
June 2014

The Man Who Walked Too Much

Michael Dwyer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate>



Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Dwyer, Michael (2014) "The Man Who Walked Too Much," *The Laureate*: Vol. 8 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol8/iss1/19>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Laureate by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

THE MAN WHO WALKED TOO MUCH

Michael Dwyer

36

He found his face in the muddy footprints. However, as he stood on the deserted street staring solemnly into his face's reflection in the puddle, he reminded himself that it was not as if he had been following these footprints. It was not as if he had any inclination to arrive at a fixed destination. Now, mind you, he had inclinations, but these inclinations were not inscribed in stone. Rather, they were the capricious breath of a breeze, and although they were capricious, they were by no means transient. Like a breeze, they were always present in some way. Even if he could not feel them, he knew they were there, hovering over him invisibly and tantalizingly, like mixed radio waves from heaven.

But had this impulse that he felt inside himself really brought him to such a low place? He did not care about the indignity of dirt. But rather, his face's reflection in the puddle was a message of defeat. Cruel earth, or maybe a demon, was sending him a concise, irrefutable letter: "To this point you will come, and transcend no more." His face was in a prison from which there was no escape. What's more, the prison had spacious windows from which he could see the glory of the outside world, only to be denied its splendor. His reflection was a dead corpse that was allowed to float to the surface with eyes wide open. And the contagious, dying breath of the corpse reverberated throughout his heart, leaving nothing but the ripple of unbreakable solitude.

Solitude was always the mood of Shadow Oaks at this time of night. Large, brick houses suffocated in ivy filled the neighborhood, so perhaps his feeling of solitude was unjustified. But houses have no life. They only give the impression of life.

The yards in Shadow Oaks, like yards in any respectable neighborhood, were neatly trimmed. Water sprinklers came on every night to cover the grass with the gloss of life. Garage doors stared down each passerby with the impenetrable gaze of a casino dealer. The windows were like eyes, but they had no ability to see; rather, they were the portals into the soul of the house. They spoke of living and dying, waking and sleeping, eating, doing, trying, failing. If the owners of the house knew what the windows told the passerby, they would burn the house to the ground and eat the ashes. And this is because the windows hold a secret. Nobody can articulate this secret, because

the secret is a whisper, and nobody has time nor the ability to whisper. Nobody wants to whisper, because they are afraid of what they might hear.

Light emanated from the house, and it irritated the boy, because it forced him to see his reflection in the puddle. But the light also saved him from his solitude, because if it were not for the light, he never would have seen the man who walked too much.

The boy's first reaction to seeing the man was fear, because he did not know where the man had come from. The man had appeared out of nowhere, and was less than a foot away from the boy, staring into his eyes. But the boy brushed away his fear as nothing but overworked imagination.

The man dressed lightly, despite the cold drizzling. He wore a white T-shirt and tattered blue jeans. Water had seeped in and soaked his dirty tennis shoes, but he seemed comfortable, and merely stood in front of the boy, switching his gaze back and forth from the boy to the puddle. The man was young and old at the same time. His hair was golden brown and his skin was the perfect shade of tan. He was thin and muscular and he carried himself with ease and agility. But he did not feel young to the boy. His skin may have been smooth and spotless, but one could almost make out wrinkles in his gray eyes, as if the tightly wound material that filled the sockets would unravel and fall out at any minute. He moved with agility, but he had no energy. His muscles did not sing like a young man's. Rather, they whispered like a dying man whispers his last wishes on his death bed. These muscles had one wish, and that was to tell the story of this man's journey. Their wish filled the air with the sharp gentleness of a million rough, disjunctive breaths, and beat down on the boy's ears with the force of a fierce rain storm.

The boy saw that the puddle now contained the man's face as well as his own. This gave him a deep feeling of connection to the man, as if he was the only one who understood what it meant to be trapped. At that point, the boy realized that the man somehow knew everything about him. He knew about the fire that had caused the death of his entire family, and he knew that it was the boy's mistake that caused the fire. He knew that the boy had been a fugitive ever since that day. The boy did not know how the man knew these things, nor did he care. All he cared about was the sympathy he saw in the man's eyes.

He was overjoyed when the man first spoke, because he had not been spoken to in a long time.

"I've been everywhere," said the man. His voice was raspy, as if he had overused it, but also soft, as if he was hesitant to speak. He continued to stare into the puddle. "I've been everywhere," he repeated. "I've been everywhere, and I've seen everything. My legs are tired, because I have walked far too long without stopping."

“What have you seen?” the boy asked dreamily. He had begun to feel sleepy when he first saw the man.

“I’ve seen too much.”

“You know what they said?” the boy asked with sad resignation and bitterness. It was the kind of bitterness that demanded a punishment against life itself, and that is the worst kind, because life cannot be punished. Life is not tangible; she does not even have a definition. She is an adulteress without a name. “They said it was my fault.”

“I know, I know. I know everything,” the man said soothingly, as he put his hand gently on the boy’s shoulder. As the boy looked up at him with gratefulness, he noticed that the man looked taller than he had at first. But he brushed his thought away as more overworked imagination. If the street had been lighter, the boy might have seen the ecstasy in the man’s smile. He may have noticed that the smile was unusually large, and that the ecstasy resembled insanity. Perhaps things would have turned out better for the boy.

“What have you seen?” the boy asked again, and as he asked, the man noticed his watery eyes, and could see his own reflection in them. He could see very clearly in the dark, because his vision was unlike that of anyone else. He saw the world through a grey lens. Light, dark, and color did not matter to such a viewer. There was only one shade and one color, and that did not even deserve to be called a color.

“I’ve seen too much. I’ve seen thousands of dirt specks spread across the city. I’ve seen a sleeping baby in a lethargic mother’s arms, a baby who doesn’t know the life she’ll be waking to. I’ve seen a man love food more than he loves his own children. I’ve seen a grandmother lying in bed with pneumonia, waiting for the phone to ring. I’ve seen a bird’s eggs crushed and smeared upon the cement. I’ve felt the cold of night after the fire dies down, and I know the emptiness that comes from seeing the sun appear after a night without sleep. I’ve tasted the sweat of a child who wakes up after a nightmare and does not know if he can call to his parents for help. I’ve seen too much, I know too much, I’ve been in too many places that I wish no longer existed.”

The boy began to tell the man that he understood his despair, but as he looked up, he was greeted with a sight more amazing than any he had hoped for. A series of fireworks was slowly growing and enclosing them in a tight circle that reached up into the sky. Nothing was visible outside of this circle, and it was gradually coming in upon them like a fire engulfs a forest. But he did not care, because the fireworks were beautiful. He loved them so much that he thought it would be a tragedy if he did not get eaten by the enormous sparks. And then flames began to appear, which only made the experience more incredible. He felt the intense heat, the heat that should have

killed him in an instant, but he did not die. It was as if he had known this fire all his life. He wanted the fire to dig down underneath his skin and fill his entire body.

The fire spoke to the boy in the crackling of the fireworks. It told him to look down, and as he looked down, he realized that the road was no longer pavement, but gold. This gold, however, was not only one color, but was composed of every color the boy had ever seen. It was not as if different spots of the street held different colors. Rather, every inch contained every color that existed. But these colors did not lose their identity in this perfect blend. Red did not lose itself amidst the yellow and green. On the contrary, red was more red than it had ever been before. The colors were alive and they were speaking to the boy in the clearest whisper he had ever heard. This whisper was soft but vibrant. It was music. The music was coming from everywhere in the circle of fire. It was even coming from within the boy. He was not singing, but there was something inside him singing, and he could hear it very clearly.

As he surveyed the circle, his eyes came upon the man, and he was shocked at what he saw. The man was staggering around the circle, slouching over and clutching his stomach as if he were about to vomit. His young tanned skin was slowly peeling away, giving way to wrinkled skin. His golden brown hair was scattered about the ground, and he now had thin white hair that lowered to the ground and wound its way around his feet, causing him to continually trip and then struggle back up. Now he was down on his knees, and he ceased to struggle to get up, but only looked at the boy helplessly, the way a muzzled dog looks at his master right before he is put to sleep.

The boy knew why he was giving him that betrayed look. The man knew what the boy was thinking, because he could hear the music playing in the boy's chest, and he knew what it was singing to the boy. He knew what the notes meant, and he knew that the boy was listening to the notes. The notes were telling him to leave the old, helpless man, because there was nothing he could do for him. They were telling the boy to walk into the fire that he had always longed to walk into, to follow where the music led, to the place where the music never stopped. In this place, there would be no distinction between music and sound. The brush of a shoe against a group of pebbles would be music. The hum of a fish tank would be music. His own thoughts would be music. In this place, people never stopped dancing, because they remembered that there was nothing worth doing besides dancing.

The boy obeyed the music, but as he began to walk away from the man, he heard his hoarse voice.

"I can help you," the man said calmly.

The boy stopped and turned around, bewildered. How could the man possibly help him? The music was leading him toward a place that he had an

insatiable nostalgia for his whole life. He did not know what he was longing for, but he knew that a small part of this place lived deep within him.

“Do you think this is real?” the man spoke with what appeared to be sincerity and concern. “This is nothing. This is a dream, and as far as I know, dreams can do nothing but mock us.”

The boy did not want to believe him. He wanted to believe that this was real, that this was something nobody could snatch from him. But he remembered the sound of the man’s voice before he was transformed, the sympathy that had been so alluring.

As the boy stood there thinking, the man opened his hand and beckoned.

“I can save you. This is an illusion. I can show you what reality is, and together, we can find ways to live. I don’t promise a miracle, but I do promise experience. And most importantly, I promise you a shoulder to hide in.”

The boy began to feel pity and guilt. How could he just leave this man to die? He had been his friend, the only true friend he had ever had. The man knew everything about the boy, and he had listened with sympathy. He began to walk toward the man, but as he did, the music inside him began to sound less like music and more like noise, as if it were nothing but the beating of his own heart. He did not like this noise. It was the noise he had been forced to listen to his entire life. He stopped walking.

“I know why you hesitate. It is because you are forced to listen to what is inside of you. And you know that what is inside of you is the same as that which is outside of you, and you think that you can change neither. Let me tell you that you are right. There is no such thing as change. There are only events and people. We cannot change events. They are more inevitable than the beating of your heart, and you are nothing without them. You are an event. But you are a person, too! And you must remember that there are other people. There are people that will listen and care for you. That’s the only hope in life. There are people, and I am one of them.”

The man held out his hand farther, and this time the boy reached for it. He reached for what was real to him, for what he could see and touch. He reached for his shriveled hand and turned his back on the exploding beauty that was behind him, because he knew that the hand was real. He could feel the hairy, wrinkled skin lick his own skin with its cold, dry tongue. But he could not touch the music. The music was inside of him, and he thought that he could hear it, but what if it was nothing but imagination? He chose the ugly over the beautiful, because he could see the ugly so much more clearly than the beautiful.

The instant he grabbed the man's hand, the music died entirely, and the fire disappeared. They stood by the puddle with their hands clasped together, and it looked as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. A passerby would only see a young man holding a boy's hand.

The only thing that had changed was the boy's vision. He could see much more clearly in the dark than before, and he was confused and slightly frightened at the smile he saw in his friend's face.

"What now?" the boy asked

"Well, for starters, why don't you try letting go of my hand?" He was insulted at the man's mocking tone, and tried to yank his arm away.

"What are you doing?" the boy asked, and his heartbeat began to race, because the man was not who the boy thought he was. He was not the same man who had a shoulder to hide in. He was not the man who had seen everything and had the answers.

"I think you had better look at yourself before you start worrying about me," the man said, and his smile widened further than any smile the boy had ever seen. As the smile widened, he could feel his body stretch apart and sink into the puddle at the same time. He could not scream for help or see anything. All he could do was hear the noise of the man's smile as it sucked in all of the air around him, taking the boy's youth with it.