

On an unusually warm April morning in Los Angeles, Bill Smede stepped onto the sidewalk in front of his home and immediately began to whine. Unfortunately for his wife Yvonne, she was only a few steps ahead and had to listen to it.

“God, it’s fucking hot out here! I can’t believe it’s already this hot and it’s not even 9 A.M. What’s it going to feel like this afternoon?”

Yvonne didn’t reply, although she was tempted to, knowing Bill’s question was purely rhetorical and that any response to it would irritate him. Instead she continued to focus on her new PaceTek Ultra, a device clearly intended to encourage either exercising a lot or losing one’s mind in utter bewilderment and frustration. Since strapping it onto her wrist an hour ago, Yvonne had been doing mainly the latter.

At the end of the block, she finally managed to bring her step count up on the tiny screen. She frowned—a paltry 375 steps so far today. Bill came up alongside, fiddling with his own device, a PaceTek Nano.

“How are your steps?” he asked.

“Lousy.”

“Yeah, mine too. Want to make this one a double?”

“Sounds good.”

One loop around the neighborhood was somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 steps, depending on whose device was asked and on which day. Major streets, like Santa Monica Boulevard, were to be avoided because of the sounds and smells of the hundreds of cars slowly passing along them during any given minute, and anyway crossing them was too much of a hassle. So Bill and Yvonne had designed the loop to provide the maximum possible length without ever reaching any of these major streets. It went south on their street, Wexler Avenue, then east on Oklahoma Avenue, north on Underwood Avenue, west on Utah Avenue, and finally south on Wexler again, back to their building.

The section of L.A. where Bill and Yvonne lived, a sprawling patch of territory far bigger than most cities, was known affectionately by its residents as the Westside (or The WestSide by its most affectionate ones) and included many famous places like the Playboy Mansion. Judging by the cost of housing, L.A. ranked among the very most desirable American cities in which to live. And, by that same measure, the Westside was apparently the most desirable part of L.A.

Bill harbored serious doubts about both. Despite the fact that he could never hope to buy even the smallest, most dilapidated house in his

neighborhood (he and Yvonne had scrimped and saved for their rather non-luxurious 2-bedroom condo), it seemed a bit of a dump. The sidewalks were always dirty, with their slabs cracked and pushed up by tree roots; parked cars, in widely varying condition, perpetually lined both sides of every street; many houses and apartment buildings had fallen into major disrepair; dubious characters roamed around at all hours of the day and night. . .

It was a list that could go on and on. And indeed, in Bill's mind, it did. As he grudgingly completed each loop to ensure the logging of precious steps, he was constantly refining and expanding his collection of gripes.

For her part, Yvonne acknowledged the shortcomings of the neighborhood but didn't let them get under her skin. She also acknowledged quite gracefully that her husband could be a hyper-sensitive, overreacting grump. She enjoyed his company anyway. He had a good sense of humor, including about himself, and their walking loops were primarily filled with lighthearted banter and shared chuckles (often at the expense of their dearly loved but easily ridiculed friends and family).

On Oklahoma, as they walked past a tiny old dwelling next door to a gigantic new one, Bill and Yvonne spotted Mrs. Harris about three houses down, in her trademark green sweatpants and slightly-different-shade-of-green sweatshirt, coming toward them. As usual, she had her cocker spaniel mix, Max, with her. Also as usual, Max was not on a leash.

Mrs. Harris noticed Bill and Yvonne, too. She'd seen them walking their loops many times before and had made mental notes, later transferred into written ones, of all their distinguishing characteristics. Two middle-aged, moderately overweight, caucasian individuals, both with light-colored hair. Occasionally one of them would be out alone but usually they were together. Both had a slightly scruffy, unkempt appearance, but not of the sort that suggested homelessness or destitution, just lack of concern. The man always wore a hat and sunglasses to conceal his identity. The woman, oddly, seldom wore either. Like many other neighborhood residents on whom Mrs. Harris kept detailed notes, she found these two very suspicious. She wasn't sure, yet, what they were up to. . . but definitely something not good.

Bill and Yvonne did not know that Mrs. Harris found them suspicious, nor even that her name was Mrs. Harris. They didn't know her dog's name was Max. All they knew about her was that she never made any effort to move out of their way, never smiled at them, and never seemed to care when her pet rubbed its snout all over their ankles.

As the two pairs drew close to each other, Bill muttered "I'll go behind

you,” and he and Yvonne swiftly moved into single-file formation, hugged the righthand edge of the sidewalk and quickened their pace. They both cast a brief nod and smile at the scowling face of Mrs. Harris as it whizzed past them on the left and some part of Max brushed lightly against their legs. Then it was over.

For Bill and Yvonne, there was nothing very special about Mrs. Harris. During a typical loop they encountered two dozen people, half of whom had dogs (though usually leashed (though it made almost no difference)) and 90% of whom were oblivious to the concept of a sidewalk being a shared space. 99% never smiled or spoke, even though 75% of these crossed paths with Bill and Yvonne regularly.

Making their way along Underwood, Bill and Yvonne’s conversation turned to the subject of their teenage daughter.

“Alice seemed funny last night,” said Yvonne.

Bill thought back to the previous evening, but all he could remember was how annoyed he’d felt with the loud music coming through the floor from the condo below them, and also with accidentally bashing his elbow against the frame of the bathroom door as he walked through it.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, she was really quiet at dinner and then she went straight to her room after, and we didn’t see her the rest of the night.”

Bill pondered this. “Hmm. . . Yeah, you’re right. Kinda weird.”

It did not occur to either of them that Alice had always been quiet during dinner and hardly ever made any after-dinner appearances.

“I wonder if she’s upset about something,” Yvonne mused.

Bill got pensive for a moment, then suddenly grimaced. “I hope she didn’t take some kind of drug,” he said.

“God. Yeah, me too.”

They both chewed on this in silence for a couple of minutes. Then Yvonne’s mind drifted to things that were going on at work, and she related some of these to Bill. After that they discussed a movie they’d recently watched together, concluding that it was a “threshold flick”—the least interesting a movie could possibly be while still interesting enough to watch all the way to the end.

Rounding the corner from Utah onto Wexler, Bill and Yvonne came upon the building where their friends Gary and Scott lived. It was a soaring tower (meaning, in most residential neighborhoods (including this one), it had five stories), finished in stucco painted two contrasting shades of gray,

with glass-walled balconies. Though over twenty years old at this point, it still looked pretty trendy. Bill and Yvonne's two-story building just down the street was more than twice as old, with an all-wood exterior desperately in need of painting, and didn't look the least bit trendy. But they weren't much concerned with aesthetics, compared to practicality (and price).

Gary was in the driveway, holding a piece of cloth and rubbing it furiously against the roof of his cherry red 1985 Toyota Supra. Technically the color of the car was "Super Deep Red," but nobody except Gary knew this (even though he'd told many people many times).

"Morning, Gary," Bill called out as he and Yvonne approached.

Gary Williams had a certain positive vibe about him. Somehow he exuded energy and physical fitness. In part this could be objectively observed, simply by looking at his lean, toned limbs and the speed and precision with which they moved. But there was more to it than that. His voice, his facial expressions, the way he held himself—his whole style of existing—all worked in concert to create the vibe. Being handsome didn't hurt, either. Most people who met Gary agreed he looked like a young Clifton Davis. Or anyway they would've, if they'd known who Clifton Davis was.

Gary's vibe was always there, and this morning was no exception. He looked up at Bill and Yvonne, a big grin breaking out across his face, even as his right arm continued buffing the Supra's new coat of wax.

"Oh, hey guys!" he exclaimed. "Good morning!"

"Polishing up your baby, huh?" asked Yvonne in the most enthusiastic tone she could manage. (She'd never understood how anyone could get excited about a car.)

"Oh yeah, you know it! Getting her all shiny and perfect. They're doing one of those 'Cars and Donuts' events in Mar Vista this morning, so I thought I'd take her down there and show her off a little."

Having just reminded himself he needed to be somewhere, Gary abruptly glanced down at his phone, lying next to him on the concrete.

"Uh-oh, I'm running late," he said with a little chuckle, then hurriedly began gathering up his car beautification paraphernalia.

"Well it looks fantastic," said Bill. "Enjoy your Cars and Donuts."

"Thanks! You guys have a great morning!"

"Bye, Gary."