

## No One

Just before 4 a.m. in the morning where I live, there is no sunlight. There is only the soft barefoot walk from our bedroom to the kitchen, accompanied by and led by our cat. I want a cup of yesterday's coffee, heated. The cat wants outside, or failing that, to be fed. We settle on my feeding him while the microwave heats yesterday's coffee in my yesterday cup. No one is disturbed.

Carrying my hot coffee cup to the room with my running clothing, I locate the shorts, the socks, the shirt, the running hat, and the days' running shoes, each that I had laid out the night before. The after-the-run clothing goes into my running bag, along with the water bottles for use during and after the run, one of which I froze overnight. The morning's heat and high dew point will thaw that frozen water during my run. No one is interested.

Grabbing the car fob, the wallet, and the cellphone, locating and putting on shoes that won't be used on the morning's run, I head into the garage, convincing our cat to remain inside our house. The garage door raising up, letting in the heat in spite of the dark, running bag and the running shoes for the day's run placed into the car, seatbelt fastened, the car's hybrid engine turned on, the car backed out of the garage, I begin the drive into the neighborhood, headed to the start of the morning run. No one hears.

Driving through the neighborhood lit by the streetlamps, onto the highway lit by the businesses fronting each side, to the interstate lit from the tall towers along its sides, music playing from the car's sound system, I sip the remainder of my reheated yesterday's coffee, I see few cars and fewer signs of life. Contemplating the morning's run laid out in my head, crosschecking myself in covering the details I determine to be important; I arrive at the morning's running route start and finish. No one shares the run.

Tying the laces on my running shoes for the morning's run, securing the Velcro together holding my ID onto my right shoe, placing the gels and chews into the pockets in my running shorts designed for that purpose, I clamp my running watch onto my wrist, changing the activity mode to run. Stepping outside the car, I see the first hint of daylight off the horizon, feeling the comfortable warmth of the pre-dawn that will be uncomfortable later in the run. No one else sees.

An agonizingly slow, easy half-mile out on the bike path into the semi-darkness before returning to the designated start of the meat of the run, lets my body meld into the planned run. A short respite from that exercise allows me to adjust the handheld water bottle, just before I dive into the run. The next two miles will be quicker with a sustained turnover, faster than the usual long-run pace but not so fast that I am running at a tempo pace. I can no longer explode into a run. I need to warm up the legs, lungs, the body, to reach the chosen velocity for a run. To achieve my running goal, I need to train myself to start out quicker. No one younger understands.

I am no longer young, but neither am I dead. Half my life ago I could run an 18-mile run in two hours on a training run. Now I need three hours. Half a life ago I could race any distance in half the time my race pace takes now. Half a life ago, I didn't need to warm up for a run or cool down from that same run. Self-massage, active and static exercises, and nutrition were needless and unheeded. Though running feels the same I know it isn't. I no longer lead the pack; I am stuck in the middle and sometimes off the end. I don't run like I used to run. No one coddles me.

Following those opening miles comes 15 miles of pushing the pace in the first quarter of each mile at just faster than marathon pace before dialing back the pace to just a bit slower than marathon pace in the last three quarters of each of those miles. No static recovery. Callousing myself to the marathon effort requires this effort. I am no longer capable of willing myself to my race goal. I am required to address the goal head on. No one is in accord.

After those miles, the last mile's pace adjusts down in effort, well above a jog and well below marathon effort. 19 miles for the morning's run. The goal is to know I could run seven more miles at the same overall pace. The morning's run is as much mental as it is physical in preparation. Knowing I can do more after having done so much carries me through and past the marathon's wall, despite my race time resulting in a much slower result than decades before. No one wants to hear that.

Between the high dew point, the temperature climbing as the sun rises, and the effort from the morning's run, success this morning is not guaranteed. Heat exhaustion is consistently in my thoughts. The saturated air will be heavy, a cooling breeze nonexistent. But the effort will be true. As long as I string together

consecutive miles in times that are either faster than the one before or consistent with that same previous mile, I should be good. Snail pace slow is not acceptable. Race pace fast is foolish. I tread a fine line between aggressive and shot past my mark. Either way, no one will know.

Turning my attention to the first two miles, I hit the start button on my watch, pushing my pace but remaining steady and smooth. I glide. I pass solo walkers. I hear the adjoining river's flow above the din of the distant traffic. Pushing the little inclines and easing down the gentle descents, I pass two miles into the run, seeing from the glance of my watch that I am over a minute faster per mile than my usual long-run warm up. Now it's "go time". Over the first quarter of the next mile, my pace is slightly faster still before I ease into the holding pattern phase of the mile, the pace being close in time to the first two miles. No one sees.

Running to, through, and past the first park, I hit the mark. The same goes for the next mile under the major thoroughfare and the one after that under the Interstate and the one after that with the Interstate a dull roar in my ears and the one after than leading into the second park where a hot air balloon rises into the morning sun. Each time, a gentle acceleration with a slight downshift in tempo only to rev up again at the end of each mile. Hold the accelerated pace, then hold the slight shift down through the remainder of the mile before launching into the same. This 9-mile section of the bike path is a gentle incline, changing to a gentle decline after turning around just over the fire station bridge. No one is timing.

Returning through the parks, along the Interstate, the balloon having disappeared, and beside the thoroughfare, always on the bike path, I play the steadily quickening the overall pace for the run with each passing mile. I succeed. Each mile is just seconds faster than the one before it and just seconds slower than its successor. The overall pace dropping steadily to a long-run pace I'd not run in years. Because I am succeeding, I am faster. because I am faster, I am succeeding. No one watches.

Finishing the last mile, I know I can both go faster and longer. That knowledge is why this morning's run was planned. I carried it out. I built my training to moments like this, this run proving to myself I am progressing on the right track. I am not fast because of this run; but from it I continue my motivation. No one cares.

Except me.