

the walk

By Rob Steele (originally published under the name Connor Sloan)

The forest was always lovely this time of year. The luscious trees all abloom with more types of flowers than he could possibly remember. Granted, he could remember very little in the way of botany. His mind was constantly wandering through the worlds of technology and politics and entertainment. He knew that there were people in the world who were more interested in the details of the botanical world and he would let them keep track of the names of all the variants of flora that surrounded him. He'd just enjoy the sights and sounds and leave all the minutia to the scientists.

He had what he cared about with him. His wife of almost twenty-five years. They held hands as they walked the path through the woods. They didn't get to do things like this very often. Either his work would get in the way... or hers would. Most of the time they blamed the kids for not letting them out of the house. They both loved their children very much, but they took up so much time.

No one ever really told them that outright before they had the kids. They'd both grown up in houses with both parents, but from a child's perspective the parents never really seemed to do much. Always going to-and-from work. Always cleaning dishes or dusting furniture. When you look back on it, always doing those things is what keeps the parent busy. Perhaps that's why children are so reluctant to clean their rooms. They see all the work that goes into cleaning properly and don't want to waste the energy when it could be used for playing and nonsense. But now they're grown and it's their turn to clean...

Just not today. The oldest was at college safely tucked away in a dormitory, or at least that's what they told themselves. More likely she was out with friends, but that was okay, too. Their younger child was still at a sleepover. It didn't matter that it was after noon, now, and that he should be home anytime now. He had a key to the house and was old enough to take care of himself long enough for them to enjoy a walk in the woods.

This was the only place he felt he could get away from the world. It had become so convoluted as he got older. Few things make as much sense as they used to. Maybe it was him getting older and this was the onset of senility. No, that couldn't be it. The world was getting weirder... or at least, more complex.

When he was growing up, it all seemed so easy. During the week, you go to work. Not that he knew what went on at "work." He always assumed work was like school for grown-ups. Get up. Go there. Come home. On the weekends, you sleep in on Saturday and go to church on Sunday. Nothing complicated about that.

He supposed it was about his mid-teens when he actually started paying attention to the services at church and realized that a lot of what was said didn't make a whole lot of sense. But he went on with the routine anyway. Not that he'd had much of a choice, his parents wouldn't let him sleep in on Sundays no matter how much he'd protested.

Then he realized that the other churches were actually different religions. As a youth, he'd assumed that at some point, people were assigned to other churches. He didn't know why he thought that. They were all, allegedly, Christian (except for Ben and Tammy who went to a Synagogue), and all Christians worshiped the same God, didn't they? Why were there differences?

That was something he'd had to accept with his wife. He fallen out of religion altogether but she was still a little religious. That was one of those subjects they'd learned not to discuss. Inevitably it would lead to an argument and he hated arguing with her.

When they were younger, oh, he'd argue at the drop of a hat -but for a very different reason. Make-up sex. That was one of the most surefire ways to be intimate with her. Release of pent-up frustration in an argument, then apologize with some spectacular sex. Ah, those were the days.

That didn't happen too often anymore. He wasn't really sure why. He knew she was always wary of the kids walking in on them. *Isn't that what door locks are for, though?* he'd thought. Oh well. The arguments these days had completely different results. Usually he'd end up sleeping on the couch.

That was one of the best investments he'd ever made – the long couch. He could stretch out on it and even though he was slightly taller than average height, he wouldn't quite be able to have his head and feet both touching the armrests. She'd wanted a love seat. He wasn't sure if that was just her preference or if she knew these days were coming and wanted to torture him just that little bit more by making him drape his head and legs over the ends of a so-called "love seat."

But then, he thought, why can't she sleep on the couch sometimes? This is a modern world. Women's rights and all that. Equal treatment. *She* should have to sleep on the couch after some of these arguments. By Jove that's what would happen the next time they... was that a 15-point red deer over there?

He'd had a theory that whenever he was getting close to unlocking one of life's great mysteries or solving a similar great riddle, the world would conspire around him to derail his train of thought and return the subject at hand to the mystery category. He had a feeling that had just happened again as his train of thought was derailed harder than an Amtrak train in the 70s.

But he was here with her now. In the forest. Holding her hand. Smiling at her. Watching her smile at him. They'd been in love so for many years now. It hadn't always been easy. There were the lean years when they'd been finishing school and finding decent jobs. The job market wasn't always so easy. And with the current administration it was only going to get worse. How could anyone have possibly elected such an absolute moron to the office of...

"Honey," she interrupted. "Are you okay? You're squeezing my hand a bit hard and I don't like that expression." For a brief moment, he imagined a box-car sticking out of the roof of a barn before he apologized.

"I'm sorry," he said tenderly. "I was just thinking again."

She smirked playfully at him, "Well, just make sure it doesn't happen again." And she pulled him closer and gave him a peck on the cheek. He smiled. He always loved it when she did things like that. She looked so beautiful. The sun coming through the trees to make her hair sparkle. She'd complained about the graying but he always thought it looked like little streaks of starstuff.

He looked into her eyes. Those beautiful, deep eyes. He started to pull her close for a deeper kiss. Perhaps they could be a bit more amorous. Maybe today he could talk her into making love in the woods like they used to do when they were... SQUIRREL!