

The Long Walk

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Editors' Note

This story tied for first place in the Sunstone Fiction Contest. Bruce Jorgensen's "Born of the Water" was printed in Volume 5, Number 1.

He hurried along the sidewalk, hardly, thought Cummings, like an old man at all. He was old and knew it, nearly eighty, but he increased his pace gradually until blood surged evenly through his arteries, connecting his brain and heart with his feet, packing his lungs with the bluish spring air. "An old man is someone who chooses the only chair in the room that's by an open window," he liked to tell his nephews and grandson, "and then complains of a draft! I'll never be an old man!"

Cummings walked bent a little to the right and his shoes barely cleared the pavement. His head tilted in line with his spine, but his eyes were keen dark brown behind his glasses. It was still cool and he wore a soft brown sweater which had had years of wear. He would carry it home in the evening. The air was beginning to warm and he increased his speed for a few steps, but a crimp began in his side. His wife was in a nursing home twelve blocks away. He wanted to arrive in time to feed her breakfast. It was unlikely, he knew, that the aides would beat him to it. There were several patients who needed to be fed and they knew he would come to feed Emily. They would probably leave her to last.

A double row of yellow iris stretched toward the sun. Cummings filled his eyes as he passed them. Emily had raised deep purple iris along the back of their vegetable garden in Provo and she edged the sides of the front yard with the palest lavender and white iris. By the time the tomatoes and peppers grew tall in the garden the iris were gone, of course, but Cummings had always liked the way they towered over the seedling plants.

He paused at the corner and breathed deeply for a moment, waiting for the traffic. He remembered Emily as she had been during the thirty years they lived in the Provo house. Sometimes he still expected, coming to their home in Salt Lake, to see her in the yard with her dark hair pulled back, her apron clean and faded. He saw her down on her knees in front of the garden; he remembered her picking up her bag and rushing down the street to patch up a neighbor child; he saw again the graceful arc of the ladle as she scooped soup into their blue, ceramic bowls. He tried to mirror what he saw into her own straightforward, unbelieving eyes.

He was the one with words. She had hands—hands that nursed, massaged, cooked, scrubbed, planted, pulled the words from the air between them and fashioned them into a simple kingdom. He had learned the things hands do although his own flow of words never stopped. Cummings had nursed Emily through the bad times when she lay with her shut face to the wall; and through the better times when the doctor said, "Rest, or you'll lose this one, too," and Cummings took

a leave of absence from the university to let his hands be hers, and their son was born.

"I don't suppose you'll ever want to try *this* again," the doctor said when they brought Emily back from the recovery room.

Her blue eyes flew from Cummings to the doctor, though her voice, when it came was still groggy. "As soon as I can," she said.

Now their son was fifty. In the last six or eight years Cummings had learned still more. How to curl a woman's hair, how to press a dress, how to keep house, although it was only presentable which seemed to satisfy both of them. Several of his friends sent their failing spouses to nursing homes and encouraged him to do the same. But he would not let her go into that anonymity, not Emily. If it had not been for this stroke that laid waste to most of her body she wouldn't be there now. She was much better. Cummings remembered how his heart dropped when he saw her in the hospital bed the first time—white, slack, sagging, unconscious, anyone, anyone.

"Emily, if you can hear me, blink your right eye. Emily! Emily!" He had kept it up until she responded with one eye, staring into his own. He must have disturbed the other patients calling out like that, he thought now. It hadn't occurred to him then. Her left eye still wouldn't open. The sun was warmer on his head now. In a few minutes he would have to remove the sweater. He felt sweat beginning on his back and under his arms and smiled a little.

There was something lovely in the pattern of the traffic at this busy intersection. The left turners entered the intersection, faced each other and paused before smoothly wheeling in opposite directions just before the other cars glided past, fast and smooth. It was like a complicated square dance without a caller, everyone knowing and yet improvising the call. He and Emily had loved square dancing early in their marriage, before the pregnancies.

Cummings shifted the small case to his left hand and flexed his right fingers. He was bringing more stationery and his favorite pen so he could write letters as Emily slept. He had fashioned a small desk out of her night table and used it almost daily. It was off to the right of her bed so she could see him immediately if she opened her eye.

He had to write to Suzanne today. He felt pleasure rise in his chest at the prospect. Suzanne's last letter said that "finally" she had found the man she wanted to marry. He taught at the same Wisconsin university she did. She was in the English department, he in Political Science. There was so much he would tell her now, give her—the keys to the kingdom, he thought suddenly—but it must be condensed, be clear.

He had noticed Suzanne during one of his last semesters at the BYU. She was registered for French literature and sat near the front of the room. She was very quiet,

never raised her hand to ask a question or make a comment although he encouraged both. Her dark hair was short and smooth, covering her ears like sleek wings. She looked up at him a little crookedly from the tops of her eyes, not lifting her head. She reminded him of George, his son, when he was a little boy caught in some misdeed and scarcely able to bear his father's censure. Cummings couldn't stand it, that look.

He asked Suzanne to stay after class. She stood, but her look still tilted up, her chin down. He reached out and lifted her chin.

"Look me in the eye like an equal," he said firmly, though he tried to make his voice gentle. "You mustn't look slantwise at anyone."

They talked for a minute and Suzanne nervously left the room. He found that his knees were trembling.

How he'd hated disciplining George, having to face that look. When George was eleven he and his friends dammed up the creek a half mile away from the house and made a swimming hole. It wasn't a very good one, small and rocky and not very deep, but they loved to drop into it from the trees on August afternoons.

One day as he and Emily drove home from the library, they heard the whoops and cries and looked up to see shining brown bodies dripping from the low branches of trees, plunging with fierce yodels into the water. Emily was frightened and questioned George that night at dinner. She could not bear the thought of him taking such chances and asked him to promise her he would never go there. But occasionally, George and his friends sneaked away to the swimming hole. It was Cummings' responsibility to soothe Emily and explain to his son why he couldn't go—on the grounds that he was unique, in no way replaceable, in every way precious. Cummings noticed as he and George stood in the backyard and talked it over how tanned George was, how free his hair in the wind. He hated clothing him in caution and responsibility but he did it anyway; he tried to make the clothing light.

Two weeks after school began that fall one boy dove into the swimming hole and broke his neck. The three of them fasted and prayed—along with the rest of the ward—as he lay in the hospital in critical condition. When he died they grieved, but Cummings noticed that an unacknowledged tension gradually faded from their home.

Cummings remembered the summer, remembered the look, remembered talking to Suzanne. It could have all happened the same summer, last summer, the summer soon to arrive—it was simply a question of chronology. It was all, somehow, still a part of the present. He remembered how Suzanne began to ask an occasional question and her effort to look at him squarely. He saw the blood rise in her face even before she spoke and tried to encourage her. She came to his office once or twice before the final exam and registered for his advanced French class the next semester. They were friends.



Illustration by Warren Archer

Suzanne was not like Althea, a girl he encouraged years and years before Suzanne. He had been much younger then, in his late forties, although Althea obviously thought him elderly and always treated him with an unconscious condescension which amused and irritated.

Cummings had noticed Althea first by her eyes, too. He could actually see her intelligence sitting just behind the blue of her irises, see the thoughts formulating in her head. "Got it," her eyes would snap as he made a point or added a subtle touch of humor. He found himself glancing at Althea as he lectured to see what was getting through. Althea loved to argue, too, and a couple of weeks into the quarter was perched on the edge of a chair in his office, blond hair tucked behind her ears, books balanced precariously on her knees. The words flew between them, and she fought intensely for her ideas.

One day her arrogance got the best of him. "Why don't you just call me Uncle Bill?" he asked.

Althea wrote a long note and pushed it under the door. The note explained that improprieties of that title and he read it and laughed. She had missed the point but her arrogance seemed a little less after that, her confidence a little more.

He wanted to take Althea home to Emily, but they would not have understood each other. He had taken Suzanne home. Emily loved reading Suzanne's Christmas cards.

Ah, what they would have given for a daughter, he thought, crossing another street and pausing by a maple to catch his breath and remove his sweater. The familiar pain gripped his heart, a claw that had lived there so long he was accustomed to the pain. George was divorced now and had no daughter. His son Paul was grown but still unmarried. But Althea and Suzanne and several others who wrote infrequently, those girls he had discovered when they were past braces and skinned knees, poised at the beginning of womanhood with their shining hair and quick, comprehending eyes—they had been, they were, in a way, his daughters.

But there had been another, he thought, and anger started him walking again. After George, more miscarriages, early, bloody, formless, but then a few years later a pregnancy that seemed to catch hold. For months they held their breaths watching Emily grow, watching her slow, careful movements, the nourishing food she lifted bite by bite, the depth of her sleep. Then one day, suddenly as he was preparing their lunch, the cramps came

hard and strong. He didn't dare move her—she was beginning the eighth month—and the doctor said he would come.

He didn't come soon enough and with Emily's instructions given from between gritted teeth, Cummings lifted from her body a perfectly formed baby girl. He could still remember how little and light that daughter had been in his hands. He could have held her in one hand, had he not been careful to support the tiny, wet head. He did all that Emily told him to do (in a flat, urgent voice), he did all he could think of to do. But when the doctor arrived, that daughter still crouched motionless in his hands, her delicate features closed, her bony chest smaller than his palm still, her curled arms and legs limp. Cummings believed as much as he believed anything that they would possess that daughter in eternity. He could not believe that there could be such brutal waste.

After that he had not been sure for a long time that he could bring Emily back. It had taken almost more patience than he could find, and it was as selfish a thing to do as it was loving.

Once he took her to California. It was ten or twelve years ago and her forgetfulness was becoming impossible to ignore; not just little things that he forgot too, once in a while, but a kind of vagueness. Emily's sister had just lost her husband and Emily was hearty and well for the most part. Cummings thought the trip might be good for everyone, that the change would heighten their senses, and her sister, Anne, would have company.

They stayed with George and his wife at first in the suburbs of San Francisco. Cummings was disappointed, though, that George and Bev had no desire to go to the city. They drove through San Francisco one night very quickly, through China Town, over the Golden Gate Bridge and down the coast. "You wouldn't believe the things in that city," Bev said with a shudder. "We never go there."

"You know, Dad," George added, "you can look around our neighborhood in San Pablo with its neat houses and yards and our garden and almost feel that you're back home in Provo." It was true, Cummings thought. He was not closer to San Francisco, no closer to the sea.

The house was tense although George and Bev were unfailingly polite to each other and warm toward Cummings and Emily. They simply seemed to have nothing that really *needed* saying. They talked about their son, Paul, all the time without realizing they were doing it. They thought they never talked about him because they never said what they were thinking. Cummings was frustrated by the dead-end talk. Emily took to watching the street from the window seat.

Paul had moved out of the house after graduating from high school in the spring. He was house-sitting a beach house down the coast.

"It's just for the summer," George said. "He'll be

starting school in the fall."

"If he registers," Bev added sweetly.

"He'll register!" George snapped and went out to mow the lawn.

Emily's sister developed influenza and Emily cheerfully packed her suitcase and moved over to be with her and care for her. Cummings was now stranded with Bev during the day while George went to work. He thought about taking the bus to San Francisco, but Bev was so alarmed he decided to forget about it.

That night he asked them to drive him down to see Paul. There was no telephone at the beach house and it might be a long time before he returned to California.

The beach house was very simple with bare wooden floors, a small fireplace, windows that faced the ocean, and a porch across the front with steps down both sides. The house stood on stilts although there was fifty feet of rough sand before the ocean. Paul said that during high tide he could feel the slap of the waves under the floor at night. Paul sat on a low stool on the porch, carving. Bev perched on the rail with George opposite her, leaning against the house. Cummings lowered himself to the steps.

The ocean was so loud that conversation was almost impossible and everyone seemed glad of it. George and Bev smiled indulgently at Paul, but Paul looked at them coolly, then stared out to sea. Cummings watched Paul's sensitive fingers moving on the wood, noticed how sand glinted in the squints around his eyes.

"I don't suppose you'd mind having a little company," he said tentatively, ready to turn it into a joke. He had to shout it again, though, to make them hear. Bev almost fell off the railing when she understood what he said.

"Oh no, Dad," George said, clapping him on the shoulder. "What would you do here?"

"And the damp!" Bev added, sounding crushed. "You'll stiffen up."

"There's not even a lock on this door," George announced. "Those kids just pull their vans and campers right up by the house!" There were a lot of reasons.

"No one's coming by," Paul said. "No one's been by for a week."

Cummings felt his breath catch. "I wouldn't be in the way," he said diffidently. "I like the sea."

"Okay," Paul said, and his parents stared at them both, unbelieving. The next day George brought Cummings' things. Cummings hadn't dared the long drive back to San Pablo, afraid they would talk him out of it, or he would have second thoughts, or Paul would.

It was easy to remember the sea, for the morning traffic filled his ears. There the sea was a constant fact of life. It didn't disappear at night like the traffic did. It never turned off, it was never quite the same, it talked through his dreams.

Eventually the conversations, lectures, theories, that

spun through his head like tape on a recorder all gave up and were still. All he heard was the sea. He walked beside it alone or sometimes with Paul. They ate hand to mouth. They slept when they wanted to. They didn't talk very often but their silence was not embarrassed. Paul whittled part of every day and Cummings, for whom words were all, was amazed at Paul's skill. He was carving a series of seals, smooth, sleek, supple, rising from the rough wood. In the house Cummings frequently stood before the mantle looking at his favorite piece—a gull just touching down on a twisted piece of driftwood. Balance was the thing, he thought, the balance between air and wood.

The night before Cummings had to leave, he began to talk. He didn't feel like Paul's grandfather now. He didn't feel as if he had those sorts of titles at all. He felt solitary, and yet in his mind his hand reached out and touched, one by one Emily, Paul, and others, forming connections that were *chosen*, suddenly newborn.

So he wondered aloud about Emily, George and Bev, his sister-in-law. He was beginning to go back, his thoughts first, making the transition with words. At last he fell silent.

"About Emily," Paul said then. He was sitting a few feet away on the steps. His knife and his hair shone in the moonlight he followed around the porch so that he could see to carve. Now, thinking back, Cummings was startled that Paul had said Emily, not Grandmother. It had not seemed strange then.

Cummings waited. "About Emily," Paul said again, shifting a few inches closer and watching the breakers. "You still *love* her?"

The question stayed there between them sustained by the night mist and Cummings didn't know what to say. All the words of his life deserted him, were shouted down by a new line of breakers rushing in like a mob of children, breaking and dissolving on the dark sand. They both took a breath, both let it out like the sigh of the waves retreating. Then Cummings leaned forward suddenly in his chair and grasped Paul's right wrist as it hovered over the wood.

"Like this hand!" he exclaimed, his fingers gripping the wrist so hard it trembled. "Like you love this hand."

He let go in a minute and sat back. Paul set down the wood and the knife carefully, nodded, and stood up. The moon caught him again as he passed the corner of the porch. His face shone with tears.

It wasn't until Cummings completely unpacked at home with Emily that he found it wrapped in paper towels, tucked into the bottom of his suitcase—the gull lighting on driftwood.

Two more blocks and he would be with her. Andrew, their nephew, would be by this afternoon. Andrew came to see them every few weeks before Emily's stroke. The last time, he and Andy had talked for an hour or so as

Emily smiled at them from her soft chair. Then Cummings suggested to her that she go to the store for some ice cream.

"What if she falls?" Andrew exclaimed after Emily left. "Anything could happen." He was almost angry.

Cummings tried to hide his anxiety. "She's only around the corner," he said calmly, shifting his chair. "She did fall early last winter, though, when we went downtown to have her glasses adjusted. We were walking to the bus stop when she fell flat. No one seemed to be around. Of course I couldn't lift her."

"So you went for help?"

"No, we managed. I got down on all fours. She was able to put both her hands flat on my back and lift herself to her knees. Then I stood and helped her to stand."

Cummings changed the subject then. When Emily's loud breathing and dragging steps sounded on the porch, Andrew was startled. He stopped talking and whirled around. But Cummings had heard those steps as soon as they turned on to their walk, and he relaxed as he sat listening, counting, giving thanks.

Today he would guide her hand to endorse her medicare check. He could do it himself, of course, but it was her check.

The pain was beginning again, gnawing at the lower part of his spine with every step. He was grateful it had not started before. Now he was nearly there and could sit in a straight chair and stretch his legs out to relax those muscles around the pain. Last night he had slept soundly—that sleep was a rare gift. Almost as many nights as not now, he lay awake with the pain and the radio.

After the years of caring for Emily off and on, he was grateful to discover pain for himself—to understand what it does to you, how it wears you down. How it fills up the room and hides under the bed and slaps down your fortune on a card table in the corner.

Lying there alone he remembered the meals he cooked for Emily and the nights he sat up. He remembered the times he shut his mouth tightly and walked quickly into another room to clean something briskly, struggling to keep back the hard, uncomprehending words. He feared his pain, too, not for how it could hurt him, but for the potential it had to stop him.

Still, the pain was slight enough now. He walked—almost trotted—down the curved driveway to the back door of the nursing home like a young man on any spring morning. He felt the wrapped wooden carving shift in his briefcase. Despite the promise in his back of a wakeful night, the blood sang through his veins like sunlight and he felt immortal; capable of lifting Emily and her dear, impossible weight high in his hands like something small, newborn, and kicking.

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