

The Dog Walker

The Dog Walker has miles behind him and miles ahead that only he knows the true path of. People follow him as acolytes, a chorus of baying hounds and yapping corgis in his wake. Of all the divination arts, his is the most bizarre but also has proven to be the most accurate.

There were schools for Crystal Ball Reading, Tarot, Palmistry, and even divining from the birds. These were regarded as high art, equal parts performance and magic. The Dog Walker, however, was considered lowbrow, even if it was more accurate than tarot cards with gold leaf. News reports had followed him seeking wisdom and asking for his past, but the Dog Walker only ever shared a few grunts or—more often—disdainful looks. With each mystery he unraveled, he wound it around himself in a cloak of silence. Even other diviners couldn't tell more than he decided to reveal.

The first inklings of magical foresight came when the Dog Walker was a boy. The palmist next door paid him less than minimum wage to walk her dog after school when she had clients. Even back then, he was a surly and quiet person who talked with the dogs more kindly than people. According to the palmist, one afternoon, he went out with her panting, snuffling bulldog and came back with a list of dates and events written on a napkin. The palmist didn't think much of it at the time until the first event came to pass and the palmist had three cancelations in a row before her father had a nearly devastating fall. If not for the dog walker, she might not have been there to prevent disaster.

More predictions came, each more absurd than the last. As the Dog Walker's reputation grew, people wondered which of the great schools he would go to. Palmist colleges sent letters offering scholarships and the University of Tarot in the northeast sent him a fine set of cards pending his application to the school. But the letters and cards all ended up in the trash with other gifts and offers from other schools of divination. The town cried out in despair when the young man continued to walk dogs rather than use his talents to their true potential. The cries turned to quiet admiration a year later.

The Dog Walker kept good business but never spent much money on anything more than a new hoodie or walking shoes. So, when word got around he'd purchased an obscure stock that no one had heard of, there was curiosity. The Wall Street Diviners tossed their runes and flipped cards, but assured the public the stock was trivial and bound to fail. It was a small group working on agricultural technology. Less than two weeks after the purchase, the company made a breakthrough with their literal "superfood" that was richer in nutrients and less

susceptible to disease. People looked away from the Wall Street runes and started watching the actions of the Dog Walker.

His first follower was literally someone who followed him. Abigail Winslow was a server at a diner who couldn't even read tea leaves. The Dog Walker came in every day at noon for lunch and talked with Abby for longer than anyone else. This afternoon, Abby brought him his tuna melt and iced tea, setting the plate down before leaning against the counter.

"So," she said, before he took his first bite, "lots of people want to know how you knew about that stock. What's the game? Tea leaves? Bird watching?"

"Nope," the Dog Walker said, sprinkling salt onto his fries.

"Then, what is it? What do you do for foresight?"

"I walk dogs."

"Mind if I join you today?" Abby said. "My shift ends in a bit."

The Dog Walker took a sip of his iced tea and looked at his phone. "I got a walk at 1 if you want to come."

"Well, it's a nice day," Abby smiled. "I could do for a walk."

The dog they walked together was a chocolate lab with a yellow bandana around her neck. Lola licked the Dog Walker's hands and sniffed at Abby's fingers while her tail cut through the air excitedly. Closing the door and locking up the house, the Dog Walker started walking down the street with the dog at his side. He would speak to her occasionally, but in short, curt syllables: 'heel', 'walk on', and 'good girl' were the extent of his conversation with Lola. Abby knew better than to try and make conversation, based on how little he said during his meals at the diner. She walked on the Dog Walker's left and made comments on the weather or the trees.

Eventually, Lola paused and relieved herself on the side of the road. The Dog Walker praised her, but paused for a moment, dropping to one knee and staring at the excrement. Abby only watched, feeling like there was a joke she didn't understand. After some time staring, the Dog Walker pointed.

"Rain on Tuesday," he said, pointing at the pile. "And your boss is going to burn their hand on the stove in the rush. Nothing you can do, so don't feel bad when it happens."

"Right," Abby nodded. "You're putting me on..."

The Dog Walker shrugged. "Believe it or don't. That's just what I see."

Abby followed the Dog Walker, looking down at Lola every few minutes. The dog was cheerful and happy, but Abby was still deep in thought when they finished their walk. Tuesday came with a deluge dropping from the sky in sheets. The restaurant

was full before the second cook showed up for the lunch rush and the owner Dean jumped onto the line to help. He wasn't useless in the kitchen, but Dean hadn't been in the back since the restaurant opened. Abby was walking out with an armload of plates when she heard Dean curse and something crash to the ground. He had to sit in his office with a bag of frozen peas and a towel.

Abby's story made headlines and the headlines were always jokes. "Dog Walker's Divination is Dog Shit" or "The Future is Crappy" were popular ones, but people began to take notice. Mrs. Owens walked her Shih Tzu behind the Dog Walker one day, following him while he walked a large boxer. He paused, examined the remains, and moved on. Mrs. Owens tried to make sense of the 'markings', but couldn't come up with anything useful. The next day, she still followed the Dog Walker and recorded her own dog's leavings.

The Dog Walker soon gained a group behind him each day, dozens of retirees and stay-at-home parents following him in the mornings and a wave of people half-out of their work clothes following him in the evening. People photographed what their dogs left behind and followed the Dog Walker's decisions like a religion. One day, the Dog Walker started walking west and continued rather than going into town.

The change made people think he was on some sort of fortunetelling pilgrimage that would reveal the inner machinations of his art. Only a few of the diehards stuck around, but the Dog Walker's followers walked behind him as his hair got shaggy and his beard became a layer of scratchy fuzz. The crowd marched together and moved toward the west coast.

His clientele list exploded as he moved across state lines. Celebrities lined up for their dogs to be part of his next great prophecy. Influencers adopted dogs and waited on the sides of streets, driving for miles ahead of the Dog Walker to accept the leash from him when his prediction with their dog was complete. Even the president made a trip so that the Dog Walker would take a trip with his standard poodle.

After a week and a half of walking, the Dog Walker finally stopped at the beach and sat on the sand. The audience behind him waited for his announcement. From small releases to piles that rivaled horse manure, the Dog Walker had observed hundreds of dogs on his journey, making notes at each stop. Silence filled the air while the Dog Walker meditated quietly with the waves. Finally, he took a deep breath and nodded.

"Good to know."

And the Dog Walker began the trek back.