

Walking the Dog

By Carl Nelson

I was walking my dachshund, Tater Tot, the other afternoon when I encountered Brian, a neighbor who also goes out for a daily 'walk' in his battery powered wheelchair. He was whirring up the street and came to a



T

stop. I told him that another fellow in a powered wheelchair had just screamed past me, hell bent for leather, heading south. Brian said, "Oh, that's _____. He's headed for poker at the Shriner's (a local club about six blocks downriver). Apparently most of the organizations back here run weekly card games from which they take a cut to meet the bills. This one apparently meets at 6pm on Mondays. I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes to six – hence, the hurry. "Texas hold 'em" is all they play," Brian further noted. It's kept pretty tame

with a buy in of twenty dollars or so. But there are also side games, "where things can get substantial," he noted.

There are two things which will introduce you to the neighborhood: kids and dogs – especially, if you mind your kids and walk the dog.

When you drive through a neighborhood that has both kids out playing, and people out walking their dogs, you've found a neighborhood where you might want to buy. Tater and I walk near a mile each afternoon around five, (or a bit later if it's hot) after finishing a day's toil in my garage office. We stroll past my neighbor's driveway car repair business, where he's often out tinkering, then down towards the fields by the river.

He can actually fix things. My neighbors have used him for some small jobs. But he's a sketchy character, friendly enough but with some prison time under his belt for attacking his mom with the oven door one Thanksgiving. She knifed him, and he was arrested sometime later, collapsed and bleeding in the yard just across from ours.

The woman down the street calls him a "compulsive liar" (though she's a bit reality challenged herself). And I read in the local news last year, that he'd been arrested for disorderly conduct and waving his gun upriver. But he's an obliging conversationalist, and grew up right where he lives now, and a bit of the (very) local history trickles out in our small talk. For example, I (may have) learned that the reclusive fellow who lives one house further down to the mechanic, used to live in a couple other homes in the neighborhood, including mine. (This is a fellow who, I believe at one time, I stood behind at the post office where he was bragging about the good review he'd gotten for a small horror movie he'd produced. He drives an old Cadillac with bald tires.) Why he would move from our rather roomy Sears American Four-Square to his current small box cottage is a mystery. My

mechanic neighbor didn't know either, or was tired of talking more. Or, perhaps my fictionalizing neighbor had talked himself into a cul de sac. (As a writer, I sympathize. It can happen.)

Another person I stop to chat with briefly is an older lady, a stroke victim, and her dog, Bennie. They're about halfway through my walk and I typically rest with a hand on her front porch stair rail while we visit. She usually just cackles and nods at what I have to say. At first Bennie would bark constantly. So one day I stopped talking and just stared at Bennie, until he stopped barking... It took a while. The lady thought that was the funniest thing in the world. Bennie's been just fine, since.

I also started chatting with a neighbor who lives in one of the original dwellings hereabouts. It used to house a dry goods store, where people would stop on their way to and from Parkersburg across the river. They would catch a small ferry where the street runs into the Ohio. There are pictures of the small ferry boat transporting a circus with elephants and Indians across the river. They used to also drive cattle from Ohio to West Virginia across the river at this point. Back when before dams controlled the river, you could walk across to Williamstown, West Virginia from Marietta, Ohio (just upriver) in the summer's driest periods. Nowadays there is a huge bridge hosting a four lane expressway over a wide expanse of moving water. And where the cattle used to cross is currently a 578 yard water hazard. I know this, because the next door neighbor to the stroke woman was out one day wagging his driver and using his range-finder to measure the distance to the railroad trestle, which stretches above the mouth of the Little Kanawha, which empties into the Ohio, on the far side.

You learn all this just walking along with your dog. Kids come out to pet the dog and ask his name. Every other dog in the neighborhood challenges you. You meet all the fellow dog

owners. Most are quite friendly, but I'm reticent to speak much with the little girls who want to pet Tater, whose single mothers watch with serious expressions from the porch. These mothers don't appear to have good feelings regarding men. Just talking with their kids makes you feel like a 'groomer' in their grim eyes. There are also several houses where I've tried to warm a few grim women with a wave or a little passing conversation, but they act as if this is some kind of a come on. So after a time, I learn to skirt them.

A block up, a frosty older woman and her daughter often sit out under a tree which stretches over the sidewalk, visiting with others I sometimes recognize. I tried for the longest time to melt them a bit. After neighborhood relations splintered a year or so ago, (see, "[Dispatch from River City](#)"), I noticed they would stop talking whenever I approached. I remarked about this to another neighbor we're fairly close with and she said, "That's because they are talking about you." She laughed. "They sit up on that corner and spread gossip with their allies about all the people they don't like on our side of the neighborhood."

'Oh'.

I'm not a gossip, but I am a very avid snoop. And it is handy to have a couple of the local gossips on tap, such as my neighborhood friend above, to keep a person in the loop. As soon as I notice something remarkable or odd on my walk, I run it right by her in some small talk at our next intersection... and Shazamm! It's like being hooked right into the Dark Web.

Walking about with the dog is a bit different from writing. In writing, and literary conversation with others of like pursuit, the ideas flash past, the humor bounces along. Out walking the dog in the world things are much more quotidian. I've found it prudent to dial it back a little. You're easily apt to make a quip or an observation that a regular bunch may not catch, let alone return the ball. It's not like on the

page where verbal play is the name of the game. Just walking about, it's best not to get too clever. Ideas not generally understood are often reflexively regarded with suspicion. Everyday categories of conversation in the neighborhood are all-about-stuff, sports, outdoor recreation, and family. You toss them an outlier and they very might well react as if you're a little 'whiffy', possibly talking down to them – or just luring them into treacherous waters where their high school teacher used to rule. My advice when strolling about with a dog: keep it nuts and bolts and listen.

Further up the block from the stroke-lady is the home of a (quite) extended family (very tenuously related – or even attached – as I've observed). It's a large house and filled with occupants who change irregularly. I would characterize the place as a loosely knit rooming house of patrons related by kinship. Not only is the family extended, but their possessions are scattered also! Stuff crams the porch and overflows all across the yard. It's owned and run by a very friendly older brood mother with poor teeth, whose health is poor but whose body is strong. Mothering is about all that takes place, and like Woody Allen's joke about the food; "it's not very good, but they give you a lot of it." Stray cats, dogs, and shirttail relations all find shelter here. It reminds me a bit of Kodiak Island in the Aleutian Chain, where I lived for a time during a medical externship, which was populated by a motley assortment of people who kept travelling west looking for a home, until there was no further west to go.

Over the years I have watched the chubby daughters/girls transform into quite overweight women, who apart from the weight seemed attractive enough to get themselves pregnant and/or attract willowy boyfriend lint, as if they were some sort of velcro. When an older (more burly) male moves in, with one of the older women, the telltale is usually a mowed lawn and some order to the outside paraphernalia.

Lately Tater and I have found ourselves stopping to chat a bit with the latest burly, older fellow. He lives in the corner front room with one of the homeowner's grown daughters. He's a morbidly overweight fellow who waddles about with effort. Nevertheless, he seems the most ambitious of the bunch – and easily clocks in as the most active. One afternoon I passed him grunting in the grass by the sidewalk, repairing a riding lawn mower he noted he'd gotten for a steal. Once he figured how to repair it, he estimated to flip it for 3 or 4 hundred profit. The standing pool, which had been left filled with plastic toy floaters and water throughout the winter – he cleaned and weeded around. It is now in an island of groomed gravel. He also cleared a hundred square feet of yard to plant tomatoes and cantaloupe. They're currently thriving under our hot summer sun.

He had to quit his job hauling freight due to back problems, which also precludes much other work he detailed his search for. Long-haul semi-drivers must have one of the least healthy jobs out there. Long hours of tedium, truck stop food, solitary, away from home for weeks at a time, time constraints, road hazards... And a little past middle age they seem to end up on disability due to back problems – at least, from the three 'retired' ones I know from back here. In addition, their performance is now continually monitored by operator surveillance systems.

This poor neighbor can only stand or walk a very small bit before having to sit due to nerve pain in his back for which is undergoing serial ablative surgery. (I shudder.) But he soldiers on with a stiff upper lip. The pool must be great restorative therapy in this hot weather. I passed recently while he was leaning, seemingly asleep, hanging off the poolside, near entirely submerged like a sleeping hippo. I feared he might have died in place, but passed quietly, deciding, "Well, he either did, or didn't."

There are the people in a fairly well maintained trailer park,

who I chat with now and then. Many are disabled or living on meager pensions I would guess. But they have their pets, and faded photos and nic-naks sitting in their windows behind water-stained drapery. Some have ramps leading to their doors, and a small side platform for a chair or BBQ. A little flower bed of pansies surrounding the trailer hitch is a small payment on their aspiration for a cozy home.

There are many more successful whose residences we walk past. The CEO of a local chemical plant lives in a home right on the point across from where the Little Kanawha enters into the Ohio. It's a beautiful location. The river was way up a few months ago when I walked past – just one inch from being even with this elevated back deck. Would make a great swim-up bar for a BBQ and flood party, I had noted. He agreed.

His first floor is a garaged area of concrete and cinderblock, so post-flood cleanup was some simple pressure washing. The most interesting problem he had was insuring that the floating pontoon rafts he had tied to a tree, were left positioned as he needed when the flood waters receded and the heavy things touched down.

But the successful are usually quite busy and not around their homes a lot, so we don't cross paths much. And frankly, there is a whole currency involved in discussing even life events with the fairly successful. There is a continual scanning for status, as if it could reveal my bar code as we speak. And if I were interested in having the sorts of discussions which walk up the streets to where they are invariably directed, I would handle that hunger with a Forbes, Wall Street Journal or a Fish and Stream publication – or spend the time shopping for life insurance. Events they follow, their opinions of them, what is moving and what is stalled, where to find best value, are all played out to the successful male protocols of physical posturing which are something like proper table manners – and quite important to the game. We're friendly, but the grit and soil humus from which a good conversation

sprouts, just isn't there for me. So we generally wave and pass amicably. Their wives, who walk their purebreds, are generally who I am more conversant with – especially if it's another dachshund!

There's a lot more I've found, and many more people I've met while walking Tater e.g. the mayor, a high end interior decorator, tourists renting an Air B&B, a globe-trotting mother who was stopping off to spend time with her daughter... who at one time managed a ranch in the Tetons several years for a quite wealthy man. But this smattering gives a taste. There is just a flood of stuff to know and to find when you leave the home with an appealing dog on a leash.

“To know more about the author, Carl Nelson, please visit magicbeanbooks.co”