

## **These Midnight Walks**

**Zach Brown**

I forgot how the air turns so abruptly with the season: dry in my throat. I cough a little, ungracefully. It's the same with the leaves; they are dry. They crack under my footsteps - I am more noisy than I like to be on these midnight walks. A light layer of frost peppers the sidewalk - under the dim glow of the neighborhood's lone streetlight it is like dust. I remember just last week the fiery autumn orange and red dotted the treetops. Then again, it's happened before. I've seen it all before.

A gray rabbit hops away as I approach the next house. The house looks like the one before it. I call the rabbit Paul. I know all the rabbits in this neighborhood. I spot them on these midnight walks. Paul's mom died a few months ago: looked like natural causes when I found her in Doug and Janice's yard. Seems a pretty good way to go for a wild rabbit, if you ask me. I wonder why Paul hops away so hurriedly, considering I'd known him for years. 'Stay for a chat' I say aloud. Paul's gone.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

I kick up some of the dust and watch it float, then swirl up and away in the lamplight, then the moonlight. When it reaches the moon's glow it returns to its white from the gray. A shiver runs down my spine. A yellow stain in the dust by the next mailbox - its only distinguishing feature from the last many mailboxes. I love the neighborhood dogs. I love their piss stains in winter. I love when I pass Janice or any of the other dog owners in the neighborhood. I saw Janice for the first time in a few months, we've only spoken a handful of times since Anita and I moved in. She didn't say a thing, just a polite wave as she passed. Her face was expressionless. I never know what's going on in these people's lives. But I watch their dogs grow old, get gray, slower and more docile. I notice the changes and it reminds me time has passed. That something changed. I love the neighborhood dogs. One of them killed Paul's brother, though.

And the last house on the street: gray roof, faded brick walls, brown door, fake wood. Same as mine and Anita's. Same as the rest of the neighborhood. I wonder if a visitor could ever find the house they were looking for without an exact number. They would be totally lost. But I could tell them 'No, that there? With the thicker paint on the bottom? From when the Fernsteins

covered the scratches on the door? From when they accidentally locked Rex the Doberman out of the house? While they were probably having an argument about how Steve never gives their kid on the spectrum any attention? Because..." and I would trail off, because they probably only needed to know the first part to find the house. Or I could tell them that the Dimaggios put a gnome out for the month of April, so you could use that if you were visiting in April. I like the gnome. I wish they left it out all year. Or the house in the middle of the street with the crack in the window? That's from when the Gomezes' little tyke Julio nailed one with his tin bat that was just a little small for him. Janice's kid, Rob, pitched it up and Julio got it right where he was aiming. Just a graze on the window, it was his room so the crack stuck around. The Gomezes are good parents. 'Why do I know all this?' I'm thinking to myself. Maybe Anita got a message about it through the neighborhood Facebook. No, that's not it. I look at this neighborhood and see a totally different place than this visitor because this is my life.

Because this is my life.

Left at the end of the neighborhood when you hit the sidewalk that runs along the street. Same street as I went to high school, just a few miles down the way. The park's just a mile, which tonight I'm thankful for. My dirty old rag of a hoodie does not cut it against the sharp cold. The leaves on the sidewalk which lines the road to the park get swept away as cars pass, there is no crunch to this length of the walk. My regular, usual silence has returned.

I breathe in, breathe out. I need these moments. Another cough. I retch, oh well, probably best not to breathe that deeply. Last month when I was around this spot I saw some raccoons crawl out of that sewer gutter. I thought about it for weeks after. How many times had I passed that spot? Never once did I think about how those little guys were camped out in there, plotting their raccoon ways. You just don't expect that kind of thing. I was elated. I guess the novelty has kind of faded now, though. Maybe if they would just peek their little beady eyes out of there again. They could attack me, give me rabies, I don't care. Can you die from rabies? Maybe not if you can die from rabies, but I really want to see them again.

Three years ago, there was a baby bird that had fallen out of her nest by the tiny tree I pass by. I picked her up and nestled her back in with the rest of the birdlings plus bird parents. Every night I'd bring by, like, birdseed or whatever other treat for the critters. Even after the smaller fellas left the nest I brought the seed by. Then one day the nest was on the ground, the

birds were gone. I was phoning it in before that point anyhow. Guess the relationship between me and the birds started feeling too transactional. Or maybe I just stopped caring. Who can say?

Crunch, crunch - wait no, there's no crunching. Just that light patter of my feet against the concrete.

Too frigid for the mosquitoes, now. I miss that wet air from their season though. In that season, the weight of the humidity and the sweat of my brow reminded me I was alive. It was like that, even on these midnight walks.

I am almost to the park now, passing the bank where I applied for my first credit card. I was sixteen working as a driver at the PizzaHut over by the CVS, a few blocks over. I thought I was hot stuff with that credit card - failed to pay it off more than once. Tanked my score for years. Anita and I had to use her credit to apply for the house. It was pretty cool of her not to sweat that. I do love her, you know.

No crunch, no crunch, no crunch.

I pass the bank, cross the street to the park. I don't sweat the road, don't even look both ways. I am the only one out here at midnight. The rest of my world sleeps. The park is small, just like my world. Lit up by two huge towers, one on this side of the park and the other at the end, with a trash can at the base. Just a galavant to the other tower, then back home. Maybe I will be able to fall asleep. We can hope.

There is a rubbery pathway that departs from the sidewalk to the playground (just some swings and a lone, steel slide) and all the way to the far sidewalk and the other tower. On the rubber my footsteps lose all their noise. Not even the patter remains.

No patter, no patter, no patter.

Breaths in, breaths out. The silence deafens, it's unnerving, then it's peaceful. What can I say, I am a creature of habit. I just have to get used to it. I can deal with it, if I just... get used to it. Step by step. To the trash can. I really hope the raccoons are around it, raccoons love trash. I think.

A cackling, shrill elderly voice breaks through my peace: "Ahahahaha yes! Very good my pet, very good! One more time now, we'll have you doing all sorts of tricks in no time." I can't believe what I'm hearing. Who is out here at this time? Who is out here at my time. Noone's ever out here on these midnight walks.

I pick up my stroll somewhat and make out the figure as I approach. He's jumping up and down and side to side rhythmically, jauntily by my destined trash can. He's got this Russian wool hat on, like how they make the Soviets look in the old movies. His beard is comically long and whiter than the frost that blankets the grass around the rubber path. He sports this green sport coat, looks like it's straight from the Master's. Underneath he's got a bright pink sweater and his hands - are those - they are - he's got velvety mittens that match the coat. He is a tiny fellow but his verdant boots (they match the rest of the getup) grant four or five inches at the base, thick. They look kind of punk. I used to wear a pair like them in black. I don't get his plain denim jeans, why did he stop there?

Three squirrels scurry about the top of the trash can. I guess he was talking to them earlier. He fishes out an acorn and tosses it gently at one of them. It bounces off their little squirrel chest and pinks onto the rim of the trash can. It's one of those donut lids, you know, where the metal donut is around a hole in the middle for you to toss stuff in. Anyways, the squirrel picks up the acorn and frolics a small distance away to bury the thing.

"Hehehehe! Very good, you almost caught it that time, little one! Next time you'll have no problem!" He begins to fish out another acorn for... whatever it is he is doing, when I approach.

"Uhm, excuse me. Hello." I think that's the right thing to say. Well, probably I could've said it better. He whips around like a crack of lightning, faster than I was sure a man of his alabaster white hair could manage.

"Why greetings and salutations there, my good young man! What brings you to my practice here on this fine evening? Come to learn the arts? It's been some time since I've taken on a pupil!" He whimsies about like a court jester or maybe like a pre-choreographed backup dancer as he speaks. I am terrified and mesmerized.

"I uh - I'm out here every night around this time. I've never seen you here before, did you just get into town?" It seemed like an innocent enough question. I don't know.

"I've lived here my whole life, whippersnap! Per! Most evenings it is that I don't leave my lair, over on Smith's Street, until around one but I've got business to attend to at one tonight! Business, I tell you!" He chortles, tickled. It seems that he knows what the business is and I don't. I guess that is kind of funny, I don't know.

I have been to Smith's street probably a hundred times in my life. I am pretty sure there are no lairs on Smith's street. What do I know? "Oh, well I uh - I understand. My name's Lee, I don't want to keep you from your business."

He takes my hand in his astonishingly warm mitten and shakes it vigorously. This is easily the firmest be-mittened handshake I have ever received. "Nonsense Lee, I am called Dr. Percival P. Perrywinkle. But you can call me Dr. P, or Dr. PP if you would rather." He smiles a broad, beaming grin.

I smile a broad, beaming grin. "I definitely would rather."

"Excellent, hehehehehe! Dr. PP it is! Ahahahahaha!" His own name has him in stitches. I laugh uneasily at first, then giggle a few genuine ones. It feels nice, for a moment. Another cough.

"What uh, what do you do out here every night, Dr. PP?"

"Well isn't it obvious, lad? I am the premiere squirrel trainer of this recreational land! I tutor my fine, furry friends in the ways of nut catching and learn them all sorts of whimsy! Watch this one here, Fidaglio has trained with me for some years now." He gestures to the decrepit, geezerly squirrel. It twitches its head to the side and back again, eyeing the acorn that Dr. PP has withdrawn. "Fetch the akern, Fidaglio!" The old man, with blistering force for a fellow so long in the tooth, hucks the nut a great distance.

The squirrel darts around the donut lid of the can a few times as it notices that the prize it had been so intent on has soared away. It hops down from the can and begins to investigate this and that brush or spot in the grass. Its search grows progressively more frantic, its hairs beginning to stand on end. I watch it for several minutes.

"See, he'll find it eventually!" Dr. PP, pleased as punch with the performance of his prized pupil, jumps with glee in the air.

"Do they ever bring them back?" It seems to me the squirrel had failed the trick. Am I missing something?

"Oh, sure, it's happened before! Can't remember the last time, but it must've been more than ten years ago now. The days fly by when you're having fun, eh, my boy!" I frown, dazed and confused by his clownish nonchalance. Dr. PP notices the change in my demeanor and scrunches his face up in a big, inquisitive smirk.

He removes his russian hat and places it on my head with a determined look in his green, green eye. “Now have a seat with me, young man.”

“I- I’d better not.” Anita probably expects me back home. I’ve already taken longer than I do every night. I don’t want her to worry. I do love her, you know.

“Nonsense, Lee. Now you sit right here and tell me why you’re out here every night, on these midnight walks of yours.” The gravity of his tone conveys an earnest, avuncular care. He still grins (I am convinced that his face is permanently formed that way), but it is muted. I want to go home. My eyes are downcast. “Now don’t look so downtrodden, Lee! You know I come out here every night, exactly an hour after you leave your home, so as to tutor these squirrels in the art of nut fetching. Why do you come here, to this same donut lidded trash can?”

My hands tremble, my body follows suit. My whole body is trembling. Also my back trembles. “I-I’m not sure. I don’t know. Who can say. I...”

“Go on, son.” His eyes are big as he looks up at me, and they resemble an innocent woodland creature in their expression of purity. I can’t say why, but he looks like a raccoon or a baby bird.

I spray the words: “I better get home. It was great meeting you Dr. PP. Maybe I’ll see you again sometime.” I mean to gingerly hand him his hat back, but I throw it at him with some force. He does not seem shaken or let down in the least by my speedy departure. I catch a wizened, cunning look off him with my last glimpse of his face as I turn around. He knows something. I don’t have time to find out.

“Well maybe I’ll see you another night! That is, if you’re out an hour later!” He hollers after me.

I launch into a run a few steps onto the rubber path. My gait picks up as I progress. I don’t care about the noise. Hell, Dr. PP makes plenty of noise.

Clomp, clomp, clomp.

Even on the rubber I am noticeable, perceptible. I bring the face of the Apple watch to my human face. It reads ‘12:17’. Three minutes. I scramble, then sprint. I am as a gazelle in the savannah.

Clomp, clomp, clomp, clomp, clomp, PATTERN.

I reach the end of the rubber path and run across the street to the sidewalk which lines the road. The Apple watch reads '12:18'. Two minutes. I am winded, I don't normally run. Not on these... I walk, normally.

I am halfway back, on the sidewalk that lines the street. I pass the empty place which once housed a family of birds. I break into coughing, wheezing. I wish the air was wet. To my left, in the middle of the road, there it is: a raccoon.

I trip as I try to abruptly halt my sprint and tumble a little, just catching myself before I hit the pavement. The awkward maneuver is enough to startle the raccoon back into his gutter home. I didn't have time to linger on him anyways. The Apple watch: '12:19'. Not enough time.

I am retching, gasping for air by the time I make it home. I wait for a few moments to compose myself before I re-enter. I check the time: '12:21'. I feel awful, nauseated. I creak open the door as quietly as possible and make my way to bed to join Anita.

"Honey, are you alright? You're a little later than usual." Anita asks. I do love her, you know.

"I'm alright, love. Goodnight."

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The next morning I walk out to my car to drive to work. I do that, on most mornings. On the weekend I drive out around that time to go to the donut shop instead. Anita likes the ones with the raspberry filling. I like chocolate.

I take note of a squirrel in one of our trees. It doesn't care about me at all, hopping and skittering around the canopy. As I drive to the office my thoughts linger on Dr. PP. I don't want to think about Dr. PP. What was written on his face? Why did he ask me that?

When I get to the office, I try to focus my whole being into spreadsheets. This spreadsheet's a log of clients from last quarter. I wonder what their lives are like. Are they like mine? 'Edward B Rutherford' is the first name on the sheet. Does he go on walks? Does he know his neighborhood? What is Mr. Rutherford's life like? Maybe he likes to be called Eddy. Wouldn't that be something?

By the time I'm clocking out my mind is all acorns and russian hats and a shriveled, cheerful, rosy face spinning around asking me the same question. 'Why, why, why'. Why does it matter to you, Dr. PP? Get over it. I can't get over it.

I'm speeding, swerving across the highway to get home. At dinner, Anita is asking me questions or telling me something. I think I mutter some reply. Then another. It seems to be working. I don't know. Nothing matters except that face. What did he know that I didn't? Why do I care so much? I know what I have to do.

I get up from bed at the usual time, Anita knows this.

"I might be out a little later tonight, Anita. I wanted to try out a new path. Don't be worried after me, sleep tight."

"Ok, honey, be safe." Anita turns back over.

Turn left at the end of the neighborhood. Walk down the sidewalk that lines the road. Cross the road. Walk the rubber path. Stop at the trash can. I try to do it all slowly, because I know PP doesn't get there for another hour. I wait by the trash can and watch the face of my watch. '12:19', '12:20'.

Every fiber of my being is screaming at me to go back, that it's time. It's always this time. This time is the way that it is. The Apple watch reads '12:22'. I am in it for the long haul. I fight the urge, the insatiable urge. It's '12:32' and '12:42' and '12:52'. I feel myself getting tired, my body out of sync with its rhythms. The lust for an answer compels me to consciousness. I have to know what he knows. One in the morning rolls around then one thirty, then two. I notice a squirrel hops out of the donut hole with an acorn in his mouth. This acorn has a tiny piece of paper wrapped around it. The little fellow begins gnawing on it with those big squirrel teeth.

"NO!" I launch myself forward and grasp the creature with a vice grip. I desperately claw at the acorn in his mouth, reaching fully inside his maw to wrest it from him, all the while the squirrel bites and claws at my arms and face. I free the acorn. The startled critter (much too young to be Fidaglio) scampers away, irritated. My eyes glance down at my prize. Does it glow under the light of the tower?

I have to know. Does he know? Why am I doing this. Why do I have to do this? How could he know: why these midnight walks? I unfurl the paper:

*A squirrel's only as much nuts*



*As it can fit in its mouth*

It doesn't make any sense.