

## Out From the Darkness

Dark.

The running path is dark, so shrouded below the early-morning starless sky that the few street lights that are sufficiently close to the path to be known are useless. But, running alone at a time when the neighboring homes are in the last throes of sleep, I could only complain to myself. Internally, I am already in full-on complaint mode. No reason to talk aloud to myself.

Cold.

January is cold, defined by its location on the calendar, which being the heart of winter in the northern hemisphere. From Maine to California, Washington to Florida, the temperature is cooler than almost any other time of the year ahead. Proper attire on these pre-dawn runs is more important than pace. But no matter the clothing or the layering of the clothing, the cold still finds a way to my skin. “Man, am I done yet?” Now I talk aloud to only myself.

Bitter

The January wind bites my well-covered skin. I feel the frigid tingles against my covered head, on my face, under my sleeves, beneath my running tights, and even between my toes. The wind makes this run unpleasant, less than ideal, and it sucks. This seven-mile run in the darkness is miserable from the beginning to almost its conclusion. I wore finger coverings. Once inside, my digits wouldn't easily function in the simple task of untying my running shoelaces.

Slivers

Yet, at some nondescript point over the final miles, rays of pre-dawn sunlight filter through the darkness, onto the asphalt beneath my feet, those rays finding my face. Now fully warmed up from the sluggish-feeling first miles, the increasing sunlight compels my pace quickening back to my abode, which is my day's finish line. The final mile is its usual blur of smooth gliding strides over the paved trail, rhythmic breathing, accompanied by the effortless increased cadence of the finish to the morning's run.

## Boston

During the October prior to this run, I'd qualified for the Boston Marathon. Now, preparing for running Boston meant running in the dead of winter through the early spring months. Some winters are more than less than ideal for marathon training. This particular winter's training was not accompanied by a temperate winter. Almost every weekday run was begun in the dark and finished with the darkness clinging to the horizon. From January through March, those dark runs were done solo and in the cold.

In that year's Boston preparation, Mondays were my no running day. Because it was winter, our running club didn't run track each Tuesday. So, I ran alone, before the January sun rose up through the trees in the hills above the neighborhoods. That first Tuesday pre-dawn run was cold, not from the temperature as it was from a biting north wind. That run taught me to include a light wind-protecting jacket in my repertoire. That run also taught me achieving my goal required nothing more than just to get out of bed, followed by focusing on the immediate task at hand. No one wins the Tuesday run, an hour in time length. Stack 12 consecutive Tuesday runs before dawn, and there may be a victory in all that darkness.

I had no delusions of grandeur when the time came to run in Boston. Yes, it's a large number of runners, but because each is surrounded by other qualified runners who are running my pace, I would be surrounded the entire way from Hopkinton to the finish line in the Back Bay with runners competing at my pace. I simply wanted to hold up my end of the bargain. Not that was relevant to anyone by me. To do that, I had to train consistently. These pre-dawn weekday runs were merely keeping the goal in mind.

## 15 weeks

Mondays were my no running day. Because it was winter, our running club didn't run track each Tuesday. So, I ran alone, before the distant winter sun rose up through the trees in the hills above the neighborhoods. That first Tuesday pre-dawn run was cold, not from the temperature as it was from a biting north wind. That run taught me to include a light wind-protecting jacket in my repertoire. That run also taught me to get out of bed, followed by focusing on the immediate task at hand. No one wins the

Tuesday run. But, stack 12 consecutive Tuesday runs before dawn, and there may be a victory in all that darkness.

I stacked the Wednesday night club runs, always from the big park, obligatory pizza and beer following. The Thursday runs were stacked, though those were the second-most challenging mornings of each week to arise at 4:30, get out the door by 5:00, returning by 6:00. Eight-plus miles in the dark cold long before dawn, while semi-asleep, is not the most joyous of runs. The Friday runs were stacked. Those pre-dawn runs weren't so bad, as each was run in half the time, with no delusions attached.

The Thursday runs in the pitch black of pre-dawn came early. Those were a mind-numbing, early redevye event, each on run in the cold, usually with stars overhead, and a bitter in my face wind, the occasional rain pelting me from the side, any side. My fingertips semi-frozen, my face feeling charred from the incessant cold, my toes never really warming up at any point in the run. And, always the sense of being shrouded while running in the darkness.

Running in the dark on Fridays was an inconsistent event, mostly because I let myself sleep an extra half hour. Many times, on those mornings, I was too exhausted to rise into a run. Other such mornings, I was up for a short five miles in an easy pace, finishing somewhere over half an hour or under 40 minutes, whichever came first.

This was my running existence through the winter and first month of spring. No snooze button slamming of the alarm. No dallying about the house. Check the weather, pick out and put on the appropriate running attire, lace up the shoes, and get out the damned door. Life should be simple and running should be simpler. At least, those two thoughts I used in convincing myself that all of this was good.

Sometime, somewhere

Last Tuesday of February was the lowest point to Boston. Following a Saturday relay race on the roads that was short in distance but long in effort, with a Sunday out and back 10-miler run in 64:00 with uphill's on the way out turning into downhills on the return, two of us made hay while the sun shined and the air was warm. Running a rare Monday morning run because I woke early, pre-dawn Tuesday arrived with what should have been Friday aches. I got out of bed a half hour earlier that morning because I was running 13+ miles that morning.

Still dark when I started, the cold, the light mist at the start waiting until just before halfway through the exercise in growing into a pelting rain, the ever so slight breeze becoming a strong north wind, the second part of the run became a mental challenge. The rain felt as though it had penetrated my jacket, the wind following right behind. Because I was running longer than usual, I actually saw sun's light through the rain, turning black to a dull gray, awakening the morning. Though I could see I was in daytime, all I felt was wet, miserably cold, and defeated. Then, I looked at my time for the run.

13.6 miles. Solo. In the dark rain and wind. I ran my marathon race pace. The entirety of that run felt as though I were merely jogging, getting in the mileage, and the mental effort that comes with that. Two unrelated events transpired thereafter: I became positive about my training and in conducting that training, and, the sun decided to get up early. Chicken, egg.

The pace picks up upon witnessing the first small shimmers of the sun's rays. Hope springs eternal with passing each day. And, I see them now, individually moving in the shadows. Silently walking under the moon-enhanced tree leaves, protecting them in the pre-dawn hour. Out from the shadowy darkness, illuminated just enough from the slow-appearing sunlight, Some run swiftly towards me, their footsteps unheard. Their presence felt. Their purpose is unknown. I can guess, but only they know their plan. These are the people I see.

I know when they rise in the darkness because I also rise. I am aware that they coaxed themselves to awaken, dress, driving to this path, for this moment in each of our collective day. Knowing that, just like me, they would arise regardless of their seeing anyone else, I can comprehend their determination to be here, right now, at this moment, in this heated semi-darkness.

No one asked them to be a part of my morning outing. None asked me to be a part of theirs. But here we are, pedestrians of different speeds, covering myriad distances. We aren't attending mass together. Nor are we assembled together as much as we have converged on this day, at this time, joined only in the idea of movement. Each has their own independence, their own rhythm. Those walking or running solo tend towards seriousness in thought, shown in their facial expressions. This effort is, after all, serious business.

I know they don't consider that they will each see me running past them when they first begin their morning ritual. I know this, because I don't consider that I will see each of them when I run here. Until I do. Then the past short seconds of a quick wave, a smile, a head nod, all come floating back into my consciousness, just before I give a quick wave, a smile, a head nod, and possibly a "Hello!" as I pass. Those fleeting memories pass, until I see any of them, again, on another day.

We own our routes, though the paths were designed and constructed by others. Each time we use these routes, they are further imbedded into our brains, and into our muscle memory. With every completion of the morning effort, we encourage ourselves to do this again. That we have individually chosen to engage the effort means it is now integrated into our daily regimen. In the winter, we awaken in the darkness, move in the darkness, the sun's distant wintry light bringing no warmth. Each morning, we always awaken, moving forward with our morning ritual, in an effort of consistency. Rising to reach the start of our day is what each of us – separately – give to ourselves. Concurrently running and walking amidst one another adds that quiet, yet necessary strength to the conviction we each share in seeing one another. And, giving and receiving a gentle wave or greeting is nice.

Preparing for the running of the Boston Marathon means running in the winter leading into the early spring months. Almost every weekday run begun in the dark and finished in the dark. Gotta start sometime. The payoff is not in Hopkinton, among thousands of like-minded runners. That comes after weeks of darkness, when the sun finally rises before the end of the run, and there is a hint of warmth accompanying the shimmer of light dancing on the running trail. The pace picks up. Running to the barn door is no longer a fantasy. Right on Hereford, Left on Boylston awaits.