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Walk Away

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WALK AWAY

I. Attitude Walk

Mom and Dad wouldn't let me sleep over at Nick's. It was Grandpa's birthday, they said, so we all had to go out to eat. I sulked over dinner at the expensive restaurant. I made it known loud and clear that I wanted to be somewhere else.

Dad smiled and nodded while talking to Grandpa about the Bears and then whispered in my ear without changing his expression.

"Wipe that look off your face or I'll take you on a walk."

In fear of one of those "attitude walks" with Dad, I tried to shape up, but I kept thinking about playing Atari in Nick's basement. Dad took me on a walk after I didn't eat my salad. They'd put the wrong kind of dressing on it.

"Young man, this is your grandfather's birthday. You're very lucky to have a grandfather. You don't know how much I wish my grandfather and father were still alive," he said. "Now go back there and enjoy yourself. If you're not pleasant and we have to do this again, it will not be painless for you, do you understand?"

He didn't try to smile this time when he said it.

II. Booger Hike

It seemed that Dad never showed up on time. He was making me take piano lessons "to gain some culture." I hated them and never practiced. Every Thursday at 4:30 Dad would drop me off at the church and then drive home to work in his study. I'd watch him drive away and then regretfully walk inside to the lesson. Once I didn't go inside. I just messed around in the cemetery for a half hour pretending there were ghosts.

But Dad never picked me up on time. Mom always had to take Gayle to ballet on Thursdays, so I was stuck with Dad's rides. I'd wait ten minutes before I started to walk each day.

One time he never showed up. I walked slowly in the slushy weather, kicking "car boogers" in the middle of the roads until they broke into pieces too small

to boot, and then I found another and started over. It was almost three miles and an hour later I stepped in the door at home. I heard Dad's study alive with the sound of the electric typewriter.

"Oh, geez, I'm sorry, son!" he said when I burst into the basement room whining. "You walked that whole way? I'm sorry."

He didn't seem sorry, just amused. When Mom came home five minutes later he told me "It'll be our secret, okay?" I always wondered why.

III. Family Trek

In ninth grade one Sunday I wanted to watch the Cubs game at Nick's. It was late summer, warm outside, the first weekend of the school year.

"We're going for a family hike this afternoon," Dad announced after church. I explained that I had plans. "I know you do. We all do. We're going for a family trek."

I detested his old broomstick--"My staff," he explained. He put on old, out-of-style tennis shoes, dirty jeans, and a plain red t-shirt. He walked much faster than the rest of us, even though he looked like he was going to die. His chubby face bright red with perspiration; his red shirt soaked dark under his arms, at his belly button, and up on his chest, just above his protruding gut.

I was embarrassed when we passed Mr. Harris, my new government teacher, and his wife. I didn't want to hike, and I didn't like my Dad's presence most of all.

IV. Walk It Off

The doctor told Dad he had to drop 30 pounds and go on a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet because his heart wasn't in good condition. Dad took up walking every morning after he went to the sporting goods store and bought a pair of good walking shoes.

He always wanted Mom to go with him, but she never did. She'd have to go to the office--too many clients demanding her time, she said. He'd chuckle and then say the book was almost done. Then he'd tie his shoes and walk out the door. I never saw him until after basketball practice at dinner time.

V. Use Your Feet

"Dad, are you going to get me a car?"

"No, son. I thought we'd discussed this before."

"You said maybe."

"I did not. I said you don't need a car. This family, as a matter of fact, doesn't even need both of the cars we already have. I think I'll sell mine. We're all going to start to walk more."

VI. Walk To The Answers

"I really feel good, Gina," he told my mom one night at dinner.

"Kids, did you realize your father has lost 35 pounds?"

"How's the book, Dad?" Gayle asked.

"I'm stuck. I need to go for a few long walks and think about it."

VII. Hike In The Valley

The funeral procession moved slowly from the church to the cemetery. Mom just sobbed and held Gayle. I took it in as if it would pass and I'd wake up and have to go to the bathroom.

Reverend Smitts read something about "walking in the valley of the shadow of death." I tried to imagine what the valley looked like, and whether or not Dad had his walking shoes on.

VIII. Sitting On The Shelf

I entered the mall bookstore and searched the fiction shelves for the family name. His book was in stock. I felt proud and went back out to where my wife and children waited to walk out to the car.

Mick Dumke