

WALKING OUT

Michael Swanwick

Terry Bissel woke up one morning knowing he had to get out of the city. Take a jitney up Broadway and keep on going forever. Travel so far and so fast that if someone were to shine a flashlight after him, by the time the beam caught up it would've dissipated to nothingness. "I don't want to live here anymore," he said aloud without opening his eyes. It was true. For a long time he lay motionless, simply savoring the thought. A strange elation dawned within him. "I want to live in the country."

His wife was in the kitchen, humming to herself. The blender growled briefly. She was grinding beans for coffee. There was the sizzle of eggs and ham in the skillet. Kris was a lark. Eight months pregnant, and she still got up first.

He pulled on his slacks and rolled up the futon. In the doorway, he paused briefly to watch Kris waft lightly from sink to counter. Then he said, "Let's move to New England."

Kris stood very still at the counter. She didn't turn around.

"C'mon, babe, you know you hate it here. Too much noise, too many people, hardly enough room to fucking turn around in. I want to live in Connecticut—no, Vermont! I want a big, rambling house where you can see meadows out the kitchen window and woods beyond them. And mountains! Snow in the winter and fresh apples in the fall. I want the kind of place where sometimes you get up before dawn to watch the deer crossing the lawn."

"Terry," Kris said warningly.

Down on the street, the recyclers were rattling the bins of cans and bottles, slamming bales of paper and bags of digestibles into the various bellies of their truck. They were in a good mood, to judge by the loud, yakyakking sound of their voices. "Yo, Nee-C! You still seeing that old fool, Benjy?" And: "He got better stuff than you do, Maaaalcolm." And: "You don't know till you try, babe! I got stuff I ain't never used." The crew were laughing uproariously at this exchange. "I heard that," said the woman. "Fact is, I heard you ain't had the opportunity to use none of it!"

"Listen to that." Terry snorted. "That's exactly the kind of crap I'm talking about. Hey—you ever seen a moose?"

"No."

"I did once when I was young. My folks took us kids to this little bed-and-breakfast outside of Montpelier and—hey, the woman that runs it must be getting pretty old by now. Maybe she'd like to sell. What do you think? Wanna run a B and B? It couldn't hurt to ask."

Kris whirled abruptly. "We need more coffee," she said in a choked voice, "We're out."

"I thought I heard the grinder."

"That was . . . decaffeinated. I put it in by accident." With harsh, choppy motions, she unscrewed the grinder and slammed its contents into the disposal. "Go across the street, why don't you, and get us some beans?"

"You're the boss." He grabbed up Kris in both arms, lifted her to the ceiling and whirled her around. "You and the little Creature from the Black Lagoon." He kissed her belly, set her down, and ducked into the cubby to throw on robe and slippers. Then he headed out, leaving his wife weeping behind him.

It was a wonderful morning!

On the elevator, Mrs. Jacinto from two floors up smiled and said hello. Her husband, Herb, was a municipal gardener, as tall as she was fat, and a dab hand at cribbage. Terry had played him a few times and the man was definitely a shark. "How are you doing this lovely morning, Mr. Bissel?"

"Couldn't be better—we're going to move."

"Well, isn't that nice? I expected you children would, now that you have the little one on the way. Oh, and that reminds me. Tell that pretty wife of yours I have some morning sickness tea that I'm bringing up later on; I know you'll think it's foolishness, but tell her to give it a try, it really does work. Are you moving Downtown?"

"We're leaving the city altogether, Mrs. Jacinto. We're moving to the country."

The smile froze on her face. "Well," she said. "Well, well."

The doors opened for the ground floor and she skittered away.

It was a quick hop-skip-and-jump across the street to The Java Tree. On the way back, Terry plucked a daisy—perhaps one of Herb's—from the street turf. He opened the top of the coffee sack and buried the stem in the beans.

"You'll be going to the Housing Authority today, won't you?" Kris asked when he got back. She accepted the coffee, filled a glass with water for the daisy, and put it up on the window sill without comment. Ignoring their earlier conversation entirely, pretending it had never happened. "Like you promised?"

Well, getting out was a new idea. It would probably take her a while to adjust to it. "Why not?" Terry said, playing along. "If we want a bigger apartment, we'll have to move, right? And if we want to move, one of us is going to have to go stand in line. That's just the way it is. Doesn't matter what you want, you've got to stand in line." He winked jauntily.

"I'd go myself," Kris said in a strained voice. "I don't mind. It's just that—" She looked down at the Creature.

"Hey, hey. I didn't say I wouldn't, did I?"

Tight-lipped, she shook her head.

"Then it's settled." Terry ducked into the bedroom and opened the closet. Silk jacket, snakeclone shoes. On the way out, he paused in the doorway. "Hey. What about Maine? Maybe we could find a place outside of Portland, nice and convenient to your mom, wouldn't that be nice?"

As he left, he heard Kris beginning to cry again. Pregnant women were emotional. He understood that.

Their flat was in the heart of Midtown, at the foot of one of the giant condenser stacks that drew current out of the flux and into the power grid. The building was wrapped around the tower's anchor pier, and even though the engineers swore it was perfectly shielded from any harmful radiation, this fact had kept the rents low. No question but a new flat was going to give them sticker shock. Maybe that was all to the good, though. When Krissie saw the bottom line, she might well change her mind about New England. The law gave them a three-month cooling off period; it would be easy to break the lease.

Kris wanted to move Downtown to be closer to her sister. Maybe he could talk Robin into moving as well. They could get adjacent farms and raise llamas.

It was another beautiful morning. The Municipal Weather Authority had programmed a crisp autumnal tang into the air. Light breezes stirred the little trees on the building tops. They looked just fine outlined against the dome.

A paper bag blew past Terry's feet and automatically he started after it. But then a street urchin appeared out of nowhere, a skinny black kid in an oversized basketball jersey, and snatched it up. He leaped high, tucking in his knees for a double somersault, and slam-dunked the bag into a recycling can. With a flourish, he swiped his bank card through the slot to pick up the credit.

Terry applauded lightly.

"Watches!" the shabby man sang. He was only a step away from being a beggar. His jacket was shiny and his shoes weren't. One side of his face was scarred from old radiation burns. That and a blackwork Luna Rangers tattoo marked him as a vet. The watches flew in great loops and figure-eights, blinking and goggling whimsically.

"This sort of post-capitalist consumer faddism is only a form of denial, you know," Terry told him.

"Hah? What're you talking about?"

"Think about it. Your devices consume three times their own weight in time and labor for their design, manufacture, and—now—sales. But what do they accomplish? A moment's diversion from the sad fact of existence. It's a measure of our desperation that we'd devote so much energy in order to generate a respite, however brief, from our very real problems."

"What are you, some kinda nut? Get out of here!" the vendor said angrily.

Terry stuck his hands in his pockets. "The truth hurts, eh?"

Without answering, the shabby man called his watches in. They came swooping down on him, finding safe harbor in his many pockets. He turned and hobbled away.

"It's called denial!" Terry shouted after him. "Therapists have known about it for centuries!"

It was rush hour in the subway. The crowds were so thick that people were constantly losing their hold on the platform grab bars and being

jostled up in the air. If it weren't for friendly hands to pull them down, they'd be in serious trouble.

The peplemover "Spirit of Leningrad" pulled in. Seats filled up fast, and there were six or seven people left standing when it left the station. A teenager in an orange leather jacket studded with video pins sat down next to Terry, then offered his chair to an old woman. A dozen pop songs clashed faintly from his pins. The crone smiled at him, sat down, adjusted her seat.

"I'm moving to New England," Terry told her. "Maybe this month."

She glared at him and turned her chair away.

City dwellers were rude. Terry was used to it. He sighed, and flicked on his paper.

HOUSING SHORTAGE SHAKES CITY, said the *Times*. Just another reason to get out. WORST SITUATION SINCE WAR. There were people, it seemed, who'd been waiting weeks for a suitable upgrade. Of course the *Times* was an opposition paper—it had to put a bad face on everything. JOBLESS RATE HITS 35%, said the *News*. The *News* was an establishment rag; somewhere in the article would be statistics justifying the situation. But the way Terry saw it the figures spoke for themselves. With a third of the working population on sabbatical at any given time, that meant almost three percent were between jobs, pounding the pavement, making do with three-quarters normal salary and benefits. Times were tough.

Terry hit Midtown before the Authority office opened, so he stopped in a diner for brunch. It was a Polynesian joint with thatched roofs over the tables and white sand covering the floor. He ordered the papaya-breadfruit surprise and two eggs that had never been inside a chicken. He didn't bother with the orange juice. It never tasted like the stuff he used to drink when he was a kid. The way he figured it, if they didn't have it down by now, they never would. You simply couldn't get oranges like they had back then anymore.

He picked at his food, thinking about Krissie. Pregnancy was tough. Kris had less than a year's leave for it. And the neighborhood maternity center—well, he guessed it was okay. Just last night the nurse-midwife had come by for the weekly and she'd said Krissie was doing fine. Still, you couldn't help but worry.

What kind of a place was this to bring up a kid in, anyway? Children needed to run wild, enough room so they could stretch out and grow, woods they could disappear into for hours and days at a time.

"A penny for your thoughts," the waitress said when she brought the bill and thumbpad.

Terry waved a hand toward the dugout canoe that hung from the rafters in the back of the diner over a small turquoise waterfall. "That thing's Malaysian, you know that? This whole place is about as Polynesian as I am. I mean, you can talk about cultural preservation all you want, but let's be honest here. It's pointless to pretend you can preserve a culture you've never experienced first-hand. You wind up with the MGM-Disney fantasy version of something that never existed in the first place. You get where I'm coming from?"

He jabbed his thumb on the pad and left without even picking up his complimentary breath mint.

Downtown wasn't so bad as Midtown if you had kids. But of course—all this urban bureaucracy!—you couldn't do anything so simple as just *move* there. You had to stand in line. Flats were assigned according to a complicated formula. So many points from the monthly lottery (one ticket for paying rent; extra for civic service or orbital work), and so many for need (about one room per family member, plus kitchen and bath). Plug in the neighborhood stats—quality-of-life, environmental health, access to schools, clinics, entertainment;—and out pops the number. They'd drawn a high number last month, thanks in part to the Black Lagoon being on its way, so they'd decided it was now or never.

He spent half an hour sitting on a gut-sprung sofa before the government lady called him in. She rose to shake his hand. "Mr. Bissel. Thank you for your patience." He took a chair and she sank back down behind her desk. "Where exactly were you thinking of moving?"

"New Hampshire."

She looked up.

Terry laughed. "Just a joke. Right now, today, I'm interested in something Downtown. Quiet. Spacious. Suitable for a newborn."

"I—see." The government lady touched three spots on her desk and it spat out a hardcopy of three addresses. But she didn't hand them over. "Mr. Bissel, I note that you're monolingual."

"Yeah? So?"

"No crafts or hobbies. You don't play any musical instruments." She frowned. "Your cultural preservation ratings are distinctly below the

mean."

"Aw, c'mon, you know as well as I do, that stuffs all bullshit."

The woman's eyes flared. "I most certainly do *not!* Multidiversity—"

"—is a crock. Look, if you want to preserve our goddamn priceless ethnic and cultural heritages, then just hand out rifles. What do you think ethnicity is all about, if it's not hating the people in the next county? Molotov cocktails for everybody in the bar! Kill the lot and let God sort 'em out! The plain and simple truth is that instead of trying to preserve our tribal identifications, we ought to be doing everything we can to obliterate them. You want to prevent the next war? Burn the family albums!"

Her mouth opened and shut. She said nothing.

Terry picked up the hardcopy. On the way out, he grinned and said, "Never mind me. I'm Irish on my mother's side, and 'tis like me Mither always sez: The only thing the Irish like better than an argument is a good fight."

The first apartment was in Chinatown, overlooking the Canal. There were some kids jiggling crabs on the stairs out front. Little goats were running around on the roof. Terry liked water well enough, but he didn't like sky goats all that much. Supposedly they helped keep the city clean by eating trash. He couldn't see it.

The manager of the building was a fat Mongolian who was more interested in his saxophone than in showing the flat. Terry stood, hands behind his back, looking at the Buddhist woodcuts on the wall while the man finished a snatch from *Rhapsody in Blue*. Then he sighed and put down his instrument. Lumbering, he led the way to the fourth floor.

The present tenant was, according to the hardcopy, a high-wire artist who was joining an Uptown circus. He squatted on the floor, greasing parts of a disassembled unicycle. He didn't even look up, but just grunted.

"Most of building is squatters," the super said, with an expansive gesture. "Only this guy is movers. No face canal, si? No face canal."

"No face canal is right," Terry muttered. He stared out the window into a filthy airshaft with a few vegetable gardens down below. Some kids were playing wall ball. They had those garish knee and elbow grips that were all the craze nowadays, and were swarming up the walls three and four floors. One of them made a face at him.

He smiled back at her. *I'm leaving the city, little girl, and you're not.*

One look was enough, though. The super was glad to get back to his music. He called an absentminded "Adios, good buddy amigo," after Terry. There was a strong Hispanic component in this neighborhood; he probably thought he was speaking English.

Off to prospect number two in Little America.

Little America was as motley a place as its namesake. The prospect was a two bedroom flat that had been created by knocking out the walls between two pre-War flats. It faced the street, and between the clash of bicycle bells and street musicians, fishmongers, vegetable-carvers, poetry slammings (Terry had signed a petition against slamming once, but the Street Poets Union had power, and a popular argument that they were a "humanizing influence" on the city) and people laughing, he would never've gotten any sleep.

The super was ethnic Kenyan, with skin as purple as a plum. She had an overprecise New Oxford accent and said she was working on an interactive software history cycle. "You and half the universe," Terry said, and she cheerily agreed. But when he suggested she look into some place outside the city, where rents were cheaper, her expression changed to one of offended *hauteur*. "Look at the apartment. Rent it or don't," she snapped. "Be quick about it. I haven't the time for any nonsense from the likes of you."

In the actual case, there wasn't any real choice. The baby would never get any sleep in this bedlam. And Krissie might like this sort of neighborhood, but as far as Terry was concerned it was exactly the sort of overcrowded chaos that he wanted to get away from.

"I'll pass," he said.

Third time was the charm. The apartment was on the top floor, windows on three sides, with solid oak floors. They hadn't learned how to grow oak by the plank until ten years ago, so he could only imagine how much it had cost new. There was a modern kitchen with a tap-line to the local shops so he wouldn't have to be trotting all the way across the street whenever the wife got one of her cravings. There were kids playing wall ball outside, but they weren't going any higher than the third floor, so the noise was tolerable.

The clincher was that the surrounding buildings opened up in a way that gave him a completely unobstructed view of Jupiter through the city dome. Terry was a sucker for cloudgazing. He could sit and watch the

planet's slow-swirling weather fronts endlessly shifting from pattern to pattern for hours.

It was evening when Terry finally went home, and all the city lights were blue-shifting into twilight. He felt weary but virtuous. Krissie, he knew, would be pleased, and that was all that really mattered.

There were two strangers in the flat when he came in. A slender woman and a real bruiser of a man. From the quiet neutrality of their dress, Terry guessed they were counselors or therapists of some sort.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "What's going on?"

"Terry," his wife said. "A woman called from the Housing Authority. She told me how you behaved and I—" She looked helplessly about her "And I—"

"Mr. Bissel," the woman said. "You've been telling people that you plan to move out of the city."

"Yeah, so? That's not a crime. I mean, look around you. It's a perfectly rational response to an intolerable situation." Krissie was crying again.

"You want to move to . . . New England, is it?"

"Look." He spread his hands in bafflement. "What is all this?"

Kris stepped close to him. Through angry tears she said, "The War, Terry—remember the War? There is no New England, not anymore. Three weeks the asteroids fell. Three weeks! The clouds covered the skies for years!" She was hysterical now, babbling. "Everything was destroyed—Earth, Mars, all the colonies. The cities. My mother. All of them." She began punching him on the chest. "My brother Allen! Mrs. Kressner! Jamal Hardessy! Angela Hughes!"

The burly man slid himself between them. Gently he placed his enormous hands on Terry's arms. It was like being gripped by a mountain. "Don't bother, Mrs. Bissel," he said. "We get a lot of these cases. More every year. They never listen."

The woman opened the door. "He'll be taken care of," she said.

"Where are you taking him?" Kris asked fearfully.

"Someplace pleasant," the man said. "You'll be informed when he's ready for visitors."

"But you can't. I need him here. My God, there's a baby on the way!"

"Mrs. Bissel. We cannot allow your husband to wander about loose. His illness—it's like a virus. It could infect others. He's a threat to the survival of the city."

"Oh, not my husband. You don't know Terry. He's a good man. He—"

Harshly the woman said, "It may not show ordinarily. But we're all precariously balanced. This exaggerated kindness we show each other, our horror of conflict, the cult of preservation—these are signs of denial. All our society is an extreme reaction to ... to what happened. We're none of us totally sane, you know. We're all of us at risk."

They escorted him into the hall.

"Terry!" his wife cried. "Try to concentrate. Try to concentrate. You can't leave the city. We're the only surviving colony—the last habitat that humanity has left. There is nowhere else to go."

"Oh no," Terry said happily as they shut the door behind him. "I know where I'm going. I'm going to the country!"