

The Paper and a Coffee

We were at the fork in the forest. Again.

This was our FIFTH pass to the open space, albeit from yet another direction on another path. The open area was the same one we'd seen the four times before this entrance. I recognized each pine needle we had stepped on each time before, having learned their place in the pine needle hierarchy. I knew each evergreen lining the forest opening by first name, as well as all of their babies and kin. We were lost. Again.

Turning to him, I exclaimed, "I'm gonna die in this opening." He was nonplused. His mind was racing on just how to get us on the right track in the forest to get us back home. "You said, 'I know these woods like the back of my hand. So, how 'bout getting us home? We've already run for three hours. I think that's enough, don't you?'" By now, I was so tired from running that long on the forest's soft trails that I merely laughed. Wordlessly, he pointed to a small single-track trail leading away from the opening, taking a tentative step in that direction, he accelerated to our normal running pace. Off we ran.

With a marathon just a week away, he cajoled me into running in the forest next to his family's house. We were there for the weekend, getting away, enjoying hospitality, home-cooked meals, and tranquility. "We'll just run for an hour on the soft trails. I ran these trails from this house all through high school. I know them like the back of my hand . . ." His exact words to me as we headed out the door, down the very short road, before we dashed into the very tall trees in the densely thicketed forest for our "hour-long run." A big mistake.

Running along snaking paths, one connecting onto another, each turning a different direction, the morning sun beaming onto each path we ran, the live and dead pine needles brightened from the sun's rays, I began noticing our morning jaunt was going to be longer than an hour, which at our pace was 10 miles. "Um, we should probably head back," I suggested. Without a word, he turned sharply onto a different path before turning onto another. This is where the clearing became a major player on our run. Each series of turns leading us into that clearing, repeatedly.

When we finally returned from the forest's depths onto the very short road, he pointed to the only visible road sign and said, "that's our finish line." Except he lied. Upon his behest, we performed strides – STRIDES – out and back along the very short road, me professing to him and the world that I hated strides after a 20-mile run in the woods. No matter, we did the strides. We'd survived.

One week later, into a warm, fog-bound morning, we ran our marathon, the foolishly-long run from the weekend prior, not even a blip of a thought in our heads. Staying again at his family's home, we retired early the evening the night before, slept fitfully because post-graduate students just don't go to be early, arose early, made and ate pancakes with cooked bacon and fruit – coffee was not yet a food group – before driving to the marathon course. Yoots.

Being the age wherein race pace is determined more by mile splits than how we actually felt while running, 6:29 a mile was our "rhythm" for this race, which was the pace we needed to race under 2:50 to a Boston Marathon Qualifier. We'd trained for this expected result – the overly-long forest run aside – and for the first half of the marathon we ran together at that pace, each mile clicking into the next, with almost no variation, thanks in equal parts to our training, the course, and the fogged-in warm morning.

Temperate spring morning weather we expected. Dense morning fog, not so much. The warm air was thick with fog. The course winding us through a multitude of neighborhoods, our view restricted to edges of the sidewalks, mailboxes, and perhaps a homeowner clapped, we could barely make out the homes we passed. We did not see a street sign in the first half of the race. we had no idea where we were running in relation to others. We just knew we were running well.

A marathon has two halves: the first is from the start to mile 20 and the second is the final 6.2 mile finishing stretch. Our marathon had two halves: the first 13.1 miles and the final 13.1 miles. Approaching the end of the first half marathon, both of us running quickly and relaxed, he turned to me saying, "I'm going." With that, he accelerated into the fogged-in morning, breaking our pact, and because of the many turns in the neighborhood we currently found ourselves, was out of my sight without any hesitation. Cretin.

Now running solo into the mid-morning, I noticed the fog was slowly lifting, allowing a bit of sunlight, bringing a better view of the streets, the signs, the homes, and the people we were passing on the course. In the miles leading to the Mile-20 marker, I could see a block or two ahead, occasionally catching a glimpse of his stride powering ahead. Performing a check in on my running status, I realized I was fine, so fine in fact that I began gradually accelerating on my own, passing another runner every so often, reminding me of just how strong I felt.

At that point on the course is when – from a distance - I saw the homeowner, his lawn chair around his shoulder, a coffee thermos in his hand, and his Sunday newspaper in his other. Now running just under 6:20 per mile pace, I watched him put down his thermos and his Sunday paper, take the chair from off his shoulder before opening it and placing it on the sidewalk, put himself into his chair, his paper in his lap, and the thermos to his lips. The thought came to me instantly.

During this particular part of my race, I was truly running solo with no other runner in sight ahead of me and I could hear no one behind me. My movement towards him causing him to glance in my direction, causing me to turn my head slightly towards him, I called out: “Hey, good morning! Do you know whether the Giants won last night? The game went late.”

Now wearing a shocked facial expression, his morning greeting smile returning mine, he quickly pulled the Sports Section from his Sunday paper, rifling through the pages to what I knew to be the box score section. His eyes searching, he found what he wanted, and looking up to me just as I came upon his lawn chair, announced proudly, “the Giants won!” With that, we exchanged waves, and wishing me good luck, I continued to the next mile marker. Updated information is a good thing.

The final 6.2 miles were a semi-blur to me. Passing through the wall, I knew I was still running strong, strong enough that I could pretend I was racing a 10kilometer race and not merely shuffling the final miles of a marathon. So, I did, pretending to what was my fifth-fastest 10km time, ever. The last two miles were along a wide, gentle curved roadway, during which I saw him for the first time since the halfway point. I didn’t catch him, but we both finished ahead of projections, earning ourselves a long period of laying on a manicured lawn in front of the city government building, watching others finishing their marathons. Finishing is a good thing, too.

This morning's weekend long run was accomplished under warm, heavily overcast sky without a breath of wind. Stopping to walk around and avoid slipping in a dense mud covering the running path, I thought of that marathon, a blip bursting front and center from the myriad thoughts drifting in my head. After gingerly navigating the muddied part of the path, having resumed my run on this middle stretch of my chosen run, I thought about training and running another marathon. The thought wouldn't let go.

My first marathon was accomplished at just over three hours; my final one in just under five hours. That two-hour differential tells me I have no business putting in my paces for yet another 26.2-mile slog. Should I do another one, at no point will I feel smooth in stride, much less run at a respectable pace matching my pride. Then again, if I choose a location and a marathon without telling anyone I'm going to run a marathon, it might become a possible thing. Or not.

Because my running pace has slowed so dramatically over the last few years, for the most part I run solo. That fact doesn't bother me. I've run solo for most of my running experience. When there is no one else to which to compare my run result for any given training day, comparing myself only to myself, I can imagine positive progression from the results. From there, it's a small step to make me believe I could run another marathon. From that, I don't need much of a push to leap to the absurd conclusion that I could run a BQ. Such are my running fantasies four decades after that marathon I shared with him.

On the other hand, I've overcome my balance issues when I run, that success aiding in my running pace accelerating. And, the medications for a dead thyroid, low red blood cell count, overcoming my body's resistance to utilizing blood sugar, all allow me to run faster and longer. My runs that were run/walks – okay more like walk/runs – that were at first merely runs without walking, are now runs with strength, focus, and realized determination. Running fast, running hard, running with purpose, are all fun again. Small successes leading to larger victories.

So, I'm saying there is a chance albeit a small one. That thought of there being a chance is more than I had six months ago. Hell, it's more than I have had over most of the last three years. Right now, right this minute, all I have is a thought of having a chance. Well, maybe that fellow's lawn chair, coffee, and newspaper.