



The Walk

Jeff Hayes

The Walk

Relax into the passage of time



J E F F
H A Y E S



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This is a true story in so far as related to the location. Concerning the events, my memory remains a bit faulty with regard to the particulars. The telling I leave among yourselves to decide.

Mari is my partner. She and I enjoy our days out indulging in kayak touring. Our outings amounted to leisurely paddling around on lakes or slow rivers near where we live, where a meandering course and mood of the day will deliver us to a destination. For some days, if the sun failed to make an appearance but we did, hats and sunscreen were optional. Those foggy days did not deter us. Actually, the calm and limited visibility added a bit of mysterious novelty to courses well followed. You see, one has to be flexible in this climate. Don't get me wrong, we do enjoy the sunny days as well, but

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limiting outings to Fair Weather Paddling Days would miss the greater balance of the magic. Not such exciting sport, I know.

What about the white water stuff might you ask? There is much to be said about the adrenaline rush of that roller coaster ride. The paddler directs their way traversing rolling course ways and even down waterfalls. We have watched videos and observed the action first hand. Totally amazing. There is so much appreciable skill and thrill on offer. But for us, it is just not enough. Boring in our own way is what works for us. That's just how we are wired.

In the north of Switzerland, near the German border, is where we live. That makes us neighbors to Lake Constance and the calm Rhine River which flows out of it. Perhaps you are familiar with Lake Constance, or its proper German name, Bodensee? Well if you are not, let me just say it is quite a lake, big enough to be visible from space. It is a natural flowing lake, glacier formed—there are no dams. Divided in half by a long peninsula, a water flow between joins the upper and lower lake. In the middle of this land bridge is a classic old German city, the lake's namesake, Konstanz. Three countries claim a portion of the waterway in the vicinity: Switzerland, Germany, and Austria.

The Upper Rhine River which flows into the lake at the eastern end is a river of another character. It consists much of the white water stuff I told you about. Though it was on a

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quieter stretch, we once joined an organized rafting day trip. The route floated the bottom of a steep gorge. The scenery was simply spectacular with areas alternating between sheer granite walls and crumbly mountainside. The views are so vast and yet compacted into a small area. It must be seen to be appreciated.

The events related herein occurred during a paddling day-trip on the German Bodensee, west of Konstanz. It is a favorite area of many favorites. The shoreline there ends a dense forest. The land begins a section of nature conservancy, what is called by the locals, Naturschutz. The terrain is secluded with rollings hills that come to an abrupt end in steep sandstone cliffs at the lake shore. It is an isolated oasis in a populous country.

For our day's outing the area was sparse of people. Even the few sleepy sail boats typically found anchored offshore were not present. It was too early in the season for them. They were still in their winter dry dock. Sadly, there would be no FKK sunbathers on deck to greet today.

This day was an atypical sunny Spring day, a break from the constant rain of the last weeks. There were few clouds and no weather threatening to blow in from the Black Forest, from the west. The trusted weather forecast had predicted as much yesterday, reconfirmed before the car was loaded. The sun had tried its best, but the last of the winter's chill was still in the air. Out on the water, our boats had no care; they were singing

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a happy song, sliding over the calm surface. The tiny wakes flowed out, intersected and carried on unheeded across the distance. We were quiet with the rhythm harmony of paddling.

The scene is set. This story begins when we pulled in midday for the lunch-break by the creek that cuts a small slot canyon called, Marienschlucht. Let's let our characters relate the story further.

"This is good here by the creek to pull out, don't you think?" I asked my paddling partner, Mari.

"As good as any, I guess. There's no sun on the shoreline at this part of the lake though. The trees overhang the water," she said.

I had sympathy for her sun needs. "We can eat our lunch floating on the lake, if you want."

"No, no. That's OK. I want to walk later to stretch the stiffness out. We might as well eat here too."

With that decided we pulled the boats up on the shore and opened the hatches. Our picnic routine was quickly spread out on the sandy shore. Out came the sandwiches, cheese, dried and fresh fruit—our staples for the outings. The water bottles were refilled.

It was after our lunch when Mari had the idea.

"I'm cold. Let's walk up the Marienschlucht path."

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“Yeah, I’m not surprised. I feel it myself. The rain melted the snow, but the air is still icy.”

The boats were quickly repacked. We changed to walking shoes and were off to the trail. It began at a slot in the steep sandstone cliff. Most of the way consisted of a series of wooden piers over the creek or cut into the rock face. The deck levels were joined by steps winding the way. The water was flowing loudly, fast and full.

At about a third of the way up the path made a sharp turn to the left. The muffled roar of water was echoing ahead. Our pace quickened. Turning the corner, there before us was a cascade water fall. It was an amazing sight, the water tumbling over a jumble of rocks. This was a postcard picture. The slot walls framed the scene steeply vertical, opening wider near the top. Trees overhung joining the sides, obscuring the sky. Clumps of ferns and ivy hung down overlaying the dripping fuzz of dense moss. The area was so green it was painful.

Mari got out her little camera for me. She knew my thoughts. This was a special place at a rare moment. Pictures of the scenery with her standing next to me, we needed this.

The light was unfortunate. It was so dim as to make it tricky to obtain focus. I’m more enthusiastic with the camera than I am skilled. But Mari, she shows great patience with her man’s indulgence. The scenery presented a puzzle how to

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frame the moment, capture it in the lens. My fumbling about wasn't working to satisfaction. While we were setting up to try the same shot for the third time, something happened. The deck jumped. We lost balance and fell, dropping to our knees. The dim light went black and the air became heavy; the water roar became distant. This lasted just for a moment, then all was back as before. The deck and the canyon continued unchanged, but for Mari and I in a heap on the deck.

"Where's the camera?" she asked.

"Here," I raised my hand. "Like the paddle, never let go. Have to pry it from my cold dead hand."

She smiled and we helped each other to stand.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," she said as we hugged.

"Shall we keep walking up?"

"Sure. You know, I'm feeling rather happy about this place."

"Me too."

The rest of the way along the boardwalk was uneventful. The scenery became more level and opened into a broader view. Ferns grew out of the tops of moss perched on boulders. It was pretty; however, the beauty of the tight amphitheater below was not surpassed—it remained the dramatic scene of this spectacular trail. Finally, we walked out of the upper end of the canyon arriving at a forest road.

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“What do you think? Should we walk back down or do some exploring. I think there is a Manor House ruin somewhere out here,” I suggested.

“Let’s keep walking. I’m in the mood. Aren’t you?”

“Sure, the road isn’t too muddy. Right or left, do you think?”

“Left.”

“My lady says left.”

Off we walked, away from the Marienschlucht and deeper into the forest.

We had been walking for a bit. Since hiking out of the canyon, the mood had been quiet. Perhaps the dream of the forest had caught us, I thought.

“The road has curved back and forth without any luck of a sign for the ruin,” I said.

“Oh well. So it goes. The way has remained relatively dry considering the recent heavy rains.”

“A tribute to German forest road engineering. Proper drainage.”

“Hey, is there somebody there, up ahead?” Mari asked.

“Where?”

“There, by the side road, standing in the middle. Don’t you see? I think it is a woman.”

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I hadn't seen anybody until Mari had pointed. The forest had me distracted.

"I do see her now. She is just standing there. Was she walking before?"

"I don't know. She was just there when I first noticed."

"Perhaps she is a ghost who has lost her way. Waiting in the dim for unwary travelers to happen along. Whoo-hoo-hoo."

"You would think that."

"But it works, right? In the dim forest light."

"I do think you are right about the lost part."

I smiled. "And the dim."

While the speculation continued, we approached the woman. She remained distracted, staring down a side road. A slight woman with white hair, the many years had worn her frail. Mari and I spoke softly so as not to frighten her with our sudden appearance. She didn't acknowledge us. We came to stand beside her and offered our greeting again. No response.

We remained standing there and were starting to feel a bit awkward for it.

Mari looked at me and mouthed, "Let's go."

I wrinkled my brow. "Are you OK? Can we help you?"

"Are you lost?" Mari asked, a bit loudly.

The woman moved to Mari's question as though waking up and turned to her. Speaking with a voice distant and slight as

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she, “Would you know the way to Ruin Kargegg? I have to go there.”

Shaking her head, Mari mouthed, “No.”

Who wouldn’t have felt sympathy for her, an old woman alone, lost in the forest.

“I’m sorry. We were looking for the ruin ourselves. I’m afraid we hadn’t any luck in finding it,” Mari said.

“I was supposed to meet my husband. He said for me to meet him there, but I cannot remember,” she paused, looking the way we had come. “It is not that way. Are you lost too?”

“We aren’t lost so much as just wandering around,” I said.

She turned to me. Her gray eyes were watery. “My husband can help you too. Would you know the way to Ruin Kargegg? I want to go there.”

Mari squeezed my hand. “You can walk with us. We can all find the ruin together.”

“My husband can help you too,” she said to Mari.

“I’m sure he can. Which way did you come from?”

The woman fell silent.

“She was looking down this road. That’s the direction to the lake. Let’s try that way,” I said.

Mari spoke loudly to the woman, “We’re going to try this way. Will you come with us?”

The woman began walking. Her steps were small and light, automatic as though she was sleepwalking. We walked beside, our steps pacing her.

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We came to a wooden building. Its was short and round. The structure was rough wood, the walls were glass.

Mari stood next to me, touching.

“Wonder what this is?” I asked.

“Seems like a place where the outside is inside without separation, but for the glass.”

“My thought as well. The benches are arranged to view the forest as the speaker.”

“What do people do here? Meditate on the forest?”

“Perhaps it is a chapel, of sorts,” I said.

“Why did you say that?”

“Just a feeling, that’s all.”

We kept on, as the woman had not spoken and did not pause.

I noticed the pressure of the silence. “Must be an effect of the damp forest.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you hear any sounds? Any birds, any wind?”

“No. Just the forest dripping.”

“Yeah, just the dripping.”

“Like a slow rain coming down in dribbles.”

We kept on.

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The road headed downhill. It leveled out before a curve to the right. The light hadn't improved. The forest remained dense, even more so. It could have been night. I checked the time.

"That's strange. I'm sure I was wearing my watch this morning."

"Yes, you did."

"Well I don't have it now." I pulled back my jacket to show my wrist was naked.

"Maybe it came off when we fell."

I tried to make humor in the gloom. "Guess it was time for a new cheapo-watch anyway. Start all over with a fresh battery."

Mari squeezed my hand and rested her head on my shoulder. We hugged at the waist, relaxing into each other.

Rounding the corner, the road was straight and continued level. A rough split rail fence began. We stopped.

"Looks like the post and rails are made from local trees. Natural construction. See, there are no fasteners or wire holding it together. They used slots and wooden pegs."

"Someone had some time on their hands. They did such quality work, and out here. Can you see the end of it? It just keeps going."

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The little old lady had continued on. We caught up with her after a quick few steps. She had stopped at an opening in the fence. Approaching the break we saw it was a gate. Just inside, a man stood smiling serenely as though awaiting her arrival. There were others, women and men in the bushy foliage, standing on the curvy path. They too seem to be here for her, waiting.

He spoke to the woman kindly as though he knew her. His voice was soft. Though we were now standing beside her, we could not hear him properly—the words were incoherent, distant. She responded reluctantly at first. He remained quiet. She spoke. Still, he did not respond. She spoke again, this time with a warm tone. They smiled. She lowered her head and embraced his offering arms.

She turned to us, “I apologize for distracting you both from your way.”

Her words confused me. I had become nervous. Mari felt it as well.

“Please, you were no hindrance. We are happy to be of help to you. We were just wandering about ourselves, you see.”

She flashed us a brief smile then turned and entered the gate. The path was before her. We offered a good-bye, but the wish was not acknowledged. Others looked to her as she passed, and joined behind her.

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The man's attention was now upon us. His look was deeply penetrating, searching, without words. Like he was trying to understand our presence.

I was embarrassed by his attention.

It was Mari who spoke first. I heard the anxiety in her voice. "We wished to have been of more help. Will she be OK?"

A confused look came across his face, like a flashlight beam passing. He opened his mouth to speak but didn't, as though he needed to think on the words more. During the moment all around us remained utterly silent. Then he spoke. The voice was quiet, like wind whispering among the distant tree tops, like it was the forest itself that formed the words.

"All will be fine. Thank you for returning her to us." He paused to gather strength for further thoughts. "She had become lost in her searching, wandering off into the frontier, looking for her husband. She could not find him because he was not here."

"Yes, she said he was to meet her at Ruin Kargegg," I said.

"That cannot be. He has yet to arrive."

"Yet to arrive?" I thought.

"Is there a community nearby?" Mari asked, distracting the man's attention to her. "The forest is so dense we cannot see but a short way into it. And it is so quiet."

"Yes, we are among the forest, as you call it."

He looked to me then back to Mari.

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“You have found your way to us. We welcome you both to come in instead of wandering by yourselves. Out there only lonely sadness is to be found.”

Mari was shaking nervous. Her grip was crushing my hand. She blurted out, “We are fine, this is a day hike for us, we paddled along the shore to here.”

He frowned and said, “I see. You do not understand your present selves.”

Mari looked at me. I was as confused with the tone as she. It was then I became aware of a feeling in my core. It bothered me that there was a possibility the man was displeased with us. Had we trespassed unknown?

The man seemed to react to my thoughts. “I reassure you. Be at peace. We will receive you. Confusion is understandable and is not unusual.” The smile was back. “It would be more unusual if you did understand so soon.”

Now it was my turn to squeeze tighter. Our hands had become wet.

“Come, sit with us for a while, if you wish,” he said, then turned and walked the path. There had remained a few others. They followed him as he passed. A kindly looking woman with long flowing hair paused to look at us. She smiled before turning to follow as well.

We were left alone at the gate. The wind whispered incoherently through the tree canopy.

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“The man was right. It is lonely out here.”

“I was thinking the same,” Mari said.

We hugged a long, timeless hug, melting into each others arms.

“I wonder about the woman searching for her husband, who was not ‘here.’ She said he was waiting for her by the ruin, not here—”

“But that he hadn’t arrived,” I added.

She whispered, “So strange, but let’s enter. Why not? Aren’t you curious?”

“I am. We can walk about briefly to see what they have got going out here. It will make for fun discussion on the paddle back. I think we’ll need that distraction to make the time pass. I’m kinda tired.”

“I’m tired too.”

Together, we walked the path. The forest floor was dense with ferns and occasional patches of grass where spots of sunshine managed through the canopy. There was a bridge perched on two boulders over a small creek. Like the fence, the bridge had a natural construction, wood split from local trees. We paused midway looking first down the creek, and then up. The water spilled quietly through moss covered rocks. It felt peaceful here, from the core. We hugged again.

Along the path we saw no other people nor recent footprints. Was it a short distance or was it long? That

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mattered little to us. There remained no thoughts about the time or the distance of the paddle back. The Gate Man had spoken true, the beauty of the place had accepted us. And in turn, we had it.

Continuing on, the path led away from the creek where we came upon a grassy area under a large old tree. An invitation to sit and lean against its strong base was whispered to us. We accepted the offer. The grass was not wet. Its softness was warm and receiving in the sunlight. We felt the glow throughout our bodies. In a short while, our heads together, we became sleepy. A quiet dream of peaceful feelings was shared, each to the other.

When we awoke together, it was not cold. How long was our sleep? It must have been only a short while. The sunlight had remained all the while fixed in the sky. I pondered the depths above us, lost in the branches woven dense. Mari interrupted my thoughts.

“The grass is disturbed with freshly turned earth. It wasn’t like that before,”

Coming back to myself I looked at the ground before us. I felt the need to joke, “The mound looks like a fresh grave.” We laughed together.

“What’s this?” I leaned across her. There was a wooden plank in the grass. I could not make out the shapes carved into it. Getting closer, words became visible.

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Together, we read aloud, slowly translating the German. “Here in the Nature Cemetery are interned a couple. They were found buried in the slide collapse of the Marienschlucht in the Spring of 2014. Their bodies were recovered from the depths of the former creek bed, each in the other’s arms. They died together peacefully. Here interned they remain so.”

We read further in silence. At the bottom of the placard were our names.

THE END.

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ABOUT JEFF HAYES

Jeff Hayes has been working for many years as a Software Engineering Consultant- not to be confused with his evil-twin, of no relation. Now located in Switzerland as an employee with a financial firm, he has found several hours free in his daily commute. Daydreaming out the carriage window on the green Swiss countryside, the idea came to him to consider the train commute as renting a public space office. Balancing the distraction of the fellow passengers with life within office space cube walls, thus began Jeff's side work realizing his thoughts into words.

Though many pets and a few horses have graced Jeff's life, he presently finds himself pet free, for the short term.

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CONNECT WITH JEFF HAYES

Jeff enjoys talking with his readers for reflections words can bring. Their impressions can be fascinating and unexpected.

He can be reached at his website, deppli.com



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Summary

[The Walk](#), a short story.

A quiet outing paddling on a southern German lake takes a turn into the mysterious after a couple's stop along a secluded shore. A short walk into the forest brings the pair into contact with a new perception of their life's forward momentum. Lasting bonds endure, resistant to severing, relaxed into the passage of time. Share their passage with the short story, [The Walk](#).