I Shall Not Walk by ight
by Shawn Jacobsob

Dear Pastor, I am writing to tell you why I have not been in church of late. It has been a while, and I know that the good folk there keep track of those who are absent from the Sunday service, so I know my absence has been noticed. My explanation follows. You will think me quite mad, unhinged by nightmares and the abnormal life I have led, yet I feel compelled to write of what has befallen me so that you can understand the journey I am about to take and my reasons for taking it.

It started at my hot dog stand in the middle of town. The Baltimore police were telling me to move on so as not to bother others on the street. I argued wasn’t bothering anyone, just trying to do my business. After a little of this, they finally left giving me a warning and leaving me to prepare for the next confrontation. I was not looking forward to seeing them again.

I know my presence offends the local merchants. They find it harder to sell their expensive lunches with me selling my dogs, darn good ones to, for a couple of bucks apiece. I am aware that every customer I got is one they don’t have. So they watch me, waiting for ne to make a mistake.

Anyway I was fuming at the police and at the lack of business that had given them reason to try moving me along. Then I saw a woman carrying a cane; she came up and leaned against the cart.

“Jeff, it’s been ages since I’ve seen you” she said excitedly. “How are you doing? Remember me, I’m Poly, I used to go to meetings with you.”

“OK I guess” I said. “Just had a run in with the law, otherwise it’s the same old thing.” But what have you been doing with yourself. We’ve missed you at the Federation meetings.”

Oh that” she said. “I’ve been living with some other blind kind of like a commune where we can be together and not feel weird because we’re blind in a sighted world. And we have all kinds of fun” she continued. “You’re welcome to join us. I’m sure it would be better than a vending stand one step ahead of the cops. You know” she continued “the cops around here can play rough.”

I had remembered Polly from National Federation of the Blind meetings. We had been good friends and had tried to reach out to each other from our feelings of isolation. Neither one of us were particularly good at the social graces, the institutions we grew up in discouraged real closeness among the students, so our attempts at friendship were clumsy, we’d reach out, realize we were doing it wrong, then step back and regroup. Then, about a year ago, she had stopped coming to meetings and we fell out of touch. It was good to see her again though.

We talked for a while then about different things. Then she asked “do you want to come with me and experience how we live?”

At that, I left my cart and followed her. I guessed that the boys in blue would do with it whatever they wanted. At that point I didn’t care. For it was as if a new revelation of personal emptiness had come over me. I felt a compelling need to fill the hole in my soul with something, no matter how insane it was.

“I see you aren’t using a cane like you should” Polly chided me as we left the cart and walked out of the respectable part of the city “You really should use it, you would be safer.”

At this point, I should admit that Polly was right about the cane, I should carry one even though I have some sight. It’s not that I want to pass for sighted, or anything as grandiosely prideful as that, it’s more that I never wanted to be bothered with it. And I didn’t stumble, or run into things, that much. So why use it; at least that was my reasoning.

We continued leaving the business district and heading into Baltimore’s heart of darkness, a place where only fools walked without trepidation. We continued past increasingly rundown buildings past shambling meaningless groups of people killing time because that is what they had to do.

As we continued, I noticed a tall thin man, or maybe he was an older boy. He wore loose pants, a T-shirt, and a ball cap with an “X” on it. I noticed he was following us, a predator of the city seeking prey.

I was about to warn Polly of trouble, suddenly, she turned and gave the boy/man a scrunched-up look and, for no reason I could deduce, he scampered off into the blighted cityscape. We’re almost there” Polly said.

“There” was an old place, a line of row houses being allowed to return to nature. The block it occupied was forgotten; one of those places between areas of urban renovation, put apart from all such endeavors, an unplanned place.

The people too were outside of any grand design of man. I remembered some of them from Federation meetings of the past, but they had not stayed with the movement. There was Jill, who decided that the work of the movement would keep her keep her from having time for her family, the movement can devour your life if you are not careful. There was Kim, who thought that we should be a therapy group, and Alex had left the movement after begging during one of our conventions. Beyond them, there were a lot of vaguely remembered folk who had come to one or two meetings and had lost interest. And then there was Joe; he was different.

“You remember Joe” Polly said to me “you had some common interest.” Indeed we had. Joe worked for NASA analyzing pictures of other planets. His job fit into our shared interest in science fiction and general high weirdness. We were two space heads trapped in a world of people who would not lift their eyes from the ground. “You’ll share a room with Joe” Polly told me.

In particular, I remember him discussing a project where NASA would shoot a beam of particles at Europa and map, through some quantum mechanical process that makes my head hurt to try to comprehend, Europa’s innards to see if there really was an ocean below the ice. “There may be life there” Joe had exclaimed excitedly “and it may even be intelligent though whatever civilization it built would not be comprehensible to us. And after we map Europa,” he continued excitedly we can go on to Ganymede, and then on to the rest of the outer planets. Pluto may even have a liquid ocean beneath its surface.” Joe was over the Jovian moons with the prospect.

Then Joe had dropped out of everything. In a fit of lousy timing astounding even for the Government, his project lost funding and was terminated. He left NASA over some office squabble and he lost interest in the Federation. The last I saw him, he was at a meeting, in the corner, griping about everything and everyone. We all thought it very sad. His leaving was in a cloud of rumors and gossip about personality issues and organizational feuds.

I sympathized with Joe. Before my hot dog days, I had worked in an office and had prospects for greater things. But my boss was big into visual communication and my body language was always wrong, always offensive in a way that I seemed too alien to understand. So I left in a move that caused mutual relief. This started a downward arc of wrong choices and missed opportunities that had let me to sell wieners on the street.

“How was your work going before you left?” I asked him that night before going to sleep.

“It was interesting” he said. “We had actually taken pictures of the waters of Europa and had seemed some structures at the bottom of the moon’s sea that looked strange, not natural at all. Then, well, you know the story, typical Federal mess. They didn’t want me on this new project, and I was just fed up with the whole stupid business. I came to NASA to explore space, not to kneel to bosses and play politics.”

“I hear you brother” I said around a yawn. Then drifted off to sleep surrounded by the creaking noises of the old, run down, row house. In my dreams something came to me. She, or at least I presumed it was female (for it was not human) came and started touching me all over my body. This touching was done in a dark place, so I cannot give any descriptions of this being save that the touch was soft and moved over me in a weird, but increasingly pleasant manner.

The next morning I awoke slowly with the pleasant memory of touching still flowing through my mind.

“How did you sleep?” Joe asked.

“Pretty good” I replied “had some really weird dream though. Not bad, indeed rather nice, but….”

“I know” Joe replied knowingly, as though this were normal. “It happens a lot here. I’ll start your training in the laundry room then.” I was glad I had gotten clothes from the stockpile, gleaned from thrift stores, kept for new arrivals. “Here” Joe continued handing me a pair of eye coverings I recognized as sleep shades used to teach partially sighted folk like me how to function blind “you’ll need these. You can’t really fit in here without the true blindness experience.”

That was my introduction to what we call the sense of presence. This is not a good word for it, there are no good words for it is not common to the human experience, but we call it that for want of a better one. This sense allows us to know where things are and some things about them. Smooth surfaces leave the feel of eating chocolate while rough surfaces leave the feeling of having a mouth full of salt. The presence sense doesn’t help with color; it would be no use at all with the new touch screens, but the ancient appliances we have in this place have buttons and dials. The new sense works just fine with these.

Later, when training in the kitchen, I learned that hot objects observed through the presence leave a feeling of disgust in the stomach. “You’ll never burn yourself if you heed the presence” remarked Sue, who used to be a cook before she dropped out of the working world.

And so the next few weeks went. I would put on my sleep shades in the morning and would go to various tasks to learn to heed the presence. I found gardening to be especially relaxing even though sharp, thorny plants left me feeling like I’d tangled with hot peppers; the kind I put on hot dogs for adventurous customers. I also found the trips down to the neighborhood store to buy food a nice change of pace.

You should know pastor that, like the early Christians, we shared all things in common. We would eat our means together rotating through the houses that were still habitable. We also hared chores so that no one person needed to do all of the hard jobs required of those who live in these conditions. The money that came in, and I never knew where it came from, was used for the common good. I guess you would say that we lived in a later day commune.

It was on a trip to the store, a neighborhood shop valiantly striving to stay in business, that I had my most frightening adventure. Polly and I were walking back from the store weighted down with bags when the presence showed me danger, a couple of men following us. I would not have been able to give you a description of the men at all, we cared little about appearances, but I knew they were trouble. I got a sense of predation, like they were hunting us down, following, waiting for the right time to attack.

Then I heard a voice in my head. “Use the presence to reach their minds” it said. “Notice them and dig deeper, deeper into their minds. Find what will make them stop” it continued.

By now, I was totally freaked out, but I saw no other way to avoid robbery, or a brutal death. I tried the presence; there were the men following us, and, yes, there were their minds. Suddenly I saw it, something with red eyes, a rat, but huge, with razor sharp teeth. Never mind just how, I put the image into the mind of the closest man. Suddenly, piteous screams rent the gathering dark. “Rats!” the man howled “They’re gnawing on me.”

“There aren’t any rats, you’re just bugging” the second man said, so I put the image in his head too. He began to scream louder than the first as we hastened back to the row houses. “That was great!” Polly gushed as she gave me a great wet sloppy kiss “you’re getting real good with the presence.”

The next day, one of our group read The Baltimore Sun on Newline, an audio service we have, when he turned to me.

“Didn’t you and Polly go to the store last night?”

“Yes” I replied “what of it?”

“Paper said that the police found a couple of young men in the alley last night, just of our route to the store.”

“Oh” I said.

“The police say they were smashing their heads into the pavement, said they were doing it to get the rats out of their heads. Really weird” he continued.

“Be weird alright” I agreed.

“They figure these guys got a hold on some designer drugs gone bad; the paper says there’ll be an autopsy, but they don’t expect to find anything else.”

I knew better of course, and it did make me sad that the men had died. I had certainly not wanted to kill anyway, just wanted to be able to mind my own without being attacked. But this feeling was muffled, as if I was considering doings on Mars; for I have found that I am becoming increasingly removed from the rest of the world, like this place we live is special, a place apart. Besides, something happened a couple of days later to take my mind off of the incident entirely.

It happened on an evening when I was tired and wanted to get an early night’s sleep. I had been busy picking up debris from around the property, clearing walks so that we could travel. It had been a long job since loose roofing from some of the row houses had fallen during a bad storm the night before. I just hoped to get some sleep and not creek like the tin woodsman the next day.

Well, just as I was drifting off, there was a tumult from the unit next to ours and Joe and I ran to investigate. I didn’t put on my sleep shades, strange since we almost always ware them, so I was depending on eyesight rusty from misuse; it was only good enough to keep me from using my presence sense, yet I would see enough to give me pause.

We ran into the living area to see a cloud of, well, not darkness as much as the mere absence of light Then something came out of that darkness, something with tentacles, feelers, and other limbs beyond description . All these were in a jumble extending from a scaly thing. It looked like it had been dredged up from the deepest ocean, like it was never meant to be viewed by man.

I felt compelled to watch as Polly ran towards the creature; then, she wrapped her arms around its body in what was obviously a loving embrace. Somehow, I tore my eyes from the sight just to notice other creatures, all horrid to behold but in great diversity, emerging from the darkness. Each of them was being caressed by two or three of my erstwhile companions. I saw Joe and two women fondling a particularly ugly crab-like thing.

Pastor, you will remember that I was always more tolerant of difference among people than most in our congregation. In fact, I lost several friends chiding them for only wanting to evangelize to folk like them and reminding them that churches that did that would surely die. Indeed, I took great pride in my advocacy of the glories of diversity. Yet, when I saw Polly with the thing she was engage with, and realized that I was meant to join them in this union of flesh, I was overcome with revulsion. I ran for my room screaming and lay in bed that night shaken to the center of my soul.

I woke the next day to find that I was alone. The night had been shadowed by a nightmare in which I walked alone in a hot place. Volcanos of sulfur spouted about me and a swollen red orb filled the sky. There was insufficient for sight, so I stumbled through bubbling pools of scalding liquid creaming with the heat and the terror of it all. I awoke from this terror and found myself alone. I search the entire row of houses finding no one at all. After my search, I made a humble meal of cereal and milk and sat down to consider the coming day.

What followed were days in which I considered what I been through. Joe had not quit his job at NASA in disgust. Instead, his mapping of Europa had gained the attention of what dwelt there. These beings had reached out, back across the void to our world, seeking kindred spirits of like mind. They had found them here and there, disaffected people tired of the world we live in, searching for a new reality.

But not all creatures could share in the presence. My guess is that people who can see cannot use this sense given that I can only use it while wearing sleep shades. Perhaps the sense of presence requires that part of the brain most of us use for sight that sight somehow drowns out the presence ability.

And given the diversity of beings I saw that terrifying night, I doubt that Europa is the only abode of their civilization. Their cultures center might be on some sunless world only heated by its own internal fires. Such a world would be presumed lifeless by being such as ourselves used to the warmth of a nearby sun. Their great culture might be as wondrous in diversity as the galactic civilizations that graced the great works of science fiction I had read as a child. And most wondrous of all, this culture has its own concept of God, though they would not worry about God’s image, and its own way of evangelism.

I still considered a return to the world. Should I go back to my family where I would be loved but would still feel myself a burden? Should I go back and try to rescue my hot dog cart from the police and start again living a meager existence on society’s edge? Perhaps I could find an office to work in, I still had the skills. I could be beloved, inspiring, a blind guy made good. I could be first in the affections of my co-workers and the first to be presumed responsible when the copier malfunctioned, the special employee with a special problem.

And I am sure you are wondering why I don’t return to the church. Indeed, I did find the joy of the lord there, and went often to seek inspiration in the quiet of the chapel. Yet there was always the feeling of separation from the rest of the congregation, of not fitting in, of being different, different, different, in a place that found comfort in the ordinary, a church that worshipped a normal God for a normal people.

And so, I had my reasons not to care about the outside world much. My experience with the presence had left me with the feeling that the world was entirely caught up with appearance games that I no longer wanted to play. Besides, the presence had made me feel disgusted by too much heat, and the days were getting longer and warmer as we are moving to high summer. It will not be long before I become a creature of the night, shunning the light of day.

Throughout this struggle for my future, the nightmares continued. The worst, even worse than walks through smoggy wastelands or noxious quagmires was a journey over a rocky landscape on some forgotten world wandering between the stars. The meager light of distant suns did illuminate my way as I stumbled, yet it showed me the great emptiness of space, a void so immense that it dwarfed to insignificance the greatest thing that man could imagine. I woke the next morning whimpering in dark awe at what I had experienced in my dream.

And so I passed these empty days as I waited for what was to come. I was always a lonely child growing up and I had taken refuge in tales in which the aliens were better folk than the normal kind of people I knew best. Maybe it was this peculiar inclination of mine, or maybe it was the lonely days I spent wandering this place, or maybe it was the long nights spent on nightmare worlds, but my revulsion at what I had seen that crazy night was being replaced by longing for the community that I had experienced as I learned to heed the presence.

So that when my dream companion returned, freeing me from my solitary nightmares, I opened my arms to its attentions. I know longer cared what it looked like, for appetences no longer mattered to me. I didn’t care how it loved, who it had loved, or who it might love in the future. I returned to it with relief, no, I should say joy, for that is what I felt.

And its attentions were more fervent than ever before, probing deeper, loving more intensely. It touched and rubbed with exquisite zeal as if it were a shepherd seeking out the last straggling sheep. Like a little lost lamb, I found that I wanted to return to my shepherd, to its sense of home.

So I wait for my dream lover, my guide and friend, to return for me to take me to the community that I found, lost, and hope to find again. For they have found a new world, a cure for the dissatisfaction I feel with the world in which we live. Just as Paul longed to be taken from this Earth, so I long to travel to ocean realms beneath the ice, to new strange places where I will feel at home. I know not what I will do when I get there, how I will live or all the things that I will experience. I do know that when I get there I will not walk by sight.