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Baby Steps

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AMY NEUFELD

Baby Steps

I'm searching through the suitcases in the thrift store. They're stacked three deep on the shelves, covered in the dust of the forgotten, but still with something to offer. The store is full of items hoping for a second act on a new stage, rather than curtain call at the landfill.

I'm tempted by the pink zebra print suitcase, but it doesn't have what I need. I push it aside. Duffel bags won't do, or those big hockey bags that pop up everywhere. I keep searching. Then I see it, tucked in the back. The size is perfect, the handle works, but that isn't what's important. The reason I pick this one is because it has wheels. Wheels are essential.

*

Sometimes, though, wheels brought problems. My first child was born at the end of October when we lived in Edmonton. She arrived home on Halloween, and by the time she was three weeks old, the snow had fallen. And not a light dusting either. This was northern Alberta; deep snow was its winter comforter, brought out in fall to prepare for the cold months ahead.

I abandoned the stroller after our first outing, when the fresh snow, already two feet deep, covered the ground. The sidewalks were hard enough to manage on foot; pushing the jogging stroller through them, even with its thick rubber tires, slowed time, like an hourglass turned on its side, the sand grains trapped. The stroller would have to wait until spring.

But the obstacle didn't send me indoors to hibernate, sensible though that might have been. Once my body had healed and the new grandparents had returned home from meeting their first grandchild, once my husband was back at work and the days were endless hours of me, the baby, and my questionable sanity, I knew I needed to walk.

So we walked. Every day, no exceptions, for as long as we could manage. It was the only way to cope with the stretches of time making up the days, hours that needed to be filled to make it to the next one.

It was what we both needed.

With the stroller not viable, I turned to the carrier, the front pack that tucked my new baby tight against me. I bundled her up, strapped her on, then wrapped us both in one of my husband's large coats. Our destination was irrelevant, and often nonexistent. It was the steps

that mattered, the kilometers under our feet. Once we walked to Southgate Mall, only to become overheated and uncomfortable under the fluorescent lights and canned music. Neither of us had the patience or desire to shop. We had no need of the baubles and distractions on offer. The kind of movement we were after was suited to the outdoors. The space of outdoors allowed me to imagine possibilities for us. For our future to reach to the horizon.

*

Once I have the suitcase home, I fill it with my provisions. In go the cans, all selected for contents that don't require heat. We have to be ready in case the electricity goes down. Sure, the beans in maple molasses would taste better warmed up, but taste is not my concern. High protein, that's what matters. And some canned fruit as well. Vitamins are on my mind. Enough for all of us. And of course, the can opener. Nothing electric, nothing that needs a battery. The radio I order can be cranked by hand.

*

Even on the bitter days in Edmonton, and there were plenty, outdoors was the best choice to give shape to our time. Not everyone we met on our walks agreed, though. An older woman stopped to peek at my bundle of baby and exclaim how cold it was, how a little one shouldn't be out in this weather. How uncomfortable she must be. Implying, I believed, my maternal deficiency at daring to experience winter with a baby. "But look," I wanted to say, "she's asleep. I can feel her warm breath on my chest. She's cozy and held and loved. How can this be bad for her? How can it cause harm when it's so necessary, when these walks are what keep us sane?" But instead, I murmured some thanks for this woman's unsolicited advice, and carried on our way.

We walked through that whole first Edmonton winter. We met another walking mom and babe at the library group, a fellow baby-wearer, and together the four of us explored the city's stunning river valley. After one walk, our babies had their first playdate, rolling around on the handmade quilt while the other mom and I took tentative steps towards friendship over tea and date squares. She was the person I called when the crabapple tree in our backyard shed its soft white petals after their bloom in spring, a gentler, warmer mimicking of the snow we'd just endured. Bring the baby, I said, and we laid our babes under the tree so they could watch as the petals rained down, a nature mobile come to life.

*

The suitcase tucks in between the sink and the shelf in our new home in Ontario. Next to it there is enough space for the big jug of water. The first-aid backpack is only a few steps away in the hall closet. All of it is near the back door.

In the front pocket of the suitcase, I tuck several five-dollar bills. I assume humanity's faith in currency will be the last thing to break.

*

The baby walking muscles continued when my second child was born, after we'd moved back to Ontario. We couldn't walk to visit the grandparents from 3300 kilometres away in Edmonton, after all. So we moved home.

Whereas walking had been essential for me with my first baby, it was child number two who demanded the walks now. This baby was fussier than my first, with more specific desires. And not being able to express these desires frustrated my child to no end. They bellowed and hollered, cried out, even when we could find no reason for discomfort. One day, near dinner (always near dinner), I had to power walk in circles around our main floor with the baby strapped to my chest to get them to settle. This child needed movement and speed. And if it meant an end to the crying, I would oblige.

With my older daughter in part-time day care, the little one and I took to the sidewalk. No agenda, no plan beyond one foot in front of the next. We investigated our neighbourhood, then ventured further afield, exploring both nature paths and the urban landscape. Discovering ourselves and each other in the vast expanse of outdoors. We weren't compelled by errands or destinations; we just moved to keep going forward. Moved, with my child tucked against me, to try and recreate those months when we shared my body. A necessity for them.

*

It is during that first summer and these many hours and kilometres walking with my youngest child that I am compelled to plan my families' escape. To prepare for it. My childhood climate anxiety that kept headphones on my ears so I could drown out any conversations about the state (or end) of the world returned when I first got pregnant. I avoided book club when the monthly pick was a dystopian Atwood novel. I couldn't fear for the future when I had such big plans for it growing inside me.

My escape plan hinges on walking. I don't know what disaster it is that pulls us from our home. Fire, flood, flesh-eating virus: it doesn't matter. All that matters, in my imagined scenario, is that I am responsible for the safe escape of the two children, and our car isn't an option. We need to be prepared to travel, on foot, to reach my husband, to reach safety.

I need both the baby carrier and the stroller, those wheels that caused such trouble in Edmonton now essential. They are part of the survival gear. The oldest child goes in the stroller, baby strapped to my front. First aid knapsack on my back. The jug of water lies in the canopy under the stroller seat. I inspect it with care, to see if the fabric can hold all that weight. I'm optimistic. I have to be. And the suitcase full of food and our radio, with its perfect wheels, gets pulled one-handed behind me while I push the stroller with the other hand.

We will walk past the lines of cars, trapped by the volume of escape. We aren't confined by roads. We have the resource of mobility. It is a lot, but I can carry it all. Carry us all.

I am prepared.

Once all the escape gear is in place, I rehearse the plan in my mind. The walks with my youngest give me plenty of time to sort out the details. It isn't enough having all the equipment. I have to be sure that I use it all properly if the time comes. I run the scenario, over and over. To be sure I won't forget anything. To be sure I can do it all.

*

Walking worked to give my younger child some peace until they were old enough to find their words and express their frustrations. As their vocabulary grew, so did their sturdy legs. Soon I had two small people, no longer babies, that were able to move themselves through the world.

Soon—sooner than I realized it would come—my oldest child started kindergarten. We still walked, but now with school as a destination. She had somewhere to be. And after we carefully crossed the busy street in front of our house, she would run ahead, called by leaves or snow drifts or tiny spring blossoms. Waving to friends also on their way to school. Before long, we had two children walking to school, delighted by nature, eager to learn.

*

And then, a disaster, though not the one I had planned for. The pandemic. No need to escape on foot—this crisis required us to hunker down. Which was fortunate, as the children had outgrown my original plan.

Within the confines of our four walls, that walking urge returned. My children's days lacked structure, with online school filling precious little time. On my lunch hour, for the timing of my days was still prescribed, we took to the sidewalk. The kids complained, but without much vigour. The daily walk became our touchstone, the thing we depended on. Sometimes there was a destination, like the time I masked up to venture into the corner store to buy us all popsicles, in and out as fast as I could, anxious about the non-essential nature of the trip. But knowing, too, how essential those popsicles were.

It was on these walks that we saw the wild turkey in a neighbour's yard. We tracked a woodpecker as it moved from tree to tree. We talked about other animals we might see, and the children got me to promise that if we met a talking bear riding a unicycle and wearing a full purple paisley suit, we could take her up on her invitation to come over for tea. Otherwise, I insisted, we would keep our distance from the wild creatures.

We walked to have a marker to divide the day. To make shape of the undefined hours of our lives. To fight the impulse, and government directions, to hermit. We walked until guidelines suggested that visits and playing outside would be okay. We walked until our bubble formed, and we had another house to spend time in. We walked to protect our sanity through those early months of so much uncertainty.

*

The outgrown stroller sits on my porch. The spokes are rusted and the cushions now a nest for squirrels. The baby carrier, unused for years, hangs in my closet.

The cans of food have expired and need replacing. The water is somehow evaporating from the sealed plastic jug, and has become more of a liability than an asset. Drinking it would send us straight to the toilet. It is on my to-do list to replace these things, but it keeps getting pushed to the bottom.

It's not that the rats of climate anxiety have scurried away. They're still digging and burrowing in my brain. Some days they're quieter than others, but they're still there.

It's that now, if we need to escape, I don't bear the full weight of that burden. We can walk away on our own, and together, each of us taking a turn pulling the wheeled suitcase behind us.

AMY NEUFELD (she/her) is a playwright, novelist, humour writer, and essayist, and a contributor to *Shameless Magazine* and CBC's *The Irrelevant Show*. Amy has published in *Dreamers Creative Writing*, *Daily Drunk Magazine*, and *Miniskirt Magazine*; she was also a member of the 2021 Pat the Dog Women's Room for playwrights. She lives in Kitchener with her husband, two children, and calico cat. Find her at www.amyneufeldwrites.com.