

The Pacemaker

David Wheldon

I had not known her name; I had spoken with her once or twice, but that was all. She was a medical student, as was I, and in the same year, but we were in different firms. I would sometimes see her in the large lecture theatre. I guess we were of the same age, about twenty-one.

She fascinated me.

What was unique about her was her walk. She had a long, loose, perfectly even stride. On random days I would sometimes find myself following her as we left the building. Now, I walk fast, but she walked just as fast. In fact our favoured pace was exactly the same, so that we remained the same distance apart. This alone is a strange coincidence, for, as I say, I'm a very fast walker and I don't like to modify my pace to suit those who merely stroll.

She was tall, but not unduly so; her legs were long, though, in proportion to her spine. She always wore a short skirt which meant that you could see a good length of her thighs.

Although we had not formally met, she recognized me and always had a pleasant smile for me when our paths crossed. Sometimes she would nod; sometimes she would wave her hand. She was well aware, I think, that our shared fast walks were of an equal pace: sometimes she would be behind me, and I would hear the click of her heels as she kept pace with me.

Why did she fascinate me? Frankly, I can think of a dozen reasons. The first is that she stood out from the other students, who tended to dawdle in groups. No, she would stride out on her own, her pace very fast. Was it that she had somewhere to go, or did she just enjoy fast walking? I think it was the latter. I saw her walking up Lower Maudlin Street one Sunday; it was quite early, and all was deserted. I was walking in the opposite direction, towards her. Then I heard the click of heels echoing from the Infirmary wall (she wore steel clippets) and I knew that it was she. And it was. She came round the corner from the direction of the Eye Hospital, a Sunday paper under her arm, *The Times*, I think, walking fast, her gait absolutely symmetrical. She passed me, and, as she passed, she smiled and raised a hand; she didn't pause, though: she walked on up the hill and vanished round the slow bend going towards Park Row, near Madame Virtue's, the second-hand theatrical clothing shop. I stopped to watch her.

That was actually the first time that she began to fascinate me. And, curiously enough, that was also the time when her own behaviour changed. Whether the two behavioural changes were linked I cannot now tell: I don't suppose I knew even then: but I quietly wondered whether a mental link had been forged that day.

The complexity of the physiology of walking is astonishing. Just to witness it activates certain areas of the brain. Bones and joints: the tilt of the pelvis; the swing of the hips: the brief flexion of the knee of the trailing leg, and then its extension as it is brought forward. What a mechanism. All unconscious and all under fine control: and all the time inherently unstable and always a split second from catastrophe. And that is before you begin to consider the musculature. It's very individual, too: no-one has quite

the same way of walking: every person has his or her own modulus, with which they feel most at ease: a style and length of pace appropriate to an individual anatomy and appropriate to an individual psyche. You can tell a lot about a person's character by the way they walk. And so, learning from her, I watched this fast-walking girl until she was out of sight.

One day — not long after this — she was leaving the front entrance of the medical school. It was early in an autumn afternoon. By coincidence I was not far behind her. As we both walked at the same pace the set distance between us remained the same. Then she turned right, crossed the road and entered the Senate House. The door closed behind her. I watched her stride away into internal distance, her form lightening and darkening as she walked beneath the ceiling lights. I did not enter the building myself, but stood at one of the several glazed doors, looking in.

What business had she in Senate House? Not that it was any concern of mine, whatever it may have been. Senate House is the administrative headquarters of the university. I rarely have had need to enter the building. What should I do? Should I wait for her?

I was actually feeling rather nervous, if you want to know. Well, very nervous: as nervous as before a *viva voce*. I tried to look at my reasons for this nervousness, but nothing would come to mind, except that her walking, her striding, had actually imprinted itself deeply in my mind. Do the interior structures of the brain oscillate in a certain pattern? At an individually tuned walking pace? I wondered this. What a strange conjecture! And quite frequently I would wake up in the night, dreaming of her, just ahead of my stationary sensorium, walking away from me, her footfalls going into distance: a perspectival sound, going to the vanishing-point of silence, yet lingering at the edge of my senses. Oh, I don't know with what I might compare the sound. In fact there is nothing with which to compare it. You might think that a metronome would come close. I would initially have thought so: In fact I had timed her paces on many occasions (afterwards feeling guilty of trespassing on her privacy) and it never varied by more than a pace a minute: then I went to the Music School to find Aaron Grøndahl and borrow a metronome. It was disappointing: the thing, set to her pace, produced a perfectly dead mechanical clacking. Actually the sound of her clipped paces was nothing like a metronome at all. I think I know the reason why: for a start there are minute differences in the surfaces of the paving-stones: some are more resonant than others — some are quite dull. And then there are the echoes. So, not like a metronome at all. No, the sound had a living quality: it couldn't be fabricated by a machine. And it was this living quality which so fascinated me: the lively, cadenced step of a girl who enjoys fast walking simply for its own fine sensual sake.

[This is a preview. The complete story is approximately 6,000 words.]

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