

NIGHT WALKS

My neighborhood is surrounded by acres of open space. This expanse of neatly mowed turf is also used for golfing. During the weekends, the golf course is teeming with hackers and can be a risky place for walking a dog. Snappy duck-hooks and stealthy shanks were real threats. To avoid any dimpled missiles that were launched in our direction, we used landscaping as cover and hugged the boundary along the townhouses.

Except in the middle of summer, when golfers pushed the limits of daylight well past our bedtime, the evening hours were more amenable to dogs and their human pets. Rabbits, owls, herons, nighthawks, bats, coyotes, and other critters also celebrated the exodus of roaming golf carts and snack wagon girls.

On our evening walks, we often ran into folks whom we recognized. These were the familiar faces. While all the dogs had names, the humans were denied this courtesy. Perhaps we had a common desire to remain anonymous.

Our usual greeting was "Hey, how ya doin'?" Then we would share long conversations about pets, families, politics, sports, philosophy, and the weather while maintaining indefinite identities. But there were awkward moments when I forgot a dog's name or gender.

Most folks prefer to shout their dog's name rather than their own and this was useful for learning a pup's name. Even the most shy and reserved people will bark like football coaches to rein in their unresponsive pets.

Anyway, during our nightly excursions around the golf course, it was nice to share some time with these folks whom

I never knew. Boo had no interest in these people or their dogs; socializing only interfered with her business. Her career path demanded more critical tasks, such as hunting bunnies or harassing slinky invaders.

On most of these evenings, we had the golf course to ourselves, especially when darkness claimed everything except porch lights and residential windows. While it was hard to conceal Boo's whiteness, we still enjoyed the comfort of being nearly invisible. If we saw someone illuminating their path with a flashlight or exposing their face with a glowing smart device, we would admire their bravery.

There were times when we passed by folks who appeared to be suffering from personal troubles and carefully slipped past their entourage of demons. On these nights, caution was another faithful companion. Once, on a very dark night, we nearly stumbled over a guy who was sitting against a tree. "Not smart to be walking around here in the dark," he said in a husky whisper. We just kept walking. Fast. Getting my front door between me and the outside world never felt better.

Despite the rare freaky encounters, these nightly walks were medicine for my soul. Workdays were a monoculture of surviving the grind inside an environmentally controlled cubical. After returning home, I would snarf a quick dinner, give Boo a treat, then forsake our modern comforts as we embarked upon brief adventures through a network of fairways and townhomes perched above a sea of streetlights splashing against the mountains. Even though heavy snow and blizzards could obscure the glittering metropolis, the glow was always present.

Boo would trail somewhere behind me or cover our

perimeter. Potential threats, like coyotes, or curiosities, like dancing poodles, drew her to the front. Offended gaggles of geese were emphatically evicted. And bunnies, afraid to risk fleeing toward cover, flattened themselves into the grass or snow as we passed. They were good at this. I would point at the vague fuzzy objects and whisper, "Bunny!"

A full moon on a clear night illuminated the golf course and created dark shadows. A cloudy night with snow on the ground reflected the city lights and bathed the nighttime in sepia. A clear night sky without moonlight or snow cover was deep black with stars shining brightly.

We shared very few evenings without a trip to the back-nine. I became familiar with the undulating patterns of the seasons and always knew the phase of the moon—even when it was hidden behind clouds or below the horizon. Waning and waxing were added to my vocabulary.

Living at an elevation above the metropolitan area was like having a balcony seat for distant thunderstorms. These sounded like bulldozers pushing boulders through an empty warehouse. Giant clouds, whose bellies were filled with fire, flashed on and off as they grumbled along. While I marveled at nature's misbehavior, this violence was racking up body shop and home repair bills for others who were sitting at center stage.

When the nighttime was calm and clear, I would gaze upward and wish I knew more about astronomy. I could always pick out the Big Dipper, the North Star, Orion, and, occasionally, his dog. A few times when the heavens were extremely clear, the Milky Way, our home galaxy, appeared as a faint smear of luminescence. And this was the extent of my celestial knowledge.

I had a sense of reverence for these dim crucibles of

stardust whose photons may have traveled for thousands of years before settling upon my retinas. Somewhere within this seemingly boundless universe, the tiny seeds of Creation had been forged and nurtured. I often wondered how a series of mystifying things, in the hands of God, could evolve into a guy walking his dog around a golf course.