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The Walker

I walk because I cannot sleep. I walk because I cannot stand still. I walk because I want the night to end. There is a crescent moon. I think of my life in the time before. I see the faces of my loved ones. And I think of the night I ran.

In that life I ran for my life. I had no time to wake my daughters. They lay three abreast on the same bed. How could I know that I would not see them for God knows how long? It has been five years, and now I do not run. I walk.

Walk. Walk. Walk. Listen to the echo of my feet. Yet, no matter how far I walk, how many streets go by, I cannot obliterate the faces of my loved ones. It cannot take away the last moment I saw them, and wanted to reach out. They come to me every night, and they put their arms around me. And they ask. 'Where are you? Why did you not take us with you?'

So I walk. And they walk with me, my wife and three daughters. Their faces bubble to the surface, from my dreams. And with them, the faces of my brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts, childhood friends. And always, my daughters. I see them, as I last saw them. One is fast asleep. The second is stirring in her dreams. The third wakes up and she knows she will not see me when the dawn comes. Now they all walk with me, my phantom partners, my fellow travellers of the night.

But you do not understand do you? You do not see me. You, who sleep in the dark houses that I pass by. You who sleep with your sons and daughters. You, whose voices are heard. You, who have forgotten that your own ancestors fled their homelands for new lives. You who do not wish to grant me my simple rights, a roof over my head, a homeland. To you I am invisible.

It always begins like this: I go to bed. I pray for a night's sleep. I lie awake thinking. As the hours go by, I panic. I hear the endless tick-tock of the clock. And I see my daughter's faces. They come to me smiling. Laughing. And I see them as they were, that night, when the call came. I hear the knocking on the door. I hear my neighbour's voice, his urgent whisper, the fatal command:

'Run. They are in the village. They are looking for you. You must run.'

So I ran.

I ran through the night.

I ran till I wore out the soles of my shoes.

I ran for my life.

And now, years later, I walk.

I walk because I cannot sleep. The panic takes hold. I want to cry out, to beat the walls. To touch the warmth of a loved one. I get out of bed. I get dressed. And I walk.

On other nights, the better nights, when I do drift into sleep, it does not last. Again, my daughters enter my dreams, and I wake up calling their names. I wake to that relentless clock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. I awake to the seconds that have become hours that have become months that have become years, that have become a wasted life-time. Again I get up. Dress. Leave the house. Close the gate behind me. And walk.

I walk because I do not know why I am here now. I walk because my life is meaningless without my family. Even when I am eating, I think of them, and the food sticks in my throat. So I walk.

I walk in search of the dawn light. I cannot walk during the day. I see too much. I am reminded of too much. If I see a family strolling by it takes me back to thoughts of my loved ones. And I must run, hide, see a friend, sit in a café. Seek company.

But at night I walk. And talk. To the wind, the crescent moon. To myself. To you who sleep in those houses I walk by. I ask, why do you not see me? Why are you afraid of me? Why do you look at me with suspicion? Do you not see that I too love my children? That I too want to be with them? That I am like you? That I want only to live in peace?

I walk because I am 'temporary'. I look it up. It means I am 'of passing interest'. 'Ephemeral'. 'Transitory'. Yes, I am a temporary man. I do not exist. I am a cloud, passing by. One day I will be gone. And that will make you, in these darkened houses sleep more easily.

So I walk, and I feel the ground beneath my feet. At this moment I am here. Yes, here. Treading this earth. Journeying from land to land, in search of people who will greet me, welcome me, to a land where I can begin life anew.

Now I walk. And now I know, this is not true.
Now I walk and I know, you do not see me.
Now I walk my temporary walk.
Now I want this walk to never end.
Because if I stop, I will see my daughters' tears.
Because if I stop, I will be crushed by silence.
Because if I stop I will fall into an abyss.
Because if I stop, I will go mad.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Arnold Zable, originally from his co-authored play, Kan Yama Kan (trans: Once upon a time).