

A Good Walk

By **Jen Reeder**

I am scared to go outside. It's March, and Denver's mayor has already announced a "stay at home" order in response to the coronavirus pandemic. But my dog, Rio, has other ideas. He's a firm believer in the morning walk that we take without his pesky sister, a little senior poodle named Peach.

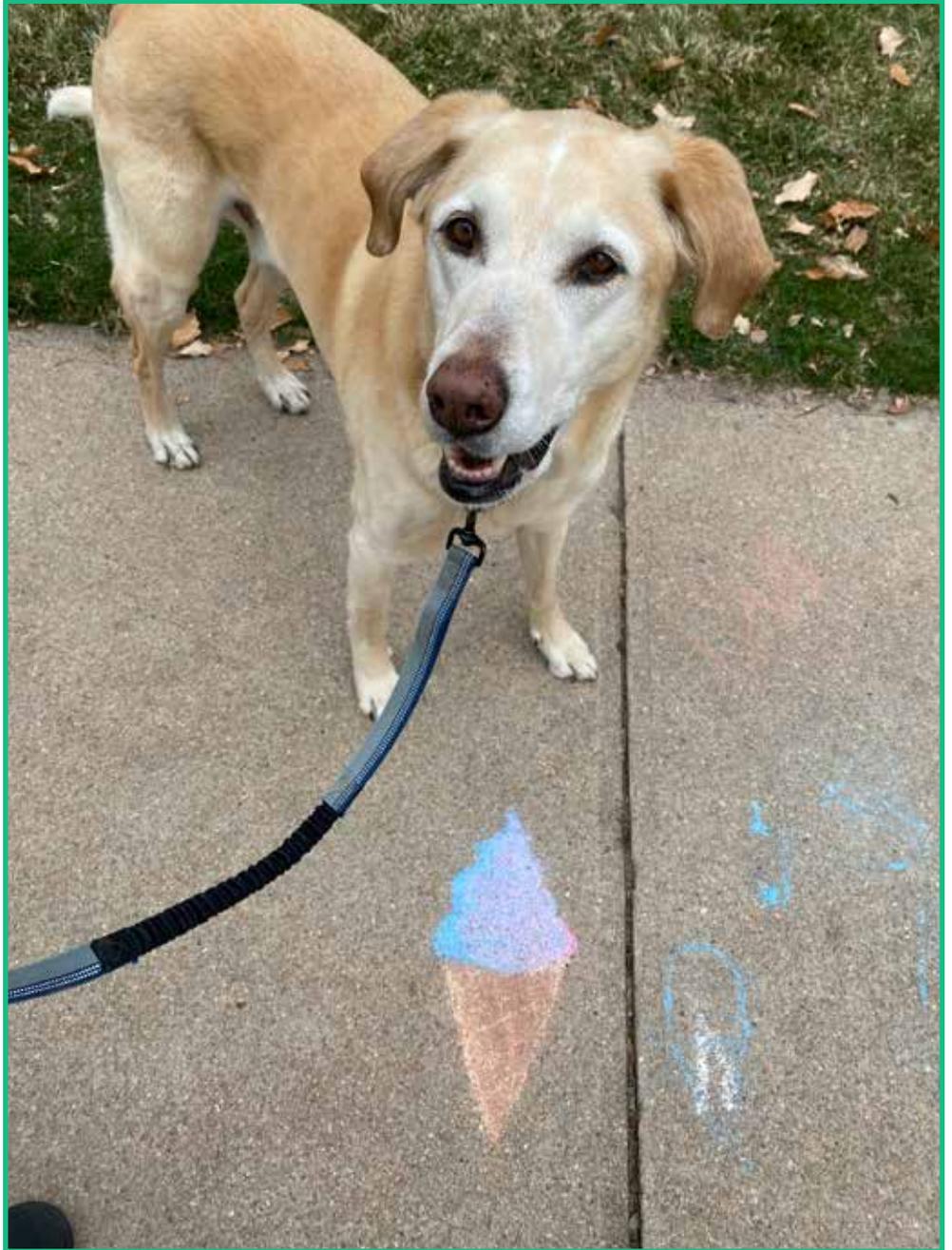
Rio seems to understand he should pester me instead of my husband. Bryan is at high risk for contracting COVID-19 due to a kidney transplant. Twice a day, he takes medication to suppress his immune system to keep his body from rejecting the kidney I donated to him. He hasn't left our home in weeks.

So, Rio and I hit the streets of our densely populated neighborhood. My yellow Labrador retriever mix stops to smell a bush as a couple walks toward us. "Let's go!" I urge my dog, eager to cross the street before they can reach us. Not everyone appreciates the importance of staying at least six feet apart.

We walk past an empty elementary school. From the base of a tree, Rio barks at a squirrel, tail wagging non-stop. Meanwhile, I eye the girl on a tricycle pedaling toward us, her mom striding behind her, and pull my pooch to the school's entrance to allow them a wide berth to safely pass on the sidewalk.

A month ago, the child might have asked to pet my friendly dog. Instead she offers a meek "Thank you" as she rides past. Rio whimpers with longing. He loves kids. I wave, wishing she could play with my dog, or with her friends on the nearby jungle gym.

But the world is on fire.



Ten minutes later, a pickup truck races down the narrow street, belching exhaust, just before a jogger passes us from behind, too close. My breathing grows rapid while I feel my chest tighten. I recently googled "panic attacks," but learned I'm actually having "anxiety attacks" when this happens.

Hysteria rising, I start walking faster, practically pulling Rio, and holler, "Cor-

ner!" to round a bend with high hedges that makes it impossible to see if anyone is coming. I never want to accidentally bump into someone. I learned my lesson with the woman staring at her phone the other day.

A voice calls out from across the street, jolting me from my thoughts.

"Is that Rio?"

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a friend of hers found a kitten in her driveway. She could not keep him forever, so she posted a message about him to her English Setter rescue list. She said he was grey striped and for some reason, he was the only one of the three kittens she could find with the stray mother cat. The others were not grey. She hoped someone on the list might know of a home for the kitten. The lady could not believe her eyes! She immediately emailed her friend and asked if she could please adopt the kitten. She was emailed a picture of him and there, by his ear, was a very light orange patch!

The lady and Bonnie, the rescuer, decided to keep the identity of the

adopter a secret until she actually had the kitten. Bonnie teased the people on the list about who this person might be. One of the listers, Nancy, asked if there was a cat man to go with this cat woman. The lady's father had been called Catman by his co-workers because of the kittens and it had been his CB moniker. Maybe it was his way of saying he was sorry he had been powerless to stand up to her mother all those years ago and he made sure she got to keep Tuffy this time!

Can you believe why, after all this, that the lady named the kitten Magic? It was truly Magic how he came into her life. I was that little girl. Please join me in celebrating the Magic! 🐾



Magic

Rio's Walk

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The questioner is Rachael, my favorite baker from the farmers' market. Rio strains at the leash, trying to get to his friend, but we keep our distance to hear the good news she shares from behind a mask: She is starting to offer home delivery of sourdough bread, rolls, pretzels, cookies and bagels – carbohydrate comfort food. There are flour shortages, but her supplier has been coming through so far.

"We leave orders on the front porch so there's no contact," she says. She gets it. She cares. My mouth waters thinking of buttered bread. Thank goodness Rachael recognized my dog.

I relax as Rio and I head on. Our luck has shifted. We stumble upon a chalk drawing of suns and hearts on concrete stairs with a note reading, "The sun still shines!" I look around. No one is coming. I take a photo of Rio next

to the message so I can text it to my parents later. It's been so hard being separated during lockdown; they're in California, and I'm in Colorado. It was only last month that we were together in Secaucus for the DWAA awards banquet, but it feels like a lifetime ago.

When will I get to see them again?

Rio and I travel haphazardly, our route dictated by avoiding contact with others. We pass a "little library" box offering not just free books, but dried pasta and a precious roll of toilet paper. I wouldn't have seen this generous gesture if my dog hadn't insisted on this walk.

I hold out my hand and say, "High five!" My good boy slaps it with his paw and wags for a treat.

In the next block, a chalk star blazes across the pavement. Someone has scrawled, "So close and yet so far away." Indeed.

Then we hit the jackpot: an entire block of chalk art. Various hands had drawn a rainbow.

Ice cream cone.
Happy faces.
Hopscotch squares.
Prancing unicorn.
Squiggles.
Flowers.
Mermaid.
Birthday cake.
Planet Earth.

A handmade banner spans a fence proclaiming, "Believe!" Posters in windows announce, "Be awesome!" and "You are strong!"

Rio poses for more photos as tears stream down my face. I reward him with treats for his efforts. Then he rolls in a patch of grass, kicking his feet at the sky, elated by the simple pleasures of a good walk.

I don't feel strong. But I used to be. I need to be. I realize in a flash that my dog – and my neighbors – will help remind me how. 🐾

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is Immediate Past President of the Dog Writers Association of America.