

## **Walking**

by **Michelle Cacho-Negrete**

My experience is the same as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's who said, "My mind only works with my legs." I've written every essay, thesis, short story on my feet. My mother insisted I was even a rambler *in utero*, the truth of that confirmed by an article proclaiming babies walk in the womb. They press their tiny feet against the uterine wall and push off, those first circular strolls an introduction to the exhilaration of movement. My mother was an incessant walker: the mile and a half to the Brooklyn/Manhattan subway, then climbing stairs to her third-floor job as a file clerk, enjoying a brisk lunch-time jaunt, and later reversing the sequence to go home.

Walking is a legacy from our tree-dwelling ancestors who evolved into bipedal hunter-gathers, their survival dependent upon studying what was around them and knowing when it was time to leave. My grandparents, thousands of years later, also knew when to leave, escaping the Russian pogroms by crossing the Carpathian Mountains, my seven-year-old mother and her younger sister in hand. They made their circuitous way through Eastern Europe, finally reaching that most walkable of cities, New York. My mother had very faint memories of the seemingly endless journey, her wary parents avoiding Russian soldiers, locating sheltered places to sleep, finding wild sorrel, mushrooms, and berries, among other plants, to eat while pointing out the beauty around them. The ability to utilize and take pleasure in everything around her was seamlessly integrated into my childhood with my mother as my guide and companion. Every weekend was a long walk through Brooklyn or over the bridge into Manhattan. Nothing escaped my/her attention: a salvageable object on the sidewalk: chairs, picture frames, dishes, all dragged home on the bus. She pointed out the brilliant red paisley of a

babushka on a grey-clad woman, an elderly couple holding hands, painted flowers on brick tenement walls, a cat in a window soaking up sun. She discovered obscure places to buy a nosh or an egg-cream or second-hand books. We couldn't afford travel to exotic locations, but Manhattan houses a multitude of cultures and the streets blazed with color all summer long. The fierce masks and long red and gold bodies of dragons wound through Chinatown among bowls of noodles, crispy egg rolls and stir-fry scenting the streets. Devout followers trailed the statue of St. Christopher carried on men's backs, pastry carts of Cannoli, tiramisu, and zeppole marking his route. Lively guitar music and pungent Puerto Rican food seduced passing strangers on celebration days. The bold costumes of African dancers were slashes of brilliance keeping time with the hypnotic drumming in Central Park. The Manhattan air itself suggested somewhere strange and distant. Walking presented the corporeal manifestations of what I read in library books, photos transformed into a living tableau.

My first walk alone was to elementary school eight blocks away. The initial few days of kindergarten my mother walked with me, pointing out landmarks, reminding me of the red lights, of the only turn I needed to make and to be wary of strangers. Although docked of needed wages, she left work early or took time off to go in late that first week. After school I'd go to a neighborhood woman who took in children. My mother's concern was evidenced that first morning by her dark-rimmed eyes, but she laughed at my eagerness as I set out. I was filled with triumph when I reached school and wished I could just continue walking all day. That evening we celebrated my success with ice cream cones.

Walks through the city's ethnic neighborhoods encouraged fantasies of all the places I could go: China, Canada, France, my ancestor's Russia, and places in America. On that first independent journey I charted a path that felt uniquely mine. Walking granted me ownership of a particular swath of pavement on these city streets and imprinted them into my internal world. I grew to define neighborhood locations as a series of events as well as addresses. The kosher chicken shop where a butcher decapitated a hen then put her on the ground to

run around headless left me with weeks of nightmares. The long-gone Commodore theatre where my mother took me to see an Ingmar Bergman film as soon as I could read the subtitles, suggested I could delve into the complex psychic world of adults. That theatre acquired even further significance with my first kiss at fifteen in the last row of the balcony while watching "Exodus". The Italian sub shop represented my first day of adulthood (although I was only thirteen) because my mother bought me a sub to take for lunch at my first job.

One of the most significant landmarks was the deteriorating Catholic church, its spire tarnished and slightly bent, that housed my first serious encounter, at ten, with anti-Semitism. A Catholic acquaintance lured me in, pointed to the crucifix and said, "That's what we do to Jews." Terrified and hurt by her cruelty I recognized at that moment how unable we are to be in charge of our lives even as adults, a lesson I should have already learned from the Holocaust survivors who had flooded New York. I recognized that forces and currents in the world override our independence in ways we couldn't know about in advance. That understanding led to many political walks: Civilian Review Board, civil rights, anti-war(s), the environment, the slaughter of mustangs, ramps for the disabled, gay rights, and most recently the women's walk against Trump.

The City slid into focus when I walked; I became viscerally connected and its center. The City itself curved around me, my feet joined to the asphalt, the sky a shelter like the tents I'd made from sheets stretched over chairs. I was both myself and more. I walked to school, to the handball court, to a street a half mile away where friends and I hung out each evening, and over the Williamsburg Bridge, which I preferred to walk alone. I found the bridge mystical, possessing a beauty not usually associated with the polluted East River. Sunlight wove a pattern of flickering stars in the water, foamy waves like clouds and the percussive slam of water against the bridge's pilings was hypnotic, especially during the rare moments when no car or subway train was passing. The elevated train line cast alternating light and shadows, an ever-changing work of abstract art. I could stand in the middle of the bridge's walkway daydreaming, sometimes

not making it home until dusk or later. On those late nights my mother paced, worried about her daughter outside in the descending darkness.

All our parents warned us about the dangers of the streets at night, especially for girls, and forbade us to walk them alone. I did anyway. I felt invincible despite once being half-heartedly chased by a gang of Irish boys who saw the Jewish Star around my neck and screamed "Kike," and encountering a flasher where the street met the subway stairs. I loved the city once darkness shifted the landscape into something new; tenement alleys were narrow corridors of possibilities, roofs interrupted the hazy sky like a crazy quilt. I grew up nearly fearless in the streets, certain I could handle myself, certain that few streets were as dangerous as claimed by the uninitiated ... these streets were mine after all and I've never felt that sense of belonging anywhere else. I realize now that I was unexpectedly naive for a ghetto kid and was lucky that I suffered nothing more serious than that hair-raising chase and a later concussion from that same gang, only in daylight.

Walking offered unique experiences. On a solitary stroll through Greenwich Village I stood outside a building lost in a recording of a singer I'd never heard before. The plaintive, raw intensity of his voice seemed as natural as wind or water and a free-floating promise that my life would hold new and unique experiences. It was thirty years later before I heard that voice again. My second husband, a blues aficionado played a CD of the blues singer Robert Johnson and tears filled my eyes. Music was everywhere. I roamed the Village, and other neighborhoods, seeking it out. On weekends, alone or with friends, we'd walk, then settle into little cafes to listen to whoever was performing. If it was summer, we'd go from singer to singer, many performing in Washington Square Park, but there were few Village streets lacking musicians. Music reflected the culture's growing awareness of social injustice: Buffy Saint Marie, The Weavers, Barry McGuire, the Byrds, and of course Bob Dylan. I fixated on Dylan's words, "And revolution in the air;" it was certainly on the streets where I participated in demonstrations and marches. I attended political meetings, saw socially

conscious films, many at the Judson Memorial Church, and encouraged in thoughtful, noisy discussions.

As I walked I observed rising prices on signs in grocery windows and apartments for rent, the changing fashions of clothing and jewelry, and the bolder, challenging nature of new books. Demolition and construction were everywhere, the city in its usual constant flux. I too was shifting, growing older, becoming different and felt the city and I were in perfect sync and moving into a future together. My relationship with my mother had also changed by the time I hit my teens. The conviviality between us had nearly vanished. We snarled at each other over unimportant things as though leaving a mug in the sink, not changing a light bulb, not making the bed were important. The generational and cultural differences were a road that divided us. I took the path into unknown possibility, a gift granted to the young, and my mother, through necessity, continued along her traditional one. We took fewer walks, our only peaceful interludes together, as I spent more time with others and she maintained a solitary life.

My mother had always been the sole parent, sole authority figure and the person I was closest to. I struggled to separate myself from her, sometimes cruelly. I once suggested she had no ambition to alter her life, an accusation that she chose not to respond to although her eyes filled with tears. She had often told me that she would have loved to go to college and encouraged me to do it. My mother stacked her books everywhere in our tiny apartment, reading voraciously ... retaining everything. Her sixth-grade education, after she went out to work at twelve, confined her to a life of low-paying jobs, but her intelligence shimmered and I was too young to understand how frustrated she must have felt.

Our distance became a complete break after my engagement at twenty to a Cuban man I'd later marry. On our last walk together, she screamed, "After the Holocaust, when you see how a Jew can't trust anybody you'd marry a Goy! Now is the time Jews have to close ranks not desert their *landsmen* (the Yiddish word for fellow Jews) like rats leaving a sinking ship."

"This is America, not the old country," I replied.

"So nobody hates Jews here?" she yelled scornfully, knowing full well how much anti-Semitism I'd encountered.

I looked around but nobody had even turned to stare. There's a personal filter on the city streets; so much happening that nobody notices unless it's a murder and sometimes not even then. It suddenly put me in a good mood and I thought, no wonder I think of these streets as my home, my "sins" are irrelevant here.

I turned back to my mother and said quietly, "I'll always be a Jew, but it's hard enough to find somebody to love, let alone limiting yourself to a specific group of people."

She shook her head and said nothing else. We continued the walk in silence.

The breach in our relationship after my marriage was never quite repaired though we had had an uneasy reconciliation after I had children. She adored her grandsons and our time together was companionable. I was charmed and nostalgic viewing a recreation of the past as she walked the boys through the city pointing out oddities, buying noshes, noting beauty everywhere around us. It was soothing, emblematic of the continuing thread that runs through a person's life, but also bittersweet. Walking together cast a type of spell, the repetitious motion, the strange blurring and sharpening of landscape we passed and the absorption of self into the city around us that even my young children experienced.

My first husband and I had only two things in common—a compulsion to escape the ghetto and walking. On our first date he suggested we take a walk in Manhattan and then have dinner. I was delighted. No man had suggested that. We shared a casual overview of our lives and ambitions as we walked: to have a well-paying job, a nice house, a safe home for our children. Although he was six feet and I merely five, he matched his steps to mine. I felt touched at his consideration, an emotion intensified when he walked nine miles to my house during the transit strike. Our early walks were deceptive, the harmony of moving

in step a false inference that we were suited to each other though our cultural backgrounds were so different. I was drawn to the newly blossoming women's movement working to expand possibilities, access to higher vocations, to pursue equality and try to insure physical safety ...especially relevant to those of us who loved the streets. Carlos came from an affluent, patriarchal background with strongly defined gender roles and my concerns were antithetical to his.

We climbed Bear Mountain, explored Long Island, took the ferry to Staten Island, and rambled all of Manhattan and most of Brooklyn and Queens. There was a companionable yet solitary component to our long walks which lulled us into a false belief that we were attuned to each other. It took years for me to recognize that walking the streets was a different experience for each of us. I felt at home there, loved the interplay of fellow pedestrians, the unintentional beauty I saw in the angled corners of buildings, statues encrusted by pigeon-shit which lent them an air of antiquity, and the careless drape of human bodies over park benches. Carlos was drawn to structure, noting construction rather than beauty. We never saw the same thing no matter what we looked at together. After we had children our differences became more pronounced.

Although he was a loving father, Carlos believed that children and the house were a wife's responsibility. I demanded he be more involved, especially since I worked part-time and had put him through school before the children arrived. I refused to live my mother's life, experience her frustration and the waste of her intelligence on a dead-end job. It was my turn to go to college. Carlos was both hostile and dismissive. Once our two sons were in junior high school, however, I walked the campus of a near-by college, examined the various degrees they offered, and then enrolled. We took endless walks, arguing about what each of us believed. What he viewed as my defiance I viewed as his insensitivity. During our final walk together along the beach, we tossed stones into the water, kicked sand at each other, and exchanged accusations on who was destroying our family.

Our divorce became final the day before my college graduation. I didn't attend the ceremony; my mother died that day. I left the hospital after viewing her

lifeless body and walked the streets of the hospital's Queens neighborhood. It was multi-ethnic, poor, the aroma of food from a hundred cultures colliding, buildings crumbled at their edges, chipped away by poverty just as their tenants were, desperately trying to survive but slowly losing. People slept on the ground in the shadows of tenements or sat with backs against buildings, palms thrust forward and up in the universal prayer of need. I felt abandoned by everyone and everything most important to me, including the city, which now echoed only desperation. I felt I could never again separate it from loss. A friend had recently moved to Maine and implored me to come. The powerful ties that had kept me in New York—marriage, mother, school, and neighborhood—were gone. I moved with my sons, then eleven and thirteen, to Maine. They loved it, a consolation for my huge decision. One month after we settled into our rented house, my friend was offered a great job out of state and moved away.

There was nothing familiar in Maine, nothing to lay claim to intimacy, no friend and no single location that suggested the past, which was both dismaying and comforting. My friend had selected the location and I'd trusted her completely, however, she was soon gone leaving my sons and I in a barely-there beachfront town deserted even as the first leaves fell. Once ice-storms, blizzards, and frigid temperatures arrived, there was only long stretches of snow-filled woods interspersed with isolated homes and a strip mall with a grocery store and coffee shop. For a long time, I'd get easily lost. I'd always navigated via street names, numbered avenues, easily identified landmarks. Here I had to chart a path through unsigned roads, particular granite formations, stands of trees and a few towns away, a landmark called The Clock Farm because of a large, long-broken, towering clock on top of a barn. It took me over a year to get there in one try.

In New York I grounded myself through familiarity, connection with neighborhoods I'd repeatedly walked, establishing a history that made me more than a mere acquaintance. I was rarely lonely. I could step out the door and be surrounded by conversations, busyness, swept up into the texture of everything

happening at the same time. I loved the natural, wild landscape in all kinds of weather, the wildness of spring with its out-of-control color, the visits to our back yard by moose, wild turkey, fox, and deer, but I was an urban person who would never have chosen this location on my own. I was displaced and isolated and needed the jittery excitement of a city. We had a ten-month lease and couldn't afford to move to Portland, the nearest big city so I drove forty-five minutes north to work as a therapist in a small agency while my sons enjoyed school and after school activities.

I set about developing a relationship with Portland. I walked the city both before and after work, exploring side-streets, admiring little architectural details that seemed as beautiful as any sculpture, finding out of the way cafes and coffee shops just as my mother had done long ago. I thought of how much she would have enjoyed this city and felt a greater sorrow at her loss than I'd felt immediately after her death. As I familiarized myself with Portland I began merging with it, felt a particular joy in passing a designated personal landmark, or at shop-owners who now nodded hello, and in the simplicity of owning a Portland library card. My sons and I went many evenings to inexpensive happy hours at the city's bars, which featured tasty, healthy buffets, alive with color, the fragrance of spiced foods and all for the price of a drink. There was often live music to enjoy and the waitresses would put three cokes on the table as soon as they saw us.

Portland was a somewhat gritty, vibrant small city that boasted a growing community of artists, musicians, cultural activities and delicious restaurants. I loved the working waterfront, the occasional seal that poked its head up from the rough water, the fishermen ready to unload their day's catch, the small pleasure boats anchored, sails heavy in the light. The salty scent of fish permeated the air with a pungency that drew circling, shrieking seagulls. Buildings along the main streets were far from the skyscrapers I'd known, some elaborately fronted, a city made even more interesting by economically diverse neighborhoods. My feet began to know the streets, intuitively cautious of uneven pavement, turning down favorite blocks, seeking out coffee-shops. My body grew comfortable with

changing weather, adjusting itself to dropping temperatures and peaks of heat. It began to be home. It was on one of my walks, when my sons were visiting their father in New York, that I met Kevin, my second husband, a botanist equally devoted to walking. Our vacations have consisted of hiking all over, but we have never tired of exploring our neighborhood in Portland. We have walked in blizzards, rain, and brilliant sun.

A few months ago, I got out of bed, took a few steps, and felt instant, acute pain. I spent the morning on the couch, leg up, ice pack on my knee, awaiting my doctor's appointment. At one point, noting that the sun had broken through the clouds, I thought I'd try for a walk but my leg buckled under me with crippling pain. An MRI confirmed a torn meniscus that required bed-rest initially and then slow, brief forays.

Those first days I worked on developing patience and a certain Zen-like acceptance of confinement. The coffee table besides the couch where I now lived my life was soon laden with books, laptop, and snacks, none of which soothed me. I stared out the window and imagined that the sun imparted an unusual warmth to this twenty-degree windy March day, the sharp brightness of it slicing through the cold. Filled with self-pity, I envied the walkers side-stepping ice while they ran errands, met friends, went shopping, certain they didn't appreciate their mobility. At night on my couch I stared out at a cloud laden sky, the darkness shot through with streetlights like shafts of dirty gold. I thought about New York but especially about my mother. I am part of a lineage from my earliest ancestors to my grandparents and their trek for survival, to my mother's need for walking, a mix of the natural human need for motion, but also perhaps of a way of warding off frustration and restlessness. Walking across the city in nearly its entirety is an accomplishment and one my mother regularly pursued; she taught me to see the world from a single city before I could venture further. My own treks are probably a mix of all of these things as well as utilizing much of what I see as I write in my head. My sons walk, continuing the legacy, both actually climbing hills and mountains as my grandparents did, though with a different goal in mind.

That first trek of a few blocks, three weeks after the tear, was filled with the joy I experienced as a child, leaving me touched by the seventy-year-old familiarity with excitement at such a natural activity. There had been small changes outside that I could not appreciate from my couch: trees budding, snow drifts shrinking, extended daylight. It was hard to stop walking, but I did rather than risk another month of confinement. Now, eight months later, I still feel some aching in my knee but I can cautiously walk five miles a day.

My expectation is that I will never totally stop walking, but age will diminish the scope of what I can accomplish, I already don't climb the Presidential Range as I did when we first moved here. Although the walks I take now are less steep, less rocky, more level, those difficult trails have joined New York's well-trodden ones in memory and I still claim ownership of the paths I've worn into being my own. At the end of the film "2001, A Space Odyssey" the protagonist grows older and older finally evolving into an embryo state encircled by a womb. I can imagine myself making the same evolution and my feet once again circling that well-worn path.



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