

# The Walker

by Julia Smillie

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Sometimes I have crazy notions. I miss London a lot, as though it somehow crept under my skin when I was there, determined to taunt me by memory. I miss the excitement and I missed the action, but what I really miss the most, I realized, was walking. Hours and hours of endless walking, or purposeful jaunts to this destination or that – virtually all of it on foot.

I was thinking about this very thing as I got into my car earlier this week to run to Walgreens to pick up a couple of prescriptions. And I had something of an epiphany. It occurred to me that I could walk to Walgreens. I mean, why not? It wasn't that far, I reckoned. It would be exercise. And, more importantly, it would be...organic, natural and pure. So I tossed those car keys back on the rack, put on some comfy shoes and headed out.

I am one of the very few Americans whose house is more than two blocks from the nearest Walgreens – a planning oversight that will no doubt be swiftly rectified once Corporate gets wind. In fact, it may be rectifying itself as my local Walgreens seems to be edging nearer, with a temporarily relocated itself to an address that, it turns out, is approximately 1.3 miles from my home.

There was no reason, I assured myself, that I couldn't be as ardent a walker right here in my own neighborhood as I am known to be in foreign lands. Pretend, I told myself, that you are in London. Pretend that you are making your way from your swanky hotel in Kensington High Street (which you got for a song on Priceline, btw) to the Royal Albert Hall! Pretend you are winding through the streets of SoHo in search of cut-rate theater tickets clutched by cut-rate theater patrons! Pretend there is a roast chestnut outside Harrod's with your name etched into its charred exterior!

This clever mental ruse I conjured up proved no match for reality. It was a deception that lasted less than two blocks before I realized that to mistake Maplewood's streets for one of the oldest cities in the world would require the kind of mind-altering substances I tend to swear off.

It wasn't the 7-11 that threw me off. No, those are a dime a dozen in London. (Or should I say ten pence a dozen! Hah hah!) It was probably somewhere between the empty storefront where they once sold (or, more to the point, failed to sell) furniture shaped like oversized, fuzzy high-heeled shoes and the very loosely labeled "antiques" mall that I realized what would prove to me to be my biggest hurdle – this was *boring*.

I feared that not much would hold my interest on this constitutional stroll, not the way the Victorian architecture of London streets provide a rich and romantic historical backdrop to even the most pointless meanderings. Not the corner house newly inhabited by frat boys – with the sofa on the front porch and leftover "you honk, we drink" sign – nor the hand-painted wooden yard notice declaring "Grandma's House – Milk & Cookies, Hugs & Kisses." (Although I did

chuckle at the thought of shocking Grandma by ringing her bell, declaring myself the demented neighborhood columnist and demanding she put up on all fronts.)

Only the dead bird on the sidewalk provided the slightest interest. He (or she – I didn't wish to cause it further indignities by checking) seemed to be completely intact. It looked as though he had simply crawled up on the sidewalk and chosen to die. On his way to Walgreens, no doubt. If this poor little bugger had the power of flight and still gave up, what hope was there for me?

I decided to quit pretending to be the world's most disappointed tourist and to pretend instead that I was walking because I didn't own a car. Plenty of people in big cities don't own the transportation I take for granted. They walk all the time, I reasoned. Except if that was so, why was I the only person out on the sidewalks now?

I had another idea! What if I was one of those people who heart the environment, nobly committed to conserving gasoline – the Leo DiCaprio of the inner-ring suburbs? Thus I walked, like a committed environmentalist for about twenty feet until I saw another human out walking her dog! Suddenly I knew how Pam Flowers must have felt, only without the Iditarod. “Greetings!” I called out enthusiastically. “From whence doth thou hail, fellow traveler?”

“Um,” said the owner, an elderly woman, perhaps an early settler to these parts. She appeared friendly enough, but her dog clearly had no manners. It kept staring at me as if to say, “Why on earth are you walking without a canine? Can't you afford a car? Is that it? Are you poor? Or are you exercising? Is that what you're doing? Is this because of that extra fat you're packing on your ass there? What kind of loser walks?”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered crossly as I passed the pooch. I'd be damned if I'd let my spirits be dampened by a half-breed. I would persevere on – with strength of purpose. Even if, you know, I wasn't really clear any more what my purpose was, exactly. The only thing, in fact, that was becoming clear is that 1.3 miles is evidently farther than it used to be. You know, in my head. When I started the walk.

I busied myself with checking out the surroundings, limited as they might be. I was surprised at what I found. I passed a lot of buildings that, frankly, I must have driven past countless times without really noticing. I discovered that there are all kinds of businesses within a reasonable walking distance of my house. It cheered me up, to think of trotting out of the house on an errand to see my real estate agent, lawyer, dry cleaner, chiropractor or, ironically enough, my auto mechanic. “I'm off to sell the house!” I'd call to my no-doubt puzzled husband. “Popping round to file a law suit! Need a resume typed or some fine art framed while I'm out?”

There was even entertainment within walking distance of my house, if one were willing to suspend disbelief long enough to imagine I might actually join the geezers at the VFW for a game of Bingo on Wednesday afternoons. If I had money, I could take it to the local bank branch. And when my knees completely gave out from all this walking crap, I could get physical therapy right there – and a dental check-up to boot, right across the road!

Walking was reasonable, I concluded. It was feasible. It was also exhausting and suddenly I hit a roadblock, figuratively speaking, fortunately. I was finished. I'd more than made my point, even if I hadn't made my destination. Walgreens. Who needed it? What was I going for that I really needed anyway – my medication? Please. How bad can withdrawal really be?

The problem was that at the precise moment I decided I'd come far enough, I had passed the half way point. I paused in the middle of the sidewalk and glanced back. I could barely see the stoplight marking the turnoff to my street. In the other direction, the road curved upwards so that while I couldn't see it, I knew Walgreens loomed over the horizon. Either way I glanced, the road was uphill. How was that even possible? I felt just like George Clooney in *A Perfect Storm*, facing that big computer-generated wave and shouting, "You bitch!" without any notion of how unintentionally funny it would be. But I had no Markie Mark to keep me company.

And like Cap'n Clooney and his funky bunch, I decided to go on, if for no other reason than at least I knew if I got to Walgreens and collapsed, I could get some CPR and a Diet Coke. Not necessarily in that order. And I could probably steal some old lady's cab to get home in.

Sure enough, I made it to my pharmaceutical destination without much incident, unless you count when I reached the highway overpass and considered tossing myself over it just to avoid the walk home. If God were truly on my side, perhaps I'd land safely in the bed of a pickup truck heading toward my house. Odds were good, considering that half the flat beds in St. Louis are parked on my street at any given time. But I didn't jump.

At Walgreens, I crawled the aisles. I checked out lip goo and face stuff and various body powders. I picked over the magazine rack, treated myself to a bottle of water and generally wasted enough time that the Walgreens staff were eyeing me suspiciously.

I couldn't avoid it any longer. I was going to have to head home and even with all my many smarts, I couldn't figure out any way to get there except by walking. (No cabs. I checked.) Feeling overwhelmed, I headed back home. Despite a little hydration and much procrastination, I wasn't particularly thrilled about life on foot anymore. There was no romance in reaching the post office without a car. There was just...effort. Lots and lots of effort.

I barely glanced up this time as I passed the little store selling used crap, the one selling Irish crap and another selling some kind of crap I couldn't figure out. Not even the stall selling crappy frozen yogurt earned a longing glance from me. What I saw from my new vantage point was a lot of litter and three – count 'em three – more dead birds. Was this normal? I couldn't say, what with not being in the habit of walking or bird killing.

And since I wasn't exactly paying attention to the buildings I passed, it took me by surprise when I found myself back in the parking lot of the 7-11 a lot sooner than I had anticipated. Somehow, the return journey hadn't taken me nearly as long or so it seemed. I had let the walking take over and when I didn't make such a big deal out of it, it ceased being, well, a big deal.

If I lived long enough to make it through the front door, I'd be able to look back on everything I'd learned on my walk. I'd made so many discoveries and I knew that from here on out, it

would be impossible for me to ignore the neighbors I didn't know I had and the small businesses I didn't know existed. No, I'd see them all now, each and every time, if only as fleeting images blurring past the windshield of my car, on my way to Walgreens.