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For Want of Syncope

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"You'll pass out before your heart explodes."

It started out as a bit of joking advice to the three of us. Matt, Stevie, and I were nervous before our first varsity race, and my father was trying to calm us down. He looked down with us over the big finishing hill, where we had been anxiously standing, shivering in the early morning mist, wearing only our thin tights and worn T-shirts, and remarked, "Yep, it's a big climb. And there are a lot more of them. Boys, there is going to be a point in this race where you want to quit, where you feel like your body just can't take it anymore. But remember, you'll pass out before your heart explodes." His eyes twinkled with the last sentence, and we rewarded his levity with some halting, nervous chuckles. It seemed too real to be funny at the time.

The joke stuck with us, though. We repeated it to one another on the warmup, and again as we were doing our stride-outs just before the start. It was there in the blue sky, that cool September morning, in the dew that coated the long browning grass, in the breeze that whispered around our sweaty legs as the tights came off and the gun went up. It was there in the pounding of 300 spiked feet across the field, in the strained breathing of 300 lungs blowing up and down the wooded trails. It became a silly sort of mantra that I repeated to myself through the first mile. I fixated on each word, and it helped to calm me down. As the race went on, it seemed less and less silly. My mind began to play with it, the phrase becoming the lyrical accompaniment to my labored breath and tiring legs. The mind does this through the difficult part of the race; it finds a word or a phrase and plays it over and over hundreds of times. It's a defense mechanism, a way to try and make the pain go away. It rarely ever works.

After the race, we laughed about it. It was a joke on our cool down, as we jabbered away at one another, each completely understanding the strain that the others had gone through, and struggling to communicate to them just how we had felt. The relief of it finally being over made us boisterous; we let our legs go limp and fell into the soft grass, laughing and clutching our chests. We made light of my father's kind words, joked about how it was the only thing that had gotten us through the race, this gentle reminder that we were young enough that our bodies would shut down to protect us, if need be. None of us wanted to admit how much our minds had really needed that reminder while we were running. If we had accepted assistance, if we had required a crutch to get through the agony, it would have seemed to us like we were cheating. It was unmanly, and our adolescent psyches couldn't bear the notion of being considered weak.

We brought it out sometimes, in the months that followed, during a particularly strenuous workout, this joke. We'd cross the line after our fourth interval mile, and look over at the other two, hands on our knees, spittle congealing on our chins, gasping for breath. We'd ask how they were doing, and get a grin and an, "About…topass…outheart's…okay…though," in reply. That would always get a weak chuckle in response, out of familiarity more than novelty. It felt good, as we stood there dying, to be reminded that we had been through this many times before. I'm certain that we all thought about it sometimes, deep in the throes of a particularly brutal repetition, but voicing it out loud in that manner somehow helped to minimize its seriousness. Sure, we thought about it, but it was only a joke, a way to keep ourselves entertained while we ran. It wasn't, it couldn't be something that we needed. We didn't need anything to keep us going.

All three of us became more successful than we ever expected to be after that first varsity race. Matt was the first of our friends to get a scholarship to run at a Division I school, I set conference and section records, and Stevie won a national championship. We all expected comparable success when we went on to run in college. We all got hurt in our first year of collegiate competition, and we all found that we couldn't stand our coaches, who were unhelpful and unsupportive at the best of times, and useless when we needed them most. Matt and I tried to hang on for a bit, but we were running slower times than we had in high school. It became frustrating to do workouts; it was hard to even motivate ourselves to get out the door for an easy run. We started skipping voluntary practices, and pretty soon we weren't going to the mandatory ones either. After a year or two, we even stopped calling ourselves runners.

Stevie was different, though. When Matt and I got our stress fractures, we lounged in the whirlpool and waited to get better. Steve, who stopped going by the diminutive the moment he crossed the finish line after his first

4:16 mile, spent a couple of hours a day in the pool. When the trainer told Matt and me that we had to limit our mileage as we tried to recover, we relished every abbreviated run of the twenty-mile weeks. Steve put in his extra fifty miles a week on the elliptical machine, because that wasn't real running. When all of our coaches expressed doubt that we were truly committed to coming back at all, Matt and I begrudgingly agreed. Steve responded by waking up at 5:00 a.m. to get in an extra six miles before breakfast. He looked at each opportunity to quit as an insult. Where before the use of a mental crutch meant that he wasn't a man, he now grabbed onto anything in reach to pull himself back to where he wanted to be, and felt the more masculine for it.

Looking back, I've often wondered why we went such different ways. The decision point, for all of us I think, was a high school practice that the three of us came to visit during our first semester in college. The track team was doing a pool workout, and at the end of it, the coach challenged them all to see who could swim the farthest under water. Most of the team made it to the far end of the pool before coming up for air. Some of the varsity guys made it to the far end and then back a little bit. One former swimmer did a complete lap underwater. Steve was the last one to go, and the coach urged him to be cautious. He'd been working hard all day, and was recovering from a cold. Steve grinned, and told the coach not to worry. He'd pass out before his heart exploded, and besides, the lifeguard was watching.

While a phenomenal athlete, he wasn't a strong swimmer, so when he made it all the way to the far end of the pool, and started coming back without losing any speed, we were all surprised. When he completed a full lap, we were impressed, and when he started to swim back down again, we began to worry. About halfway back to the far end of the pool, he began to slow down. Bubbles of air started leaking out of his mouth, and eventually he stopped and floated to the surface. The next five minutes passed slowly through the over-chlorinated air, as Steve was fished out of the pool and an ambulance was ordered. The next thing I remember clearly was him waking up, smiling serenely at the faces looking down at him, and coughing out, "Did I win?" It was a question to end a career, or to start one. Matt and I both stopped running within a month. Steve hasn't lost a race since.

I saw them both a couple of months ago, when we were all back in town for winter break. I only had a chance to chat with Steve briefly; he was stopping by to say hello as a quick break on his run to Pennsylvania and back, a twenty-two-mile-long run that would bring his weekly total into the triple digits. The night before he had stashed water bottles along the route so he wouldn't have to carry anything with him. He told me about his first race that season at Princeton. He had run the mile, and was disappointed that he had only gone 4:26. He had had the flu that week, and he thought that might

have slowed him down a little, but he was worried that if his performance didn't improve soon, the coach might cut him from the varsity team. Last weekend he ran a 4:12. I think he is going to be just fine.

I saw Matt that same day. We went to get lunch together at a new taco place in town, to catch up and reminisce. It's easy to talk with someone who shares thousands of miles of cruel history with you. It's a connection that doesn't require spoken words to communicate, although there's almost never a shortage of them. It's as comfortable as a pair of old trainers, but even in a relationship as close as ours, some things are too raw to talk about. Before this day we'd never seriously discussed the end of our running careers, how it had left a vacancy for rent inside. We'd never talked about the pain that comes from realizing that we were "once a runner." And we'd never talked about, probably because we couldn't articulate it, why. But that day it all came up. How there, in that humid pool room, we knew. We'd never had that passion, would never be able to admit that mental crutch. And in knowing that, we knew we could never continue in the sport. We didn't quit, but we couldn't go on. That's a kind of mortality, I suppose, and we might be paying penance for a long time to come, but I hope it means that we too are going to be just fine.