

We Walk by Night

by Steven Gowin

And I charged your judges at that time: Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien... Deuteronomy 1:16

That old lady wanted those dogs to leave her alone, both the ugly one and the retarded one. She wanted me to leave her alone too, and she wanted to hate us all.

But we noticed danger; an open garage door, wide open at night. So we rang her bell, and she lit the porch lamp. Then we waited under that billion watt bulb, in that violent light, smelling her house... garlic and ginger, cigarettes, and furniture polish, seeping out at us. But she wouldn't answer the bell, wouldn't open her door.

Finally, looking frightened, she peeked out her blinds and shook a fat finger at us to shoo us away as if disgusted, as if we were thugs... home invaders. She pursed her mouth in contempt, despising us, and would have told us so in her own tongue had she not been too afraid to open that door.

Walking those damned dogs is a pain... a PAIN every night. If it's not urban skunks, it's Mormons on bikes... the bastards. You never know who's who, and it's always chilly; sheets of cold wind and fog rage in off the North Pacific. You can't pop out in a t-shirt like back in Council Bluffs; you want jeans, a warm jacket; sometimes you want gloves.

Cretin idiot dogs... my wife rescued them both, fostered them. Otherwise the little black one... the ugly one with the underbite... would be at the bottom of a landfill in Stockton or Los Baños. That's where those banker thieves ruined the mortgages and where families abandoned their houses leaving pets chained up in weedy back gardens, howling for kibble, biting cockleburs from bloody paws.

On walks, she strains ahead chocking herself while the other one, the retarded one, stalls behind to sniff out canine urine or street

garbage. He's also a rescue from a litter of multiple daddies. His mamma wanted to run around, had lost her soul running around. So she didn't nurse him properly, and he suffers dog retardation... what happens when your mama is a running around whore.

That old hag didn't keep a dog; if she did, my dogs would have known. Although if she had kept a dog, the dog could ward off the bandits after her treasures. See, these little old dragon ladies usually keep cash on hand, lots of it, gold too and other stuff. But hell, a home invader'd just as soon move on rather than mess with even a little dog; there's another old granny down the street somewhere close.

If you do keep a dog though, you have to walk it, and in our neighborhood, that means you'll run into Walco. And when you cross Walco dog walking at night, he wants to be all up in your business, wants to know what you paid for this and what you gave for that. Say you've been on vacation... it's, you get cheap ticket? how much for rental car; you get bargain hotel? You eat at restaurant or take sandwich? He'd take sandwiches.

I call him Walco because he manages something or other at Walco. He thinks those warehouse stores are a friggin' Shangri-La instead of the badlands of detritus, junk, and trash that they really are. Like damned Vegas casinos... no widows, no clock in sight, they maze you in so you can't find your way out, and time bends back on itself, evaporates in there. You travel through a continuum of wanting and desire, a bad diet of junk and more of it.

Cheaper and cheaper and cheaper... 70 inch flat screen TVs blaring banjo music; twenty pound buckets of frozen chicken breasts... unwholesome, shot through with steroids and antibiotics; smelly leather sectionals from Shanghai; SafeArms Brand firearm safes to safe keep revolvers and shotguns for protecting all that crap from home invaders. Sating the wanting is Walco's vocation I suppose, but where's the grace in it?

Still, you can't judge... no not really. Because Walco knows first hand those ancient desires from places in the world where there's nothing but material poverty and no junk to sate it. Besides, we all

want crap, and after the cheap Walco crap, we want better crap... single malt whiskey and Gucci bags and German automobiles. We want satisfaction, sanctification, here, on the western edge of the western world. But it's the void of that insatiable wanting that generates our frosty wind and blustery sheets of fog.

It was cold and foggy when Walco caught me up for a god damned dog walking stop and chat. His idiot cur, HiHo, was yapping at our retarded dog and our ugly dog. Did that cretin have a runaround mama too? I asked, but Walco only answered, Ahhhhhh, HiHo so cute. He want to play. HiHo only want to play. Then something caught Walco's attention... down the street, strangers on bikes. God damned Mormons... They want your soul, I tried to warn him, but Walco and HiHo were already gone.

When you walk dogs, you want to watch out for Mormons and for Walco and for strangers, and you want to watch out for urban skunks. For urban skunks want to visit our neighborhood and want to be bold in our neighborhood. They want to walk right up to you and dare you to threaten them so they can spin around and squirt you a measure of skunk juice.

But our stupid dogs, the ugly one and the retarded one, don't know a kitty hiding under a car from a damned urban skunk. They only want to chase small animals. They don't care about what skunks can do, as if their noses, which work fine for dog pee and rotting garbage, are broken for skunks, as if running around whores broke their skunk noses too. So I watch out for skunks, but I do not hate them.

You never hear of skunks wanting Walco trash or being run around whores or Mormons or retarded or ugly. A skunk has soul and will root out a bastard rat and eat its rat pups. Sometimes I see a friggin' rat when I walk those dogs at night. Rats are filthy; their teeth never stop growing. So I want a skunk over a rat any day. Go skunks! Kill rats; kill their wives and rat children, and stuff what you can't eat down their holes for their cannibal brethren. Then go kill more of the bastards.

What I'd wanted when I saw that damned open door in the first place, that open garage calling out to skunks and rats, was to ignore it; just blow it off; I mean this is not Council Bluffs. Do onto others does not hold here, does it?

If home invaders storm up screaming with their jet black hair and cigarettes to rob that old lady of all her Walco crap and cash, and humiliate her for forgetting the SafeArms arms safe combination, and pistol whip her to ginger mash, is that my concern? No... She wouldn't even open the door for us.

At least it shouldn't have been my concern... shouldn't... But then god damn it all to hell, I was from Council friggin' Bluffs. And do the fuck unto others did hold, and if the shoe'd been on the other foot, I'd have wanted the old bitch to fight through the fog and the wind to tell me something was wrong so I could protect my crap and my dogs.

So there we were, in the white blue glare of that porch light, wanting her only to close the damned garage. We rang the bell anew and beat on her door over and over, until she peeked out again, and I pointed and signed and mimed the state of her garage friggin' door that some damned fool had left open in the night.

But nothing happened. And there was quiet and more quiet until that billion watt light bulb extinguished with a click, and the porch went black. Our eyes didn't adjust immediately, but while blind, we felt vibration through our feet. Something on rails scooted and hummed.

After a moment in the silence and the new darkness, the ugly dog and the retarded dog and I moved away from the door and onto the sidewalk. We walked to the driveway. The big panel door was down, closed tight. The old woman and her cash and gold and junk were safe again; neither rat nor skunk nor home invader would enter through her garage that night.

And in the street, HiHo began yapping while Walco grilled the Mormons... Where you buy those bike? How much you give for bikes?

