

The Walk

By Nick Hayden

“Hey, mom, I’m going for a Walk,” Tyrone said casually, with immense accent on the last word, as he passed by the kitchen. He knew what to expect.

“Sure. See you in a second.” She did not look up, but Tyrone knew she was smiling. He had been running this same gag for months. That was why it was so funny this time.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m really going.” He struggled with his lips, wrestling the imminent smile to the ground.

“Tell my grandchildren ‘hello’ while you’re there, will you?” She stopped stirring, looking up with mock realization. “Oh, but you’re not even eighteen yet. I forgot. Silly me.”

Tyrone suppressed a fit of childish giggles. “You know, mom, I feel this...this...urge, I guess you’d call it. Like a hunger, but not quite. Deeper, maybe. I can’t tell. And a pulling, like a rope tugging me.”

Tyrone saw the merriment in his mother’s eyes harden. Then she laughed and returned to her cooking. “You’re not serious, are you, Ty?”

“I couldn’t be more serious if I tried.” The grin that ambushed his face undermined the statement, but it was true, and his mother saw that.

“But you’re so...Ty, you’re not even eighteen yet. I’ve never heard of anyone Walking before then. It’s, it’s...”

“Just fine, mom.” He wished his mom would not worry so much. “Professor Gromell told me once that there have been several cases of early Walkers, so calm down. I’ll just go out back, take my Walk, and return in no time.”

She smiled slightly, whether at his jest or his light-heartedness, he could not tell, and he did not really care. At least she was smiling. She followed him as he walked around to the back of the house. Tyrone positioned himself just inside a row of oak trees. His mother was silent. He wished she would not be so quiet. She always got like this when he tried something new or “dangerous.”

Being just inside the tree line should keep him safe. Professor Gromell believed collisions, or as he called them, “temporal overlaps,” could not occur. While most times Tyrone trusted the Professor, this was his first time. His mother’s anxiety was

infiltrating his senses, he was sure. This had been done for centuries—since the beginning of civilization, the stories said. It was who they were, their gift...but it was certainly better to be cautious, right?

Drawing in a deeper breath than Tyrone wanted to admit, he nodded, grinning, to his mother, and took his first Step.

The world fluctuated, wavered. Tyrone stopped, slightly disoriented. He scanned the area, waiting for the dizziness to cease. He had not moved. That was to be expected. Everything looked much the same, but his mother had disappeared. The air was cooler, though, and the grass and leaves were not as green as they had been. At least, he thought they weren't. It was strange to think they had changed already.

The invisible rope tugging him had him Walking in a few minutes. That urge appealed to him, like water appeals to the thirsty, saying, "Drink me." Tyrone watched his feet, but they never moved. At least, in the normal sense of the word they never moved. Instead of pushing against the ground to walk, it seemed to Tyrone that he was pulling the terrain past him. That was not exactly it, but it was as close as he could come.

Professor Gromell had tried to explain what Walking was like more than once. "Your mom's taken you to the city before, right?" he would always ask, and Tyrone would nod patiently. "Well, then, you've seen those conveyors people ride on. Just standing there, waiting. Well, that conveyor's like Time, Ty. People begin at the beginning and end at the end. We, however, we...we...ah, yes," he started again, "we can get *off*, Ty. We can get off the conveyor and walk to another point farther on and rejoin the rest of the world. But not back. We can't go back. We've already made our decisions there. And, Ty, don't you see that if we're moving, and by my definition, Time is motion, maybe we're creating our own bubble of Time, or maybe it's like Dewan theoriz—"

"But what does it *feel* like, Professor?" Tyrone once interrupted. It was the only way to get Gromell's attention.

"Feel like, Ty? I haven't a clue. Don't remember."

Tyrone couldn't decide what Walking felt like. He moved no muscle. He simply did it. It was like moving his eyes to see what drew his interest. Walking felt as if he was tumbling uphill, not downhill. He was disconnected, as if everything simply *was* without significance attached; but there was more *being* about everything. This land was his to pass through and admire, but not his.

Around him, nature undulated. The greens browned, wilted. The crazed mélange of sound died away. The brown melded into white. The warmth fled. Then it reversed: warmth returned, green sprung from the land, the whisper of sound grew into din. Then the cycle began again. It was rather pleasant to watch. It comforted the mind.

An image—no, a memory—flickered across his mind, a memory like a freshly dreamt dream. Tyrone backed up, slowly, searching. He knew it was a new memory, and it became clearer with each Step he took. Mid-stride, he stopped. The yard was filled with chairs and people. The minister stood at the far end. In a realization, shocking in the fact that he felt it obvious, he knew—felt—himself getting married.

Blunted emotions seeped into Tyrone. The nervousness, the excitement, the joy felt like worn-out, hand-me-down versions of the real things. He was twenty-one, he knew. Memories he had never had blossomed, waiting to be examined. If the urge had stopped gnawing and the tug had stopped pulling harder and harder, he would have stayed. He started Walking again.

Nature began to cycle continuously around Tyrone. He became lost in thought. The tug lessened, only to be replaced by a gentle resistance from the other direction. His Anchor, that immovable essence still back with his mother, he decided from what Professor Gromell had described during one of their many chats.

Only one thing never altered. The Tower rose to Tyrone's left, a massive, pristine column of stone too polished to be natural, a single door the only scar upon its bare surface. It stood as an eternal sentinel. All but a handful of those who could Walk called its shadow home. Gromell claimed the Tower had existed since the beginning of Time and would last until the end of it, but no one, not even Gromell, though he discoursed for hours in speculation, knew what it held. Tyrone couldn't resist toying with the idea that it was a lighthouse of sorts, a stone in quicksand. He kept staring at it. No, it was too large for that. Too...impressive.

Tyrone stopped suddenly. He instinctively knew he was there. The urge and tug were gone. Only the Anchor remained, a gentle reminder.

Five faces greeted him, all five wearing his face as it might appear in five, ten, twenty years. The oldest one spoke. "Ah, so we are all here now." His wrinkled face was a consummate grandfatherly grin. "Or should I say, I'm all here now."

Tyrone laughed, joined by five eerily similar laughs. There was an intoxicating sense

of hilarity as others echoed his amusement. He felt the others' amusement, and they likely felt his, so that a simple laugh was as exhilarating as the time Tyrone had ramped his sled going down the tallest hill in the area.

The Oldest waited for the laughter to die, then said, "Let us begin the search."

"What search?" Tyrone asked. "What are we...I...looking for..." He already knew, though. The memories were there if he looked. His granddaughter, Lindra, was missing. The little rat—the word sprung fondly to his mind—was always Walking without permission. Walking? At age nine? She had never returned. She would never have run away. He was afraid she had Jumped. Jumped? *Jumped?*

"Linny, she...she can Jump?" Tyrone had not known the term this morning, but now unbelievable amounts of information hung just in view beyond a thin veil. There were half-believed legends, myths from long ago that told of Walkers who could reposition their Anchor, who could relocate their present. Jumpers, they were called.

"Yes, I believe so." The Oldest sighed. "She's so smart, so gifted, but so young."

As knowledge he never knew shimmered just beyond the veil, a tidbit slipped from behind its covering. "Professor Gromell's dead?"

"Yes. He died quite a bit ago. You took his place." The Oldest smiled fondly. "I should know." His face grew serious again. "I'm going to Walk ahead five years and scan Linny's favorite hiding places. She shouldn't have been able to Jump farther than that. In order of age, stagger behind me, a year between each. Understand?"

Everyone but Tyrone nodded. He didn't understand. Thoughts and memories cluttered his brain, but he could not access the information he was sure would make everything clear. Odd, random thoughts kept drifting across his mind. That game of checkers he had let Linny win. The great food his daughter-in-law cooked for him every Sunday. An obtuse theory on temporal mechanics. The arthritis that afflicted him at times. The aura of anxiety that permeated the situation did nothing but worsen Tyrone's concentration.

Fighting off a strange sense of nostalgia, Tyrone noticed only the Oldest remained. "Your first Walk, right?" The small smile appeared again. "Always wondered where I went that first time. You couldn't imagine the sense of *déjà vu* I had when I saw the first of me appear. Five separate Walks, all converging here. Amazing." He blinked, eyes focusing on Tyrone. "Sorry, but you always did have a tendency to ramble," he joked

gently.

“How do I get this clutter out of my head? I can’t focus on anything.”

“You’ll adjust, I suppose. No one remembers their Walks.”

“Oh. That’s right.” Tyrone felt a little foolish. Everyone knew that. It was a simple fact. But all the knowledge, all the life! Tyrone could not imagine forgetting it all.

“You ready?” the Oldest asked. Tyrone nodded. “Well, I’m off, then. We’ll find her. One doesn’t get the urge for nothing.” He vanished.

Linny, Linny. Tyrone ran the name through his head, hoping to focus his thoughts. Hiding places. He remembered the hut his son had built for Linny back in the woods a bit. She had been so proud of it. Tyrone headed to it, his legs feeling strange at their regular use. It was as good a starting place as any. The stump she used as a table was covered with a plain cloth, battered teacups lying on their sides. He had had a tea party here once, with Linny and her doll. Penny was its name, or something like that.

Don’t remember her, find her. He tried to clear his mind again and started to Walk slowly ahead. Nature did her dance outside the hut; to a slower beat, but the same dance. Inside, little changed. The cups disappeared. Tyrone had caught a glimpse of his daughter-in-law sitting at the stump but moved on quickly. He did not want to see her cry.

Step, on, two, Spring. Step, three, four, Summer. Step, turn, Autumn. The leaves fell on cue. There were still other places to check. Maybe she had Jumped farther; she had the ability. Snow settled on the ground outside, blew into the hut. A blur of black and white passed by Tyrone. Nothing.

There was a flicker of color. Tyrone moved back. Linny slumped over the stump, red ribbon in her hair. She was bundled in a coat too large for her. Her face was pale, and her eyes closed. She wasn’t moving. Tyrone shook her gently. “Linny. Wake up, Linny.” She had to be sleeping.

“Go,” she mumbled, yawning. “Go away. I don’t wanna play.”

“Linny, wake up. It’s grandpa.” The word sounded foreign and familiar at the same time.

Linny groggily lifted her head, rubbed her eyes. They lifted to look foggily at him. “Grandpa?”

“Hi,” Tyrone said, smiling, forgetting everything else for the second. She was cute,

with big, wide eyes. His granddaughter. He knew her from the memories, but memories weren't reality. Memories weren't alive.

"I'm not going with you," she said with surprising seriousness, now completely awake.

"What? Why not?"

She turned the other way, refusing to look at Tyrone. "I'm not going. I've got things to do."

"Things to do?" Tyrone asked harshly. He sounded like his father when reprimanding. "Do you realize that you've been gone nearly a year? It's only been, what, a couple of hours for you, but it's been a year—a year, Linny. You can't go back!"

"I know that," she snapped. "I'm a genius, remember? You told me so."

"Then what are you doing?" Tyrone tried to recall everything leading up to her disappearance, and the memories came. He remembered her irrational pounding on the walls of the Tower, demanding entrance, when he had fallen ill once. She had thought she could help. She had thought the Tower held answers. She believed that her abilities not only destined her to be great, but demanded that she be great.

"Have you ever resisted a Walk?" she asked quietly.

"No! Of course not," Tyrone assured her, a bit defensively.

"I have. You just ignore the urge. It's not fun." She smiled lightly. "But after it's over, you feel fine. You're always preaching free choice."

"But not like that! To completely disregard the urge! It's there for a reason. We have been given the privilege of assisting in our own future in ways most can't imagine. You know that better than anyone." The words flowed out with a certainty of knowledge, like that of a dream wherein the dream one knows some person, but upon waking wonders who it was.

"That's why I Jumped."

"What?"

"I Jumped because of the urge, the call. You know the urge for Walking. It's like being hungry and being given the choice to walk over to the cookie jar. Jumping's worse. It's like starving, I suppose, and smelling mom's mashed potatoes. I couldn't resist. I won't resist. I have to go. I've been called." Linny declared it proudly, but there were tears in her eyes. She turned away from Tyrone. The voice before had been so intelligent, like an

adult; he was startling to find the sob belonged to a child.

Tyrone stroked her hair and let her be a child. “Come on, you squirt,” he said after awhile. “You don’t have to Jump right now, at least. Let’s go home.”

“I—I can’t,” she gasped between the sobs overtaking her. “Stay with me. I’ve a long ways to go, grandpa. Don’t let me go home.”

Tyrone held her. “Come on. A night in your own bed will do you some good. We’ll worry about the next Jump when it comes. If it comes.” He was being grandfatherly, and it disconcerted him that he did it so well.

“No,” Linny said defiantly as she tried to control her emotions.

“Relax, Linny. You can’t go traipsing through time. You’re only nine.”

“Don’t...don’t you understand? It’s too hard.”

“What’s too hard? Maybe He Who Control Time has set you up for something grand, but you don’t have to rush into it. You can Jump, and you’re very, very smart, Linny, but you’re just a child. Wait for the urge, but come home for now.” It pained him to see his granddaughter like this. He remembered her smiling, laughing. The veil of memories was more transparent than before; the experiences were still borrowed, but they fit more comfortably.

Linny looked out her little window. The Tower filled the view. “I don’t understand, either. I don’t know where I’m going, or why...I don’t know anything. Except that I’ll have to go again.” There was a pause, maybe a sob. “And *it* laughs at me.”

Tyrone hugged Linny, trying to soothe her. “Now, Linny, the Tower isn’t laughing.”

“Yes, it is! It knows and won’t tell me. It knows!” Linny nearly screamed.

“You’re being ridiculous and you know it,” Tyrone said sternly. “I’ve studied the records for years, and Gromell’s notes, too. I searched every inch of the single chamber we can enter. We don’t know what it is. For all we know, it’s just a tower, plain and simple.”

“I...I know,” Linny said quietly, looking at the table. Tyrone remained silent. She looked up again. “Why?”

“Why what?” Tyrone said gently. “Why can you Jump? Or why the Tower? Or why now? Or why you at all? In any case, Linny, I don’t have the answers. But come home. You don’t need the answers now.”

“I.... Leave.”

“Come now, Linny. You’re just being stubborn. Let’s go.” Tyrone moved to take her in his arms.

“Thank you,” Linny said quietly. She paused for a second, very quiet. “Good-bye.” She looked weary and resigned beyond her years. Then she disappeared.

Tyrone cursed under his breath and Walked. At least he knew where she was, if not when. His Anchor was pulling him. He could feel his line stretching like a rubber band, growing tighter. He wasn’t sure how far it would stretch. He moved as fast as he dared, knowing that if he went too fast, he would miss her. He saw himself once, a middle-aged version, searching the hut. A year passed. Another year. Another. Muscles, or something very like muscles, began to ache. His whole body ached. He had been away too long; he had gone too far.

Six years passed before his eyes. How far could Linny Jump? She had Jumped, hadn’t she? Maybe he had missed her along the way, somehow. Either that, or she had Jumped further than he had believed possible for her. A morbid part of his mind offered fresh morsels of misfortune to his imagination, and though he tried to refuse them, his imagination gobbled them up.

Year seven passed, and Tyrone began to wonder how much further he could go. The pull of his Anchor was distinct and sharp. He pushed on another year, despite the violent protest of his aching body. His eyes joined the rallying cry, tired of staring endlessly at the ever-changing, strangely constant floor of the hut for the slightest glimpse of Linny. The hut had fallen into disuse, the stump now on its side, rotting, mushrooms growing from it. He pushed on.

The going was slower now. It felt like he was trying to climb uphill with someone pulling him back down, and the incline only got steeper as he went. Another year passed. He stopped to rest, plodded forward, stopped to rest again. When he discovered Linny, he almost passed without seeing her.

She was sprawled in the floor of what had once been her hut. Her coat was missing, and she was paler than before. It was spring now, not winter. Her breathing was shallow and quick; she had Jumped too far. Without thinking, Tyrone lifted her inert form into his arms and headed to his house.

Her face was peaceful when he looked upon it, more like a child’s, less like a driven adult’s. That final expression Linny had given him before she Jumped had haunted him

through his race after her. She was a child, only a child. Why did she believe she must Jump now? He knew children weren't supposed to have the look he had seen on her face.

Tyrone made it to his house without being seen and awkwardly opened the door and let himself in. His older counterpart looked up mildly from his book, saw him, and stood quickly. Tyrone could feel the other's excitement trickling into him. "Linny! You've found her!" He leapt to meet them, as well as he was able. "How is she?" He was curious, not anxious. He had obviously felt no distress from Tyrone, only worry.

"Exhaustion, mostly, I think. She needs to stay with you." Tyrone looked up into the Older's face, disconcerted with the thinning hair and lines of age. "How are they?"

"Good, good. They still remember her birthday. She'd be 17 now, you know. The other two occupy most of their time. And mine, too." He smiled slightly. "Why did you bring her here?"

Tyrone laid Linny down on the carpet near the empty fireplace, gritting his teeth not with her weight, but with that of his Anchor. "She believes she's got a place for herself further on. I don't know what to make of it. She said she had a long way to go. I think she wants to break her old ties." The Older was standing by Tyrone now, looking down at Linny's thin form. "It'd be too hard for her to be anywhere else, to see her parents. She's already made it hard on herself."

"She was always her own worst critic," the Older agreed. After a moment, he added. "You seem...disappointed."

"It's nothing. A vague idea. I just thought you—I—might have learned something about the Tower. She thinks it has something to do with her."

"Maybe it does, but for all we know, it could be just a tower."

"I told her the same thing. But you don't really believe that."

"Don't I?" the Older replied, looking upon his granddaughter. "So, you're the last of the five."

"I guess so. I didn't do much, really." There was a period of silence as they pondered the strange workings of Time. The others had accomplished other tasks. Tyrone felt himself slipping, knew he would have to leave soon. "I know this is repetitive, but, please, take care of her."

"I'll watch her as well as you would." The Older chuckled.

Tyrone smiled thinly. A mist of worry permeated their jests. “Where’s she going, you suppose?”

“I don’t know. Nowhere sounds good to me, but wishing is just that.” He watched Linny’s thin chest as it rose and fell. “But it’s hard not knowing, isn’t it? I hope it’s not too far, or too difficult.”

Tyrone started to nod in agreement, but everything fell away. He was being slingshot back. Colors and images rushed past at a sickening pace, causing a bizarre vertigo. He felt things slipping away, not just days and months, but images, memories, layers of who he had been. Experiences faded away without leaving even the ghost of an image. Dreams leave vague impressions, random, senseless images, but this left nothing but holes, and that was the worst part. There was nothing there, but Tyrone knew, for a little time, that there had been *something*. He tried to grab onto the images, to his wife, his children, his work, his obtuse theories, to Linny, but it was like trying to capture fog in his hand.

Everything stopped. Tyrone was still. Nothing would focus. He wiped his eyes, half-surprised to find tears. His mother knelt over him. He was on the ground, trying to sit up. “It’s okay. It’s always hardest the first time.” Tyrone looked around and saw his house, the familiar surroundings. He knew where he was. The holes faded, not away, but out of sight. His mother looked at him worriedly.

He grinned to reassure her. “Your grandchildren say, ‘Hi.’”

She laughed. “Come on, Tyrone. Enough with your gallivanting. It’s almost time for dinner. You can tell Dad all about it when he gets home.”

Tyrone nodded, looking around. He didn’t know what he was looking for. He gave it up and followed his mother inside.