

LIFE IN TIDEWATER

Walking through a pandemic

by MARY ARCHITZEL WESTBROOK | illustration by WES WATSON

One morning last spring, while it was dark outside and my family was asleep, I laced on my running shoes and went for a walk. I didn't have a route in mind, only an objective: to feel better.

The governor had just announced kids wouldn't be returning to the classroom for the remainder of the school year, grocery stores were out of toilet paper and bleach, and I was becoming a reluctant expert on new phrases, like "social distancing" and "flattening the curve."

My gym was closed, and I gave up running in my 20s, but something about walking appealed to me. So, I set out.

I probably walked 2 miles that day, maybe less. Since then, I've walked almost every morning, through the heat and humidity of summer, the fog and drizzle of spring, and now the chill of fall. I've found cut-throughs and footpaths, pondered oak trees and night herons, waved at neighbors, dodged cars, worried over foxes, raccoons, and rabbits.

I've listened to podcasts, new music, old music and radio shows. Sometimes, it feels like I've been walking nonstop since April, one foot in front of the other, again and again, sorting out, mulling over, thinking through, until, eventually, the only sounds I pay attention to are my own: footsteps, heartbeat, breath.

Walking has been one bright spot in the pandemic for me. There are others. My family is healthy. My husband, Roberto, and I have jobs. We still like each other. We've tackled a few home projects faster than we might have absent a global health crisis. Our kids, Luke, 8, and Paul, 5, have gotten closer – so close they seem to be growing into each other.

At night, I do the thing I've done since the boys were babies: check their breathing, listen to their nighttime noises. They sleep together in a queen-sized bed in our

guestroom, rather than in the bunkbeds in their room, the one they begged for in the Before Time.

Paul usually ends up huddled on a pillow, rear-end high or stretched horizontal across the comforter, but occasionally their faces line up, nearly touching, eyes closed, lashes long, both kids small, perfect and safe.

Daytime hours are less idyllic: remote third grade, remote kindergarten, remote work. We mute and unmute, save passwords, turn on notifications, set timers, put on headphones, turn off cameras, change backgrounds, hiss directions and pantomime "not yet," "five more minutes," and "stop it ... NOW!"

I coax Paul through the long virtual school day with treats and empty promises. At lunchtime, we walk to a favorite climbing tree. I read while Luke and Paul shimmy skyward, until one of them calls for me to "look up, look up, look UP, Mom." They're always higher than I want them to be – waving, giggling, pretending to slip. This is part of their game – to test me, to scare me, but only a little.

Eventually, we hurry home: more Zoom, more Teams, more Google Classroom. "I've never been so tired," I say often to Roberto before passing out. And, we are the lucky ones.

At the start of the pandemic, the author George Saunders gave advice to his writing students, which I heard via a podcast while walking. Pay attention, he said. Write everything down. You'll want to describe your experiences later, to help the world make sense of this time.

I didn't take his advice. I don't have any notes. I can't make sense of much. But some mornings, the streets in my neighborhood already feel like a memory, and when I close my eyes and think about the best parts of this time, I see kids scrambling up a tree, spiderwebs glistening in the morning, a sidewalk lined with oaks – all of it together in stillness, beauty, wonder and hope. ■

