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A Running Life

Like a clock or calendar, running marks the passage of time and, if one does it long enough, a life.

This year I celebrate my twenty-eighth anniversary as a runner. I started by chance and without enthusiasm, in a small high school in Virginia where everyone was expected to do something athletic. Too small, short, or timid for other sports, I turned to cross country and discovered my *métier*. I also discovered a sport whose image and reality—that of an individual endeavor saturated with pain that bestowed no public accolades—appealed to me for reasons I still don't fathom well, but which helped to shape the person I am today.

I found inspiration in Alan Sillitoe's "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner." That story, a defiant cry from the depths of the English working class, was far removed from the comfortable middle-class surroundings in which I grew up, but I took the narrator's anger as my own. Lines from it still bring shivers of meaning and recognition to me. Now, looking through the musty sixty-cent paperback copy I keep on my bookshelf—the same copy I read in high school—I find the following passage underlined:

It's a treat being a long-distance runner, out in the world by yourself with not a soul to make you bad-tempered or tell you what to do. . . . Sometimes I think that I've never been so free as during that couple of hours when I'm trotting up the path out of the gates and turning by that bare-faced, big-bellied oak tree at the lane end.

And one expressing a less bucolic sentiment:

It was hard to understand, and all I knew was that you had to run, run, run, without knowing why you were running, but on you went through fields you didn't understand and into woods that made you afraid. . . . You should think about nobody and go your own way, not on a course marked out for you by people holding mugs of water and bottles of iodine in case you fall and cut yourself so that they can pick you up—even if you want to stay where you are—and get you moving again.

All of that—the running and reading—started in the Vietnam era and was colored by the violent emotions of the day. It would be misleading of me, however, to suggest that my running was politically motivated. Tenth graders are not known for their commitment to global causes. Although my father was a career naval officer, I never viewed him as a representative of an evil military-industrial establishment. Our problems were personal, not political, and of a rather ordinary variety: the conflict between a man absorbed by life's practical demands and a dreamy, bookish boy intent on something different. Now, with the acuity of hindsight, I see the origins of my running in stark, simple terms: I ran in order to get out of the house, to put physical distance between myself and my family.

At the same time, however, there was a social component. I met teammates, other boys who for their own private reasons were doing the same thing I was. Our compulsions bonded us. We were the pale, skinny kids who were always running everywhere. The football players resented and mocked us, especially when we were more successful against our opponents than they were against theirs. Most of the other students ignored us. Our meets were attended only by coaches, trainers, occasionally a parent or girlfriend. (I forbade my father to come to our races.

For the most part he respected my wishes, only sneaking to our conference meet my senior year, then leaving before I could talk to him.) The isolation enhanced the camaraderie among us. We were members of a select fraternity, joined by our outcast status, initiated by pain.

In college it was much the same. Although I sometimes viewed running as an elemental act of protest—my reaction to our society’s obsession with material gain—that is not why I ran. I ran because I didn’t know how to fit into the larger world. I still belonged to a team—a group of eight or ten skinny, nervous, compulsively competitive adolescents—and we inhabited a smaller, different world, one with its own rules and rituals. We met for practice in the late afternoon, joking and laughing, and finished our workouts in silent struggle at dusk. We ran in a tightly clustered pack through city parks and along neighborhood streets. We fought each other for our position on the team. We teased and nicknamed each other: Monster (a tribute to his competitive drive); Grundy (the name of the rural county where he had grown up); Bone, Organ, and Hawk (corruptions of surnames, filled with sexual innuendo). Our world was closed and insular.

Our coach was a medical doctor, a teacher, and, of course, a runner himself. (Only a runner can understand what is going on inside the heads and hearts of other runners.) He was stern and didactic, and he commanded our attention. Runners are prone to crude, scatological humor, and he was nonpareil. “Men,” he sometimes said with a straight face as we hovered panting around him after practice, “Just remember: You haven’t run a hard race unless you either puke or piss blood afterward.” And we howled with approval. At those moments we were feral, demented, possessed.

And then, one day, without my even anticipating it, it was over. I graduated with a degree in philosophy and no clue what to do with my life. I drifted from one place to the next, one temporary job to another. I fell away from competition. Weeks and months passed when I didn’t

run a step. There were times when I thought I would never run again.

After moving to New Mexico in 1980, however, I returned to a different form of the sport. I became a mountain runner, telling myself I was doing it, not to compete, but to relax and enjoy the scenery. “I refuse to run a race that isn’t pretty,” I told my friends. And race I did, with rejuvenated passion, in New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. (In August 1983, with the woman I thought I would marry waiting for me at the finish, I ran one of my best races in the La Luz Trail Run up Sandia Crest outside of Albuquerque.) I recruited friends to run and devised for us team-like rituals—eating at the same Mexican restaurant the night before La Luz every year, sharing an ironic sense of humor about what we were doing. An air of studied congeniality surrounded those occasions. It didn’t occur to me that in arranging them I was trying to recapture the spirit of teams past.

Then, over the course of several years, coincident with other events of personal moment—a mysterious illness (my first presentiment of mortality), the beginning of my professional career, love’s failure, the stuff of life—my competitive impulse began to weaken. I no longer seemed able to devote the energy and hours required to do well in races. Every day, for weeks at a time, my legs were tired. My body was tired. At first I didn’t know what was happening, or why. I took more care with my sleeping habits and diet and finally consulted a doctor, but even as I did, I began to sense that the problem was more emotional than physical. I know now that my lethargy was a by-product of change: I was finally emerging from the cocoon of my adolescence, making my way into the world, leaving behind the driven, angry spirit of my youth. To all who want it and work at it, a certain peace comes at last, though not without its cost.

My father is still alive, and we talk on the phone almost every week. There are things we

don't discuss, nor do we need to—ancient history, sediment on the bed of the river, better left undisturbed.

This past August I ran my twelfth La Luz race. I ran as far up the trail as I ever have, to the cement steps just below the Crest, before walking it in. My time was twenty-seven minutes slower than in 1983. I will never again run the mile as fast as I did just after college, when four minutes seemed almost within reach. My legs are no longer able, and the desire is gone. But I know now I will continue to run, will always run, if only slowly on sunny afternoons, playing the song diminuendo, to honor what lies within. I will be an old man with skinny legs, struggling up the mountain, hearing in my mind the echoes of countless footfalls, the myriad voices of the past, the music that haunts my life.

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