

Walking Life

The asparagus cries in the microwave. And I realize I'll need at least three carrots for the chicken soup I'm trying to create. It's a pretty afternoon; a little after four, and I decide to walk to the produce store in the Tano Mall. I wanted to exercise anyway, and I figure the walk will take me at least a half hour.

Just this morning (it was raining earlier) I had been standing at the front desk of the Metuchen library checking out the DVD of *The Little Foxes*, and the librarian, looking at my wet hair, had asked, "You didn't walk, did you?"

"No. Not today."

The young-adult librarian, Moira, who today wore exotic green streaks in her black hair, turned to me and said, "I *always* see you walking down Woodbridge Avenue."

As I set off now in pursuit of some carrots, I think about walking.

In a small town like Metuchen, I can walk nearly everywhere. I walk downtown each morning (even in the snow) to buy the *New York Times*. My neighbor Andy looks at me and says, "Two words, Robert. *Home delivery.*"

But the walk is as much the point as the paper. It's a way to annotate the passing of time: the hissing of the overhead power-line near the Presbyterian Social Center; the dogwood trees in sudden, surprising white bloom; Mike the mailman honking his truck, flashing me the peace sign, and yelling out the window in his broad Brooklyn accent, "Yo, Robert, my brother, what's hap-pen-ing!"

A woman near the post office is walking a large dog; her daughter stands shyly behind her. "My daughter wants to ask if you're famous."

"Tell her not particularly."

The daughter, maybe about ten, has now approached me, smiling. "Are you famous?"

"Well, they made a movie out of a novel I wrote called *Me and Orson Welles*. It starred Claire Danes and Zac Efron."

"Oh, my God," says the little girl, holding her hand to her chest.

"Zac Efron is her favorite."

So, standing here on Woodbridge Avenue, we discuss the humility of Zac Efron....

There's a guy wearing leather exercise gloves doing serious stretching exercises on the stairs leading up the northbound side of the train station.

But I turn left this afternoon down Amboy Avenue thinking that it's one of those days filled with a strange, silent beauty—a beauty you can only catch if you're standing right in the middle of it. A rush of greenery spills over the brick flower borders, and I look at the cactus-shaped leaves, and I think that I don't know the name of a single shrub in front of me. A line from the British television show (and novel) *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* comes back to me. Perrin, a spiritually-exhausted, mid-level executive in a mediocre dessert company says, "One day I will die, and on my grave it will say, 'Here lies Reginald Iolanthe Perrin; he didn't know the names of the flowers and the trees, but he knew the rhubarb crumble sales for Schleswig-Holstein.'"

I pass those splintered blue-and-white obelisks painted with the names of the streets. Whoever knew there was a Goodwill Place?

A woman driving a large black sedan pulls cautiously out of Deol's Auto & Transmission with a look on her face that says, "My car is fixed, but it cost me \$812 so stay the hell away." I pass the office of a chiropractor who, years ago, urged me to try the neck-stretching machine he had just purchased. I remember it looked like some sort of high-tech torture device.

And here's the reserved parking spot for the Berkshire Hathaway Agent of the Month! I'm amused by the thought of a throat-cutting rivalry whirling around a pack of realtors vying for a prized parking spot. "So she *sold* the house in March, but she didn't *close* till June. And you're telling me *that* counts as a June sale? This place is *so* unfair."

Outside of the produce store hang fifty-three hanging baskets of flowers. I look at all the seedlings for sale, all the flowers whose names I don't know, and I say out loud: "Here lies Reginald Iolanthe Perrin..." And I remember suddenly (my nose prickly with the blossoms) that thirty-seven years ago I wrote a fan letter to David Nobbs, the writer of *Reginald Perrin*—mailed it dutifully to England—and then,

months later, received a long, warm-spirited response—handwritten on that blue tissue paper which used to signal an overseas airmail letter. The return address was a letter in itself: The Old Post House. Broxwood. Leominster. Herefordshire. England. *Thank you very much indeed for your letter of August 2nd. It's always a pleasure to hear that someone has enjoyed my work but especially so when it comes from another land....* I remember standing in my kitchen reading it, thinking of the miraculous power of art to reach out and find a stranger. Today in my kitchen, on the corkboard, is pinned the *Times* obituary from August 12, 2015. *David Nobbs Dies at 80; Wrote British Comedies.*

Time passes.

And as the sun pours down around me now, standing outside the produce store, I think about the miraculous power of these small towns—the walks, the neighbors, the lavender blossoms in perfect circles beneath the trees. It's a miracle, I think, as powerful as any art. In fact, these small towns *are* a kind of art: elusive, evanescent, mysterious, profound.

So I purchase my carrots and walk back home.