ELIZABETH STROUT

The Walk

About his children, something was wrong.

This came to Denny Pelletier as he walked alone on the road one night in late December. It was a chilly night, and he was not dressed for it, having only a coat over his T-shirt, with his pair of old jeans. He had not intended to walk, but after dinner he felt the need in him arise, and then later, as his wife readied herself for bed, he said to her, "I have to walk." He was sixty-nine years old and in good shape, though there were mornings when he felt very stiff.

As he walked, he thought again: something was wrong. And he meant about his children. He had three children; they were all married. They had all married young, by the age of twenty, just as he and his wife had married young; his wife had been eighteen. At the time of his children's weddings—the last, his daughter's seventeen years ago—Denny did not think about how young they were, even though now, walking, he realized that it had been unusual during that time for kids to marry so young. Now his mind went over the classmates of his children, and he realized many had waited until they were twenty-five, or twenty-eight, or even—like the really handsome Woodcock boy—thirty-two years old when he married his pretty yellow-haired bride.

The cold was distracting and Denny walked faster in order to warm up. Christmas was two weeks away, and yet no snow had fallen. This struck Denny as strange—as it did many people—because he could remember his childhood in this very town in Maine, and by Christmastime there would be snow so high he and his friends would build forts inside the snowbanks. But tonight as he walked, the only sound was the quiet crunching of leaves beneath his sneakers.

The moon was full. It shone down on the river as he walked past the mills, their windows lined up and dark. One of the mills, the Washburn mill, Denny had worked in starting when he was eighteen; it closed thirty years ago, and then he had worked in a clothing store that sold among other things rain slickers and rubber boots to the fishermen and to the tourists as well. The mill seemed more vivid to him than the store, the memories of it, though he had worked there not nearly as long as he had at the store. But he could remember with surprising clarity the machines that went on all night, the loom room he worked in; his father had worked as a loom mender there at the time, and when Denny began he had been lucky enough to go from sweeping the floors for three months to becoming a weaver and then, not long after, a loom mender as his father had been. The earsplitting noise of the place, the frightening scoot a shuttle could take if it got out of place, whipping across the cloth and chipping pieces of metal—what a thing it had been! And yet it was no more. He thought of Snuffy, who had never learned to read or write, and who had taken his teeth out and washed them in the water trough, and then a sign had been put up: NO WASHING TEETH HERE! And the jokes about Snuffy not being able to read the sign. Snuffy had died a few years ago. Many—most—of the men he had worked with at the mill were now dead. Somehow, tonight, Denny felt a quiet astonishment at that fact.

And then his mind returned to his children. They were quiet, he thought. Too quiet. Were they angry with him? All three had gone to college, and his sons had moved to Massachusetts, his daughter to New Hampshire; there seemed to be no jobs for them here. His grandchildren were okay; they all did well in school. It was his children he wondered about as he walked.

Last year at Denny's fiftieth high school reunion, he had shown his eldest boy his yearbook, and his son had said, "Dad! They called you *Frenchie*?" Oh sure, Denny said, with a chuckle. "It's not funny," his son had said, and he had gotten up and walked away, leaving Denny with his yearbook open on the kitchen table.

Times changed.

But Denny, who had turned to walk along the river, now saw his son's point: to be called "Frenchie" was no longer acceptable. What Denny's son had

not understood was that Denny had never had his feelings hurt by being called Frenchie. As Denny kept walking, digging his hands deeper into his pockets, he began to wonder if this was true. He realized: what was true was that he, Denny, had *accepted* it.

To accept it meant to accept much: that Denny would go to work in the mills as soon as he could, it meant that he did not expect himself to go on to school, to pay attention to his studies. Did it mean these things? As Denny approached the river, and could see in the moonlight how the river was moving quickly, he felt as though his life had been a piece of bark on that river, just going along, not thinking at all. Headed toward the waterfall.

The moon was slightly to the right of him, and it seemed to become brighter as he stopped to look at it. Is this why he suddenly thought of Dorothy Prescott?

Dorie Prescott had been a beautiful girl—oh, she was a beauty! She had walked the halls of the high school with her long blond hair over her shoulders; she was tall and wore her height well. Her eyes were large, and she had a tentative smile always on her face. She had shown up at the end of their sophomore year, and she was the reason Denny had stayed in school. He just wanted to see her, just wanted to look at her. Otherwise he had been planning on quitting school and going to work in the mill. His locker was not far from Dorie's, but they shared no classes, because Dorie, along with her astonishing looks, had brains as well. She was, according to teachers and even students said this, the smartest student to have come through in a long time. Her father was a doctor. One day she said, "Hi," as they were at their lockers, and Denny felt dizzy. "Hi there," he said. And after that, they were sort of friends. Dorie hung around with a few other kids who were smart, and those were her real friends, but she and Denny had become friends too. "Tell me about yourself," she said one day, after school. They were alone in the hallway. "Tell me everything." And she laughed.

"Nothing to tell," Denny said, and he meant it.

"That's not true, it can't be true. Do you have brothers and sisters?" She was almost as tall as he was, and she waited there for him while he fumbled with his books.

"Yeah. I'm the oldest. I have three sisters and two brothers." Denny finally had his books and he stood and looked at her. It was like looking at the sun.

"Oh wow," Dorie said, "is that wonderful? It sounds wonderful. I only have one brother and so the house is quiet. I bet your house isn't quiet."

"No," said Denny. "It's not too quiet." He was already going out with Marie Levesque, and he worried that she would show up. He walked down the hall away from the gym where Marie was practicing—she was a cheerleader—and Dorie followed him. So at the other end of the school, near the band room, they talked. He could not now remember all they said that day, or the other days, when she would suddenly appear and they headed toward the band room and stood outside it and talked. He did remember she never said he should go to college, she must have known—of course, "Frenchie"—he did not have the grades, or the money, to go; she would have known because of the classes they were not in together, just as he knew she would go to college.

For two and a half years they did this, talked maybe once a week. Mostly they talked during the basketball season when Marie was practicing in the gym. Dorie never asked him about Marie, though she'd have seen him in the halls with her. He saw Dorie with different guys, always a different fellow seemed to be following Dorie, and she'd laugh with whoever it was, and call out, "Hi, Denny!" He had really loved her. The girl was so beautiful. She was just a thing of beauty.

"I'm going to Vassar," she said to him the spring of their senior year, and he didn't know what she meant. After a moment she added, "It's a college in upstate New York."

"That's great," he said. "I hope it's a really good college, you're awfully smart, Dorie."

"It's okay," she said. "Yeah, it's a good college."

He could never remember the last time they spoke. He did remember that during the graduation ceremony, when her name was called, there had been some catcalls, whistles, things of that sort. He was married within a year, and he never saw Dorie again. But he remembered where he was—right outside the main grocery store here in town—when he found out that she had finished Vassar and then killed herself. It was Trish Tucker who told him, a girl they

had been in school with, and when Denny said, *"Why?"* Trish had looked at the ground and then she said, "Denny, you guys were friendly, so I don't know if you knew. But there was sexual abuse in her house."

"What do you mean?" Denny asked, and he asked because his mind was having trouble understanding this.

"Her father," said Trish. And she stood with him for a few moments while he took this in. She looked at him kindly, and said, "I'm sorry, Denny." He always remembered that too, Trish's look of kindness as she told him this.

So that was the story of Dorie Prescott.

Denny headed back to his house; he went up Main Street. Over him came a sudden sense of uneasiness, as though he was not safe; and in fact the town had changed so much over these last years that people no longer strolled around at night as he was doing. But he had not thought of Dorie for quite a while; he used to think of her a great deal. Above him the moon shone down; its brightness continued, as though the memory of Dorie—or Dorie herself—had made it so. "I bet your house isn't quiet," she had said.

And suddenly it came to Denny: his house was quiet now. It had been getting quieter for years. After the kids got married, moved away, then gradually his house became quiet. Marie, who had worked as an Ed Tech at the local school, had retired a few years ago, and she no longer had as much to say about her days. And then he had retired from the store, and he didn't have that much to say either.

Denny walked along, passing the benches that were near the bandstand. A few leaves scuttled in front of him in the harsh breeze. Where his mind went he could not have said, nor how long he had walked. But he suddenly saw ahead of him a heavy man bent over the back of a bench. Almost, Denny turned around. But the large body was just draped over the back of the bench—such an unusual thing—and appeared not to be moving. Slowly Denny approached. He cleared his throat loudly. The fellow did not move. "Hello?" Denny said. The man's jeans were slightly tugged down by the way he was hanging over the bench, and in the moonlight Denny could see just the beginning of the crack

of his ass. The fellow's hands were in front, as though pressed down on the seat of the bench. "Hello?" Denny said this much more loudly, and still there was no response. He could see the fellow's hair, longish, pale brown, draped across his cheek. Denny reached and touched the man's arm, and the man moaned.

Stepping back, Denny brought out his phone and called 911. He told the woman who answered where he was and what he was looking at, and the dispatcher said, "We'll have someone right there, sir. Stay on the line with me." He could hear her speaking—into another phone?—and he could hear static and clicks and he waited. "Okay, sir. Do you know if the man is alive?"

"He moaned," Denny said.

"Okay, sir."

And then very shortly—it seemed to Denny—a police car with its blue lights flashing drove right up, and two cops got out of the car. They were calm, Denny noticed, and they spoke to him briefly, and then went to the man who was draped across the back of the bench. "Drugs," said one of the policemen, and the other said, "Oh yeah."

One of the policemen reached into his pocket and brought out a syringe, and in a flash—it seemed to Denny—the policeman injected the man, in his arm, in the crook of his elbow, and very soon the man stood up. He looked around. It was the Woodcock boy.

Denny would not have recognized him, except that his eyes, deep-set on a handsome face, looked at Denny and said, "Hey, hi." Then his eyes rolled up for a moment, and the policemen had the fellow sit down on the bench. He was not a boy any longer—he was a middle-aged man, and yet Denny could think of him only as a kid in his daughter's class years ago. How had he turned into this person? Large—fat—with his longish hair and all doped up? Denny stayed where he was, looking at the back of the fellow's head, and then an ambulance drove up, siren screaming and lights flashing, and within moments, two EMT men jumped out, and spoke to the policemen, one of the policemen saying, Yes, he had injected him with naloxone right away. The two EMT men took the Woodcock boy's arms and walked him into the ambulance; the door shut.

As the ambulance drove away, one of the policemen said to Denny, "Well,

you saved a life tonight," and the other policeman said, getting into the car, "For now."

Denny walked home quickly, and he thought: it was not his children at all. This seemed to come to him clearly. His children had been safe in their childhood home, not like poor Dorie. His children were not on drugs. It was himself about which something was wrong. He had been saddened by the waning of his life, and yet it was not over.

Hurriedly he went up the steps to his house, tossing his coat off, and in the bedroom Marie was awake, reading. Her face brightened when she saw him. She put her book down on the bed, and waved her hand at him. "Hi there," she said.

ELIZABETH STROUT is the author of six books of fiction, most recently *Anything Is Possible* and *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Her other books include *The Burgess Boys*, *Abide With Me*, and *Amy and Isabelle*, which was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and also won the Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction. In 2009 her book *Olive Kitteridge* won the Pulitzer Prize. She divides her time between New York City and Maine.