THE WALK

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I THINK SHE'S HAVING ANOTHER BREAKDOWN. Her eyes are glassy and lifeless, as if her skull has been replaced by a hollow shell. It's dark in her bedroom, the little apartment in San Pedro she moved into just before her breakdown in August. I'm hoping to go to sleep before she freaks out again. I'm exhausted from all the drama of the past few weeks, I've been working all day, and I want to push off until tomorrow the dreaded task of taking her to the hospital one more time.

It's around midnight when Laurie begins pulling off her blouse. Despite the fact that her mind plunged into a paranoid, bipolar hell several weeks before, she looks like she's glowing. As attractive as ever, if not more so. I don't stop her when, naked now, she begins rummaging through her closet. On a hanger in the back she finds a slinky dark dress, the one she wore to her high school prom eight years before. She slips it over her slim, ballerina-like frame, dances across the darkened room, climbs into bed with me, throws off the sheets, and begins stroking my limp cock in a lifeless, mechanical way, as if this is a duty she's being forced to perform. She goes down on me until I grow erect, then straddles me. She doesn't ask me to put on a condom.

Her first schizophrenic breakdown, when she was twenty-two, was triggered by her pregnancy. The fact that she's eager to fuck me without a condom just shows how much she isn't thinking.

I'm not sure what *my* excuse is. I let her do it. While in the midst of her schizophrenic haze, before being admitted to the psych ward, she wandered the streets of Long Beach and San Pedro for days and days. I have no idea where she's been, *or* who she's been with. But I let her do it anyway.

She leans down and kisses my neck, then sinks her teeth into my flesh. I pull away in pain. She grabs my throat with one hand and grips it, applying just a little pressure. She laughs manically as she begins to bounce up and

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 7, NO. 1, FALL 2013. Copyright © 2013. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

down, her legs chafing my hips. She stares up at nothing way above my head, near the ceiling, and whispers that she's seeing lights. Her grip on my throat tightens. I dig my fingernails into her bony thighs as her moans increase. When I feel I can't breathe anymore I tear her hand from my throat. She pouts for a second, disappointed, but doesn't stop. She closes her eyes and gasps in extreme ecstasy. For some reason this heightened state of awareness makes her easily aroused, even more so than usual. She orgasms three, four times in a row before I grunt her name and ejaculate inside her.

Only seconds later, I regret everything. What if . . . ?

Her eyes dart from side to side, as if she's tracking invisible fireflies. "They're not going away," she whispers—so low I almost can't hear it. Her laughter transforms into frightened whimpers. My cock shrinks inside her rapidly.

"I have to go to the hospital," she says.

"Right *now*?"

She doesn't respond. She swings her legs over me, slides off the mattress, and starts walking toward the door. I shoot up out of bed and grab her shoulder. "Laurie, *wait*," I say, as sternly as possible. As if I'm talking to a child.

She pauses, but only for a second.

"Let's just wait until morning," I say.

"*You* wait until morning. I need to go now. I'm going to die if I don't. I'm going to *die*."

"You shouldn't drive."

"I'll walk."

Her apartment is located at 530 West 37th St. just off South Pacific Ave. in San Pedro. The nearest hospital is Little Company of Mary at 1300 West 7th St. Thirty *very long* city blocks away. And it's nearing one A.M. I know she isn't bluffing. When she sinks into one of these moods nothing can persuade her from something she's intent on doing, even walking the entire length of Pacific Coast Highway. A walk she actually attempted not long ago.

She slips back into her gown.

"At least change your clothes," I say. She just shakes her head and breaks away. The idea of her walking through the deserted streets of San Pedro at one in the morning, barefoot, in an eight-year-old prom dress is just too Gothic-creepy for me to even imagine. Besides, San Pedro's not the place you want to be wandering around this late at night, particularly if you're a

pretty twenty-six year old girl. San Pedro's not the safest city in Southern California; its most popular export *and* import seems to be black tar heroin. All kinds of freaks are shambling around on the streets this late at night, most of them looking to score. Who knows what'll happen to her if she tries to get to the hospital by herself?

I follow her into the living room, attempting to be as quiet as possible. She shares the apartment with a couple of waitresses she used to work with at Joe's Crab Shack in Redondo Beach. Only two weeks after they moved in together, *surprise*, Laurie's brain turned itself inside out. And Laurie lost her job.

I had been dating her for seven months before the breakdown transformed her into someone else. She had never bothered to tell me about her little mental "problem." Was she ashamed? In denial? Outright lying? I don't know for sure. All I know is that I had to discover the secret for myself. It was quite shocking, that first night, to see her suddenly *change* like that. For the first time I think I understood where the myth of possession came from.

She opens the sliding glass door that leads out onto the first floor balcony, climbs out onto 37th St., and begins walking. Very fast.

"*Laurie*," I yell while grabbing her shoulder again. I'm naked in the cold night air. "*Please* let me go with you. Just wait here while I get dressed. You can't go alone. Do you understand?"

She's staring right through me. She clasps her hands in front of her stomach, casts her gaze at the ground like a child, and nods yes.

"Okay, stay right here," I repeat. I run into Laurie's bedroom, throw on my clothes, then dash outside to the balcony. This doesn't take me more than a couple of minutes, if that. But by the time I get back she's nowhere to be seen.

"Son of a *bitch*," I mutter beneath my breath, paralyzed for a moment with indecision and worry.

* * *

"I've been looking forward to going to Ireland for a long time," Laurie says, "but I don't have to, you know, get all *wild* when I'm over there. I don't want to ruin what I have with you."

I can see the position of her body when she says this. Smoking a cigarette on the patio of an outdoor diner in Redondo Beach at four in the morning,

her long legs crossed, the first gray patches of dawn lightening the sky high above her head. I'm exhausted. We've already had sex twice tonight. We've spent hours in her bed just talking in between. This is an important night, the first time we ever had the courage to be honest with each other. The first time we ever had sex.

I'm so relieved when she tells me about Ireland, when she assures me she'll be with no one else but me.

But when she gets back from Ireland she tells me, only seconds after fucking me again, "Maybe I shouldn't even say this, but, well, I'm not the type to have a one-night stand, but, well, you know, something happened while I was in Ireland . . . but it was just because it was over *there*. That kind of thing wouldn't happen here."

It's early in the morning in the back seat of her car as we lie in each other's arms watching the sun rise over the steep cliffs of Malaga Cove up in Palos Verdes. The fresh smell of salt water fills the air. I wrap my arms around her and stroke her hair and say, "Listen, I don't own your body. I don't have any control over what you do, but I'm telling you right now, I don't intend on having sex with anybody else while I'm seeing you."

She says nothing.

Seven days later we're in the parking lot of an all-night donut shop in her hometown, the isolated desert city of Riverside, when she tells me she agrees. Just like that. In the middle of an unrelated conversation about skeletons.

"I just want to be with you from now on," she says, "no one else." She smiles. "You know . . . I haven't said that to too many people. Only two, in fact." Then she laughs nervously, flicks the bangs out her eyes. "I guess I shouldn't have said that. About you being one of the two, I mean. Don't want to feed that massive ego of yours." Then veers back into whatever frivolous and yet crucial discussion we were having at the time.

So, for months we're doing almost nothing except laughing, eating, being stupid. We visit Ella Fitzgerald's star on the Walk of Fame (Lady Ella is Laurie's hero, the singer she most wants to emulate). Eat banana pudding at three in the morning at Nancy's (Laurie's favorite diner in Redondo Beach). Explore the creepy interior of a graffiti-laden storm drain up in Palos Verdes. Try to record the sounds of the dead at an old cemetery in Riverside. Explore the forbidden catacombs beneath Riverside's historic Mission Inn (for which you can get arrested, as the catacombs are unsafe and closed off to the public). Play like children on the rocky cliffs above Sunken City in San

Pedro. See *Danger: Diabolik* at The Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood. Drink vanilla French sodas at Nova Express (a café on Fairfax in Los Angeles) while marveling over their massive collection of plush Cthulhu dolls and 1980s Voltron action figures. Visit the staircase in Silverlake where Laurel and Hardy once attempted to deliver a grand piano. Write crazy stories back and forth while eating greasy curly fries at Fred 62 in Los Feliz. Take the train down to San Diego and wander the antiquated cobblestone streets of Old Town with no particular destination in mind. Watch Jimmy Stewart movies (*Harvey*, *Rear Window*, *The Glenn Miller Story*) in her bedroom in between taking late night strolls on the beach, holding hands and watching the phosphorescent glow of the waves roll in slowly over our bare feet.

No arguments. No drama.

Everything's *Perfect.*

For seven months.

* * *

I don't even have a jacket and it's bitter freezing cold outside. I slide the glass door shut, but don't have time to lock it. I run up to South Pacific Ave. and glance from left to right, trying to spot her lithe figure in all that darkness. Many, many blocks away I see a distant dot walking east on Pacific.

Is that her? How the fuck did she get so far away this damn quick?

I run after the figure. It takes me awhile to catch up. I slow down as I reach her side, already out of breath. "Laurie," I say, "why didn't you just stay *put*?"

She glances through me again. "I'm going to die. You don't have to come. Go back to sleep."

"No, Laurie, I *have* to come. You can't do this by yourself."

She nods. For a second she smiles, reaches out, squeezes my hand. Then lets it drop to my side limply and continues walking. . . .

We walk for well over an hour. On the corner of 29th and Pacific we pass a suspicious group of teenagers—and what looks like a bunch of old homeless men—gathered under a lamp post. They yell out offensive comments to Laurie as we pass, offering bottles of alcohol for her attention. Laurie doesn't seem to notice. I pray they don't approach us.

And yet at the same time I just want all of this absurd madness to end, no matter how tragically.

But their catcalls fade behind us.

Sometime after two A.M. we stroll into the Emergency Room of Little Company of Mary. Laurie walks right up to the front desk and says, "I think I'm having a breakdown." The nurse behind the desk reacts calmly to this. She stares into Laurie's eyes and can see that something is, in fact, wrong. She asks her a series of perfunctory questions. Laurie answers most of them in a robotic tone. Sometimes she'll space out, though, and I have to answer the rest.

We wait in the Emergency Room so god damn long. A young black man is bleeding next to us, a victim of some kind of knife wound. Laurie and I chat while sitting in the vinyl-backed chair—about what I can't recall. She thanks me for bringing her here at one point, despite the fact that I feel as if *she's* the one who brought *me* here.

A doctor finally agrees to see us, even though the man next to us is still bleeding. The doctor takes us into a little room in the back. By the time this happens Laurie has calmed down. Her eyes have become somewhat less glassy. She's more coherent. She's no longer afraid of dying. Or seeing the strange, darting lights above her head.

The young doctor, a handsome blond in his late twenties, asks Laurie to sit on the edge of a table. He says, "Can you tell me what's wrong?"

Laurie says nothing. Slowly, she turns her head towards me and gives me a frightened look. A chill skinnies up my spine. I feel as if a thousand tiny knives are shooting out of her pupils and penetrating my skin. The doctor glances at me, worried.

"No," she whispers.

The doctor says, "Do you feel safe to talk around . . . *him*?"

Laurie shakes her head no.

The doctor turns toward me and says, "Sir, why don't you step outside for a moment."

I can't believe it. Only a few minutes before she was cuddling up next to me in the Emergency Room and thanking me for looking out for her safety. I don't know what to say. The slightest protest will make me look more unstable than Laurie herself.

"Okay . . . ," I say. I get up and wait just outside the door. I stand in the antiseptic white hallway, biting a cuticle on my thumb, wondering what the hell's she's telling him in there. Is she accusing me of assaulting her or something? She's accused me of far worse. If so, they're going to have to call the

cops. I'll end up in jail. It doesn't matter how nuts Laurie is. It'll take the cops at least twenty-four hours to sort through all the nonsense.

I consider bailing, but that'll make me look even more guilty than I already am. Wait a minute . . . *am* I guilty? What have I done? Nothing. I don't *think* I've done anything wrong, at least. But Laurie has accused me of so many horrible things since her breakdown that I've begun to believe some of them—just a little bit. Why not? Hell, maybe I really *am* an international terrorist and a CIA agent and a Satanist. Maybe all the pain in the world really *is* my fault.

After an eternity, or maybe twenty minutes (who knows?), the handsome young doctor strolls out of the room and tells me I can go back in with Laurie. He places his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. Hard. "She'll be okay," he says. "I'm giving her a prescription for _____." I don't remember the exact name of the drug. Risperdal? "Make sure she takes it, per the directions. Understand? And then tomorrow you need to make sure she sees her normal physician about further treatment . . . if you really care about her. It's hard work taking care of people like this. You *do* understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

I nod. "Yes, sir, doctor," I say. He pats me on the shoulder twice, hard, as if this gesture is meant as a warning.

That's it? That's what we've come all this way for? I'm almost disappointed that she really isn't dying.

I go back into the room and sit in a metal chair beside Laurie's table. I'm trying so hard not to get annoyed. "Laurie," I say.

"Yes?" She stares at me innocently.

"Why . . . why did you look at me that way just now?"

"What way?" All innocent.

"Like you were afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you."

If not for her insanity, I would have to conclude that she's playing some kind of sick game with me. But she is crazy, and she didn't act like this at all before the breakdown, so I don't know what to think—about *anything*. All previous reference points are useless in this relationship.

"What did you tell the doctor about me?" I ask.

"Nothing." She grins like an evil version of The Cheshire Cat. "I feel better now. I just want to go home." She gets up off the table, opens the door,

walks into the hallway, then begins strolling back toward the Emergency Room.

"Wait a minute," I say, "we have to wait for the prescription."

"Oh, I don't want it." Casual as can be. As if she's refusing a bottle of Pepsi offered to her at a picnic.

"But . . . that's why we came here, isn't it?"

"No. I'm not dying now. Let's just go home." She walks through the middle of the Emergency Room and out into the early morning darkness. I don't know what time it is, but it's so black I know the sun will be rising soon.

"I can't fuckin' believe this," I say to her on the sidewalk outside. "You dragged me all the way here for nothing, so you could just turn right around and go home?"

She stares at me as if *I'm* insane. "I didn't ask you to come along."

"Let's at least call a cab then."

"No. I'd rather walk."

I slam my fist into a metal stop sign standing on the street corner. "What the fuck? Are you trying to drive me fuckin' *crazy*?"

She laughs, still walking, me trailing behind her. Like always. "No," she says, "you're driving yourself crazy."

I plead with her for several minutes to let me call a cab for the two of us. She tells me I can call a cab for myself if I want, but she feels like walking. Of course, I can't let her take that route all by herself. So I follow her every step of the way. Fortunately, the wolf pack on 29th has already dispersed by the time we pass that corner again. Even they aren't mad enough to be out this early.

And as we walk, we watch the sun rise. Under other circumstances, it would've been a beautiful sight.

It must be almost six o'clock in the morning by the time we reach her apartment. We re-enter through the sliding glass door. Appearing to be genuinely puzzled, she asks why I didn't lock it. I explain there wasn't enough time.

"Besides," I say, "if I'd locked it we never would've been able to get back in."

"Oh," she says.

We sit at her kitchen table at dawn and eat a bowl of cereal. Gorilla Munch. Realistic illustrations of hairy primates adorn the brightly colored

box. She tells me the DNA of a gorilla is 98% identical to that of a human being (she read that somewhere once). She also tells me she's on a diet, and doesn't want to consume anything too sugary. Hence the Gorilla Munch. And yet she's just a little over 100 pounds. She's so willowy, like a phantom impression of Laurie. Only briefly now do I catch glimpse of the laughing little sprite I fell in love with last February.

Laurie's roommate, Rebecca, wakes up to get ready for work. She sees Laurie in her gown and asks, "Are you guys just getting up or going to bed?"

"Going to bed," I say, so exhausted I can barely even think.

Rebecca nods and retreats into the shower, not interested in knowing any further details.

After we're done eating, Laurie asks me if I'm ready to go to sleep.

"I think so," I say.

We draw the curtains tight. I pull off all my clothes and climb beneath the covers. Laurie's ghost throws off her gown and slips into bed behind me, but not before retrieving an object from a cluttered bottom drawer in her dresser. She carefully places the small object on the night stand beside my head. It's an unopened bottle of psych meds—a prescription from many weeks before, judging by the date on the label. I realize then that Laurie never even needed to go to the hospital. So why dig out these meds *now*? As insurance? Just in case? Is she using them to mock me?

I don't bother to ask.

She presses her warm body against my spine, wraps her arms around me, kisses me on the back of the neck and whispers, "Good night, babe."

"Good night," I say. As if we're an old married couple on a mundane summer evening. Two figures in a Rockwell painting from a 1950s *Saturday Evening Post* cover.

Jesus, I think, what the fuck am I *doing* here? I pat the warm hand that lies on my stomach. I wonder if my hands are freezing. Hers feel so feverish and hot. She falls asleep within seconds.

Her words echo inside my head: *You're driving yourself crazy.*

Maybe she's right. I *am* driving myself crazy.

On purpose?

Because I think somehow everything's going to return to normal with the help of a magic bottle?

I wish I could walk to a hospital and get that question answered from a young professional in a white lab coat. *You* do *understand what I'm saying,*

don't you? Yes, doctor, I do. I understand. I'm an international terrorist and a CIA agent and a Satanist. I drove my girlfriend into madness with the evil, psychokinetic powers buried deep within my mind. All the pain in the world is my fault and mine alone. I admit it. I assaulted my girlfriend—or so she'll tell me tomorrow or the next day or the day after that. I understand everything, doc. I'm just as crazy as she is. Yes, better to have the diagnosis confirmed by a medical expert such as yourself than this slow, confusing disintegration into complete numbness. I can't think or feel anything anymore. And I don't want to. Is that wrong of me, doc?

Is it?

I just stare at that little plastic bottle on the night stand for a very long time as the room grows brighter and brighter. The sunlight makes the amber bottle glow slightly, as if something magical is stored within.

But I'll never know for certain, because she'll never open the bottle.

And Laurie's ghost will grow fainter and fainter. And sooner or later I'll fade away along with her.

I climb out of bed quietly, throw on my clothes, and leave through the sliding glass door. I lock it because I tell myself I'm never coming back.

I leave Laurie's sleeping ghost behind me.

I walk.