

The Walking Man

The Chinese astrologist said
You'll be a happy old woman
Something will shift in time
Just keep walking

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Baal is the Canaanite-Phoenician god of fertility and weather, specifically rainstorms; depicted in ancient sculptures as a man with raised right arm as if to thrust a thunderbolt, left leg strides forcefully forward: A walking man

The walking man is a classic figure of myths and storytelling, his black and white silhouette etched onto bucolic Alpen paths, craggy Greek mountain passes, and meandering country roads; you might see his frozen action figure at the top of chapter heads in old leatherbound volumes. I mention him because I see versions of him everywhere. He has a role to play in the story, the story of Uz in an interregnum in history.

The walking man of yore has a bearded, windburned face, a broad brimmed hat, a woolen jacket or vest, loose knickers, a rumpled shirt, knee high lisle socks laced up with braces, and cracked leather boots between his soles and the unpaved earth. In his left hand he carries a crooked walking stick, a leather bag slung across his back. Sometimes a dog follows him. Who knows why he walks?

The walking man of Uz cuts the same figure. Same silhouette, different fabrics: wonky tan travel hat, loose nylon windbreaker, baggy knee length sweat shorts, white compression socks squeezing red swollen calves betraying dropsy, gore tex hiking sneakers. His retractable black

hiking pole is in his left hand, a nylon gym bag slung diagonally across his back. He looks exactly as I first saw him a year ago, right before he toppled over.

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On the dusty gravel road the neighbors won't pave to discourage traffic, the dog and I were getting a late start on our daily walk. Phone pressed to my ear, I chatted with a far away friend. To the left were the club tennis courts, the thick *pong* of neon yellow balls striking the green cement, followed by low male grunts and higher female groans. Preppy sex. Comfortable homes to the right, and perhaps fifteen feet ahead was the walking man. Before a short sloped driveway with a vintage light blue Subaru wagon, the walking man paused on the gravel, as if hesitating to turn the page. There was the thick buzz of bees- the music of suspended time- as he wavered to and fro like a metronome gone awry. I froze in awful anticipation, the way of the witness. *Pong!* He toppled over like a green plastic toy infantryman, rifle rigid between arm and foot, fallen in place on his side. We ran to stand over his motionless figure, supine in the same crumpled angles of my father-*pang*- in his size 12N new balance sneakers. *No shoes on the bed, Doc!* My three small children made him laugh. He kept his shoes on.

The fallen man lay like a fish on a dock, one blue eye staring up. The bees gently hummed in the gap between his breathless response to my question, *Sir are you alright?*

He grunted, the eye circling below a bushy white eyebrow, its straying hairs stretching like antennas to catch a signal. He was whiskery, unshaven. *Pang*. Taking my father to the barber to trim the gray thicket of eyebrows and the snow on the folds of his cheeks.

The fallen man did not ask the next self-incriminating question, so to spare him I said, *You fell over...the uneven gravel... It's hot out. Can you move?* He thought for a moment. He could move but he couldn't get up. *Deja vu'*, my mother in a heap on the blush bedroom carpet

at 1201 Park Street, twelfth house of sickness and sorrow. The thud passed through her bedroom wall to the faded kites my visiting dreams were tied to.

The dog pulled at the leash, so I attached him to the mailbox, which threatened to topple next to its owner. What to do? I couldn't get him on his feet alone. My neck and back were a mess from falling. If his hip were broken, I would only make it worse. *Pong. Pong.* The tennis balls marked time. *Groan.* What to do...

With a sickening thud my mother fell out of bed just hours after my late night arrival. I found her on the bedroom floor crumpled on her side, *pang*, one visible bruised arm, the skin crinkled like rice paper from blood thinners, the other pinned beneath her. We were both afraid for me to move her.

“Do you think you broke your hip?”

“I don't think so. *Pang.* I'll just sleep here”. I tucked a blanket around her and put a pillow under her head. She closed her eyes.

Do you think you can get up? I asked him.

He continued to stare up at me, silhouetted against the bare blue sky. It had not rained for a year.

If I called an ambulance, she would be left on a gurney in the emergency room hallway for hours, sleepless and disoriented. My brother spent countless hours there, waiting; at least at home she would sleep. The nurse would return in the morning, only hours away, and together we would move her. I went to bed groggy and ashamed.

Is anyone home?

No. (gruff)

I did not call an ambulance for him. I avoided the thought, acceding once again to the inchoate wishes of the proud, old and infirm. A millennial man was getting out of his SUV several houses

down, and I called him for help. He hesitated, perhaps he was listening to a great podcast. He did the neighborly thing and came over. He spoke to the fallen man as if this darned thing happened to him every so often. Kind. I felt better for the fallen man, for now he was free from the shameful emasculation of being not helped by a middle aged female who could be his daughter.

Pang. My mother had been too weak to walk for a year or two. She had home nurses and my brother's devoted care. She had her daughter's voice on a telephone across the country, her occasional visits. Her tenacity was daunting, because life appeared to be done with her, but she was not done with it.

Most car accidents happen a mile from home, as do falls. I unclipped the weighty gym bag slung across the fallen man's back as the neighbor and I picked him up under his armpits. He was dazed and unsteady on his feet. We got him up the path, up the wooden staircase, and sat him down in a wood deck chair. The helpful neighbor left to finish his podcast. The dog sniffed the strange deck.

Good looking dog!, the sitting man barked.

Men do admire the dog's quintessential canine good looks.

Can I get you some water?

Gesturing at the closed door, he said, *Open the front door-*

He was rational, appraising the situation. The door was locked and I asked if he had a key.

Check my bag.

Inside the gym bag was the world's saddest six pack of beer. He intuited my judgment.

"I went to the store. Don't like to drive. Key must be in my pocket." He felt around in his baggy shorts pockets, pilled and discolored from washing and drying on high, but not lately. Pang. My father's nipple high gray gym pants.

I could do his laundry, but I backed away from the thought.

He produced the key, I opened the door. His house was dark compared with the bright summer day.

Does anyone live here with you?

Wife died a year ago.

I'm so sorry.

(Grunt)

Do you have any family I can call?

What for?

Sometimes bluntness softens the blow. *Well, you fell, and you should get checked out. Just in case.*

Oh. I must have gotten dizzy.

The gravel is tricky there. I saw you go down.

You did. It was a statement of fact, one of several facts he was gathering.

I glanced at the other hiking pole in the corner by the door, and suggested two poles might be better. He grunted noncommittally, a Stoic. His eyes were those of a bright, decent man who was having a time of old age and knew it- a good sign. It would be both better and worse when he no longer remembered.

Do you do any scuba diving? My ever curious but demented father asked every few minutes, usually to the same person. Scuba diving was his passion. In his dementia he dove places he had never been- Japan, the Red Sea, the Great Barrier Reef. Lucky duck-

I walk everyday, he said.

That's a good thing to do.

We talked for a while. I must have gotten him a glass of water.

He did not have dementia, though I was concerned he had had a mini stroke. My mother had a couple of those: once sitting in a car with old friends, and before that, when her doctor suggested she could not see well enough to drive. *Pang*. She sits in the back of her friend's car on the way to dinner, something passing behind her eyes- a blip, or a sizzling current- and her face getting the drawn, shrouded look, and her sitting quietly, terrified, in someone else's car in the dark. With the doctor, it was his accusation of incompetence which triggered the mini stroke, she said. Her pride, her freedom. *Pang*.

'Will' was the fallen walker's name. Will's son is a doctor up the way and he has a sister in Petaluma. I suggested he call them and let them know he had a fall. He might want to get checked out just in case, or I could take him to the doctor in the morning.

'No, I'm fine.'

Let me give you my number. Thwack of a tennis ball. *Pong*. I had forgotten about the people playing tennis.

Producing a small ipad to impress me with his tech savvy, I typed in my name and address and number. I assumed correctly that he would never use it. Still, it made me feel better.

Pang. My father sitting in front of the old beige computer, frame covered in yellow sticky notes. Directions on a yellow legal pad. Time passing slowly, trying to get on the wonderful new Internet. His perseverance went hand in glove with his ironclad will- 'the will to power', I called him in my mind, after my old anti-hero Nietzsche. Time stopped with George Bush Sr, the last president he could recall. *This Barack Obama is wonderful*, which shows that one may regain sanity with dementia. My father posed a problem for the people around him: perseverance plus dementia plus physical vitality plus the Internet conjured a ring of Hell Dante never imagined. It

was comical in an awful way, him looking at the legal pad illegible with directions, then yelling downstairs to my mom for the IT guy's number, and my mother sighing and telling him it was on the sticky note on the computer, over and over again. Eternal Recurrence, Samsara, dementia.

Pong. Pang. Pong. My mother always said at the mention of some pain or sorrow, *This too shall pass.* Not fast enough I would add.

I sat with Will for a while, and when he seemed to be alright, I told him the dog needed walking and I would stop on my way back.

Why?

To check on you, as if the danger had passed. I walked on, and he stayed put.

When we returned, he was much clearer, almost jocular in his gruff old man way. He told me what he makes for dinner, how he needs some new ideas; how he doesn't like to drive, how it is bad for the environment. Likes to walk. Walks up to seven miles a day. Gotta do something.

Good reason, I said.

I asked around the club and the neighborhood if anyone knew him. The manager looked at the computer list of members and found him. Wife died a year ago. He sometimes had french fries for lunch, the bartender, a sweet faced elder with light pink lipstick and sticky blonde bob offered. Someone else said he was friends with the man next door, who knew everyone. I knocked on the neighbor's door, he'd look in on him, he said. Will's an old friend.

Next door to my parents lived Bob, who was kind and looked for my father when he wandered off. When my father died, my mother asked Bob to be a pallbearer. He had been in the local paper for illegal tampering with city contracts and was awaiting sentencing. A disgraced criminal to the town, to us he was a hero.

The next day I brought Will's *NY Review of Books* from his listing mailbox. William H. Ball. He wasn't home. I hoped he wasn't gone.

He returned. I saw him on his porch afternoons for a while. I would make up for not being present for my own parents' decline and death across the country. I got a touch of covid, and couldn't stop by for a few weeks. One day the blue Subaru was gone. I hoped he was visiting relatives, and that they were driving. Another day I brought him some of my daughter's blueberry cobbler, which he said wasn't bad, but not her best, apparently.

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When I see the bartender at the club, she smiles warmly at me because she lives alone and 'hopes someone would look out for me like that'. I glow inside when she says that, while feeling guilty. I hoped my parents in heaven would see me checking on Will, even though my mother didn't believe in heaven, only hell, and she would be proud. I thought of what she did for people, how she planted daffodils outside her sick friend's window. At least she could see something beautiful from her sick bed. My mother's friend told me that at my father's wake. It still makes my throat thick, and it makes me love my mother and daffodils even more.

I imagined I would invite Will over for dinner, have my son change light bulbs for him. My husband would take Will up as a surrogate father figure, as his father was not currently available. I pictured my husband and son helping Will up our staircase. Sitting at our dinner table, or outside on the patio, grunting about my bad food.

August came and we went to Europe on our first real post-pandemic vacation. Then school started, and life got busy again, and I only saw William H. Ball, the walking man, walking. I checked his porch on my way to swim or dog walk. Usually he was not.

My mother hated hypocrites and my father said a foolish consistency was the hobgoblin of small minds. Wordsworth wrote that, and he also wrote of daffodils ‘tossing their heads in sprightly dance’. Between my parents’ disparate world views, daffodils were a good compromise.

When I see the walking man, he makes a point to ask about the kids, to remember. He has a twinkle in his eye which makes his gruff manner unassailable. He exercises his memory. I admire that. He is self aware. He is a smart, able man. He has a strong moral code, classic Stoic. He reminds me of my family, their thoughtfully lived lives. I am familiar with the type, though I’m not one by nature.

There was the chance, I reminded myself, that this stretch of Will’s late life struggle was a phase, and that he might take a turn toward renewed health at any moment, as surely as things could go the other way. He was still mourning and getting used to being alone. Things change. Most likely, things would continue ‘as is’ for a long stretch on a familiar road, the gravel shifting underfoot in small, daily increments.

A year later, I see him walking all over town, as I drive by- up hills, down hills, across streets, downtown. Every day this week. Miles and miles of walking. My head and neck are much better most days, I am no longer violently despairing, and I learned in a subsequent conversation that he cracked some ribs with that fall a year ago. He’s got old fashioned grit. I admire him.

One day recently, he walked by my house as I rushed down our front steps. I told him he was looking good; he barked, “You would too if you weren’t dressed like a car mechanic.” I grinned in my blue jumpsuit and we went our separate ways, me in my car and he on foot. He still walked with only one pole. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” my mother used to say.

