

## O'Dark Thirty

No coffee. In the carafe there is no coffee left over from the day before. That fact awakens me more quickly than could consuming the coffee. I'll get coffee on the way to the run. Having quickly moved to pre-run Plan B, walking to the bonus room with my running clothes, I pass the cat sleeping on the couch. When his sleep time comes, he owns that couch. This time, my passing by doesn't disturb his beauty rest. Being a cat must be so exhausting.

I glance at the cellphone for the time. 4:35 a.m. Swapping sleep shorts and t-shirt for running shorts, long-sleeved shirt, double-layer socks, I slide into my running shoes, tying the laces comfortably snug, but not too tight. Tossing a running hat and running gloves into my bag, I confirm sufficient gels in my bag, a complete change of post-run clothing, including running shoes, a rain shell, a neck covering, and an alternate pair of warmer running gloves. That pre-run check complete, I fill two water bottles, place each in the bag, grab the car fob, wallet, cellphone, open the door to the garage, hit the garage door opener, turning on the garage light. Walking down steps, behind two cars, and putting my gear in my car, all in the dark, is not a needed experience in the pre-dawn darkness.

Buckled into the driver's seat, the smart watch charging, I back the car out of its garage slot, closing the garage door only after I turn the car towards our street. An alternative routine would not be recommended. "Alexa, take me to McDonald's," I command. Only I laugh at my solitary humor. The smartphone, the smart watch, and the car each inform me of the distance and time I am traveling to the meet up location for the run. I have thoughts about that.

The real problem with getting a small cup of McDonald's coffee is not that I am paying the senior's price of 75-cents, plus tax, or that there will be no slow, smooth sipping while I read, or even that coffee is merely adequate in taste. The taste is actually decent enough. It's how damned hot that coffee will be and how long I have to wait for the coffee to cool down. Following my paying for the small cup, I locate a safe place in the lightly-populated parking lot, open my door, pour a third of the contents out of the cup, place the cup back into its slot, leaving the lid on the front passenger seat. A good 10 minutes will pass before I can even think of taking a tentative sip. I have time.

The time is just now five a.m. The sun is not yet thinking about lifting itself above the eastern horizon. Darkness wins the moment. Merging onto the interstate, my thoughts take over the drive. I review the week that was, the week upcoming, the chores that wait for my attention when I return, my post-run brunch choices, the anticipated weather changes during the run, various runs on this route from not that long ago, other long ago runs in the various trails, towns, and cities I've encountered, what our son may be doing with his family this weekend, why that SUV driver just went by me doing over 100 miles per hour, where is a state trooper when you need one, and . . . wait! Was that a ray of pre-dawn sunlight I just spied off to my left?

Long ago, many decades before this morning, I was fast enough as a runner to sleep in, get in my 20 miler in just over two hours. The heat of the morning was of no matter. Long ago, I also had a reason to sleep in on a weekend morning, having stayed out late, as was appropriate for my age. Any lack of sleep didn't slow my long run. Now, I quietly awaken before the rooster, moving in the dark from the bed to the other side of the house with great stealth so as to not awaken my spouse or our cat. At o'dark thirty, I know where the boobytraps have been planted.

Long ago. That thought trailed in my head while I reached for the now half-full coffee cup. With each sip consumed, my brain adjusted from autopilot to wide awake, fully-developed thoughts. Why aren't there safe long running routes in my rural county. Why aren't there parks that I could connect up as a long run. Why do I have to drive 35 minutes to meet up with the faster running kids. Why am I slower than the running kids. Why is that little two-seater passing me; it's not worthy in size to be on the interstate. Another sip, more sunlight, the merge onto the interstate taking me to the meet up at one of the linked parks in another town.

Passing the various and numerous weekend jobbers on their respective way to cut lawns, paint inside or outside walls, fix leaks, renew heat or air conditioning, continue with landscaping, deliver the ingredients for restaurants to serve me their dishes, or continue with myriad never-ending construction, I plan my attack of the day's running route. Initially, hang onto the group's coattails for as long as I can. Next, hope that my legs are up to the hanging on part. I just never know whether I can hang from week to week. Not anymore. Finally, accept that I may be running solo for almost three hours if I can't hang on. Deal. I know the route because I created it.

My coffee completely consumed, I enter the parking lot adjacent to the bike path, locating a parking spot away from any other car. I see that the oldest of the running kids, the Professor, retired, fussing with his attire, has arrived ahead of all of us. Once the run starts, he will loudly complain that the group is running too fast, only to push the pace just a mile later. I know that I'll have that mile to both warm up my lungs and determine my day's running pace. I just never know from run to run.

At first, the arrival of the others is a slow trickle, followed by a rush just before the pre-determined starting time. Why runners gather in a circle before they run, I'll never know, but we circled up. We were waiting for one more, the one of us that lived the closest to the route and was always the last to arrive. The joking over her consistent, constant lateness had long ago ended. We chatted as we gently stretched, confirmed water bottles, tied shoelaces, gels in storage, hats, sunglasses, and sundry other things each deem necessary for success. I am internally convincing my body it can hang with the running kids, when the habitually late runner appears, parks her car, jumps out, saying, "I'm ready. Let's go!" did I mention she's also the fastest of this morning's group run? She is.

The morning portends a pleasant run: moderate temperatures, with an imperceptible breeze from the southwest, with cool morning air upon which the lungs could gorge. Northwest weather comes to the Mid-South for a day. Somewhere in the second half of the run, I will take off my gloves, draping them over the waistband of my running shorts. At some point deep into the run, I will find the day's rhythmic pace, guiding me towards the finish. In the first mile, I'll know just how fast, or not, will be that pace.

The run is three hours, whether we run 20 miles or less. The course runs along a river before diverting into the hills of the neighborhoods above the river's floor, returning to the river for the return to the parking lot. The course is designed for early returns to the cars so that everyone has the opportunity to run for three hours and finish at the same time. A couple of the running kids will run longer than 20 miles and a few more will run under 20 miles in that same time. I will run just over or just under 18 miles. But we will all finish at the parking lot, in the three-hour time limit. Those that take longer buy the post-run brunch. We're a cutthroat gang.

Gently gathering ourselves into a slow running pace, we cross over the bridge, beginning the trek. Turning right onto the bike path, I hear without looking, "too

fast! We're going too fast." Inwardly, I smile. Just three quarters of a mile into the run, I'm checking out how I feel. I'm running a straight line, which is good, as I have balance issues because my ankles are weak. My breathing feels smooth, which is good because that means I'm not overdoing it. My legs feel good, which is good because heavy legs now wouldn't be the needed sign of success. Onwards we go.

There is a difference between trying to accomplish a goal and doing the action necessary in achieving the goal. Know the difference. Distance runners know the difference. They run. They run often. They run fast, short, hard, long, slow, uphill, downhill, in the heat, the cold, the wind, the rain. They run. When they line up to race, they know how to simply do the magic they do so well. These weeks, I don't know if I have that same magic. This particular morning, I had that magic.

Grouped together still at the first mile, where conveniently located was a restroom and water fountain. Several took advantage of either or both. I stood quietly next to the rest, noting that I was standing next to the rest and not trying to catch up. Personal chores done, we set out for the first neighborhood loop. We ran in pairs up the hills, my legs feeling fresh, my breathing easy, all with the pace picking up. Heading back towards the river trail, I realized that I was in the middle of the pack. I was never in the middle. Following a mile along the river, we turned into the hilliest of the neighborhoods.

Noticing I was relaxed running up each of the long hills, shoulders dropped, hands loose, arm swing short, knees lifting into short strides, breathing light, the hills fell rapidly behind me. These series of hills almost always felt long, laborious, and arduous on the best of my runs. I am no longer a good uphill runner; those days are so far behind me that it had to be a different lifetime. Today, I held my own.

A big u turn at the top of the final hill in the neighborhood and we were off to the rolling portion of the run. I saw quick glances noting my continued presence into the final third of the run. The group's pace picked up, again. Down the long grade and onto the rolling path back to the cars we went on, my stride locked in for the duration. Focused on doing the task at hand, relaxed running form leading my way, I was simply doing well what my training allowed me.

Over the final two miles, in the shade of the running path, on an ever so slight decline, the pace progressively reached its peak. Glancing every other tenth of a mile

marker, I saw a pace I hadn't seen in almost two years. Longtime friends pick up conversations right where they were left, no matter how long the separation. Runs are like that, as well. I fell into that long finishing pace as if it had never left me. Remindful to me of when I played baseball and I would slip my hand into my fielder's glove, this finishing pace was my comfort zone, with my lungs in sync with the forward flow of my legs leading my feet to gently touch the path ahead of me.

It is why I do o'dark thirty.