a few blocks, I saw a couple coming toward us. Like it always does when I see other people, my heart started thundering and my limbs went numb. I accidentally dropped Dee's leash and she kept walking. I panicked

further, my mind screamed at me: "She might jump! Grab her!" I knew I had to catch Sweet Dee before she reached the woman walking toward us who was carrying a newborn infant against her chest in one of those cotton kangaroo-type pouches. I gave chase, trying to step on the end of the leash where it dragged behind her. Never a good idea. My foot hit the edge of the sidewalk. I lurched forward. Twisted my ankle. Scraped my hands. Screamed, "stupid fucking bitch!" which I'm sure the couple thought was directed at poor Sweet Dee though in reality it was self-recrimination. (I may have to ask my therapist if she thinks I have a mild case of Tourette Syndrome as well.) Thankfully, Dee halted at hearing my distress, and I was able to grab the end of her leash and pull myself up with the grace of a round beetle that landed on its back. If humans still had tails, mine would have been tucked between my legs as I turned and went straight home, managing to make it safely inside before I burst into tears.

I'm not sure why I kept going after all that. In 2019, I would have given up for sure. But now, having lived through a global pandemic, political turmoil, social upheaval, and a midlife crisis, I needed to keep going. I needed to believe change is possible, even if it's small and not nearly consequential enough. Plus,



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now I have a therapist to disappoint, and I didn't want to tell her I couldn't do something as simple as taking a short walk. I considered lying but reasoned that that might undermine the personal growth process just a little. So the walks continued and got longer each day.



Now Sweet Dee expects, even demands, our time together outside. She stands behind me while I check the weather. As a pandemic pup, she knows the signs. If I put on pants, I'm almost certainly leaving the house. But is she invited? I put on socks and she's hopeful. When the tennis shoes get picked up, she starts to whimper, softly at first, but increasing in volume like my cell phone when it rings—impossible to ignore once it reaches top volume. Her fluffy tail thumps against a tan carpet thick with her furry castoffs.

Sometimes I take her older brother, Walter White, first. Just a short walk around the block for the brindled thirteen-year-old beagle / Boston terrier mix. (I tried walking them together a few times but decided I like having arms that are connected to my body.) It's almost more trouble than it's worth to take Walter first because Dee sits in the front window, channeling her wolf ancestors,

howling like she lost her firstborn pup. I've been assured by my partner—who does not walk with us (is agoraphobia contagious?)—that this continues for ten to twenty minutes, until either I get back or he takes her into the backyard for a distraction romp. I worry what happens when we both leave. But then again, that rarely happens these days.

When my socks, sneakers, and headphones have been donned, I finally reach for Dee's pink harness. She dances a jig, making it difficult for me to snap the clasps. I tell her to sit still and laugh as she drops her haunches for half a second then stands right back up. Incurrable! I relish the feel of her soft fur on my cheek as I reach under her now ninety-pound body, searching for the straps. Click! Click! She flaps with delight and lunges toward the front door. I make her wait while I turn on my audio book and attach her leash.

Finally, we're out the door and she's off. She runs ahead, pulling the leash to the full fifteen feet of its length while I holler, "Slow down Fluffmonster Fuller!" She knows the route and feels no need to wait for her slowpoke human. First, she turns left and sniffs the dandelions growing along the six-foot-tall cedar fence that separates our stolen [Tulalip](#) land from that of our neighbors. Dee

pulls me around the corner and barks hello to our neighbor's black lab, Bear; the dogs are still talking through a tall barrier, but this time it's from a different angle, which makes it much more fun. Sometimes all you need is a new angle.

Now we're on the asphalt path that runs through the open field behind our neighborhood. Dee speeds to a full gallop before she halts suddenly in front of a pine limb blown onto the path during a recent storm. Within reason, I like to let Sweet Dee experience her walks the way I wish I faced life—fearless, head on, throwing her face into every tall bunch of sweetgrass just to see what she might find, stopping to inhale the scent of every daffodil, a perma-smile on her lips, grateful for every breath of spring air. Unlike Dee, usually I cower. I procrastinate. I make excuses: I have MS, my partner is depressed, I'm tired, I have a headache. Maybe I'm just exhausted from the effort it takes to be my own worst enemy.

On our walk, Dee feels an obligation to sniff all the fallen pine branches to make sure they smell just as good as yesterday. Her tail wags in confirmation but then gets caught in the bramble of wild blackberry vines— Washington State's most frustrating weed—and she pulls hard to escape their grasp. The vines crawl from this open field and into the yard of every house on 24th Street, where some of us wage war and

others have conceded defeat, letting them grow so tall that six-foot-high wooden fences are devoured in their campaign to conquer the whole earth. They're colonialist vines. Later in the spring, the county will come and mow them all down out here in the field. But they'll be back. They're as tenacious as Sweet Dee.

Dee pulls me from the trail and into the small neighborhood across the field. The houses are newer here but far more cheaply made than the ones on the street where I live. It's one of those hit-and-miss neighborhoods where we pass a split-level house with rotting porch steps and overgrown myrtle bushes hanging over the sidewalk next door to a tidy rancher with a perfectly manicured garden filled with sunny daisies, perfectly trimmed dogwood and holly bushes, and thoughtfully pruned rhododendron trees that line the edge of the yard. I wonder how many countless hours the owners spend pulling and digging, pruning and screeching when a finger gets jabbed by a thorn from the detested barberry bush. Why is this something people even care about when it can't possibly last? Aren't there better things to do with our time? asks the middle-aged, mentally ill, video game addict.

I pull Dee past a mud puddle that wallows in an empty corner between someone's cement driveway and a row of evergreen arborvitae; not only are

those trees ugly as a star-nosed mole, but, like so many other things in the suburbs, they make no sense. We have them, too, blocking our driveway from the neighbors, and I've always wondered why we need a dozen ten-foot-tall evergreen bushes planted a few feet apart forming an impenetrable hedge at the edge of our driveway. I'd rather the monstrosities have been planted where they might be useful—along a freeway to block sound, in a park to provide shade, or in my backyard where, despite the six-foot-high fence flanking its edges, there is no privacy whatsoever. I brush my hair and put on a bra every time I go out to water my vegetable garden because the neighbors on two sides have tall decks that effectively turn our backyard into a fish tank, and I'm the exotic puffer fish. My partner thinks it's weird that I'm bothered by such an insignificant thing like neighbors gawping at my greasy blonde mop in the morning, but he grew up in a neighborhood just like this, whereas I grew up on a farm surrounded by acres of wheat fields, and beyond those were forests of lodgepole pine and aspen. If anyone was looking into our backyard, it was either a deer or a person who'd find themselves at the end of my daddy's shotgun-shaped No Trespassing sign.

Sweet Dee is much more neighborly than I am. On our walk, we find no shortage of potential friends as she tugs me along. I duck my head and mumble-

echo any greeting I hear as I try to walk faster. Often, we cross the street or give others a wide berth when crossing isn't possible. I'm sure Sweet Dee wonders why I never let her stop and say hello. Today, I shorten her leash and pull her past the half-dozen munchkins playing on damp yellow-brown-barely-green lawns or riding bikes and skateboards along the street.

One of the things I look forward to most days is passing the Alpacas that live behind the big house on the corner. Dee stops and we all stare at each other from across the street. I ask her if she wants to go say hello, and she trots across the road where we stand outside the barbed wire while the pack animals gallop toward us. The tall white one is usually the boldest. She comes within a few feet of us, turns her head to the side and looks regal. The smaller black one is timid, so she stays at a distance, but I can tell she's interested. I wish I was brave enough to knock on their owner's door and ask to pet them. I also wish I knew what was in Sweet Dee's mind while she looks at them so fixedly. It seems she knows she was meant to do something with creatures that look like this, and she longs to be the dog she was meant to be. I wave goodbye to the alpacas and pat Dee's back, telling her, "It's okay." Not everyone gets to be what they think they were born to be, only the really lucky ones do, and there just

aren't that many of those. I wanted to get my Ph.D., write a bestselling novel, travel the world. All but one of those dreams requires leaving the house and, you know, having a working body.

On the corner we pass the house with the iron flower boxes I like so much; they're industrial and rusted, the exact opposite of a suburban aesthetic, and I appreciate the owner of the house for her artist's eyes. I also like her Black Lives Matter sign—one of two I pass on this road daily. I shorten Dee's leash as we near the crosswalk on the busiest road. "All clear! Let's go." We cross the street at a noticeably quicker pace then slow down as we pass the house on the other corner where two Chihuahuas screech at us through thick glass windows. I watch them quiver and bounce from their perch on top of a sofa. Sometimes I wonder if Walter has a little Chihuahua in him because he has the same way of vibrating when he wants something—usually a pet or a cuddle, but also food. Dogs, Chihuahuas especially, know what's most important: human contact, long naps, a brisk walk, and a full belly after dinner. I should be more like a Chihuahua.

Now we're in the newest development in our area. The houses are spacious, the lawns perfectly green and edged along the sidewalk, flowerbeds sparse and freshly mulched. I don't stop Dee from

walking through them and kicking the mulch around with her giant paws. This group of a dozen homes has its own private park with a sign that states: No Trespassing. For Residents Only. The vast grassy expanse is large enough to host soccer games and baseball practices, maybe even a small festival, but they won't share with outsiders. The wealthy can't be forced to mingle with common folk. The private park, with its verdant carpeting is Dee's favorite place to stop and empty herself. I'm pretty sure she's a socialist like me.

Once we're past the bougie block, we find ourselves on a street a lot like our own, with older homes built in the seventies and eighties. Dee starts to pull harder as we get closer to the house with her favorite pals—the middle-aged Lab and the Bohemian shepherd puppy. The puppy wants badly to play with Sweet Dee. From the way she nearly pulls my shoulder out of joint as we approach, I understand the feeling is mutual. Every day I have to hold tight as she gets excited and starts to lunge toward the chain-link fence that keeps her friends at bay. The puppy doesn't seem to realize that it's her job to protect her house from strangers, but the older, wiser Labrador does, and when we first met three months ago, he made that message clear. He didn't scare me. I'm never afraid of the animals we pass—only the people. I tell the Lab what a good buddy he is as

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we walk by, and after months of this routine, he doesn't even get up from his sunny patch of earth to so much as growl at us.

Just over a mile into the walk and after the excitement of seeing her favorite pals, Sweet Dee exhibits her first signs of fatigue. She walks slower, almost next to me, instead of pulling ahead. Pyrs aren't known for their high energy levels—she's definitely the right dog for me. Dee doesn't notice the Catholic Church we pass. She has about as much use for it as I do these days. Like the Virgin Mary, the grounds are immaculate, the building is clean brick and colorful stained glass. The parking lot is interspersed with planters that hold cherry trees, now in full bloom; the snowy pink petals litter the ground like confetti. Just a couple of blocks ahead, on the other side of the street is the Lutheran Church. In contrast to the Catholic, the grounds appear shabby, the mulch sun-bleached, the dogwood bushes untrimmed and crawling onto the blacktop-paved parking lot. Even the building has a look of disrepair. It's as if every Lutheran takes a vow of poverty, not just their ministers.

Dee is thirsty and dragging her paws by the time we reach the end of the longest street we walk. She stops and I let her drink from the plastic pipe that has been cut off and now sits in the ground like a bowl, collecting rainwater just so Dee can wet her

parched throat. We're paused in front of the house with the Trans Pride flag. I've never seen the people who live here, never glimpsed so much as a coming or going, though we pass by here nearly every day. I wonder if the neighbors are kind to them and if they feel welcome here, on this church-heavy block, in this conservative town, or if they hide away like I did for many years. It's not easy to trust that other people will treat you with kindness when you're different.

Down a hill and around another corner, Dee and I are finally back on our own street, only half a mile from home. Sweet Dee meanders up this loneliest stretch of road. The only friends we pass here are squirrels, and she knows she's not allowed to play with them. One time she took off after one as though propelled by a jet-powered engine and almost pulled me off my feet. We had a long, stern talk that day, and with her "I'm sorry" kisses she promised never to do it again. Unlike some humans, Sweet Dee keeps her promises.

She stops and sits on her soft haunches at the top of the road that leads down to the lake. Right now, I think it must look like one large water bowl to her, but in the summer, it becomes a bathtub too. "It's too cold," I tell her, tugging at her leash and using the command we taught her when she was a puppy—"Let's go." She obeys when she feels like it,

though today is not one of those days. I repeat the command and she lets out a low groan, but she stands. She gives the lake one last glance before we walk away.

Moments later, I see a woman jogging toward us, and I pull Sweet Dee to the side because the shoulder is narrow here. The woman smiles as she runs past, and I don't look down. I feel my lips turn up at the corners, too, and I nod my head. My heart doesn't race. My breath is calm and even.

We're almost home. The end of the walk is a steep hill. Sweet Dee and I are both panting by the time we reach the cool, mossy blanket of our lawn. Dee flops down and rolls onto her back, paws in the air as she wriggles around, thankful, as am I, for the one hour of joy we find on our walks. I think that's the miracle of it all—after only three months, I love this time as much as she does. And I've been at it, consistently, for way longer than my usual three weeks.



For an hour a day, Sweet Dee teaches me to live, to breath (sometimes quite heavily), and to appreciate beauty. When we're walking, I try not to think about all the lives lost in recent years or how lonely my grandmother is in her retirement home because no one visits. For an hour, I try to forget how my partner's burgeoning case

of fatalism was cemented when he lost the best job he ever had. I don't worry about how Dad has cancer, and I had to send him actuarial tables in an attempt to convince him he should consider a bone marrow transplant. I don't think about how Walter, my cuddliest four-legged pal, who stayed by my side and comforted me every time I cried the year after I was diagnosed with MS, may not be with me much longer. I try not to dwell on the environmental crisis happening on Earth or wonder about the future of our species. No, for an hour, I attempt to live like Sweet Dee. Unafraid. Intrigued by everything I find outside. I breathe deeply, enjoying the musky scent of wild grasses, the touch of velvety buds on the low hanging branches of the Magnolia trees, the sounds of children laughing and dogs barking hello to passersby. Walking Sweet Dee in early spring confirms that life, in all its forms and facets, finds a way to carry on, to renew itself, to burst forth in the most unlikely places. Life fights to exist. To grow. To change. And so, I suppose, do I.

"Come on, my sweet canine polar bear. Let's go get a drink," I say as I pull at Dee's leash. She lifts her head, rolls over, and ambles to her feet. We're going inside for now, but we'll probably be back out here tomorrow even though the weather channel says there's a chance of rain. ※