RUNNING A FAMILY

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This thesis contains two parts. The preface theorizes memory and examines the author's own experience writing her identity. Part II is a memoir framed with the process of training for a marathon. The marathon acts as a narrative thread that pulls together scenes of memory from the author's childhood which features the author running away from home on several occasions. Running a marathon and running away from home intertwine to allow the writer to draw conclusions about her life and her family.

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PART I

PREFACE

I started this project without knowing that I wanted to write a memoir about running a marathon. When I started training and writing, I didn't really know what would come of it. Because my past is punctuated by bursts of speed, I believed that running away would coalesce nicely into a completed piece about how running a marathon and running away from home connect. Somehow along the way that changed and it became something more. I had various goals for the project. One goal: write a completed narrative. Another goal: finish a marathon. And yet another: tell my entertaining story of my wild adventures as a teenager. These goals marked definitive spaces in my thoughts. They existed as controllable, knowable and structured things. However, writing doesn't always operate according to schedules and controls. Sometimes words surprise us, enlighten us and change our perspective.

Krista Radcliff uses Heidegger's view of the movement of time and thinking to explain, what she calls rhetorical listening, "The only way to go forward is to return to the origins and seek a new beginning" (93). Rhetorical listening works by actively attending to the sounds of the environment that circulate around our writing. When we hear the sounds of childhood, allow them to enter our conscious thought and write them, the past becomes more than just the heap at the bottom of our memory. The past, in rhetorical listening, becomes a powerful vehicle for change. Writing acts as a method of hearing ourselves and examining the result of that listening. The voice is subtle, often buried beneath convoluted memories and emotionally charged narrative climaxes or, as in my case, the voice that was to be heard had been chastised often enough as to stop speaking altogether.

Not only did my voice grow ever more quiet, over the years, my ears hardened against an inner listening as well. In a recent study by Nina Kraus and her colleagues, musicians were found to respond forty percent better than non-musicians when asked to recall sentences while distractions were playing. In the midst of distraction, Kraus found that those who had trained ears, musicians, could recall sentences better than those who did not have the training. When I changed identities, when I went from an irresponsible teenager to a responsible adult (a phenomenon I am sure is fairly common), I forgot how to listen. I lost my ability to discern the subtle changes in my internal music amid a cacophony of distractions. I forgot how to uncover the aspects of myself that needed expression.

The narrative of my past, the one I told myself, characterized my adolescence as a lengthy period of suffering caused by one person—me. I took on the burden of my parent's marriage, my sister's success in school, the weight of the threads that kept our family together (the ones I had systematically ripped). When telling the story of my past I would begin, "You wanna hear about how I was bad? Let me tell you." Teenage Mimi made a good story. She was sassy and inventive and impulsive. Sometimes funny, sometimes heart wrenching; she always made for a great narrative arc. Because my stories always involved some sort of flight, my escapes defined my main identity during that time as a delinquent. In fact, I had made up my mind that this was my identity.

This youth and all her caricatured one-sidedness worked well as a contrast to the woman I have become. As an adult, I changed. I became a mother, responsible, traditional and certainly not a run away. The story of my childhood became a tall tale that was told for the sake of a good story, for balance against suburban sameness and

to reinforce the ways in which I am “good” now. I have spent a lot of years remembering only the ways in which I had changed; never acknowledging the ways I have stayed the same, or the ways in which at the core of my being I am still that young girl. Unfortunately, that negation has made it difficult for me to find peace in my adult family. I thought I had made peace with my siblings and my parents but Heidegger is right that the only forward progress one can make is by circling through time to find origins for yourself.

Truth be told, I’ve had a cycle of questions about what kind of person runs screaming from the people that love her. Why would anyone be so foolish? My methods of escape nearly always put me in more danger than I was in at home. I rarely had a steady source of food and I constantly came into contact with nefarious creatures. I could attribute the whole angst part of this equation to ennui—middle class young blond girl gets bored from her quaint suburban lifestyle and turns into a hellion. That’s another version of the story. But rhetorical listening is about hearing the same story in a new way or maybe hearing a new story altogether, circling the future and the past and picking up new insights, understanding and depth.

I imagine this circling looks like a spirograph. I had them when I was about ten years old. I could sit for hours and trace the various circles and spirals. The patterns given to you by the template can yield an infinite number of possibilities. You can create different wacky shapes that crisscross over each other or you can draw one template on top of another. The plastic mold guides your multi-colored pen as you switch from green to blue to red by pressing down on the coordinating buttons at the top of the pen. The patterns sometimes get muddy and sometimes each line stand out from the ones

around it. The mystery unfolds again and again and renews itself each time. How do I get a different shape by using the same pattern? Why do some colors juxtapose nicely while others do not harmonize?

Circling back through time in memoir works this way. We trace the patterns that we already know and in the process find new ones that exist in harmony (or in opposition) to the ones we are familiar with. My main goal in writing was to tell the story of my life on paper in a way that mirrored the story I had rehearsed thousands of times. The metaphor of running matched perfectly as well and, in the beginning, made so much sense. The act of running away—from stress, from love, from complacency—was my soothing mechanism. Whenever I encountered difficulty, I fled. The past several years of my marriage had all the markers of that difficulty and yet I found myself unable to run. As a mother (that responsible one) I couldn't abandon anyone. My job met the needs of other people who could not do for themselves and this posed a problem. I found that training for the marathon gave me an outlet; a way to escape that necessitated a return.

Yet, as I circled the track, circled my tried methods of explanation I found that the story I wanted to tell didn't have as much to do with running as I thought. This posed a problem because I began the project a) not knowing if I could actually run a marathon and b) not knowing why I felt like I needed to run one. Each time I went for a training run I would walk through my front door and sit down and write for about twenty minutes. I often had tangible physical things to say, things about my body or the physical nature of the act of running. Sometimes I would write about the statistics of the run—how far I

went, how long it took, what it felt like and what my goal was. I liked the nature of these details. They seemed clear cut, icy in their clarity and precision.

I found myself writing the log in my mind as I ran the training sessions. Five minutes and I hit one mile. That's a twelve minute mile this time. If I keep this pace I can run the marathon in less than six hours. When I got to the notebook to record the mileage, a hint of disappointment never failed to appear. I didn't think I could do it. After the first month of running with little encouragement from the voices in my head or from those around me I almost gave up. However, an interesting thing began happening. I would go out with my husband or my parents and they would tell strangers that I was training for a marathon. My sister would post notes on Facebook about my progress. Suddenly everyone was talking to me about this goal and how excited I should be to finish and I was stuck. Not only did everyone know I was running a marathon I was also committed to writing about it. I had to produce a completed narrative about the experience.

The details of my training sessions suddenly seemed pretty irrelevant in light of the anticipation that swirled around me. Along with realizing that I was stuck in the goal in order to save face was this paralyzing fear that what I was doing didn't have any purpose—that running 26.2 miles was a waste of time and then to write about it? Well, that was going much too far. I questioned every move. Each time I circled the stories of my runs (past and present) I found myself negating their significance. I realized that I had acquired that habit of silence over the ten years since my first child was born. In the myriad of voices my own was swallowed up, taken over and I allowed it to be. My effort to reclaim that voice has been an uphill battle, one I think many women struggle with.

The art of memoir works directly against that negation. Recording something, whether statistics or feeling or memory, elevates the most mundane experience out of obscurity. Phillip Lopate wrote an entire essay on the merits of bookshelf organization (an essay that entertained as well as provoked). Other writers (notably Marcel Proust) have also found the most ordinary items and chosen them carefully as subjects for close inspection. I realized that in order to find the significance, then, I needed to listen, intently, to what was being said when my body had quieted. Small things get larger when there are fewer distractions. As I got more proficient at running and I didn't need to pay as much attention to the structure of my body or the minutes or the terrain, I began to hear the quieter, soft spoken voices that rose up and shook loose in the movement of my body.

The movement of running is repetitive. One foot in front of the other doesn't seem like a complicated move but your body is not the only part of the equation. When your body fills with oxygen, all of sudden, it can feel as though an enormous dump of information is pressed to the surface of your consciousness. It feels like a large front end loader is rearranging the files in your brain, scooping them up and driving them forward in piles. These piles come unbidden, often unwelcome and complicated. During one particular training run, my head felt so large that I wrote for over an hour when I returned. This happens as a result of the concentration required to meditate and move simultaneously. Many people find deep meditation inordinately difficult. Sitting still, cross-legged for an extended period of time mocks the American work ethic. We feel we should be doing something. We feel we must be in motion constantly. Running, much like yoga, is an avenue to that place of meditation that does not involve as much

stillness. I found that, as the info dump came, the meditation of running became the driving force behind the physical space. I found a reason to do it.

The process of training to run long distances is very similar to the process of writing. Each moment takes careful planning leading up to the act. You must plot your progress: where will you go, how long will you be gone, how much fuel you have. Once you have the map and you are ready to hit the road, however, you have to be willing to throw it out. You have to be willing to let obstacles come, to allow inconveniences like mud or traffic to challenge you rather than defeat you. Despite all of your efforts to control the outcome of a training session, you must allow for surprise and epiphany.

Phase 1 of my training and writing became a constant movement for that epiphany. Each run gathered together more information and pressed it forward into my consciousness. I found myself searching for the next important idea each time I laced up my shoes, thinking that somehow I would discover important aspects of myself that I had forgotten or maybe never known. As I encountered obstacles, however, I realized that my path to discovery was not as effective as I had hoped. My writing became circular. I kept revisiting the same themes and repeated ideas. In the beginning, I made very little progress which was frustrating. The art of circling defeated me. In fact, I nearly gave up on the whole of it because my mind could not adjust to listening and repetition. At the end of the initial stages of the project I had already given up—the task too daunting and inhibiting for me to feel confident in finishing. I decided to take a break and rethink the plan.

One afternoon, I coaxed my husband to an art exhibit that I desperately wanted to see. I am an art lover and find so much community in a quiet gallery of paintings that invite me to see the world in a new way. This, however, is not my husband's favorite past time but as a favor to me he finally consented. The exhibit was a collection of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque during two years in which they collaborated and influenced each other. Cubism has always eluded me, taunted me. I do not understand the broken images and can rarely find the "art" in the Picasso. To me, he has always been a frustrating jumbled mess. However, as Dave and I walked the gallery he became excited. He would stare at each image from one side and then another. He would exclaim, "I see it," and move to the next room searching for more treasures. Finding myself again frustrated with the dark and confusing shapes I stood a ways off. Dave would pull me to a painting and try to explain it to me but I would fold my arms defiantly unwilling to hear what he was saying.

We came to a piece called, *Girl with a Cross* by Braque, and I walked away and sat on a bench some distance from the work. Dave moved on, his eye caught by something intriguing, and left me alone for a moment sitting on the bench facing the painting. I sat to the left of the work, entering it visually as though from a side door and suddenly the image came into focus. I saw the fractured image almost in 3D, lifted off the page as though in a futuristic computer screen. Each block represented part of the picture and when they were pressed together I couldn't see the whole. As I saw the squares and rectangles from the side I could see how they represented part of a whole as though they were hanging from strings in the ceiling with space between them. Only then, through the space, could I see what I had so desperately been trying to visualize.

Suddenly my project made more sense. My fractured memories could only be seen through the space created in my mind by running.

I had been trying to work chronologically but Sven Birkert says that it is possible to smother the threads of connection by working chronologically (3). I struggled with this concept as I worked against my instinct to present the information in order of events rather than emotion. Always I began with a narrated event. Always I uncovered meaning and connection to that event, but resisted the impulse to follow those connections because they did not offer the scene closure or continuity. What Birkert describes is, for me, utterly painful in the writing process because it calls attention to the disorder of memory and the difficulty we have in wresting from memory composed meaning that is accessible to an audience outside of ourselves.

That wrestling process is inherently dramatic. Birkert says we have a desire to "dramatize…the impulse to forget the unbearable" (147). Mary Karr dramatizes her process of remembering in her work. She circles the event she cannot name until she arrives at the place the memory was cloaked. I am fascinated by the way that she constructs memoir, from the fragment of a snapshot memory that builds toward an unveiling, one that she has worked so hard to find. The question is, how to make significance out of an event that you do not understand or a memory that inserts itself, will not let go, but seems so mundane that you wouldn't deign write about it? I find myself continually drawn to advice I was given by Alexandra Fuller: Go to the place you most don't want to go, and be still there. Birkert seems to advocate a similar tactic only in terms of connectivity. He might say connect the things that you don't want to connect. Avoid chronology as a masking device for the real issues at stake or maybe he

would just say resist the urge to write autobiography. In any case, the idea of allowing the sinews of my memory to recognize each other and create their own narrative structure intrigues me.

When I returned to running and writing about running, I had a new perspective. It became very clear to me that I would need to take frequent breaks to reassess my goals and to gain some emotional distance. The distance allowed me to create a persona. The strength of creating a persona in composing a narrative is that the author has an opportunity to take from the raw material of experience and transform it into meaningful order. The origin of this persona is in the space between the narrator and the writer. Vivian Gornik takes the reader on her own journey to discover this distance in her book *The Situation and the Story*. The relationship with the author and the persona is an intimate one and it is through this working identity that the writer generates the most effective work. "I had a narrator strong enough to do battle for me," Gornik says of writing her memoir about her mother. Entering the realm of memory is tricky business and it takes an emotionally detached character to infuse the words with the emotion they require to be effective.

One way to achieve this detachment is through description. Patricia Hampl says, "Description in memoir is where the consciousness of the writer and the material of the story are established in harmony, where the self is lost in the material, in a sense" (Hampl 46). There must be an anchor for the reader (and incidentally the writer) to trust. The narrative can descend quickly into confession or degrading commentary. Gornik says, "I become interested then in my own existence only as a means of penetrating the situation in hand. I have created a persona, who can find the story riding the tide that I,

in my unmediated state, am otherwise going to drown in" (25). This persona must be tied to some degree of physicality to be effective. Hampl's materiality fits the bill.

In the three month break I took from both writing and running I spent a great deal of time avoiding any thoughts on my project. I devoted a tremendous amount of energy to being distracted. I engaged my mind in observation, trying to hone my skills in listening and observing details. Physically I developed strength. One of the reasons running became painful for me in the beginning was because my knees (and perhaps my emotions) were not strong enough to handle the impact. The best way to fix that was to develop my quadriceps. Strength in one area had quite the effect on others.

I flexed my writing muscles. I wrote a couple of essays. I read a few fluff books. I spent time with my family, talked to them. Interviewing my mother led to some interesting discoveries. During the winter months when it was difficult to be outside training, I found comfort in focusing on something else for a time. At the end of the holidays and my weight training schedule, I realized I was ready to go back to work. The marathon schedule gave sixteen weeks to train. I determined I would start in February so that I could give myself a few weeks of leeway. After a rocky start, I began running regularly with more confidence.

When I returned to my memoir, I felt I had gained something as well. The exhilaration of the start often burns itself out. In most kinds of projects, after a fairly short period of time starting loses its excitement and the project can stall. I believe this might be one of the primary problems for writers. We lose steam; we lose interest; we lose faith. Taking a break and allowing for some time to be at rest renewed my sense of purpose—which of course was to find the purpose. The effort began to take on the

weight of the deadline. Finishing, the memoir and the marathon, took on a life of its own. However, uncovering layers of the self can feel like ripping off a Band-Aid. At first, you try to peel it slowly and gently. The sticky glue that has adhered itself to the surface of your skin stretches in protest. You work your nail underneath. You try to wiggle it back and forth to loosen it but that pesky thing will not let loose. Finally, you have to rip it quickly. You have to move against your instinct. Press forward and just do the thing you are anticipating will hurt.

The pain of writing slowed me down. I avoided the confrontation with the relationship I was creating. As I recorded my past, circled the young Mimi who had been delinquent all of these years, I found a profound sadness waiting for me. The words felt like a reprieve for a sentence I had already exacted. The original narrative of my life went like this: I hated everyone; I treated everyone badly; I was solely responsible and therefore deserve to be punished. Blaming myself allowed me the freedom to love everyone else in my life without judgment. In bearing the weight of the past alone, I thought I could somehow free them from the weight of their role in my life. Perhaps, if I let my parents be free of any accountability for who I was I could give them something. I could take away the darkness of those years and instead of being the instigator become the savior. I passed the judgment, I owned the mistakes and I had become hardened toward myself. No mercy.

Through the act of writing I had to confront a different reality. It became possible in my mind to see my teenage girlhood as much more than a mindless rebellion. Laurence Steinberg, a well-known developmental psychologist, offers some insight into my brain during that period of time. In a recent *National Geographic* article he says that

“even 14 to 17-year-olds—the biggest risk takers—use the same cognitive strategies that adults do….if teens think as well as adults do and recognize risk just as well, why do they take more chances?” (Dobbs 54). I’ve often asked myself this same question. I was an above average student with the mental capacity to reason my way through these questions of risk versus reward. Why would I put myself in such grave danger? Why was the risk of damaging the relationships with my family less than the risk involved in trawling downtown Houston in the middle of the night? Perhaps, my ability to take on challenges, to explore and my curiosity for adventure was actually something to be treasured rather than denied. Perhaps, a new narrative was possible. One in which, I loved life and I loved people and therefore I went out into the world to discover.

Trying to find some love for this girl I was writing about was, in some ways, more difficult than running such a long distance. An act of love for the past seems like a silly thing. It seems like a trifle of wasted hopes. It has already happened. It cannot possibly be redeemed. There lies in the passage of time the mourning for the things that can never be repaired. And yet, as my heart shifted to respond to the language of my experience I found myself…softening. Writing became a healing art, one that had power to rewrite the narrative I have told myself for fifteen years.

Not only did the rewrite change my narrative about myself, it changed my concept of writing. No longer could I avoid the responsibility of telling a story that had power to affect the world (at least my world). As my training schedule progressed I realized that the marathon had the same power. These two unrelated activities were on a course to collide in something real and lasting, something that had value. What I

didn't understand until later was that my family had become intertwined in the work I was doing.

My sister bought a plan ticket to Provo. My parents arranged their schedules. My other siblings were ready to cheer me on. They got swept up in my progress. Each phone call they would check in. Each time I would waffle. "Maybe I won't do it," I would joke as we talked. They would say, oh yes you are, and I would hang up still committed. Their belief in me worked as a revision as well—a revision to the narrative we had all told. My younger siblings were too young to know what was going on but they felt it. They lived a part of my life in their subconscious. Now they lived far away and I still felt like we were separate entities, the big kids and the little kids. The marathon acted as a bridge between the two generations. Perhaps, we could create a new story.

As I said in the beginning, when I began this project I didn't know what it was about. I wrote without knowing the meaning of what I was writing. The culmination of my work and effort ended up being less about the writing or the running and more about the relationships I created. These relationships have redefined the way I think about myself. The method of dialogue I have about my family and my past. How do my words affect the real and distinct modes of living? How does the process of writing change my heart?

In medieval terms, the heart was the center for emotion and sensation, imagination, memory and soul. Traditional ideas figured the heart as book and blank manuscript which could be coded with truth, inscribed with the textual reality of the church or other power structures. We continue to inherit some concept of the heart as a place of inscription—learning words by heart, love written on the heart. However, post

structuralism (and in concert post modernism) displace the body. Philosopher Geraldine Finn says that in the postmodern stance the body is dead; “under the sway of postmodernism, body [functions] as an arbitrary abstraction or floating signifier somehow separable from the local, specific historical and concrete bodies marked by it” (Flickenstein 282). Memoir does not work well under these conditions.

Bodily transfer, an inscription of sorts that leaves indentations in the heart and mind, does work in the process of writing memoir. The art of remembering and composing a life is a conversation that we construct with ourselves—that is at once meaningful and life changing. The writing of reality creates and simultaneously inhabits the body that writes. In the months since the marathon, I have had several opportunities to build a strong friendship with my dad. Perhaps, we were both just ready during this time. Perhaps running with me gave us both something to believe in, something that connected us. The way a writing life can become reality intrigues me.

The noun inscription has five or so listed meanings in the dictionary. The most common understanding of the term is the verb form to engrave, to write or print as a lasting record. Socrates invokes this concept in the Phadreus as he discusses the invention of writing and its merits against dialectics. Socrates explains that discourse is “brother to written speech” and that goes “together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner.” (159). Socrates is not satisfied with any sort of language that does not penetrate through the mind, to the core of the soul. What he seeks is a bodily transfer, sometimes a violent one, which etches the language itself physically in the listener. Socrates believed that could only occur through dialectic. Given Socrates framework I can’t fault him for missing one the most powerful dialectics available

through writing—the conversation one has with herself. Memoir, as the site of remembering and composing life, can somatically inscribe Socrates' definition and ultimately be a place of change.

In order describe how this might occur through the writing of memoir, I must turn to theorist Kristen Flickenstein and her explorations of the somatic mind. Flickenstein defines the somatic mind as "a permeable materiality in which mind and body resolve into a single entity which is reformed by the constantly shifting boundaries of discursive and corporeal intertextualities" (286). The somatic mind is the location of inscription in memoir. Any work that must represent reality must exist in this intertextual space. It must be within the boundaries of the real, of the true and of the experienced but it also must be drawn in such a way that the mind can pursue connections not apparent in reality. The writer must also construct things that are not there. So the work of memoir happens in a tangible location through experience and lived memory but also in a state of being through reflection and understanding. The proverbial mixing of body and mind in non-fiction is one of the ways it connects with other bodies and minds.

The materiality of experience can be translated into a thoughtful rendering using the language of body. Our relationship with the body often precludes our ability to allow it to seep into our work. By writing, the author can potentially disembody the self, extract language as a means of distancing from the locus of pain within the body. However, without the connection to flesh the memories and experiences lose their tangibility, their vitality on the page. This is more than a description of feature. Inscribing the body must touch all the parts of the self—tangible and otherwise—in a visceral way.

Kathryn Harrison demonstrates this well in her memoir *The Kiss*. The book is full of body, full of acts on the body that are taboo and difficult to describe as she is having an affair with her father. One passage discusses her descent into anorexia:

> I watch as [my mother] pulls her bathing suit up under her dress, wanting her to look at me, my body. I like nothing so much as taking my clothes off; I do now that I'm so thin. Each day, I undress countless times and stand on the scale. In public restrooms, I wait until I am alone so that I can lift my shirt and admire my ribs in the mirror….I am amazed by this body I've made. I don't interpret it as a criticism that no one else admires it, only as evidence that my standards are too rarefied for ordinary human beings to appreciate.

This passage is grounded in the layers of flesh of a living being which characterizes her material existence. When I read the memoir, I know that Ms. Harrison is a breathing human being—one that suffered in the flesh. "Words are made flesh," says Fleckenstein, "within particular material evocations, so flesh has the power to disturb its own signification, to disable its own systems, to challenge its own power" (293). Kathryn Harrison does this fluidly in her memoir, moving through the reality of her memory, shaping it, defining it, re-signifying it for herself.

Bringing the somatic mind into memoir offers the writer an opportunity to give the work a heartbeat, a life and an avenue for the development of the self. In inscribing life, we recreate it, embrace it and, as we all hope to do, better it.

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PART II

RUNNING A FAMILY

Prologue

My sister, Rachel, knocks loudly on her own front door as she jiggles the key in the lock. I stand in her small apartment kitchen gathering together my hydration belt, sweat shirt and other necessities like Motrin.

"I'm almost ready," I say as I finish tying my tennis shoe, "have you slept at all?"

"I laid down for an hour or so. But you have to get moving the buses leave soon." She practically shoves me out the door. The city of Provo has the soft ethereal quality of a city asleep, not unlike my hometown in Texas. I have been riding around the Wasatch Valley in Rachel's car for three days—getting acclimated to the altitude, shopping and getting to know my sister who is ten years my junior. In the darkness I feel off kilter. I cannot see the mountains. The landmark that is so solid and enormous slips into invisibility in the deep black of the very early morning and makes me feel blind.

The buses are scheduled to leave every fifteen minutes from 3:30 am to 4:15 am. As we approach the hotel where our transportation is waiting I begin to be plagued with self-doubt. Maybe this isn't real. Maybe I am not really going to do this. Maybe I can just go and cheer on the participants. I circle my own route of denial, self-pity and negativity as Rachel deftly navigates the turns toward my destination. Running a marathon suddenly seems like a terrible idea.

Rachel has been helping set up the course all night so she has a better idea of what I am in for. I don't know the terrain or the course at all—except that it is downhill. The marathon course has been only one of her many volunteer commitments she has fulfilled while I am visiting. I envy her generosity and her freedom. Despite looking remarkably like me and having the same parents, we didn't really grow up together. My

memories of her do not do her adult version justice. Instead of the independent, creative woman she is, I see a tiny tow-headed four year old with big blue eyes and a sweet smile. It is hard for me to imagine her as a person with a driver's license, a husband and a college degree. I have enjoyed having her to myself for the week.

I can tell she is running on pure adrenaline. Her movements belie her fatigue. Her arms beat in staccato patterns at her sides and her legs take long hurried steps as she guides me toward the van. I move slowly—not wanting to break the fluidity of the tangible black air that surrounds me. I feel like I am in my own movie, slow motion, walking toward the climax and I don't know the script; I don't know whether I am triumphant or defeated in the end. The uncertainty weighs me down. When we get to the door of the bus, I hesitate against Rachel's hand at my back pressing me into the vehicle.

"Good luck," she says behind me, "I'll see you at the finish line." With that she pushes me up through the door and disappears.

The van closes in around me as I am forced to the back seat. The smell of the fabric interior transports me to high school. After our baby sister came, bringing our family to a grand total of nine, my parents purchased a large brown passenger van to seat all of us. The brown beast signaled every time it was thrown into reverse. The loud beeping sound is forever engrained in my memory as a symbol of embarrassment. The rest of the runners pile in the white van, un-phased by the embarrassing mode of transportation, and throw their gear to the floor. The gentleman next to me does not put on his seat belt and neither do I. I feel dangerous, rebellious; I'm right on the edge. We do not look at each other but I notice that his head is not higher than mine over the

seatback. He is short, like me, and he could swing his legs back and forth without touching the floorboards. Rather than connect with him I stare out the window and listen to the conversation that is going on between the front two rows.

"I'm running the RAGNAR next week. Have any of you done that one?" a slender girl in the middle seat asks. She has begun conversation and is asking various probing questions about her relay race. It is clear that she is a seasoned runner.

"I ran Utah Valley last year," says a young father in the front who does not look old enough to be wearing a wedding ring. I think of my own husband. He has opted to stay in Texas with our four children. He does not run but has cheerfully supported my herculean effort. "I Boston qualified," the father continues, "the Boston is a lot harder than this one. UV is faster." I am encouraged by his assessment of this race as I listen to the hushed voices—hushed for the night not for privacy—and think that maybe I am not that different from them. I am encouraged until he says, "I hope to finish today in two and a half."

Two and a half hours? My marathon speed in training was seven and a half hours. The panic flutters underneath my rib cage reminding me that I am not prepared, or thin, or even emotionally stable. The ride up the mountain grows longer and more treacherous as my thoughts roll along with the tires through the deserted streets. What am I thinking? I am not a runner. I am not a runner. Pinned in the back seat of the van I feel more and more claustrophobic, my breaths increasingly shallow.

We arrive to the small town of Wallsburg, a town with no stop lights or street signs, at around 4:30 am. The race is scheduled to start at 6 a.m. just as the sun begins its ascent from behind the mountain's peak. The driver seems to be following the bus in

front of us. The silhouettes of the runners in the bus bob up and down in the dark panes of glass. Some shapes are flat as though the heads of each runner are laying two dimensionally against the side of the bus. When our caravan comes to a dirt road, the driver ahead of us begins to attempt a three point turn. Our van, slimmer and easier to manage, also accomplishes a three point turn to the music of complaints from the passengers.

"Does anyone know where the start is?"

"How is the bus going to make that turn? The road is only six feet wide."

"I hope we make it there on time."

The soft voices rise in volume as the driver pulls forward, turns and backs up, then repeats the series. It takes several minutes for the van to complete the 180 degrees it needs to go back the way we came. We head back along the road completely devoid of landmarks. The stars and the mountains blur into one continuous horizon that never seem to touch the earth.

We come to a fork in the road where another bus went right. Our driver, swearing under his breath, takes the left side and proceeds along another deserted road. He is going rogue—off on his own—he thinks he knows the way. The desolation outside the vehicle does nothing to assuage the tension inside. The eleven of us suddenly become foreign objects in an uninhabitable landscape of unfamiliarity and everyone takes notice.

One girl says, "I feel like aliens or like we are in that movie where the aliens land in the mountains. What was that called? *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*" I don't know how comfortable I am with being so close to a close encounter of any kind. My anxiety stays just beneath the surface as I practice my yoga breathing. My neighbor

probably thinks he is sitting next to Darth Vader as my breath sounds get progressively louder. I do not belong here alone. My sisters are supposed to be on this bus with me. They opted out of the whole production in favor of having babies. I am feeling bitter toward them. All of a sudden the isolation is debilitating. The people in this van are strangers to me and to this planet. I am a stranger to them.

After finding a policeman directing the buses, the driver decides to go his own way a second time. Proceeding through the country streets at a tense speed helps me to focus on someone else's anxiety long enough to get mine under control. When we finally arrive to the start, everyone clamors to get out of the vehicle and away from the cocky driver. The adventure becomes real then and sweeps through my worry. As I step off of the bus into the crowd I feel immediately calmed. The buses are leaving passengers along a residential road that slopes into long yards and large well built homes. Port-o-potties line the gravel road with streams of people waiting patiently and shifting from foot to foot. I find a line leading to the largest portable toilet and give myself a place to stand while I survey the territory.

When I first disembark from the van, the cool air refreshes me. The van had been stifled by the sweat of fear and anxiety. The air, at 5,800 feet, invades each capillary in my chest and makes me heady with clarity. The course begins on a ridge just below Wasatch Mountain State Park. The town sits overlooking the Utah Valley. From our vantage point, however, we can see nothing. In every direction large black shapes rise into the sky and lean in on us. The stately guardians of rock and snow simultaneously surround and liberate us. The boundaries of the mountains are comforting and I can

imagine myself skipping the marathon altogether, waiting for dawn and then hiking up through the trees to the top.

After waiting for the potty for twenty minutes, I begin to feel the cold. I only brought a sweat shirt to keep warm. June in Utah is not the same as June in Texas. When I got on the plane at DFW airport the temperature was 95 degrees. Nestled between the two peaks, my guess is that we are shuffling around the 50's. I had been so concerned about being acclimated to the elevation and being able to breathe properly that I had forgotten that my body knew the heat not the cold. After a harrowing experience in the pitch black port-o-potty, I wander up the road looking for something to attach myself to. Every face I pass looks through me. Every group I find looks away as I approach. I finally work my way into an opening next to a fire pit and begin to thaw. I squat near the ground thinking that from my lower vantage point I can see the faces of the people in the circle. Fifteen people stand shifting politely in a pattern around the metal fire pit only three feet in diameter. As one person becomes warm they move aside to allow the person on the outskirts to move into their spot. I watch strangers help each other with their belts or their hoodies or move aside and give up the warmth of the fire for the cold that lies just outside the group. Because I am so low to the ground no one expects me to move. I can rock back and forth on my haunches and keep my place. I don't speak a word to anyone.

As the sun starts hinting its arrival in the east the masses begin to slide toward the blaring music that signals the start line. I look behind me and suck in a breath. I can see people, thousands and thousands of people, winding up the side of the mountain. The light gives away the secret of the marathon. I will not be running alone

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Like so many adventures in my life, my decision to run a marathon wasn't premeditated or planned. I just decided I would start running. Rachel mentioned that she wanted to run one and I said, "Well me too, then". In fact, I didn't think very carefully about it at all. My mind was set. I printed a schedule. I started running. Spontaneity has been one those tenacious personality traits that have stayed with me throughout my life. I make commitments before I have a good understanding of the requirements involved. The running schedule seemed feasible enough. I had a year to prepare and believed that becoming a runner would be a goal I could easily accomplish. When I first began training, my preconceptions were confirmed. The first month the runs were smooth.

When my alarm goes off at five a.m., I groan. Its pitch black but for the buzzing of my phone. By the time I am putting my shoes on I have begun to feel life pumping in my limbs. The anticipation builds as I stretch and plug in my music. I walk down my street with Loreena McKennit's guitar sounding in my ears. I look behind me and I can see the light of the full moon creating a halo over the roof of my house.

My street is lined with thick trees that crowd the horizon and are nestled against rows of suburban builder copies. When I reach the end of the street, the sky vaults out over a flat plain. It grows wide and stretches up the way a tent is raised—gathered at the edges where the stakes are planted and then billowing out full when it catches the cool air. This is when I begin to run.

In the early morning, there are few cars. Street lights that burned through the night to ward of predators have been extinguished. The dawn is still almost a full hour away and I feel embraced by the solitude of the dark. My feet make the sound of a herald as they move in rhythm—just three miles today. I'm heralding the day, alone. This utter blanket of quiet is at once exhilarating and slowing. I can sprint for a short moment but it does not fit the smooth movement of the constellations above.

I'm acutely aware of the sky. The breadth, the scope of the space above the horizon draws me into it. My tiny body moves along this miniscule strip of concrete that is superficially imposed on a much grander landscape. The moon hangs just about the bell tower of the impressive compound of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's Catholic Church. The trees cannot even meet its stature as it nears the horizon. I want to stop, to lie down in the dewy grass and be swallowed up. But time urges me on. The moon is already slipping elusively behind objects as it moves lower. It is impossible to capture it. I am looking up in every direction as I run trying to keep my feet steady and also see as I move. The Big Dipper is turned up on its handle in the north, threatening to overwhelm Orion in the east. The light of the early morning has a special quality, like the burnished sterling silver of grandmother's special heirloom pieces. I am on my way back and my pace has slowed.

I reserve this final stretch to slow my heart rate, quiet my mind, and prepare to return to the confines of my house. It is not unpleasant in the warmth and comfort of my kitchen but still the demands of family life crowd the space. Out here, under the sky I can breathe. The molecules of air that fill the pre-dawn sky are still. They make room only for the living body that causes shivers in an otherwise static atmosphere. My heart

pumping heat, my muscles expanding and contracting are the motion in the still frame. The renewal of my body prepares me for the day and I am ready as I step inside my house to confront it.

The exhilaration of running from my house to the grocery store and back was like a drug at first. I grumbled to myself as I put my shoes on but once I opened the door to the darkness my stomach would flutter and a smile would spread across my face and move through my body toward my toes. Short runs are like bursts of light and space. They make the capillaries in your lungs expand without breaking and the flood of oxygen makes you heady and full. For a month I ran four days a week, at five a.m., under the light of the stars. To Kroger. Back. I had the route memorized down to the divots in the dirt. I felt as though my body could become a runner's body. The muscles in my legs responded that month. They felt stronger as they expanded and contracted to propel me forward.

The silence of running lives in your heart beat. The beat that keeps rhythm to the sound of your feet hitting the pavement; your insides work in sync with your outsides. The early mornings became a pleasurable effort. In fact, they were much like a vacation. The focus of my daylight hours was on my four children, my husband and my job. I felt the burden of those responsibilities lift when I began to bounce along the road; the way a ball bounces down a hill and the people on the sidewalk stop and smile and watch it as it goes. The life of a working mother demands a great deal of attention. Details like who to pick up at what time, what to feed them, who needs sleep, clothes or attention all swirl around in the mind of a mother. The list never completes itself but sort

of works in a cycle: make lunches, get the baby dressed for school, make breakfast, drive to three schools, go to work, drive home from three schools, make dinner, make lunches, take baths, sleep, do over.

Running worked itself into my schedule, finding the early dawn hours unscheduled, and then solidified my need for it. The run was an escape from other people's voices long enough that I could hear my own. I learned this guilt as I watched my mother. She never seemed to be alone. As the oldest of seven children, my growing up years were full of noise and motion. Babies occupied every corner of our house. I rarely saw my mother go out alone or spend time with friends. My impression of her life was that of an isolated housewife. I knew that she needed time outside the home. I caught her on several occasions sitting on the floor of the bathroom late into the night reading a novel (historical romances were her favorite). I saw this as a guilty pleasure she allowed herself—a quiet place to slip into another world.

I knew early that this was not going to be a part of my life plan. The demands of other people's needs would not interfere with my own. I spent much of my childhood trying to escape the confines of home and family. I ran, physically and emotionally, from the boundaries that my parents placed around me to keep me safe. Of course, life often as other plans for us than we have for ourselves. For the past twelve years my life has revolved around other people's needs. As my children were born, I began working hard to be unselfish. I wanted to give them all the parts of myself that I believed they would need. Jared came in 1999, Ayla just 21 months later. Wesley showed up in 2004, just as I began my Bachelor's program and Abigail slipped in in 2007 just before graduation. Raising my own family has made it difficult for me to run away.

The idea of a marathon went against the identity I constructed for myself as a mother. Other mothers I knew who ran would say, “Running, for me, is a matter of life and death. I can’t be a good mom without running,” but I didn’t believe them. Training takes hours and hours of time alone. I felt guilty even asking that of them. I also felt guilty for wanting to leave, to be alone especially since I’ve spent my life running away from people.

I learned to run when I was a young child. When I ask my mom about it, she reminds me that I started running away when I was three years old—the same age as my youngest daughter, Abby.

“I was shattered. It was the most awful feeling when I couldn’t find you,” she said reminiscing.

I knew my mom was smiling on the other end of the phone despite retelling the harrowing story of when we lived in Alaska. I’d heard it before but I said, “Oh, I didn’t think of that one. Tell me again what happened.”

“Well, my friend wanted me to go to a meeting with her and she said that her teenage son could handle babysitting her kids and that you could come over and play too. I was nervous about leaving you there with so many children for one teenager,” As she recalled her young mom self she sounded wistful. We lived in Anchorage—my parents, my sister and another girl on the way.

“When we came back from the meeting, the babysitter didn’t know where you were. I was so panicked I could hardly breathe. How could you have disappeared? We searched in toy boxes, knocked on doors, and finally called the police. Luckily, the police already had you at the station. You were safe.”

I looked over at Abby then, tucked safely on the couch under her blanket, sucking her thumb. Her blond hair tumbled over the arm of the couch much longer and thicker than mine ever was and her face toward the show she was watching. What would I do if my little Abby disappeared? My heart beat a little faster at the thought.

"You were sitting on the counter at the police station with an ice cream cone. A lady saw you trying to cross a busy four lane highway by yourself. She knew you looked out of place and called the police. When we asked you why you left the babysitter's you said you needed to go to the bathroom. You were walking home to use the bathroom." Of course, I needed to use the bathroom. I'm sure I thought it completely acceptable at the time that I could walk several miles home to use my bathroom.

I can't imagine myself as a three year old even though, I never really hit a growth spurt. When I started kindergarten I was still wearing toddler-sized clothes. Despite my frame, it never occurred to me that I wasn't perfectly capable of doing anything at all that I wanted. My mom says I cried all the time when I was a baby because I was angry that I wasn't able to say the words I wanted to say, do the things I wanted to do. She often says I thought I was an adult in a little body and she's right. I was frustrated with my body and that it couldn't go faster, be bigger, be stronger.

"You thought were an adult from the time you were born," she always says. I think, perhaps, that since the rest of world was much smaller than me—the world that I was surrounded by anyway—I was pretty sure I was in charge of all of it.

So, it is no surprise that the next year, I decided I no longer needed a mother. Just after we moved from Anchorage to a suburb of Houston, Texas, I became utterly convinced that I could go out on my own, start my own life and be happier than I would

be at home. Things in my little world were mundane, boring, and unadventurous. I wanted to be like Laura Ingalls Wilder on the plains with the excitement and unpredictability of nature or like Jedis exploring the galaxy. The regularity of my routine preschool life just wasn't enough. So, I screamed to my mom in the kitchen, "I don't need you." My mother's version of the story is that she stayed in the kitchen and let me run around the house being destructive and wild before she decided she needed to reel me back into line. She took hold of me and held me thrashing and screaming in her arms, rocking me in a rocking chair, until I exhausted myself.

Perhaps because I was so young, my memory works in a series of Polaroid's, flashes of image and color, rather than in cohesive strokes. First, a stack of pillows in the house in the doorway of the kitchen and the window opening. I believed that I could blockade my mom in there and she would be powerless to prevent me from carrying out my plan—which, of course—was to do whatever I wanted. It sounds a bit diabolical for a four year old. The next Polaroid image is the view from the highest closet shelf and my hands shoving tiny little game pieces, that I was not allowed to mess with, to the floor. I climbed out the front window of our house. Then a flash and snap to my bare feet sinking into the soft flower bed outside the window. Stomping around in the front bed I got my feet good and muddy before marching through the front door with my knees high. I walked the mud all around the entryway, living room, hallway and dining room.

I don't remember my mother restraining me. I also don't know the trigger of the episode. I think Mom was always trying to tell me what to do and I'd had enough. I knew at that young age that I was in control. I always come back to this story of my childhood.

I wonder at the tenacity of someone so small. I see that little girl as someone outside of myself. She was a child and I was never a child.

I was eight years old the next time I decided I didn't need any parents. Again, we had just moved from my first grade home to my second grade house, a bigger house. I didn't like my new second grade. My class didn't have a spot for me. In my old school, I had been in a pilot program which allowed the children to go as fast as they could through the material for the grade. When my records transferred to the new school, they showed I could do math skills at a third grade level and reading skills at a fourth grade level. The teacher didn't know what to do with me. Rather than place me in the higher grade, the solution was to allow me time to do my own work. A wheeled chalkboard was placed at the periphery of the school room. I sat behind the chalkboard alone and did math problems that my classmates had not studied yet. In reading, I went through the box of readers so fast that the teacher threw up her hands and let me read whatever I wanted—things by Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume and the Baby Sitters Club series.

It was shortly after the beginning of the school year that a girl at my table told the teacher I had a pack of cigarettes in my purse. The cigarette companies had not been sued yet and no laws existed in 1984 to prevent stores from selling cigarettes from minors. In those days, I spent a lot of time with my best and only friend, Jennifer, who lived down the street. Jennifer seemed like a more mature second grader than the other girls. She had thick, sandy colored hair that her older sister Katherine had taught her to fix with a hair dryer and hair spray—creating the pancake bangs that were made popular by Madonna in the 80s. Jennifer also seemed happy to have a friend and we got along well. Her mother, Penny, smoked long, glamorous Virginia Slims. I thought she looked like Audrey Hepburn or a model. Jennifer and I had tried smoking a couple

of times before I went to the store to try to buy my own. I had begun to think that if I smoked that the other kids would think I was cool or older or more mature. If they didn't want to be my friends, fine. If they did, then they would be cool too.

Unfortunately, no one thought I was cool. The adjustment of the move was awkward. I found it difficult to relate to my new school that was so different from my old one. My little brother, Chris, was born in 1982 bringing our family to four children. My mom seemed perpetually busy and stressed. In fact, I remember her crying regularly. Perhaps, the move was difficult for her too. We liked being in a bigger house, with more room, but everyone was out of sorts.

About half way through the year I finally got fed up. I was tired of being unknown at school and I felt invisible at home. My new baby brother was taking all of my mom's time and many tasks were relegated to me, tasks I resented, like helping with the laundry or with the dishes. The tension between being seen and being invisible strained my relationship with my parents. One night I even threw up to get out of doing the dishes by hand.

"Get in here and finish the dishes," my mom called.

"I can't, Mom. It's so gross," came my shrill whine.

"I need your help," I remember her saying, "I can't do all of this all by myself."

I couldn't stand the thought of putting my hands in that dirty water. I walked into the kitchen and went to place my hands in the soapy sink. My gag reflex began just as she came through the breakfast room with a load of laundry in her arms.

"I'm gonna be sick," I choked out.

"Too bad," was her reply and she went on with her chore.

In that moment, I felt contempt rise up with my dinner. What my mom did all day, taking care of babies, cleaning, cooking. Ich. I wanted nothing to do with it. In fact, I was pretty sure I was cut out for much better things than motherhood or domesticity. Oh yeah, I was going on to bigger and better things than diaper changing.

One afternoon, I took my mother's ATM card from her purse. I arranged for an older girl in the neighborhood to take me to the skating rink and headed out to get supplies for my adventure. At the end of the street there was a strip center with a convenient store at the corner. The entire neighborhood spent all of their allowance in that store. I had gotten to know the guys who worked there as I came in to get candy and other treats. Using the ATM card, I packed my bag with chips and other snacks, thinking that I would need some for the road.

I had planned it all out very carefully. My friend told her parents we were going skating together so we would have a ride there then I would set out on my own from there. I stepped into the roller skating rink feeling powerful and large. I had a purse on one arm and money in my pocket. The darkness of the room felt inviting and dangerous. I went to the counter confidently telling the clerk what size shoe I needed and proceeded to get my skates on. I had roller skates at home but had never gone to a roller rink before. The music filled the space around the smooth white floor. Lights moved constantly around in circles, illuminating each part of the arena separately. I skated around the dark circle listening to the music with no desire to be anywhere else, basking in anonymity. I remember feeling so free. In the hour I skated alone I left behind my family, my crummy school and my disappointment. I can imagine myself floating

along in the speckled rink—moving in and out of the light at will—without a care in the world.

That is, until I heard my name over the loud speaker telling me to come to concessions. A police man was standing by the half door that led onto the rink floor. My parents stood behind him. I wasn't all that upset that my parents came to pick me up. I didn't really know where I would go or what I would do beyond the skating. My main aim was to suspend my life outside of time. Skating in a circle completed the work of stopping time. I could be a child; I could be in my own world without interruption unlike at home where I was constantly barraged by attention, responsibility and noise.

Still, I loved my family and I longed to have a good relationship with my parents. They worked hard to provide for us and I knew my dad had a good job. My mom worked hard to keep our house clean, to make sure we had nutritious meals and that we were grounded in a deep faith. I have circled back through this series of memories many times looking for some compelling reason why I felt the need to escape from what was supposed to be a comfortable and healthy home environment. From the outside, there wasn't any clear reason for me to run away.

However, the pressure to perform a role as the oldest daughter felt like more than I could bear. My parent's expectations (in my mind) bordered on unreasonable. They wanted me to wear shoes at church. They wanted me to be kind to my sisters. They wanted me to be a good example to them. I made the conscious decision not to become what they wanted me to be. I would disappoint them and fight their decisions to control my life. Looking back, I can see that often my parents made mistakes. They did not provide specific consequences for my behavior. In many ways, they spoiled me.

However, while they were not perfect, like most parents are not, I reacted in an extreme way. I resisted acts that demonstrated love. I would twist away when hugged, run through the house when invited to sit and read a book. I pushed away attempts by anyone to get close to me. I became an expert at running away.

The next time I decided to run was an impulse—not pre-meditated like the skating incident. My mother had wrapped Band-Aids around my poor, bitten down fingernails. I regularly chewed my nails until they bled. My mom could hardly stand to watch me gnaw on my hands but when she attempted to intervene I responded with screaming and tantrums. In my anger at the Band-Aids, I slammed my bedroom door, packed an empty box of Girl Scout cookies with clothes and other supplies and climbed out my bedroom window. In one version of my memory, I run down the street away from my mother's face looking out the window, giggling to myself as I rip the sticky latex from my hands. In an alternate version, I'm in stealth mode sneaking quietly through the glass. Either way I felt a freedom in that moment, out from under her watchful eye, away from the gaggle of sounds that made up my family life. Texas is the biggest state in the union, next to Alaska and I'd already been there, and I knew there were all sorts of wonders out beyond my little network of streets. Second grade was nothing to the big wide world that I thought I would find on the other side of the golf course at the end of our neighborhood. I picked up my accomplice—Jennifer—and we walked to the tree lined path for carts and retired players. The concrete path was familiar, lined with aging trees. We cut across the green, wandering through what seemed like miles of course until we came to Burger King.

"We need to change our clothes," I told her maintaining my confidence, "the police will look for us in what we have on. If we change we'll blend in." It never once occurred to me that this plan was bad or dangerous. My sense of immediacy precluded any common sense whatsoever. In my mind, I took on all sorts of roles. We could be

secret agents going on a mission, or musicians heading out on the road to tour, or maybe we were famous actresses and we needed disguises to protect our privacy. I must have picked up the idea that we could change clothes to avoid detection from television or books. My fantasy life was alive and well in the second grade.

We went into separate stalls. I was careful not to let my clothes touch the floor. It was fairly dirty and yellowed. Jennifer did not like the bathroom; it was too dark. There were no florescent lights in Burger Kings in 1984. Once out of the bathroom, I walked with a swagger and swung my cookie box with a careless smile. We set out along Antoine—a major four lane road running through the northwest side of town. My plan at that point was to find a bus to take us downtown. Beyond that I hadn't considered much. Jennifer started complaining that she was hungry but we needed to get some money first. I hadn't had time to dig through Mom's wallet before we left. We found a car parked behind a Stop-N-Go convenience store with a man sitting inside.

"Are you waiting for someone?" I asked innocently.

"Yeah, something like that," he said through teeth clenched around a hand rolled cigarette.

"Would you like to buy some cookies?" I said as I came up alongside the car. I had had the foresight to pack some boxes of cookies to sell to get money to eat. He was generous, buying several boxes.

"Oh yeah, I got the munchies," he said grabbing the boxes and pushing his face toward me out of the window. I never once felt that I was in danger. I didn't feel any impressions or restraint about talking with strangers or asking for what I wanted. The man in the car probably wasn't dangerous, but he could have been. Why didn't I know

that? Why didn't I sense any threat at being out in the world without my parents? I've often wondered if I just had been taught to be independent—if my parents had just encouraged me. However, there is more to it than that, I think. Underneath the swagger and the confident running, I have more questions than answers.

From the car, we headed nonchalantly into the store.

"I need to buy some cigarettes for my mom," I said, my hands folded neatly on the counter with the bills between them, "she can't come to the store because she just had surgery." My smile spread out and my eyes innocent—making my angelic face even sweeter. I'm not exactly sure where I learned to bat my eyes at store clerks to get what I wanted but like the clerks at the store near my house, this one fell for it. Jennifer stood in the background shifting her weight, worried we would get caught. I remember believing wholeheartedly that I could get that clerk to do anything I wanted. As we walked out with cigarettes and candy, I could see myself in the window—a woman in charge of her body and her surroundings. I don't remember if we had a lighter, knew how to smoke the cigarettes or tried it. My logic in procuring the cigarettes was that a real woman smoked; a sexy independent woman must smoke in order to be powerful. No matter how hard I try I can't recall being a child, or feeling like a child in that moment, or ever really. I felt within that I was a woman being socialized to be a child. I decided I could rebuke the dictates of my parents. I could escape the reality of my tiny body that did not reflect the maturity I was certain I possessed.

I was oblivious to the seriousness of the reality, of how tiny I really was. When my dad arrived home from work that evening there were police officers in our house. A helicopter was patrolling the bayou, which ran along the back of our neighborhood, with

a search light. Apparently, eight year old girls should not be out loose on the streets without their parents. I didn't know or understand how devastating it would be for my parents to not know where I was. Before cell phones and computers, my family searched the streets with flashlights and neighbors, calling my name frantic with worry.

Meanwhile, Jennifer had spotted a Metro bus and we ran to the stop, trying to get somewhere as the sky grew dark. We barely managed to stop the driver who opened the doors on what must have appeared to him a strange sight: two eight year old girls, innocently clad in shorts and t-shirts, chasing a downtown bus at nine o'clock at night carrying boxes of cookies. I can imagine it now as utterly quixotic. We took a seat close to the front and I asked the driver all sorts of questions. I was curious about the rules of the bus. Did people not pay sometimes? What would he do if the doors got stuck? Did he think anyone on the bus would want to buy some cookies? He, in turn, asked me a series of questions.

"What're ya two girls goin' downtown for?"

"My dad is working late at his office. He said we could come to sell some cookies to his friends." I turned on my fabulous head bob and bright eyed smile.

"What's your daddy's name?"

"Jeff Kirk," came my dad's name quickly and easily. I turned to Jennifer and whispered, "Just be calm. We aren't going to get busted."

The driver was busy talking on his CB radio. In my heady self-confidence, it did not occur to me that we were in big, big trouble. I wasn't aware of the magnitude of the situation. I didn't see my parent's stricken faces when they realized I had not just run down the street to my friend's house. I didn't see the rearranging of their lives, to get

babysitters for my siblings, or to call the police and show them my photograph. As a mother now, the thought of one of my children missing in the night terrifies me. I can imagine the heartache now in a way I never could before.

By a strange coincidence, the driver of the bus knew my father who rode the Metro everyday to his office in downtown Houston. He knew that there was no way I was telling the truth. He radioed the authorities to come and collect us when he finished his route. The exhilaration of breaking free had consumed my thoughts until they were dashed by the detectives who met us at the door of the bus and put us in the back seat of their patrol car.

"Do you know what Juvy is little girl?" asked the officer in the driver's seat, "you don't get to stay with your parents. You live at the jail." The driver had a softened face and I could see that he was concerned about us.

"I'm not going to jail," I said haughtily. I was pretty sure I was smarter than them.

"You won't get to kiss your parents goodbye everyday," said the officer in the passenger seat leaning towards me, "how'd you like to kiss me good-bye every morning?" He thought he was being clever as he tried to scare us into not ever running away again. He smelled like stale coffee and metal. I was thinking I would most certainly not be kissing him ever. When they let us out of the police car, believing they had given us what for, I'm sure my mother's face was tear stained as she hugged me tight. I know that she and my dad were there together. I can look back and imagine the way their hearts hurt and the tenseness in their backs made them feel like they would never sleep again with worry. I can also imagine the way they wondered what was wrong with me, if they needed to help me, if I needed some sort of therapy. But I didn't think of them—not

once. My entire escape was formulated on my own disgruntled perception of the injustices in our family.

Developmentally, children are supposed to be self-centered. My behavior and thought processes, in hindsight, reflected my age and maturity. Somehow through the lens of my rebellious personality I saw evil or something akin to it. To my friends, my life was idyllic. We lived in a quiet neighborhood and my mom was always home when I got home from school. I played tackle the man with the football with my best friend, Jim, who lived next door and we went exploring in trees. I rode my bicycle up and down the street with my sisters. In so many ways my childhood was idyllic but I didn't fit in idyllic. I craved drama, adventure, uniqueness. My parents would often talk to us about family unity and how we each needed to be a part of a whole but I wanted to be alone, independent and separate. I also wanted to be the center of attention. The two competing desires presented quite a conundrum for a pre-pubescent young girl.

When I try to place myself in my family it seems fuzzy and discombobulated. I wasn't ever connected to them in the way they wanted me to be. I had one sister, Erin, who anchored me and stuck by me. It didn't seem that anyone else wanted to take me for who I wanted to be. Somehow I was a foreign object, an irritant, in an otherwise smooth running machine. My perception of our family was that it was tumultuous. My parents were never happy with the way things were. Babies are unpredictable and our home never seemed to measure up to the image my mom and dad had conceived. Despite their attempts to make our home a loving place, I never felt like I fit in and never wanted to try.

Yet now, I want to take hold of that little girl, to tell her things, to rewrite the history of being ungrateful, of causing hurt and damage to the people I know she loves. I want to give her my perspective on my parents—tell her they were just doing their best and that she should trust them. I want to go back in time to make certain that she knows how important she is, how much power she really has and how that can be used to bring hope instead of destruction, light rather than despair. What could I do if I could hold her and rock her myself and say look at what you have to look forward too? In order to find out I have to run my way back.

When I started training for the marathon, I realized that my runner self still lives underneath the adult body. Little Mimi still believes that she can do anything she pleases and when I started the runs and they were breathtaking and beautiful I was reminded of that power. I was also reminded that, although I have worked hard to stay, worked hard at mothering and being grounded, I am still ready to bolt. I think to myself that I am fast and furious. I can do anything. There are no limits. This is a constant dialogue in my mind. I have given birth, gone to college and had a job (sometimes all at the same time) and my confidence is high. That is until I get into the thick of it.

My height has been five foot two inches since I was sixteen; however, my body is not the same. My thighs are fleshy and my abdomen soft from carrying babies. My muscles are no longer sinewy and I can feel the heaviness in my backside. The aftermath of stress and pregnancy and nursing appears in the dimples along my legs. They are not, in actuality, fast in any way. My body, in no way, resembles a runner.

As I approached the longer distances on my training schedule I found that my body could not do what my brain wanted it to do. I could see the finish line in my mind, imagine that I could run fast, but when I got on the road and start clomping reality showed up. There is an image floating around the internet with an image of a slender, blond woman with a pony tail in perfect form. The caption over the image says, “What I think I look like when I run.” The image underneath is of a squatty childlike girl with a full round face and an expression of desperation. The caption for this photo is, “What I actually look like when I run.” Grandiose visions of success plague the most fool-hearty

dreamers. I didn't know how far 26.2 miles actually was until I started trying to run more than three. Only then did I start to understand what I had really gotten myself into.

I try to convince myself that it is too late, I am too tired, I will go another day. Then I tell myself, "Get your lazy butt moving; put your feet on the floor; take the dog." My body responds to the commands but my mind is hesitant—doesn't want to collect itself from the dissolution of sleep. I am undecided about the mileage. I should go two miles. I should keep to the schedule if I want to increase my lung capacity and my stamina. A marathon is twenty-six miles; it is forty kilometers; it is a long way.

My shoes feel heavy and they clomp on the side walk. They get heavier in the mud and I have to slide them through the grass. I don't usually run on the track just across the street from my house because it runs in infinity—no beginning, no end. When I run I want to go somewhere, to travel some distance and to return. But the track is the safest choice since I only have a half hour before my children wake up. I count the minutes, ten minute miles today. Impossible.

There are no lights in the field. It is completely dark save for the shimmering of dew on the grass as it catches the moonlight. I pass the tennis courts and football practice fields before arriving at the gate to the track. A shape moves past me on the tarmac. The woman is stealthy, slim, and whispering in the breeze as she passes me. I pretend to stretch as she passes not wanting to compete—to pass or be passed. I choose the lane second from the center. It is shorter than the outer lanes but it isn't the smallest loop on the oval. When I begin to run I realize that the ground is spongey. My shins are excited about this and they cooperate as I move along the loop. As often

happens in the dark, the sides of the track rise up into a bowl shape, slanting down, becoming deceptive without the colors of the grass and turf to distinguish where one ends and one begins. Disoriented I try to focus ahead at nothing, not swinging my head from side to side.

The first lap is smooth and I allow myself a twenty yard break to slow my breathing. Again, the loop rises on the side, lifting me until I am not straight up and I realize I haven't seen the woman. I search for her shape, the hint of her shadow and find we are pacing each other. She is at one goal post and I am at the other. Half way through this lap I begin my chant. Just to the other side of the bleachers, just to the next gate. You can go twenty-five more yards. You can move your legs for just twenty-five. That voice is right, I make it to the half mile mark and I slow to breathe.

I walk a little longer this time to look at the looming metal of the bleachers on my right side. They are shiny in the light of the gibbous moon that is hanging above the horizon, seeming to be unwilling to slide into its resting place beyond. I decide to run the next half without stopping and I do, wheezing, sliding in and out of proper form, slogging my shoes across the bouncy surface. Proper form is key. I try to tuck my abs into my back, to tuck my tail bone under and lift my posture upright. I try to swing my arms so that they are controlled but I imagine I look like a drowning, flailing body in the shallow end of the pool.

At the end of the mile I decide I only have time for one more half. I can only do two more laps before heading home, by now it is six a.m. and I have to shower, make my lunch and pack my things before repeating the process with all four of my children. It

is rounding the fifth lap that I remember the advice of the manager of the shoe store when I bought my tennis shoes.

"Take off your shoes and run in the grass. The Kenyans. They win the Olympics. Do you think they have nice little tracks? Run in the grass."

I slip my shoes off, my expensive running shoes, at the long jump and step into the wet grass. It moves underneath the balls of pressure as I move my weight onto it. The grass, soaked and limp, is pressed to the dirt by the gravity of my body in the darkness. I forget my form, I forget the time and I sprint to the goal on the other side of the field. It is difficult to run and stifle a giggle. It is difficult to run in the grass and not fall into it and roll tumbling through the flecks of earth and sky that collide in the tumble. What happens in those ten minutes leaves me breathless, lighthearted and lifted up out of my slump. It is here that my music gets suddenly louder in my ears. "Six o'clock in the morning, you're the last thing in the warning, You've been trying to throw your arms around the world." U2 makes magic in my spirit. "I'm gonna run to you, run to you, run to you, be still." In answer to myself, I say, "woman, I will."

-5-

I started crawling out of my window when I was too young to be wandering the streets in the middle of the night. At ten years old I had insomnia. Perhaps I was growing or worrying, I'm not sure what it was that was so inviting the first time. I do know that I found these adventures satisfying, as if I was drinking from the big dipper the stuff that stars are made of. I can taste the smell of the crisp earth from walking quietly through the grass. One specific instance is particularly clear. I lived on the main entrance road to the neighborhood, the one trunk with branching tributaries. The "back" of the neighborhood as we called it backed up to the bayou. My friends and I always called it the buy-o but apparently it is supposed to have a U sound at the end. I had extensively explored the trails that lined this wide body of water. It was the closest thing we had to nature in our suburb of north Houston.

I had decided that exploring at night would be even better. I opened my window, which occupied the left side of the front of our home, and climbed delicately through the flower beds toward the darkness that hung under the large maple tree in the yard. I stood there with the grass coming up between my bare toes. Cool, sinewy, crinkled. Each sensation seemed heightened by the blanket of sleep that surrounded me. The night does not sleep despite the belief that when you close your eyes the world outside of your body ceases to exist until you open them in the daylight. My first awareness in the new territory of the unknown world of the night is that it is not, in fact, quiet. It feels quiet. There envelopes the insomniac child a feeling of security. They are the only one awake and the only one who is privy to the reality while people are dozing away.

I imagined myself exploring an uninhabited landscape full of wonder and delight. Stepping into the street I walked toward the light of the street lamp with no intent but to view. I walked to each neighbor's front walk. From puddle of street light to puddle with long stretches of closing darkness in between. I stood in front of a house of a boy I knew. He was much older than me and very distant from my circle. He drove some sort of sporty car and I would catch flashes of him as he would drive by--captivated. I stood in front of his columned porch and imagined him in his bed. Did he wear pajamas? Did he have a full size bed or a twin? It seemed curious to me that he would exist in this way. I thought I could conceive of him as a crush and a crush only but now the questions intruded on my image and I brushed them away, moved on.

The street leading to the back of the neighborhood was well known to me on a bicycle or walking to my friend's houses. However in the expansive darkness, it grew into an alien territory. The street grew, seemed to expand into a giant highway with the houses spread apart from each other. Sprawling two stories lined the first tributary road giving way to smaller ranch style homes toward the last two streets before the bayou. I headed toward my friend Sarah's house. A place that was, in my mind, a cool hang out. In the dark it didn't seem all that special. The house was empty of any social context without the lights and people and objects left in the yard. Stoic, sitting in its place with no one to animate it, I faced it for a few moments and began walking back toward the front of the neighborhood.

One street away from Sarah's, I heard noise from one of the homes. One light was on in the upstairs window. The girl who lived in that house rode my bus but we were not well-acquainted; all I knew of her were her large brown eyes and long dark

hair. I stood at the base of the driveway and listened intently. This house was alive, expressing some sort of commotion. The noises disturbed my tranquility. The house became menacing and imposing—the side of it akin to a sheer cliff from which the innocent inhabitants would be thrown by their aggressors.

I began to move away quickly until I came to another turn heading back to the entrance to the neighborhood. There I slowed and pondered what I had heard. I made up scenarios about the girl I knew from the bus being abused, or her mother. I imagined an ugly man doing ugly things. In my mind, these were the kinds of things that people would do in the night if they didn't sleep. My concept of the danger was that it was something that happened on television and that I had glimpsed evidence that t.v. was real. It made me question at the next few houses what secrets did they contain. Were they like *Flowers in the Attic*? Did they harbor young girls who were under threat from family members, locked away to be the victims of abuse, like the girls in the book I had just finished? The black windows had no answers for me.

I walked in the night off and on over a period of a year. For one adventure I decided I needed to have Erin along for the walk. I told her I had been going out at night and she should come with me because it was really fun. Erin, only twenty months younger than me, existed in my life as an extension of myself. We always joke that we don't have any memories without each other. I can't remember back before she was born. Despite our close relationship, we represent very different personality types. I am the more reckless; she is practical. I am intellectual; she is compassionate. She agreed to come on the adventure, but she was hesitant. As we walked down our street toward the exit to the neighborhood she fretted.

“Won’t we get caught?”

“No, sis, I’ve been doing this for a while and Mom and Dad never know. It’s cool.”

“What about….bad guys?” she whispered.

“What bad guys? I’ve never seen any. I think they’re all asleep.” I could imagine bad guys, and bad things, and danger but when it came to reality nothing bad had ever happened. In all of my books, danger comes and is conquered. No one would hurt me.

I tried to reassure her over and over. Once we got to the golf course she began to get into the adventure.

“Do you want to go to Jack’s house?” she asked. Jack’s house was several neighborhoods away. It would take a while to get there.

“Um, I don’t know. Its kinda far.”

“No, its not. I’ve walked there before, after school.”

“Well, it’s different in the daylight. I mean, it’s really late.” I was starting to have second thoughts about bringing my little sister out into the darkness. It was one thing to put my own body in harm’s way but it wasn’t fair to do it to her. She continued to persist so we stepped out onto a busy road to head in the direction we wanted to go. I grew more and more apprehensive as we went on, feeling that every car was looking at us and wondering what we were doing out at one o’clock in the morning.

A car passed us and slowed as the window unrolled.

“Ya’ll wanna go party?” the driver yelled at us. Startled I froze. Erin just looked straight at him and yelled, “No” really loudly. As the car drove away she began to laugh at me.

“Were you scared?” she goaded. I tried to shake it off and pretend like it didn’t bother me but the spell was broken. I was confronted with a different version of reality with my sister at risk than I could see when I was alone. The world takes on a whole host of other colors when a person you love enters the equation you have designed for yourself. It changes the variables. Suddenly, there are more factors to reduce and expand. Adding Erin into the equation paralyzed my ability to arrive at the same solution to my problems.

We arrived at Jack’s house and stood there and looked at it. She tried to knock on his window but he didn’t answer. I had to pee and did a dance out by the street.

“Just go in the bushes,” Erin told me, taking on the tone of the older sister.

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, you can pee your pants but no one is out here. No one will see.”

I took her advice, squatted behind the bushes and then directed us quickly back home. It was the last time I crawled out my window for a stroll through the magic of the after-midnight air. Reality and all it splendid consequences had demanded I pay attention. Confronted with the texture of those possibilities I backed away. For a while.

I didn’t learn my lesson. The next time I left, I took Erin with me again. We had decided to run away to my grandmother’s house in New Braunfels—a small town about two hundred and fifty miles away. I was twelve years old or so; Erin was about ten or eleven. We arranged for our mom to drop us off at the movie theater with our sleepover bags. Our friends were going to meet us there, we said. We went into the theater to begin watching the movie. I remember sitting in the dark watching Sylvester Stallone and counting the minutes until we could meet Matt and Shawn. They were our escape

party. I met Matt at the mall and we immediately began talking on the phone for hours at a time. I had become boy crazy and Matt showed me a great deal of attention. I told him about my home life and he encouraged me to meet up with him and he would get us to safety. He probably saw himself as the knight rescuing the imprisoned young ladies.

The girls locked in the tower were Erin and I and our father was the king with the temper. He would get angry and react in a split second. Once, while reading in my bed, I was abruptly taken aback as my father slapped me hard across the cheek. I didn't understand the punishment. I had been sitting quietly, not bothering anyone, not doing anything wrong that I could see. My father's face was red as he towered above me.

"I've been calling your name for ten minutes," he said through clenched teeth. I started crying, sobbing. I told him I didn't hear him. I had become completely absorbed in the book I was reading and I had left reality for a time. I didn't know he had needed me to come to where he was. Without another word he left the room. I sat there, not knowing what to do, or how to react. That episode still haunts me even though my dad came back in the room a short while later and apologized. He said he thought I was being disrespectful and ignoring him on purpose. He said he was sorry. Despite his apology, I still believed that my dad's temper tended to the extreme.

The occasion that elicited Erin's and I's plot to run away involved my baby brother, Todd. He was one of our twins (number five and six in the family) and just two years old. He had done some toddler-like thing and my dad had thrown a shoe at him. I don't even think the shoe hit my brother. But I remember being angry. I went in to Erin and told her we had to get out of there. We had to get away from Dad.

When Matt and Shawn came to the theater, we went out into the summer night with them. They were prepared to camp out for the night, with us, and then Erin and I would somehow take a cab or a bus to New Braunfels the next day. It was a sticky summer night. Houston is notorious for being so humid you have to take a shower after every step outside. We found a concrete section near a bayou to crash. The boys were more comfortable than we were. I tried to put on a brave face but I really just wanted to go home. I thought I could be exotic and sexy and cool if I went along with the boys. But really I was just dirty and exhausted. My parents picked up Erin the next day. I refused to go home and went with Matt to his house for another day. I told my parents that I wasn't coming back until Dad stopped being so mean. My relationship with my father was different after that—distant—and I felt that we would never be able to bridge it again.

Once I got home and got ready for the next school year things improved. Middle school loomed as a mark in my maturity and I needed to be more responsible. Sixth grade was a time of optimism for me. I was growing up and I would have more freedom. I thought I would be able to develop a new set of friends and be more popular because I was going to a different school. Unfortunately, middle school isn't really that great for anyone. In fact, it is pure torture. I did not make cheerleading. I did not get a part in the school play and no one voted for me for student council. By the end of sixth grade, I had given up hope of ever having friends. Even Jennifer and I had a fight and didn't speak again until eighth grade. I thought things couldn't get any worse but they did.

-6-

The first five miles of the marathon are magical. I have run the first five miles in one hour. I check my monitor every two minutes looking forward to my breaks. I cannot believe I have run so fast. The scenery takes so much of my breath that I wonder if it is a hindrance to be in such a beautiful place. The little town that seemed so ominous in the darkness appears quaint in the early morning light. I tried to keep pace with a group at first but they blew passed me twenty minutes ago. I decide that I will not try to be like anyone else. My goal is centered on my own ability, my own training and experience.

When the crowd first began to move forward from the starting line I was hyperconscious of the crowd around me. Who would blow past? Would any of these strangers be my running buddy? I wondered about the older people and some of the younger runners who appeared to be very out of shape. As I fell into a rhythm I let go of any desire to compete with the others. Some people are faster than me and some people are slower. All that mattered once the race began was the finish line.

In the town, I see a girl with a pink shirt on. The shirt says in large black letters, “Sarah’s First Marathon.” I know I am going to pass her but I hang back for a while and just watch her run. My emotions rise to the surface as I watch her in these first few miles. She has headphones on and looks happy as her head bobs back and forth in rhythm with whatever music she is listening to. It is my first marathon too but I am probably fifteen years older than she is. I know how to endure passed the point you think you cannot go any more. I wonder if my life experience would help her. I wonder about her reasons. Did she lose a lot of weight and now wants to prove something to herself? Perhaps, she has gained some new self-confidence through another

achievement that gives her hope that she can accomplish this goal? People come to marathons for a variety of reasons. There are the token racers—the ones who are there to win or race the clock. I think more people come with something in their lives that has encouraged them to see the potential they have to do more, be more. I wonder about Sarah's motivations for a long time. Is she mentally prepared? Does she know that this part—the beginning—is the easy part? I consider introducing myself, making conversation but she is absorbed in the music. For the next few miles, I think about Sarah and her determination. I second guess my decision not to stick with her. Sometimes it is worth moving slower so that you can stay with someone. I decide, in the end, that Sarah will be ok on her own.

I come to a long red painted fence. Four horses follow me with their eyes and then begin to trot next to me for a few seconds. Their gaze fills me up. I imagine that they are curious about me and are wondering why they are in the pen and I am free to head off down the street. I hope their owners take them for runs in the mountains. I can see the mountains peeking through the trees lining the horses' property and the sky remains cloudless. I am utterly captivated by this place. The horses cheer me on and my body feels lean and strong.

I begin to feel sweat pool under my sweat shirt. The air remains cool and my breath comes in cold each time shocking my lungs as my body heats up under the exertion. I decide I can ditch the sweat shirt just after mile six. I think that I am warm enough now to stand the cool air. The sweat shirt is my husband's. It is large and bulky and in my way but it is also comforting. It has felt like a bubble of protection and I am sad as I just throw it to the ground next to the road. Someone will appreciate it, I think,

as I move past. The grass along the road is frightfully green a shock of electric color along the granite walls. I stare up in all directions; wishing that I wasn't moving as fast through the course; wishing I could plant myself on the side of the mountain and watch the world move down below.

Once while traveling on an airplane, I opened the window next to my seat. The day had been overcast and dreary and I wondered what the cloud cover would look like from above. The light from the setting sun shone delicately from the horizon of the cloud cover beneath the airplane. From my vantage point, it appeared as though we were flying straight into the sun. It was so dazzling I couldn't take my eyes from the light. The colors had depth and complexity as they danced along the white and gray puffs of air and water. The quality of that light has a vibrance to it that I had never seen before and still find it difficult to describe. I thought that heaven must be so bright. I thought that if heaven was a real place and it looked like this then I would be happy to crash the plane at that moment. I would gladly give up the dark, dingy earth that I could see peeking underneath the clouds and live bathed in the soft warmth of the sunlight.

This is how I feel as I run. For the first six miles, I am transported to heaven—this place of solidity and movement, contradictions and harmonies. I feel as though I am traveling toward the light. Entranced, I hardly notice that my arms have gone completely numb. I go to take a drink of water from my hydration belt and notice that my fingers will not work properly. My legs keep their cadence and although the front of my thighs is also numb I continue to stick with my timing: run three minutes, walk one minute. I begin to rub the skin on my forearms trying to regain feeling in my hands. I have to pound my arms to bring them to life. I am slapping them, windmilling them around and rubbing

them. The rest of my body is weathering the cold but my arms are exposed, vulnerable to the air. I have been in the shade for much of this course and I am feeling it. I long for the sun. I regret discarding the protection of the sweat shirt.

When I don't think I can take it anymore I round a corner to an open space. There are cars lining the road and a police officer is directing the traffic and I see that the course is blocking the road. In this moment, I am running faster than the cars. My lane has been sectioned off from the road and I am passing people sitting at their steering wheels. The privilege of running on the highway is exhilarating. I push myself toward the next downhill slope in front of me. Off to the side as we approach seven miles, a young girl is in the grass hunched over. She looks much younger than me and appears to be in much better shape. Another woman crouches near her rubbing the girl's back with one hand and a cell phone in her other hand. The younger runner is throwing up. All of a sudden I am in awe of myself. Except for the chilly arms, my body feels tight and full of energy. There is a lightness in the air that I can't discern. The altitude, maybe. Or perhaps, it is the feeling of solidarity with the other bodies that surround me. In fact, as I begin my descent, there are runners all around me.

-7-

The summer before eighth grade everything changed. My mom was pregnant with my youngest sister, Jessi. I quit doing sports. My friendships shifted. That summer I lay on the couch and watched soap operas. I watched them in a row: *All My Children, One Life to Live, and General Hospital*. I especially liked the fiery red head, Tina, from *One Life to Live*. She looked like Cyndi Lauper. The other women on the show looked like bombshells, curvy ones. I started eighth grade with few friends and a self-image that did not measure up to the characters I had grown so accustomed to seeing every day. My mom didn't help.

"I don't want to make my own clothes," I protested at her request that I sew some culottes and model them in the mother daughter fashion show at church. Culottes were the 80's version of gaucho pants. The fashion trend of plumes of fabric billowing out from the hips and sewed at the crotch was not my favorite. I enjoyed sewing well enough. I had taken a sewing class and sewn a knit dress which I was quite proud of.

"You already know how to sew," she said, "we can pick any fabric you want." My mom was trying to create an opportunity for us to do something together. I was not interested in the outfits or in hanging out together.

"I don't want any fabric, or any sewing, or anything to do with your stupid project," I replied turning my back on her.

"Well, it doesn't matter. You don't have a choice."

I did model the outfits in the program and I did what she asked me to but I resented every second. I have often asked myself why I had so much animosity toward my mother. I certainly did not respect her. I did not see her work as valuable. The work

of mothering. I believed that my intellectual capabilities were far more important to the world. I believed that I was better than her. Perhaps, my view of motherhood was shaped by the dysfunctional characters on the soap operas. In fact, so great was my dissatisfaction with my mom, I invented an imaginary mother and past. My biological mother was Madonna. It did not occur to me that having a different biological mother than the one sleeping two doors down was an impossibility—I looked just like her—I just wanted someone more glamorous. So, my “real” mom was a famous actress and singer and she had placed me with this good family to keep me out of the spotlight. For several months, I had a bag packed for when she would return and collect me.

My imaginary parents weren’t always famous people. Sometimes they were aliens. I would invent elaborate schemes in which I was an alien life form (a super intelligent one, mind you) who was on Earth for the purpose of studying human life. I was subconsciously storing all sorts of data and information in my head that would be extracted when my alien parents returned to collect me. Sometimes my friends were in on the adventure. Sometimes I would lay out in the backyard and stare at the sky in anticipation.

Sewing was the most benign of the conflicts between my mother and I. My music turned out to be aconstant point of contention. Mom thought that the posters I brought home of Motley Crue were indecent. When she found me listening to the Beastie Boys in the bathroom she took my tapes away.

“I hate you,” I screamed as she demanded my box of unauthorized cassettes. She was firm, carrying the tape case toward the garbage.

“These are not appropriate.” I followed behind her whining and complaining about her reasons. She tried not to engage me in the argument but the pressure was building. Her mouth was tense and she was moving away from me quickly.

“I want them back,” I spat as I lunged at her to wrest my tapes away. I grabbed them and ran through the house.

“You throw those away right now,” she said firmly following me through our dining room.

“No,” I turned, “You do it.” With that declaration I threw the case toward her head, red faced and indignant.

Mom and I were constantly at odds after I turned fourteen. It was as if a switch flipped on and I hated my very skin. I constantly felt like I didn’t belong—at home, at school, even in my own room. I sometimes wanted to just slip out of the body I was trapped in and get a new one. I wore strange outfits, was moody and distant from my parents. In hindsight, puberty had a lot to do with the shifts in my demeanor. A young girl’s hormones are difficult to control. At times I knew I was being irrational but I couldn’t control my reactions. The emotional shifts consumed me, washing over me in tidal waves, and leaving destruction in their wake. I saw the world as a giant conspiracy to rob me of dignity and happiness.

Boys made fun of my body. They would snicker as I passed in the hallway. Rumors began to circulate that I would make out with anyone, even though I had never kissed a boy for real. I didn’t even have a boyfriend. Physical maturity does not create emotional maturity. My breasts invited me to see my reflection in the mirror as much older than my age. The reflection I saw in other’s eyes reinforced that image.

-8-

My image as a runner began to be distorted as I tried to push through just the first phase of training. Everyone said they believed in me. Everyone encouraged me and said I could do it because I could do anything. Marathon training requires consistent dedication to a schedule. Construction began near my neighborhood destroying my route. I began teaching at the university where I was attending classes and didn't have the energy to get up so early. Even with the stresses of my daily affairs I tried to keep to my plan, to the little spreadsheet boxes which marked off each short run. Three miles. Two miles. Three miles again. I couldn't seem to get myself up early enough.

I also didn't know when I started running that my body was all wrong. My angle of motion was slanted rather than straight and the place my foot hit the pavement made my shins begin to splinter. In just the third week of early morning runs, my legs rebelled against me. Shins splints feel a bit like someone has taken your tibias out of your skin and begun to scrape them with a vegetable peeler. Then those shavings are placed back in your legs so they can poke at your skin from underneath the surface. The longest distance I had ever run was three miles and I could barely do that without walking every few quarters to catch my breath. Even the barefoot running did not correct the scraping in my shins.

When I decide I'm going to run in the morning, I stay seated on the couch. I'm in ragged sweat pants that have paint splatters. My hair, greasy and flat against my forehead, is unwashed. I am completely exhausted. I look down at my belly which is

protruding slightly from underneath my chest. After childbirth my stomach is a scratched up surface of dimples and stretch marks. I think to myself that if I run, if I get my butt up off this couch and move, that I will feel better. I think that if I have to look at myself in the mirror I will vomit. I go into the bathroom to get my shoes, deliberately avoiding my reflection, consider whether I need a bra. My breasts, once the object of a great deal of attention, have sagged under the weight of nursing babies and age. The pants I'm wearing are too big and also sag, right down my back side. I put the shoes on and the bra but I don't feel dressed to run. I typically wear tight spandex shorts with a sleek sports bra and tank top. I feel slim when I run and can pretend that I'm athletic. But today, I cannot even muster the pretend. Today I'm just going because I should. When I get to the track I try to run but I feel as though gravity has increased a hundred fold. My insides are sloshing around and the bra I chose is allowing my chest to do the same. Nothing feels secure or tied down in my body. My muscles are weak, my pants slip down every time I try to pick up the pace. After one quarter of a mile, I give up. I do not try to run. I walk home and go back to the couch.

After two runs trying to breathe through shin splints, I decided to take a break for a couple of weeks to heal. As much as I loved the pre-dawn hours and the openings that beckoned me to them. I had to let them go.

-9-

I visited my parent's house in Houston during my training. They recently moved to a new home only ten miles from the neighborhood I lived in when I graduated from high school. The new neighborhood has much bigger homes and, while the area is familiar, I don't know my way around. I planned to run nine miles while I was there. Each time I increased my mileage my anxiety about each run heightened. Would I be able to go the distance? Could I muster the motivation to do what seems a ridiculous thing to do? I stayed up the night before and searched the internet trying to plot the run through the tree lined streets of the Champion Forest Golf Course. I have been in awe of these homes since I was a little girl. When driving through the area my sisters and I would always point out which one we would live in when we grew up. I find it hard to believe that this is where my parents live now.

The route I plotted was a labyrinth from my parent's house to the golf course and through the neighborhood that wraps itself around the greens and paths that say "Members Only." I drew myself a map which I tucked into the layers of bras I wear beneath my tank top. I had my iPod in a case strapped to my arm and my cell phone, also tucked in my bra with the map. I had a water bottle. I knew I could not run the distance without a drink. I wore my tight hot pants. I have gotten braver as I've become a runner. I decided to go early in the morning. When visiting my family, the days are full and I want to have time to spend with them.

It is dark when I step outside into the unknown, lamp-lit street. I have memorized the street names but the directions must be checked and double checked. Turn right on

Maple or was it Cherry. Each time I reach a turn I must consult the map. The darkness of the each home seems somehow inviting and peaceful. It has been so many years since I went out in the dark like this. The lawns are perfectly manicured and I decide each dark face has a story. I try to imagine who the people are in their beds, their lights off, their children asleep. I am alone on the road, running alongside the curb. I turn one corner and find myself next to an apartment complex. I have to run in the grass to avoid a few cars that are pulling out onto the road. The grass is wet and the ground spongy under my tennis shoes. I wonder if they see me and wonder about me.

In one house, a light is on in the front window. A man is sitting at a computer desk with his feet propped up. I slow slightly so I can see the details. Only the tips of his shoes are visible but he is leaning back with his hand near his mouth. I guess, he is reading the morning's news, sipping his coffee, enjoying the silence of early dawn. The computer screen on the desk is lit and it appears the man is in the process of starting his day. The scene invites me into it like the pages of a book and I stare as I pass, mesmerized.

By the time I reach the main road, the sun has begun to light the eastern sky but I can barely discern the change in light because I am surrounded by mature trees. The golf club is on the main road and signs are posted warning people not to park there, warning that they will be towed. I feel almost like a stranger even though this city is my home. I consult the map and see that I must pass the club and enter the neighborhood that is embedded in the course. I feel a twinge of danger as I pass rows and rows of azaleas in full bloom. I feel prickles on the back of neck as I ponder what could be lurking behind the enormous bushes. I am entering an exclusive place.

As the sun rises higher and the air goes from gray to pink, I can feel the gentle luxury of the swaying trees, the slow ease of the Saturday morning as I see people padding out to the sidewalk to retrieve their papers. There aren't many with newspaper subscriptions but I smile as I see an elderly man stop to run his fingers through his hair as he picks up his newspaper bundle and look back at the front of his house, sizing it up, and walk inside. I am running the opposite direction of the traffic but there are very few cars. When they come they slow and watch me as we pass each other. I am the only runner this morning, perhaps I am a rare sight. I enjoy the solitude. I cross a bridge.

I have gone only two miles and I have to remind myself to take it slow. I feel energized and refreshed but I have only just begun. I notice movement on my right and turn toward the flash in my periphery. An armadillo is scuffling around in the underbrush near a stand of large azaleas that block the view of the golf course from the street. He is wading through the brush slowly as if trying to get one last morsel before tucking himself in for the night. I stop my iPod and slip it slowly out of its case. I have never seen an armadillo up close, alive, before. I have lived in Texas nearly all of my life and this is a big first.

My dad often tells stories about his grandfather, Louis Morf. He emigrated from Switzerland in 1945. When my dad was a young boy he enjoyed Louis' love for animals. My great-grandfather would keep birds, possums, fish and any other distressed creature he came across. Once, my dad fed a deer with a bottle that Louis had rescued. This fascination for animals led Louis to stop dead in the middle of the street and get out and watch an armadillo cross. I think of this story as I creep carefully through the grass. My iPod doesn't take great video so I have to get closer and closer to see the animal on the

screen. I am struck by how rough the skin is—surprised that I am fascinated by a nocturnal creature that I usually know as road kill.

I smile about my video for the next mile. Feeling the pattering of my feet against the pavement and trying to time it to the rhythm of the music I am listening to. The morning air feels fresh and although it is humid I find that Houston is more pleasant in March than I remember. I think of things and then brush the thoughts away. I wonder about my family—at home in Keller—if they miss me, or if they are content to be with their father. I think of my sister in the hospital, cradling her new baby (the reason for my visit) and wonder how the adjustment to three children will be for her. But mostly, I look at the houses and make mental notes of their features. Some homes have columns and porches; others have large gates or circular driveways. Most of the homes are at least twenty years old and all are custom built. I see a family gathered around a truck in the driveway toward the end of the third mile. They are talking easily with one another and I assume the daughter, who looks college age, is preparing to leave. There are two little dogs barking at me as I pass—a little dachshund and some sort of terrier. They try their hardest to be fierce but I just smile at them.

I make it back to the main road and realize I cannot read my map very well. I am sweating comfortably, feeling the cooling moisture on my back and legs. The map has gotten soaked nestled so closely to my skin. I try to tuck it into the bottom of my shorts after I decide where to go. I take a road that I am unsure of. The map I made does not reflect the street names and directions I see in front of me. I decide that it does not matter if the course is perfect. I have already taken several twists and turns to make a

circular pattern. I am focused on keeping my feet moving. I am nearing the halfway point and I am beginning to feel the fatigue.

I switch my iPod from talks and music to silence. I am roaming streets that are unfamiliar, unnamed and not in the right direction. I feel no panic or worry. I am enjoying going off the route and exploring. People smile and wave at me from their lawnmowers. Some are pulling weeds. I near a trash truck and have to run in the grass around mailboxes and rocky drainage ditches. The trash truck is loud and jarring. My sense of direction has totally precluded my physical discomfort and I realize as I head back toward where I think the main road must be, that I am really enjoying myself. The solitude of three hours alone, with no one to demand or to need, is freeing and thought provoking.

I have returned to the place I started and I must make another round to complete the course. I have to repeat my directions. The familiarity makes me surer in my steps, more hurried. I begin to focus heavily on my breath, on the tightness in my abdominals, and the pains that shift and move as more tendons in my legs protest the length of the run. The second time around seems to go faster and slower at the same time. Time seems suspended and I cannot judge how long I have been running despite the monitor on my wrist. It says I have burned fifteen hundred calories and I'm only three-quarters finished. That's when I realize I forgot fuel. I am forcing myself to lift my feet as I head back toward my parent's house. The flowers and lawns and houses are not as interesting now. I am focused on my body as well as focusing on my focusing on my body. I have to tell my brain that the pain I'm in is not a sign of distress but of accomplishment. I have to repeat to myself that running these nine miles has a purpose.

The answer I get is, "Why?" Why would anyone run this far? I feel like I should know. I feel like, "just because I want to" isn't enough. It isn't enough to just want to do something, for the thrill? For the experience? I have tried all kinds of things for the experience. I want to know what it feels like to be able to run and run and run. I want to be able to go as far as other people have gone, or farther. I want to feel the rush of hormones as they flood over my brain and drip down my spine. I want to know that I can.

I am stopped at an intersection. My map is backwards and I am trying to trace my steps in reverse order but I do not have the common sense skills to navigate myself. I recognize landmarks but I am not sure if the turn right is correct. As I get further on, I realize I am on the wrong street. I look at the map again. I turn left. I notice things that look familiar. I notice that I have been here before. And that's when I realize I have passed my parent's home. I ran right by and didn't recognize it. I finished the run and kept going because I didn't know I was finished. As I walk back swinging my arms and singing along to the music, I feel like I can.

In February of 1990, a boy in my class named Darren hung himself in his closet. His sister, who also went to our school, found him. I knew Darren because he and Jennifer had dated at the beginning of the school year. We were all in shock.

The school was in an uproar. No one could quite process what it meant. In fact, some of the talk in the hallways was more about getting out of class to go to the funeral than it was about Darren's death. Most of us felt somewhat removed from it, like when you know someone who has a disease and it's terribly sad but you turn away so you don't have to see the suffering of that person.

I went to the viewing the night before the funeral with Jennifer and we sat in the pew holding each other's hand tightly. I didn't really know what to think. The family stood around sobbing into other people's shoulders. I spent much of the evening there staring at Darren's sister. How would she go on from this? I didn't understand death much less suicide. Why would someone place a rope around their own neck and kick the chair from under their feet—someone who was only fourteen-years old?

After the viewing Jennifer and I stood in my entry way and held each and cried. I did not speak with my parents about the funeral at all. In fact, it was another parent that drove us to and from the viewing. I don't remember feeling connected to them. Perhaps, I didn't want to acknowledge their fragility. Danger, reality, mortality came crashing down on me and I felt cut loose from the anchor of the world. I could no longer see my adventures as harmless forays. Running away after Darren's death became a dare—a challenge to the powers that be to wreak their worst havoc on my potential to die.

A cloud settled over our school and the end of eighth grade couldn't come fast enough. Other things circulated in the halls. Kari Bautchs's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Another girl lost her father to a heart attack. Death followed us around that year and influenced everything we did. The despair curled itself around my heart and I began to distance myself even further from my family. I spent hours in my room reading books and writing poetry. By the close of my last year before high school, my exterior had grown hard and brave to protect the fragility I was too afraid to admit.

I am tired, weak and my knees are sore from the shock of training. I pace the house. I am dressed in my shoes; my iPod is charged; I have eaten. There is no excuse to stay home except that I am tired. I am tired. I am tired. My hands are numb and my anxiety about my education, my future, the future of my children, the whole Herculean effort, has peaked in a constant panic. My son says I must go. He is watching me pace and he finally says, “Mom, you have to follow the schedule.”

I concede but still feel rebellious as I slip my gear into place. The wind is strong today. It whips my face and the trees rustle their petticoats, mocking me. The day is beautiful but my mood is bleak. The excitement of the marathon has waned as my daily life has struggled to keep pace with what the calendar says we should do.

I begin to jog slowly and each step of my left foot screams with pain. My knee feels like its full of fluid and I have to stop in the middle of the street and walk in circles to grit my teeth and breathe deeply. I turn to go home, turn to go back on the run, turn to go home again. Indecision is complicated by my desire to stick to my plan and my need to rest my knees. I’m unsure. Am I being wimpy? Am I trying to find an excuse to avoid my goal? Am I forcing myself into an inability to do anything at all? After two or three turns around the street I forge ahead. I head toward the sidewalk that I have committed to. My knee hurts but I do it anyway. I limp. I take longer strides. I start. I stop. I adjust to the stride by lifting up on my toes. As Enimem begins his duet with Rhianna, my legs have lengthened and I am going fast across a four-lane intersection.

I see a dark shape on the sidewalk. I think it might be an animal at first but dismiss the idea because this street is a main walk way for middle-school children. I

assume it is a knee pad or helmet that has fallen in a scuffle between eleven-year old boys. As I get closer, I realize that it has feathers. I come up on the bird and see that it is a pigeon—a carcass of beak, claws and feathers lying on its back on the right side of the concrete path. The head is turned to the left, gazing away from the wound in its belly. The exposed intestines and the way the legs are curled up around the base of the body immediately revolt me. I run faster, lifting my knees high, ignoring the pain. My emotions are very near the surface and I realize that the rush of hormone that is surging in my veins is also going to make me weep. Here on the sidewalk in the benign neighborhood across from a middle school lays a violent scene of senseless death. The wind is still pummeling my face and I'm running into it—the beating of the air much easier to tackle that the confrontation with mortality. I have a feeling I can run from it. I can escape the inevitable end that lies in my path. When I slow from my sprint, to catch my breath and take a minute to think it through, I realize that today was supposed to be a rest day.

Tuesdays have been a run day for me for two months. I have worked my schedule so that I can run on Tuesday mornings. The readjustment of the training schedule is one of the things that produced the funk, unable to decide to run or not to run. I haven't known if I like the early morning, or if I would rather run in the daylight. Today, I assumed, was a run day. As the realization sets in I start to giggle. The weeping I was swallowing just a minute earlier has flipped. I am elated at the news that I do not have to force my knee to cooperate and that I can just walk. I swing my arms and walk quickly to keep the sweat flowing. In this minute, I am alive—really, really alive. I have run on a day I didn't have to. I made myself go when I wasn't required. For some

reason, this bolsters my strength, improves my mood. I walk back the same way I have come. As I approach the dead bird, I veer into the grass, far away from the sidewalk. I decide that I do not have to look at death on this clear, brisk day. I do not have to confront anything but the walk home.

I say to my friend Melanie, “I’m going to run a marathon.”

“I’ve wanted to start running again,” she replies, “let’s run together some time.”

That sometime happens shortly after our conversation. We are going to go three miles—despite my effort and training I can still only run for three miles. It has been a while since she ran. But she’s done it before. She’s run a marathon. I believe that she has great secrets, great wisdom. I am going to watch her and learn well from her. We are very much alike in a lot of ways. She has four children; I have four children. She is a writer; I am a writer. We both come from big families; we are both the oldest of seven children. However, the similarities end when it comes to our appearance. She towers above my 5’2” frame. Melanie is tall and lean and fit. I am stumpy. She teaches yoga. She is dressed in Nike pants and looks so slim and cute in her running outfit. I feel shabby in my worn shorts and old t-shirt. I am not lean and I’m certain I do not look cute but I go anyway. I walk beside her as we head up the street and pretend I am confident.

She wants to start right away. I usually walk for a while, get my heart rate up. Already in the first two hundred yards this feels strange. Keeping pace with someone who is a good six inches taller than you and chatting at the same time works a different part of my brain than usual. The first mile passes quickly, however. Melanie is good company and our conversation is meta-running.

“The first mile is hardest,” she says as we fall into the same rhythm.

“I’m used to walking a bit to get going so the first mile isn’t usually as hard.”

"If you start when your muscles are cold, they stay tight and you have less risk of injury," she responds, giving me gentle advice. We talk about water, how to use fuel and the mental game you have to play with yourself to keep going.

The air is sticky. Summer lasts longer in North Texas than in the rest of the country. Moisture hangs in the air and collects toward our bodies as we move through it. By the time we reach the first mile, we are parched and stop to drink at the water fountain. I told Melanie that the route we are going is three miles. I told her I knew where the mile marker was in the park. I've been running this same trail for more than a month. I know where the mile marker is.

After the water break, the pace is more difficult. I'm having trouble keeping up with Melanie's long legs. She seems to be just jogging along, without much effort. Although she has said she has a headache. I think that if she has a headache and can keep going then I can too. I try to stop comparing myself while simultaneously lengthening my stride to keep time with hers. We round the bend where I think the marker is for us to turn back. If we go one mile to the park, ½ a mile in the park and ½ back, then finally one mile home, we will have achieved our three-mile goal for the day. Three miles is the perfect mileage—not too far, not too close. However, the marker is missing.

"I'm sure there was a marker here. It's a tall wooden stake with the letter chiseled on the side in white," I am justifying the missing marker, "they must have moved it."

"It's ok," she says, "maybe it's just the next bend." Throughout this first mile and a half, Melanie has been patient with me. I wanted the water stop. I am slow. I am starting to feel light headed from the heat but I don't say anything because I don't want to quit.

My legs are screaming from the continuous pace. When I run alone, I slow and walk frequently. More than I am willing to admit to myself. Walking equals weakness. If I want to run a marathon, I have to run.

After the next bend, there is still no marker. I am frustrated and tired and trying not to be cranky in front of my friend. Her long brown hair is pulled back into a pony tail. Even glistening with sweat, her skin is smooth and she looks much more than two years younger than me. When we do see a marker, it says one mile. We went too far. The mile marker is now on the sidewalk in green not on a post, like before. By the end of the route we will have gone four miles, not three. I begin a dialogue with myself in my head.

"You can run. You have done this before. Don't stop," says Perseverance.

"No, it hurts. My legs are so sore. I am not breathing right," regular me just wants to give up.

"It's ok. Don't stop. Don't give up. She isn't slowing; you don't have to either," this encouraging voice comes when I need her, gentle and giving.

While I am persuading myself to keep going Melanie says, "We don't have to talk. We can be quiet if you want." I wonder how red my face is. I wonder if I look as worn as I feel. I wonder if she can see my desperation as I force my body to perform the steps that it wholeheartedly resists. But I am quiet. I focus on the trail in front of me. I push myself to the limits of what I think I can do. Billy Blanks says at the end of one of his workouts, "let your eyes see what you don't think you can do." I tell Miss Negativity, "See, look what we can do. The end of the third mile. We only have one more to go."

Regular me responds pragmatically, "But that last mile is uphill."

We stop for another drink of water. I want to sit on the bench in the shade. Every electrical impulse firing in my legs is directed toward the pain center—the complaint department of the brain. I do not have any answers to the complaints. I will not ask Melanie to come back and pick me up in the car. I will not humiliate myself.

We turn to go up the hill and I am staring at the ground just a few feet in front of me. My head hangs slightly as the muscles sag. Melanie takes the lead as we single file have to go around an elderly couple walking their dogs. She passes the gentleman on the right, while I head around them on the left.

"Oh, there are two of them," he says surprised.

I am proud to be included in this run.

After we pass the couple, we are on the home stretch and I know it. But I'm so dizzy I am having trouble going in a straight line. I am determined to make it up the hill. I am determined not to stop until Melanie does. When we reach the stop light, I hang my head over my thighs gasping for breath. My arms tingle. My legs are weak and heavy. I do not feel good.

But I make it.

I run all the way back to her house. I make it the entire way.

"When I ran the marathon," she tells me in the last half mile, "my partner plotted all of our training routes. We had to run twenty-two miles by our last training run. During the marathon I got to mile twenty-one and I hit a wall. I cried and I wanted to throw up. The last leg of the race was pure torture. A few weeks later she called me and said the farthest we had run during training was seventeen miles. My mind thought we'd run

twenty-two. When we got there, my body said quit. Running is a mental game. You have to know how to tell yourself to keep going beyond what the body thinks it can do."

I smile as she tells me her story. I smile because I know I have run what was a long distance for me. I have had a very difficult time running more than three miles.

Perhaps, this is the advantage of the partner. So many things happen when you are not alone. You feel supported, pushed, competitive. I enjoyed the company and I stayed longer in this run, not walking, than I ever have before. My limit exceeds the line where I thought it was. Melanie and I commit to going again at the end of the week.

Unfortunately, I wake up the next morning and cannot walk properly. I try to climb the stairs to teach my first class of the day. When I step my left foot onto the step my knee buckles. Under my left knee a pain sends signals to my lungs to draw in a short deep breath. Throughout the day, the pain increases. I am having trouble walking to my car, trouble driving, and trouble standing to cook dinner for my family that evening. When I crawl in bed, I cry, hugging myself tightly, discouraged, exhausted. I wonder if I should just give up.

The mountains feel like walls around and behind me. Fatigue weighs in around my ankles. The runners that felt like a crowd as we bottlenecked through the intersection at mile seven have spread out and I feel isolated. The jagged rock faces of the mountain peer down at me from both sides. They are solid, immovable and I am trying to escape them. The Utah Valley Marathon boasts a downhill course and I have been grateful to find this is true. My thighs cannot do uphill.

Another feature of the course is Bridal Veil Falls. Just two days ago I came here with Rachel as she showed me around Provo. The waterfall is a popular spot along highway 189 in Provo Canyon. People come and hike on the trail up to the falls. The water cascades down the rock in a burst of white froth that resembles a tulle veil delicately draping a bride's shoulders. The water, raging and dangerous in the river, does not appear overly threatening as it follows gravity's pull down the rock. When Rachel and I poked around the day before, I put my hand in the water. My skin instantly flared an angry red against the cold. The sight of it, with the sun fully overhead causing each drop to catch the light and sparkle, makes me smile.

My thoughts return again to the solidity of the mountain. Human beings cut through the stone to build roads and homes. I wonder why we, human beings that is, work so hard to transform the landscapes around us. Why is it so important to wrest movement from something permanent—to blast mountains or to forge canals? The thought of being affixed terrifies me. Staying with someone, or somewhere sounds drab and boring. Perhaps, there is a tension between staying and going or between being alone or being loved. Running a marathon is an in-between. A long distance runner

must keep moving, changing scenery and difficulty. The training must be varied and obviously running a race requires a movement from point A to point B. However, the long distance run repeats the series of movements, over and over and over again.

So, the balance, delicate as it is, stabilizes when you have an equal amount of movement and steadiness. I remind myself that I am a Libra—the sign of the scales. The Romans named Libra as a representative for justice. Another reason the constellation is associated with scales and balance relates to Libra's position in the night sky. The sun passes through the constellation precisely during the Autumnal Equinox, when day and night are exactly the same length of time, at the exact moment of the changing of the seasons. Libra's position allows it to see the movement of time through the equinox. Libra is the only constellation named for an inanimate object. The weight of the scales in the sky never changes, but, for a Libra on earth there seems to be a constant shift between motion and stillness.

At the moment, I long to be still. I feel no pain or warnings but the fatigue sends messages to my feet to stop. In order to shut them up, I focus on the crags on my right side, looking away from the road. I try to work my focus in slow motion to pick up small details. Bridal Veil blurred into a smeared canvas of color so fast that I didn't even have time to see if there were any people there. I see that I am approaching a trickle of water. The surface of the rock shimmers so I know that it is wet. I don't walk here but I slow my thoughts. In several cracks, tiny shots of green grow directly from the mountain. The surface is not sheer but it is not jagged either. Worn smooth by the centuries of trickling water the ridges of each crevasse are rounded rather than sharp. I know the face is not climbable. Too slippery. However, I watch carefully, following the trail with my eyes, the

path of the water. I imagine I am an explorer and I have just come upon this oasis in the mountains. All around me the mountains hide their reservoirs of life giving water yet here a trail leaks out offering refreshment. The temptation to drink draws me toward the edge of the road. I have water in my bottles still but the cold, icy liquid straight from a mountain stream is almost too much to resist. My head stays turned to the side of the road as I pass and for a few seconds my body exists in that in-between.

Shortly after the trickle, I hear a voice beside me.

“How are you doing?” it says. A woman has appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and is pacing me on my left side.

“I’m hanging in there,” I respond. I am really not hanging in there. My efforts for the last few miles pale in comparison to the first leg of the race. I feel weak and while up to now I have been able to keep the doubting voices at bay I can tell my mental resolve will not keep them silent for much longer.

“Can I stay with you for a while?” the stranger asks.

“Of course,” I say and explain my pace, “I run for three minutes and then walk for one minute. I’ve stayed really consistent. If you don’t want to do that pace, I’ll understand.” She likes my plan. She decides to stick with me.

“My name is Jeanette,” she says. And then we begin talking.

Within one mile I have learned a great deal about her. This is her second marathon. It is her birthday. She has three children. She is divorced. I tell her about my life, my struggles in marriage, my near divorce. By mile sixteen we are talking like old friends and I have forgotten my fatigue.

On the last day of eighth grade, our neighbor, Lara, had a party at her house. She had a pool and was Erin's friend. She had an older sister, Vicki, who I looked up to (perhaps I believed she was like the women from the soap opera). They let me come to the party. I considered Lara and Vicki my friends but I was more in awe of them than anything. They were cool people. Vicki sprawled out on a beach towel in her bikini as the music blared from the boom box. Her boyfriend propped himself up next to her nuzzling her neck. She had darkly tanned skin and long blond hair. She wasn't beautiful by Hollywood standards but I thought she was a model. Her features seemed a sharp contrast to my stocky body, my short torso topped by breasts that did not fit my frame. I did not know much about hair or make-up. My mom said that I didn't need it, that I should let my natural beauty shine. I thought that was a crock. My eyelashes were too short so no one paid attention to my best feature—my crystalline blue eyes. My hair, stringy and white, never would flow down my back in waves. It just hung there like the yarn on a mop.

Some other boys were at the party from our neighborhood. Across the street from our house was a street that led to a cul-de-sac and we played there often. The boys were familiar to me, Larry and Tony. Boys I'd seen around. They invited me to come back to Larry's house to watch a movie. It seemed innocent enough and I thought since my mom knew I was at the party I didn't need to tell her where I was. I was excited to be hanging out with the boys. While I got a lot of negative attention for my figure at school, I made a concerted effort to be one of the guys in the neighborhood. I had a reputation for being rough when we played football and I would hide in trees

during bee-bee gun wars and shoot from above. Larry and Tony were two of the guys that hung out with us even though they were in high school. Larry was a light blond with typical sixteen-year-old acne. He was short and stocky and attractive in his bathing suit. Tony had dark Italian features with silky hair and a mechanic's body. I was flattered that they wanted me to come over and watch the movie. When I found out it was *The Adventures of Ford Fairlane*, with Andrew Dice Clay, I felt like I was walking on the edge.

I did not watch rated R movies and I certainly didn't go to over to a boy's house when his parents weren't home, but I figured my mom was at home busy with my baby sister. Jessi was born just three weeks earlier, the last of our seven kids. Rachel and Todd, the twins were only four years old and my brother Chris was six. Mom had so much going on that she wouldn't know if I tried something new. I found out later that my mom had known something was wrong. In the special way that moms do, she had protested going to my brother's baseball game. She wanted to find me. My brother was having his big moment; he was playing in an important game. My family left to go to the game, not knowing where I was.

Once the movie was on and we had settled in, I began to be uncomfortable. The lights were low and it was dark in the room despite it being late afternoon. Larry sat next to me on one side and Tony sprawled out on the floor. Larry was dating Sarah. She was my friend. When Larry put his arm around me, I pushed it off and whispered, "What about Sarah?" His response brought his arm back at the top of my shoulders.

"We're on a break right now," he replied. I wasn't sure what to answer to that. I didn't know if I liked his arm on my shoulder. I didn't know that he had other intentions.

My sex education had consisted of some mechanics instruction from the Time Life anatomy guide. I had no idea what teenage boys thought about. I only knew that this one was thinking about me. About half way through the movie he steered me to his bedroom under the pretense that he wanted to play a tape for me.

I didn't plan to lose my virginity that day. I didn't plan to give it to a boy I didn't even really know but in the end I didn't know how to say no. Larry caressed me and told me I was beautiful and that he wanted to teach me things and show me what it could feel like. With his coaxing and the refusal of my voice to protest, I left that day with a very different view of the world. On the one hand, I told myself that sex felt good and shouldn't be wrong. On the other hand, I knew that I had made a mistake. I had gone against what I had been taught and had let go of something I should have held tightly to. However, at fourteen, I didn't understand the consequences when someone takes your body as their own or when you give it away freely without protecting it.

One of those consequences was very clear the next day when I got up to go to the bathroom. I went in to sit down and felt a shooting pain that radiated out from my groin and down my legs. As I sat to urinate the pain turned to a burning—a burning so fierce it was like having someone rub poison ivy on my genitals and then brand them with a hot iron. I stayed in the bathroom crying at first but it passed and I got dressed. That weekend I had planned to go to a youth conference with other kids from church. There would be a dance, a service project and other team building activities. It was a weekend away. Our four bedroom house had gotten crowded with the babies and I was grateful for the opportunity to stay at someone else's house. Despite the searing pain between my legs, I went to the conference. By the time I came home, I had a low grade

fever and walked as though I'd been riding a horse for months. My mom noticed as soon as I returned that I was having trouble walking.

"You probably just have a yeast infection," she said, "We just need to get you to the doctor."

I didn't know what to say so I let her believe that that was the problem. I had never had pain before. I had never broken a bone or even had the flu that I could remember. I didn't even really know what it was like to go to the doctor. But my mom was insistent that the doctor could help me and when my dad arrived home that evening she took me to the after-hours clinic.

We sat in the waiting room quietly and I pondered the mess I had gotten into. I knew that I was sick and that it was from the sex but I couldn't think of anything other than AIDS that it could be. In 1991, AIDS awareness was a huge part of sex education. I knew that it could be transmitted from sex and other bodily fluids. I tried to remember the symptoms from the video we had watched. I didn't think I had those but because I wasn't sure I went over and over them in my mind. Worrying, waiting and worrying. Because of the nature of my problem, I went into the exam room alone. I sat on the table with my feet dangling from the edge. A part of me, a small part, was angry with myself and Larry for the predicament I was in. However, mostly I tried very deliberately not to think. I kicked my legs back and forth and looked around the room for any distractions. I had never had a gynecological exam before so I didn't know what to expect. When the doctor came in, he asked me to lie down. He put his head under the sheet and immediately came out and snapped his gloves off.

"You have herpes simplex II," he said matter-of-factly.

“Huh?” I had never heard of herpes. I didn’t know what it was or what it meant.

“It's a sexually transmitted disease that you will have for the rest of your life,” he snapped. He was looking at the chart in his hand. He did not make eye contact with me or engage in any other conversation. I didn’t react. I just kept swinging my feet. The man had just touched me in a very personal way and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. At least, Larry would still talk to me.

The doctor began writing a prescription on his pad.

“Can someone read that writing? For my prescription?” I asked trying to be nonchalant, curious about the cryptic script.

“Don’t be flippant, young lady. You have a serious illness. You should not take it lightly.”

I didn’t know why he was so angry. He handed me the paper and left the room without another word. I sat there in the gown just waiting for a minute before I realized I needed to get dressed. I went to the waiting room and had my mom go into the bathroom with me so I could tell her. She dissolved into tears. She knew exactly what it meant, although I still felt bewildered.

I stayed bewildered and aloof for a long time. The stifling knowledge of the consequences of my choices, the inability of my parents to save me from them and the anger I felt at the boy who produced those consequences left me in a state of limbo—paralyzed me. I learned that my body did not belong to me and that if I let someone love me I would be disappointed. I knew I was broken in that moment. I knew that somehow I had stopped being the agent of my body. I felt completely and totally out of control of my hands, feet and vagina. It was as though the doctor had wrested the last

vestiges of dignity from my soul but at the time I didn't even know I had a soul to lose. That young girl, that Mimi, lost herself. It started when Darren took his life and continued when Larry took her to the bedroom. It continued with the pain that would appear between her legs and remind her of what she had done. And it was finally stripped out in the exam room. This one weekend and the steps leading to it made an unalterable course correction in my life. It has taken so many years to find all of the pieces and put them back together again.

The dare of the marathon grew more intense after my shin splints healed. I took the Christmas holiday break to rest. I determined to begin again and complete the new schedule I worked out. I began training again after working hard strengthening my knee and working on my marriage. My knee wasn't the only part of my life that was broken. For years, we had struggled with my husband's gambling addiction. Periods of relative calm cycled through periods of intense chaos. As the year wound down we entered a period of calm. We decided we would work out together to get stronger. We began getting up very early in the morning and doing strength training together. He helped me to stay focused and to challenge myself. The time we spent together was especially cathartic. After the holidays we resolved to move forward together.

I needed my husband's support to get through the daily routine of training. With a full household to run, someone had to step in and take care of things when I was out for hours running. I didn't realize at the time that the rest of my family wanted to support me as well. Until, my mom called me early in the spring.

"We are coming to watch you run," she declared proudly. I was surprised that my parents decided to fly to Utah after spending a week with my brother in California for his graduation. I was surprised anyone cared if I run a marathon.

"That's really cool, mom. I didn't think you guys would be able to come." The original plan was for Erin and our younger sister Rachel to hang out—sister style. I didn't want to hesitate when my mom said she would come and support me but I did. The thought of having my parents at the finish line waiting for me to appear added pressure to my building anxiety. I wanted so much for them to be proud of me and didn't

want to fail them again. At that point, five months away, I was not sure that I could pull it off. I ran a wonderful week one. I felt confident and my knee felt strong, then the snow. I restarted my training two weeks before North Texas had the worst snow storm in decades. We called it Snowmaggedon. I couldn't leave my house for a week, couldn't train. But when I talked to my mom on the phone I didn't discourage her support. I was touched by the way that they have moved things around to support me. I was grateful.

In the third week of my training schedule, spring sickness invaded my house. I came home from work one day, lay down on the couch and could not get up. My husband came home, the kids came home and life was swirling around me. I was dizzy lying down and too weak to stand. Dave helped me to the bed and I stayed there. For two days I stayed in bed, hardly able to get to the bathroom. On the third day my son came home from school and found me lying on the floor of the living room in a fetal position. The weakness in front of my son caused me to weep uncontrollably. I told him through my sobs that I was ok, trying to reassure him that I just probably had the flu. I told him I'd never been that sick. I told him that his dad was coming home to take me to the doctor.

He sat down beside me and began to rub my back.

"Hey, mom, it's funny," he said, "Tears and sweat are made of the same thing." His wisdom overpowered me and I began crying again.

I did not want to go to the doctor. I rarely go. It was only out of concern for my unborn children that I went when I was pregnant. I hate being a patient. I hate being in the exam room. But this time, sicker than I have ever been, I knew I needed help. My

husband dropped me off at the office so that he could keep our household going, drop kids off, get dinner ready. I sat in the waiting room alone, chewing my nails, waiting.

When the nurse called my name, I walked toward her in a stupor. I could not make my feet move faster than a shuffle. I knew I looked horrid and could smell the sickness on my breath. In the exam room, I struggled to keep my head straight on my neck. The nurse asked me questions but my mouth was so dry it felt like my tongue was swollen. When the nurse left, I lay down on the table, crinkling the paper and tried to keep my head on the paper pillow. I curled up there, uncomfortable and weak, and began to cry again. I get angry when I cry. So I lay there angry that I could not control it and so frustrated that I had to be in this place and be so helpless and alone. The tears, embarrassingly wet on the paper, left stains underneath my cheek. It felt like the whole world was shaking. I held on tightly trying to keep my feet and hands tucked into my body so I didn't fall off the table.

As the sobs slowed, it dawned on me that my feelings of weakness come from my first visit to a doctor's exam room. My first humiliating experience at the doctor taught me that I was not allowed to have a voice and that someone else knows better. My body lodged itself outside of my consciousness the day I was diagnosed with herpes. As though it happened to another body, one that isn't mine and I just had to live in it for a time. The canyon between that body and this mind had somehow come together here. Some doorway swung open inside my consciousness. A light peaked in through the darkness of my frustrated hopelessness. I didn't have to be that little girl anymore. I didn't have to protect her because she is stronger. I am stronger.

The first time I dropped a hit of acid was just after I lost my virginity. Jennifer had told me about it on the bus going to and from middle school. She had tried it with her boyfriend and she wanted me to come with her one night. One of her sister's friends had a car and would pick us up. I snuck out the bedroom window and went to the boyfriend's house. That night was not clear like the others. It warped and colored in a way that is difficult to describe.

The house was dark but for the flashing lights of the television. Jennifer and her boyfriend wanted to be alone and I was left in the living room for hours watching cartoons with the boyfriend's little brother. I thought my mind would expand and my spirit would be set free from the weight of my body. I tried really hard to be good at doing acid that first time but mostly I was just bored.

Somehow my dad found me. He stood outside yelling for them to give his daughter back or he was calling the police. Eventually I was pushed out, despite my attempt to hide in the back yard, sitting on top of the air conditioner.

The next time I did acid, things got a little more exciting. Kathleen and I made a plan. We would sneak out at midnight, walk until we arrived to our boyfriends' trailer park, and hopefully be able to sneak in. We were fifteen. We knew everything. We had it all planned out. She was my best friend—the one who understood that when your parent's tell you what to do its time to go. She had more experience, I thought. We began hanging out when I met my boyfriend Chris. His best friend was Yoda—Kathleen's boyfriend. It seemed a foursome of serendipitous consequence. We must be destined to be together.

I heard her knock outside my window at the agreed on time and peeked out. I threw my backpack to the ground and lifted my legs through.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Yeah, my mom would not go to sleep,” she said as she rolled her eyes. Kathleen and I began our friendship during our freshman year. We ditched school together a couple of times. She was curvy and vivacious and had long brown hair that I coveted. When I looked in the mirror I saw an overweight unkempt girl with too many moles on her face. Kathleen dressed in trendy clothes and she had the sexy swagger I had long since tried to master. She also seemed wise and experienced. She dated older boys and she wore short shorts. I figured if I was going to go to California (our ultimate destination) she would be good to have around.

Kathleen and I would walk to Chris’s house, spend the night and then head to California in Chris’s car in the morning. His mom lived there and would give us a place to crash. I was not on good terms with my family. Just the week before we were to execute our plan, I had jumped from my mom’s van at a stop light to run to Chris’s house. Mom and I were fighting, as usual, and I saw the opportunity to bail. When I got to the trailer where he lived, Chris’s parents politely told me I wasn’t welcome back. My parents had called the cops on them before and they weren’t keen on more trouble. Kathleen and I had thought of this. Her boyfriend, a smooth faced intellectual with glasses named Yoda, was staying at Chris’s and there wasn’t room for two under-aged girls. I thought we could weasel our way back in, beg for amnesty, play on their pity. I believed that the floor of Chris’s trailer was better than being home, better than being watched, being told what to do and who to be.

After walking for what seemed like several hours we came to a gas station. Kathleen was downright whiny at this point and my feet hurt.

“Hey man,” I said walking up to a little truck, “wanna give us a ride?” The man in the truck smiled a slightly disturbing smile.

“Sure, hop in,” he said opening the passenger side door, “where ya headed?”

It seems strange to me now that he didn’t ask us at that point where we belonged. At the time I was grateful he wasn’t interested. He turned toward the directions we gave him and I settled in.

“We are going to California,” Kat spoke up, “her boyfriend is gonna drive us to California to his mom’s.” I nudged her with my elbow in the cramped cab and shook my head. I was worried we would get turned in and I was increasingly uncomfortable with Mister Chatty Driver. I had gotten much savvier about guys and what they wanted from young girls.

“Ya’ll got time to party?” he asked as I motioned to the street where the trailer park sat.

“No, we got people expecting us,” I said wondering if he was actually going to stop the truck at the place I showed him.

When he slowed, I put my hand on the handle just in case I had to roll out. When he came to a complete stop I jumped from the truck and slammed the door shut.

“What are you doing? He was creepy.” I snapped at my friend. I thought she had better radar than that. She just shook her head. We were both really tired and hungry. At Chris’s window we did the secret tap.

“My dad’s really pissed,” Chris said in answer to my question to come in. His stringy hair hung in his freckled face. The first time my dad met him he called Chris a concentration camp victim. Chris was definitely too skinny.

“But where are we gonna sleep?” Kat was shifting uncomfortably under the weight of her back pack.

“There’s an empty trailer across the street. We’ll come and get you in the morning.” With that Chris shut the window and turned off the bedroom light. We stood there in the dark and looked at the dark shape.

Chris was right about it being abandoned but the trailer wasn’t empty. It was full of rolled up carpet, dirt and scraping sounds. We found some lumps that didn’t seem to be moving and curled up next to each other to wait for dawn.

Someone called our names late into the morning and I squinted into the sunlight. The trailer was much worse in the daylight. I jumped up and ran to the opening in the floor we had climbed through.

“I gotta place for you to hide out today while they’re looking for you. The guy next door can keep you hidden until we can head out after dark,” Chris seemed to have the situation in hand. He introduced us to a man with large forearms and a thick black mustache. I don’t remember his name or maybe he preferred to be anonymous seeing as how he was hiding two teenage girls in his house. I called him Popeye.

The trailer reminded me of a seventies movie with brown shaggy carpet, brown furniture and paneled walls. I sat on the couch drinking a soda and watched t.v. most of the day. Occasionally, we peered out of the curtains to see if the cops came. We saw a

patrol drive by but the day was quiet. Popeye slept most of the morning and Kat and I just lounged around on the couch—grateful to be someplace without rodents.

Sometime in the afternoon, Popeye came out of the bathroom and asked us to come and see a surprise he had for us. Lying on the bathroom counter was a small pocket mirror with two white lines. A one hundred dollar bill lay rolled up next to the mirror.

“I’ll give you the hundred if you do the lines. There’s one for each of you.” He was leaning in the door way, completely blocking the exit. I felt my stomach drop. I had dabbled in drugs before but this was way outside my comfort zone.

“Can I have them both?” Kat asked. I wasn’t entirely sure what the powder was but I was relieved she knew and was interested. Watching her place the bill in her nose and inhale the powder was like being transported to a new level of crazy. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be in on the ride. Within thirty minutes, Kat was jumping on the couch and singing. She made her way to the back bedroom with Popeye and I pretended to watch another sitcom. The texture of that place is very real to me, in the way a smell lives in the shape of your memory, winding itself around the reality until they become one and the same. The rough couch, the thick carpet and small living room. Pieces of the day missing as they fall into the textures of paneling. This is a time I am grateful for the grooves.

Chris came to collect us as he said he would. We couldn’t drive the car, he said. It wasn’t going to make it. The boys’ brilliant idea was to hitchhike. Kat and I dreamed of hitching along the freeway. The dream was so real to me I began to think it was a story that needed telling. I wrote the first chapter when we took breaks on the side of the

road. I envisioned our grand adventure with humorous interludes and interesting epiphanies.

We had to walk several miles to get to the freeway. We found ourselves talking animatedly about what would happen in California. Chris and Yoda were seventeen. They could work jobs and Kat and I could go to school. We loved each other. We would make it.

As we came to a major four lane highway, everyone sat on a gravel turn off to rest. The four of us slumped against our back packs and swatted the mosquitoes away. I had borrowed some very short shorts from Kat and a tank top that had a snap at the crotch to keep it tucked in. Every inch of my flesh, it felt, was exposed to the night air and the predators waiting to feast on my blood. Kat started crying and Yoda reassured her in the dark. Chris was laying flat on the ground. He didn't have a back pack now that I think about it. Maybe he never intended to go very far with us at all. Yoda managed to sandwich himself between my friend and I and spent the remainder of the dark hours roaming our bodies with his hands.

When Kat and I woke up the guys were gone. We were lying in the middle of a gravel road, whose entrance wasn't entirely visible from the highway. After deliberating we decided to make our way to a guy's apartment she knew who could score us some acid. We began walking along the highway or Farm Road 249 as it was officially called, not saying much and scratching all over. A man pulled over, in another small truck, and asked if we needed a ride. He asked a lot of questions and seemed so authorial in his white shirt and tie. I flipped the handle of his briefcase back and forth as he chatted with us about what we were doing on the highway. I'm sure I invented what sounded a

plausible explanation because he dropped us at a Kroger grocery store before heading to what was probably a pressing day at work.

The itching had escalated, causing us to writhe about in strange positions attempting to get at the bites along our spines. Kroger held the answer—hydrocortizone. Remembering this episode I wonder to myself what happened to the $100 bill that Kat was supposed to have. I don't know what became of it. As a result of us not having it, we decided the best method of getting our needed relief was to steal it. Talking outside for several minutes we came to the conclusion that she would walk behind me and put the cream in the outer pocket of my back pack, slightly unscrewed so as to appear opened, and we could pretend it was there all the time. We wandered the aisles picking things up and talking. An employee began following us. I'm sure we were quite a sight. We were filthy from the dusty gravel road. We hadn't showered or even brushed our teeth and neither Kat nor I remembered a comb of any sort. The woman followed us.

"Kat, they're onto us," I muttered, "put it back."

"Ugh," she said placing the tube of relief under another object.

"What are you girls doing?" the woman's voice asked behind us.

"Just looking," Kat replied.

"What's this?" she asked pulling the tube out from its hiding place.

"Don't know."

We didn't know what else to do but run. The woman screamed behind us to never return. We were laughing from the adrenaline as we cut through an opening in a chain link fence that led into the apartment complex.

It was so hot we had removed our shoes—our sandals swinging from our fingers as our bare feet negotiated the hot pavement. Summer in Houston, Texas is not the most pleasant time to decide to hitchhike. We were hot and tired and hungry. Kat guided us to an apartment complex and straight to the pool. We sat near the edge with our feet cooling in the tepid water. The water soothed the sores on our feet and I felt unencumbered. The plan was to wait until Kat's friend woke up and we would get him to sell us some acid, possibly on some sort of credit scale, possibly for a favor. While sitting at the edge of the pool working on our plan we saw two men peeking out of blinds in a window across from us. They were waving to us and smiling and looked friendly so we met them at their front door. Two slobberishly drunk Hispanic men invited us to come into the apartment. We called them Cheech and Chong. Cheech excused himself pretty soon after we arrived, they had been up all night drinking after all, so we were left with his companion. We sat by Chong on the couch and cajoled him for food, cigarettes and money.

"Whatcha need?" he slurred, handing Kat his wallet.

"We need to get some smokes," she said handing it back. We needed him to come to the store to buy the cigarettes and alcohol which he was only happy to oblige. Back at the apartment she headed to the bedroom with him while I stayed in the living room to watch t.v.

"He was all over me," she said when she came out, "I let him feel me up but he passed out so we have the whole day. Wanna order pizza?" Kat's nonchalance about her body fascinated me. I couldn't do what she did, lying there passive while a boy (or a man) just took what he wanted. I wanted to be aggressive, in control. When Chong

woke up we had finished half of the Domino's order and were negotiating the sale of a hit of acid with Kat's hook up. Chong wasn't at all upset. In fact, he tried to convince the dealer that we needed more than one hit as that wouldn't divide equally between three people. We finally agreed that Kat would take half, I would have a quarter and Chong would get a whole one because it was his money. Wait, that math is wonky. Maybe Kat had ¾ of a hit and I had a ¼ and Chong had a whole one. That makes more sense.

Acid trips weren't new to me. They were my favorite—the crowning achievement in drug production in my opinion. I had read Timothy Leary's *The Politics of Ecstasy*. I knew about altered states of higher thinking. Trips worked well as an escape from the bland reality of our surroundings to a more electric one. My imagination could float away into a very real feeling hologram. One minute I could be a mermaid swimming in a bathtub, the next minute I could fly and twirl as I jumped on a bed. I felt we were finally headed to the apex of our escape. Not only had we thrown ourselves out of our homes we were being propelled into a new consciousness. Unfortunately, within just an hour of the commencement of that journey Kat got a call from her sister (she had called at an arranged time to let her sister know she was ok) that the cops were coming. We had been discovered.

Chong was in the bathroom when we bolted. We dropped our back packs in some bushes and began running. My run was frantic—full of adrenaline and fear—as we haphazardly crossed 249 in the growing dusk. Another apartment lay in the path of escape, one where we could use a phone. Kat dialed Chong's number.

"Kat! What the hell? The cops are here!" came his confused voice. We hung up the phone and thanked the mother who was standing with her hands on her son's

shoulder. The son would not be coming with us. He was staying put and we were leaving. That mother had her reasons for not keeping us until she could alert the authorities. Oddly enough one word comes to mind when I think of that place, Sunny. A brighter place than any on that trip. I think perhaps I knew under the thick cloud of LSD that what I was doing was selfish and her hands on those shoulders holding her son in place, a contrast, was an act of love.

Standing in the street with no belongings and nowhere to go, the acid kicked in full force. What happened in the ensuing hours is very clear and yet elusive. I remember individual blades of grass and feeling them prickling each hair on my arms as I lay in someone's yard. The smell of summer is the smell of grass through the hallucination of a magical kingdom. It's possible we were seen by an owner of one of the houses on our trek but in my mind we were the only human beings that existed. We were isolated against the world of driving cars, falling in love and making babies. We held each other up; we chased each other and laughed when we fell down. Wandering through the streets in the dark seemed like the most natural and unending activity that had ever crossed our minds until we were beckoned from above.

Male voices calling out to us, "Hey girls," "Come on back and party with us," "What are you doin out here alone?" They called from a balcony behind a fence and we responded to the enticement of the hot tub. We made our way up the wooden deck surrounding a small circular swimming pool to the picnic table and hot tub. Full of frat boys drinking beer and cajoling each other. Sounds of boy talk, dares, jokes. Kat and I the only girls. Warm water, warm friendly voices.

“So, what brings you to our humble abode?” one said grandly gesturing with his beer can.

“Shut it, they are just here to hang out before moving on.” A bulky figure sat in the corner of the hot tub with his arms stretched out along the edges of the tub, “I’m John,” he said.

One of the boys flew. From the railing diving off into the pool below.

“I wanna do that,” I piped up. Free falling into black air, oh yeah baby, what a trip. Negotiating the railing , unsteady, a hand in the small of my back. From my perch all I could see were the stars, every one that was visible under the heavy light pollution of the city. I lifted my arms and spread them out like wings as I titled forward toward the water below. The rush was much too fast. I could have replayed it over and over. The wind along the sides of my body, the abrupt cradle as my chest hit the surface and the way my figure sank toward the bottom, only five feet down), to settle like silt on the smooth fiberglass. When my head came up I shouted in exultation.

“Kat, you gotta try this!”

She had taken more of the drug than I had, she had had a beer and smoked a little weed. Her feet and hands were shaking so frightfully she couldn’t get her balance on the railing. When I got to the top of the stairs another guy was on the railing with her, holding her hand and trying to help her get her balance. Before I could shout a warning another guy had come up behind and pushed them both hard. It seemed like a long time, sitting on the edge of the hot tub, waiting to hear my friend’s voice. Instead of her shout like mine, I heard a male voice in panic, “She’s not moving!”

Commotion. Voices blended together in panic.

“No cops, this isn’t my house, man.”

“Oh shit, I’m gonna get fired.” Another was yipping like a frightened wolf pup at a threat. John, the imposing figure, mentioned as he made his way down the stairs that he was a lifeguard. It was him I followed, floating toward and down the stairs in a fluid slow motion. I felt as if everything was happening in a tape reel and the speed had been deliberately slowed so I could catch every breath. From the top of the stairs I could see the shadow of her body with her hair floating out from behind her head in the center of the circle. Even when the boys dragged her body from the pool I stared at the shadow. Focusing on it as I came down the stairs.

“Anybody have a cigarette?” I asked with a shaky voice. I was suddenly freezing cold, shaking uncontrollably but trying to maintain an appearance of calm. The boys pulled her from the water flopping her out onto the wooden surface of the deck. Kat lay face up and John had his head on her chest, checking for a heartbeat, before he started compressions. I just stood there, wishing for the warmth of fire in my fingers, waiting for someone to do something.

“The ambulance will be here in a few minutes,” came a breathless boy who had run to the convenient store to call.

“Whad you do that for?” said another.

“She’s breathing,” came John’s deep voice. He was the oldest, the most in control and he rolled Kat to her side as she began to cough and spit the pool water onto the deck.

“What happened?” she slurred, her head lobbing from side to side as though her neck bones had been replaced by silly putty. Still standing in the same spot I noted the

sound of the sirens in the distance and one of the boys who had come up beside me placed a lit cigarette in my hand.

I didn't speak as the EMT's placed the neck brace on my friend. They had laid her down and poked her and decided in case of neck fracture they would restrain her. When they clasped the orange foam around her neck she began to scream hoarsely, arch her back and kick her feet. I watched, disconnected from my body, disconnected from the universe and the trip and the run. The EMT's asked me questions which I answered dismissing them.

"We need to know what she's on. What did she take? You won't get in trouble." I wasn't withholding out of fear. I couldn't hear my voice. I couldn't make it be heard. Disembodied I floated through the back yard and into the garage to follow the stretcher. John met me in the garage with his hand stretched out.

"Get something to eat," he said as he pressed some dollar bills into my hand, "and for goodness sakes, go home." His touch brought me out of my reverie and I finally felt myself connect to the earth, to the cold hard concrete of the garage floor—my weight no longer defying gravity I sank back to the ground.

I nodded in agreement and turned to get into the front seat of the cab of the ambulance.

When we arrived to the hospital I headed to the vending machines to follow John's instructions to get some food. Nothing looked edible. I could see that there were packages in the machines but I couldn't discern what was food. I went and sat in the waiting area hoping to see a smoker. I had five dollars and the clothes I was wearing. I needed a cigarette. I needed it. So bad. I paced the waiting room. I went to the pay

phone and called home. My mom answered the phone and said dad was on his way. I looked at the vending machine again trying to decide what to eat. I went back to the room and crawled on the floor. I hadn't brushed my hair in two days. My long blond hair formed dark, tangled clumps around my head. I was still wearing the outfit I had borrowed from Kat but the snaps from the top were hanging out of the back of my very short shorts. I also did not have shoes on. After trying to sit, agitated in the stuffed vinyl chairs of the waiting room, I went outside to try to find a cigarette butt in the ashtray that I could smoke. There wasn't anyone around and while I didn't have the sense to be embarrassed by my behavior I did wonder what I looked like. I carefully and gingerly pushed the ash and gravel around in the tray looking for something that would calm my nerves.

It was at this moment that my father showed up with Kat's mom. He looked at me as he held Kat's mom's arm and they passed into the doors without a word. As I came inside, I saw Kat's mom dropping her keys, crying, shaking. My dad was cool. He sat in a chair; his face stoic. They called Kat's mom back to the exam room and I went and sat next to my dad. I didn't know what to say. He didn't either. He could probably tell I was high as a kite and I didn't really want to explain. In fact, I think he was just weary. He had been out all night looking for me the night before. He had a job to go to. Now it was three a.m. and he was sitting in a hospital waiting room trying to figure out if this young woman with matted hair and wild eyes was his daughter.

Dad and I didn't speak and I finally turned my attention to the plant in the corner. It was good for conversation. When we got home, I tried to go to my room and go to sleep but the darkness was suffocating. I had my own room and I lay in bed and tried to

keep the acid visions from closing in on me. Things started to get scary and I finally went and tapped my mom on the shoulder.

“Mom, can you wake up?”

“hummffff, are you okay?” she muttered into her pillow.

“I’m scared. Things are kind of scary in my head.”

“Ok,” she said, “let’s go in the kitchen.”

We went into the kitchen and I sat on the counter while she prepared something for me to eat.

“Do you like this drug?” she asked. Perhaps, the middle of the night, my vulnerability and the quiet made it easier for her to be direct.

“It’s fun.” I didn’t know how to describe the swirling color and light that constituted the world behind my eyes. I knew things weren’t real but they seemed more real at the same time. I remember the viscosity of it twenty years later. Yes, indeed, I liked LSD.

We talked for a long time, moving to the couch in the living room. I don’t remember all of the things we discussed but she made me feel safe, loved. I know at one point I committed to not doing drugs anymore. I said I wanted to be good and to take better care of myself but I didn’t really mean it. However, the image of my mother in her night robe, sacrificing sleep to keep me company through the rest of my trip, has stayed with me. She did not approve of what I was doing, nor did she fully understand the consequences of what I was feeling. But she stayed. She sat with me through the long night until I felt safe enough to go to bed.

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The kids fight over who will go with me. Riding their bikes alongside me while I run seems especially attractive. We decide Ayla is next in the rotation since Jared's tire is flat. It is an impeccably clear spring day. I am nervous, as usual, because the route is so far (16 miles) and I have my doubts. Dave gives me a hug and he says, "You can do this," into my ear. We are outfitted with our energy packs and our water bottles and music.

I have found a trail system that winds its way through downtown Fort Worth—forty miles of trail in fact. I plotted out the route, printed the map and feel ready to begin. The trail head where we park is in an industrial district and I have a twinge of nervousness because we are isolated. However, once we are on the trail we see families out walking dogs and people down by the river with fishing poles. Two horseback riders pass us, complete with ten-gallon hats. Into the second mile, Ayla marvels at a building that has been built along the side of the embankment across the Trinity River from where we are. The windows are blue and the building is very modern. In fact, Ayla marvels at everything. She points out squirrels, birds and people. She notices the lights above an embankment and guesses a baseball stadium. She says repeatedly, "This is fun!"

Ayla rides ahead for a while, looking back occasionally to make sure she can still see me. She stops and turns around.

"Mom, Mom!" She is waving her arms and pointing at the water. When I get closer to her, she exclaims, "I saw an alligator. It came up and splashed in the water." I

smile and nod at her and humor her imagination. I suspect a turtle but you never can tell.

I take many breaks in the first six miles. I am taking it gently, easily, conserving my strength. Ayla rides ahead and looks for the mile markers that are embedded in the concrete path. We pass through a park that is teeming with life and sound. People are picnicking along the banks of the river, pushing their children in swings and playing basketball. We move through them silently mostly unnoticed. Ayla is watching and so am I. The roller blader. The family with five children under five years old. We notice and move on. Anonymous.

At the fifth mile, we pass a man sitting on a bench. He has a duffel bag standing upright next to him and a backpack lying on the bench. He is sitting with a book in his hand reading intently. The cover indicates a crime novel and he has only just started the book. I wonder if he is homeless. If he is, a bench in a park with a book sounds pretty nice.

At mile six, Ayla is getting tired. She is trying not to complain because I have already briefed her on the power of negative thought. We will go to eight miles and turn around to go back the way we came. However, I don't know how far it is. The first few miles seem so fast. They seem effortless. Now we are constantly slowing. There is shade as we continue with the river on the north and a rail yard on the south. We can hear the sounds of trains as they brake and squeal. Ayla maintains her curiosity. She spots flowers and dogs and other children on bikes. My legs do not hurt at eight miles and I am encouraged. Ayla has no experience and yet she rides ahead of me, turning to smile, to verify I am still behind her.

I give her my ipod as we turn to head back toward the car. Seven more miles, six more miles. We count them down. We pass a man on a bridge who yells, “Mom, get a bike!” I am perturbed by his assumption that my running is somehow beneath biking, or that maybe I am running because I don’t have a bike. I yell back, “I can’t run a marathon on a bike.”

When we get back to the man on the bench, it has been two hours. The man is still seated, in the same position, with the book on the same (or nearly the same) page. I am shocked by the image of the scruffy man frozen in time on the bench. The staying power of a person to maintain the same position, the same activity for so long seems unnatural to me. Then I realize that that is what I’ve been doing for ten miles. I have been maintaining the same position and the same activity. An often quoted saying attributed to Einstein is that: Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. But isn’t that what I’m doing? Isn’t that what practice is? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting change? When I ran six months ago, I could hardly breathe after two miles. My legs screamed in pain, my heart pounded. Now, at eleven miles I’m only just now feeling the weakness in my knees and the weariness in my quads and hamstrings.

I am approaching thirteen miles when I begin to panic. I begin to breathe shallow rapid breaths. I begin to freeze up. I have never run more than thirteen. My legs are tired. The adrenaline is wearing off. We are nearing the park that, even at dusk, is full of people. I am having trouble focusing and willing my feet to move—one in front of the other. As I try to get my breath under control, I see Ayla ahead, with one foot on the ground and one arm in the air.

“It’s here,” she yells. She has found the next mile marker. Her smile draws me to her and I am overcome with an image of my parents and siblings at the finish line of the marathon. I imagine my sister, Rachel, running alongside me. I can see my mom and dad yelling my name and urging me toward the finish line. The image causes my torso to buckle. I am overwhelmed with emotion, overwhelmed to be loved in such a way. In the past, I have tried escape this love, this responsibility to other people. I realize that the love is the reason to run.

In his book, *Born to Run*, Christopher McDougall writes, “there [is] some kind of connection between the capacity to love and the capacity to love *running*” (98). He examines different runners in the book and their motivations for the runs. He goes on to explain, “Both depended on loosening your grip on your own desires, putting aside what you wanted and appreciating what you go, being patient and forgiving and undemanding” (98). In that moment, running toward my daughter’s out stretched hand I know that I am learning to have a larger capacity to love. Learning to love running has brought with it a lesson in loving. The space in my lungs around my heart allows me to feel so deeply and powerfully that I am stunned.

With renewed strength I fill my chest with air. I breathe deeply and evenly and calm my mind. I push away any thoughts of failure. I push away any doubts. If so many people believe in me, it must be possible.

My parents made many attempts to save me from myself. They took me to therapists; they enrolled me in programs. One event escalated my need for help. A couple of boys in the neighborhood invited me to join them one day to get drunk and I accepted. After the first shot, I fell off the bar stool in the den and don't remember much until Garrett was splashing water on my face telling me I had to go home before his dad arrived. When I appeared on the front doorstep of my house, completely sloshed my mother realized something had to be done.

"Why did you get drunk?" she asked after I had slept of the effects of about a fifth of Jack Daniels.

"Because I thought it would be fun," was my dejected reply.

"I don't know what we're going to do but we're going to do something," she said, mostly to herself. That something was a treatment program at the Depelchin Children's Center. I consented to accompany my parents there because I wanted somewhere to go. Anywhere but where I was.

"Have you ever tried to commit suicide?" the nurse asked, ticking off questions on the admit survey.

"Yes, once," I said. My mother looked at me sharply and held her breath. "I took a whole bottle of aspirin. I went and lay down in my bed. Nothing happened." The nurse made notations on my chart—Suicide Risk. I wasn't all that interested in being an at-risk patient but I told the truth. I had made a suicide attempt but I wasn't suicidal. Consciously I knew I didn't really want to die. I just felt like I was somewhere in

between. I knew I wasn't a nice person to be around. I was admitted to the in-patient program in December of 1991, right before the Christmas holidays.

My roommate, what I can remember of her, was unremarkable. She slept quietly, did not engage me in conversation and generally kept to herself. She left shortly after I arrived and I was able to enjoy a room to myself. I had socks to wear but no shoes; I had some comfortable pants with no drawstring and a t-shirt to wear. My first week, I was on Suicide Watch. I had no objects even remotely resembling a suicide device. Everything around me felt very white and soft. My room was mono-chromatic with white linens and tile. It was peaceful and quiet. I was left to myself (something that never happened at home) and I found consolation in that. At night, I would sit in the bathroom with the light on so I could write in my journal. The night nurse would come to check on me and assume I was using the bathroom for what it was intended. I wrote pages and pages and pages.

During the day we did some group therapy, some individual therapy and they made me take all kinds of personality tests. After one test the doctor pronounced that I had a strong nurturing instinct. I had a great many mothering qualities. I scoffed at him. Didn't he know how selfish I was? Didn't he know that I was most certainly not going to be a mother? I wrote them all off after that. None of those yahoos in white lab coats had any idea what they were talking about.

I spent most of my days wandering the common areas, talking to girls and causing random mischief. One day I pretended to cut my wrist with a plastic butter knife. Joking that they couldn't take away all instruments of death. An orderly came and immediately scolded me.

“It isn’t funny.”

“Come on, I was just joking.”

“I know but for some people it is very real.” His blue eyes were focused on me, looking at me directly. I was trying to be coy but it wasn’t going over well. He pulled a chair to the table next to the vending machines and faced me.

“Why do you act like that?” he asked bluntly. The force of his question gave me no room for skirting the issue.

“Because, I don’t know what else to do. I’m not good at anything.”

“I want you to try something. Stay here and write twenty positive things about yourself that don’t have to do with your looks.” He handed me a piece of paper and a pen, stood and left, “I’ll be back in an hour.”

Thinking the exercise would be easy I numbered the margin of the page.

There were now eighteen lines that needed answering and these were my best guesses. 1. I’m nice. (I didn’t actually believe I was nice but it seemed an appropriate place to start)

Specificity had left me and I sat in the chair utterly stumped.

2. I’m smart.

3. I’m pretty.

Wait scratch that. Not allowed. What else is there? I put the eraser in my mouth and frowned.

When the orderly returned I had written only a handful more without specific details, without substance. He spent some time with me then asking questions, willing me to fill in the rest. I don’t remember what those items were how significant they were

or where that paper ended up but I left the table thinking there were twenty things about myself that had value. That exercise gave me more freedom on the unit. I was given my shoes back. It was determined I was not a threat to myself.

Unfortunately, that was the night that Sean arrived.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!" came a scream from outside the plexiglass window that marked the barrier between our unit and the outside world. The scream echoed along the sterile countertop and ran down the halls. It was haunting that sound. Otherworldy.

A head appeared through the arch cut out of the window with black spiky hair, pale skin and dark eyebrows. His face floated, strangely severed from his body, in front of the receptionist's desk periodically sticking his tongue out. His loud voice and bold entrance back to our unit was immediately interesting. I learned that he had been picked up somewhere and returned after running away a first time. The idea took hold of my imagination. We could run away? I decided then and there that Sean was the love of my life.

I followed him around, spent our round table discussions sitting near him and staring. Often we would just sit in the cushioned chairs of the common room and play cards and talk. I didn't think he was nuts. Just different, misunderstood. But, I understood him as no one else could. He wrote me poetry and we talked about vague metaphysical things. When we were separated for Christmas Day—most of us got a pass to go home to see our families—Sean and I came to the conclusion that we could never be separated again.

“I will wait until the day time shift is getting ready to change. You go to your room, gather your things together and wait until I can sneak down the hallway and we’ll pull the alarm at the same time.”

“What if something goes wrong?” I asked. He had obviously not had a fool proof plan the first time or they wouldn’t have brought him back.

“We’ll think of something else. But this will work. I promise.”

This was the big plan. My room was at the end of the secluded hallway away from the nurse’s station, away from the other rooms. If Sean could get down the corridor without being seen the fire alarm would unlock the door and permit our escape. I had a sweat shirt that I tied around my waist, blue jeans and a t-shirt. The only other possession that I felt was immediately necessary was the journal I had written in—a flat taped together notebook with a neon yellow cover. It was covered in my scribbles. Covered in my notes about who I loved and who loved me.

I waited by the door with my heart beating wildly and my feet shifting, antsy to get the show on the road. Sean knew the system. He was by my door and pulling the lever on the wall before I had time to change my mind. When the second the bells began to sound Sean began to shove the door. It didn’t budge at first. The sign says that the door will open in 30 seconds but Sean was jumping at the door handle immediately. His shoulder slammed into the glass window willing it to break or let us through. When it gave way, adrenaline kicked in. We burst out with superhuman speed, scaling a chain link fence and landing on the sidewalk next to a four-lane road.

Sean yelled, “Run into the street, they won’t chase us,” and threw himself into oncoming traffic. I was only slightly more timid, watching for an opening before I

plunged into the street. Behind me I could hear the shouts of the employees of the hospital. Their job was to keep us under lock down, to keep us safer than our parents could. They failed. We began running toward a one-way street going the opposite direction. Two weeks after my arrival at Depelchin, I found myself roaming the streets with my boyfriend without money, food or shelter.

After a couple of days, Sean came down with a terrible virus and wanted to go home. My mother picked me up at Sean's house where I was waiting with his dad. We stood in the driveway and talked for a long time. It is the first time I can remember my mother talking with me like I was an adult. I was fifteen.

The following year I had not made much progress. I dropped out of high school. I constantly disappeared whenever a friend drove by and invited me to go for a ride. I kept my family in a state of limbo, never knowing what I would do next. My parents uprooted our family during that time and moved us out to the suburbs away from the negative influence of my friends. The distance did not stop Chris and Kathleen from coming around.

Just after we moved, my friends and I made a new plan to head out on a big adventure. I had been staying around with some of Yoda's friends when we decided to leave the state. I needed some things to take with me, like clothes and money. In stealth mode, I had my sister bring me a duffel bag full of my things from my room. Our house had a garage apartment and my parents were forever trying to keep us from getting out of the house in the middle of the night.

Erin snuck out and met me on the street with the things I asked for. She hugged me and told me to stay. She was responsible, holding a job, getting good grades. I

always looked up to her and felt that she was really the big sister. She gave me some money and told me to be careful. I had an hour or two to wait for my friends to pick me up so I walked to the grocery store near my house where I had worked as a cashier. I wandered around the neighborhood with my Mountain Dew and candy bars and waited under the street lights. I was sitting across from an apartment complex, which backed up to my backyard, when I saw a man standing under the eaves of one of the buildings. At first, I didn't pay him any attention. I thought perhaps he was just out for a smoke.

I looked at him for a long time before I realized he was looking back at me. His figure loomed larger than life, half in shadow, half under the light. I moved down the street close to my house under another street light. As I sat on the curb, smoking a cigarette, I felt fragile, vulnerable. The man followed me and stood at the corner of one of the buildings, facing me. Under the light, I could see that he was stark naked. A white towel wound around his head but the rest of his lean body shone in the lamp. Mystified, I peered at him, squinted. What in the world was a naked man doing outside in the middle of the night? He answered my question with an obscene gesture. I got the message and began to panic. He seemed to be directing his movement straight at me but I didn't move until he began to move forward. I didn't wait to see if he was coming after me. I jumped up, ran without looking back, all the way up my back stairs and into the garage apartment I shared with my sisters (when I was home). I locked the door tightly behind me and the three of us hid under a bed until we were sure he hadn't followed me. Erin and Juli had been reading scary stories to each other and my frenzied escape heightened every one's fear. We did not sleep well that night.

In the morning, I snuck down stairs to call my friends to come and pick me up. My mom caught me standing at her desk with the phone in my hand. She shut the door to her bedroom and commanded me to sit in the chair. She sat facing me with a proposition.

"We found a place in Arizona that we want to send you," she began.

Arizona? It sounded like an adventure.

"You would be hiking every day and you would be in the National Forest there. It's a wilderness camp."

My mom had her argument well prepared but, to be honest, it wasn't really a difficult decision. I loved to camp. I loved to be alone in nature. I thought this would be an excellent compromise. I would be out of the house and safe so my parents could rest and I got to do something I thought sounded great.

I spent forty-two days at Anasazi. I hiked several miles every day except Sunday. I met some incredible people. I loved it. I had many opportunities to discover my own strength. Once as we were climbing a difficult hill, my abdomen began to throb. When I had arrived at the camp, I was given antibiotics before I was allowed on the trail due to a bladder infection. I knew that it had returned when I had trouble moving without pain. I could see the crest of the plateau above me. I could hear the voices of my group as they talked amongst the trees. I sat with my back against a tree breathing deeply and trying to overcome the painful stabs in my belly. I knew that I had to walk, put one foot in front of the other, and when I had rested I did. I got up; I continued walking; I did a hard thing. The accumulation of hard things on the trail gave me confidence—allowed me to

see myself as more than my body and as wonderful as my body. I found courage in each fiber that grew sinewed under my sun-darkened skin.

When my parents came to pick me up, I became emotional. I was so happy to see them. I wanted to repair our relationship. I wanted to see my little brothers and sisters. This time in our family was a time of hope. We rebuilt some of what we had lost as I had pushed them away and been self-destructive. Our family was peaceful for a few months as I got back into the regularity of living at home and being with other people.

Unfortunately, it didn't last. By the end of tenth grade, I dropped out of school again. I found new friends who knew all the cool places to hang out and get high. I spent the last years under my parent's roof challenging their authority and fighting with them about curfews and school. I barely graduated high school and moved out as quickly as possible.

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On my last training run before I marathon, I have set a goal to go twenty miles. The effort it takes, the preparations and the struggle have started to sink in and every day of the two weeks before the marathon date I wonder if I should just quit. The training run before this one was only seventeen miles and I am so worried that I will not be able to finish that I plan my last long run only one week before race day. This is not advisable. All of the websites say to begin tapering at two weeks before race day but I am determined. I need to see myself through this last distance—to know I can do it.

As I put my shoes on this morning, I smile. I am up later than I planned and the day is already very warm. My anxiety is rumbling under the surface. It speaks the language of despair. You can't do this. You are too slow. You are not a runner. I fight it off. I tell that voice to shut up.

I have decided to run the same route as last week. Since I have to go three miles further than before I have made a slight adjustment but overall it's the same. I drive to the park. I know the trees now. The mulberry tree will be first on my left. The oaks come as I get close to the creek. I know their branches and the sounds of the birds that live among them. I don't think I've ever done one thing enough times to know these things.

As I'm working my way through the first few miles I realize that I have done other things with endurance. I have mothered. I have wifed. I have daughtered. These roles are things of doing. The ways we love each other when we stick to one another become known the way I know these trees. They become intimate, loved. I think of my husband for three miles. He continues to amaze me with his endurance. His stamina in our relationship has far exceeded mine. So many times, I have wanted to quit, to give up, to

move out. It is always me that suggests that we throw in the towel. He is patient. He waits out my anger. He quietly keeps the machine running. I recall a poem I wrote about our marriage.

The Miracle of the Dance

The music begins.
You take my hand and lead me to join
in the wedding march.
We are stiff, not knowing the steps
Not knowing where to place our hands.
I step hard, trying to get it right,
I step on your toes.

The next song.

I must leave the dance floor
There is a baby crying
And I leave you standing there alone.
You offer to come with me
You offer to lead me through the darkened room
I refuse.

(The group dance)

We spin in a circle
We join hands
There are tall, short, young and old
You smile at me as we pass each other
Our hands brush as we circle the others
The music is loud, the beat is fast
Your voice is drowned.

silence

Something is broken
Something has fallen apart.
We all stop and stare.
No one knows what to do
Without a word you walk
To the turntable
You fix it, you make the repair.

I feel strong as I run. By six miles I am pacing myself, pushing my hips forward and bouncing along. I smile as I think of my running just six months ago when I suffered through two miles with my lungs burning and my legs weakening. I have come so far—can run so far. I send a text to Dave at nine miles. *9 miles, 2 hours. Wahoo!* I have achieved my marathon pace for this first leg. And I am smiling, smiling, smiling.

However, by thirteen I am beginning to have to work through Lamaze breathing. My left knee has started to throb. I continue running, taking only thirty second breaks, but I am running much slower now. I call home three times. No one is answering. I call my husband's cell phone, my son's cell phone and then home again. I am desperate for some Gatorade. I can smell the salt on my skin. I smell like a sour bay—an ocean filled with mildew and musty sweat. I am out of pain reliever. I have to take longer walk breaks to calm my panic and breathe deeply.

Finally, someone answers the phone.

"Hey, mom," my son answers.

"Is dad there?"

"Yeah, you sound tired." I am tired and I'm trying to contain my emotion. I don't want him to know how close to the surface my despair is.

"Is Dad busy?"

"Yeah, I'll get him." I can hear the family in the background. I can hear my husband grumble as he comes to the phone. He is in the middle of something.

"Can you bring me some Gatorade?" I plead. The fatigue and pain in my voice are thinly veiled.

“Are you serious? I’m working in the backyard,” he doesn’t say no. He doesn’t refuse exactly but he doesn’t want to do it.

“If you can’t do it, I understand. I just really need some. My knee hurts really bad,” I choke on the last phrase. I can feel my breath get quicker, less controlled. I know that I am close to hyperventilating.

“Well, give me about five or ten minutes to finish up here,” he bends. He can hear the desperation.

“How about thirty? If you come up Keller- Smithfield you’ll see me. I should be there in thirty minutes.” We concede to each other, compromise, give a little, take a little. “You know you want one too,” I say smiling into his silence on the other side of the phone. His voice is comforting.

“K, see you then.”

I know he’ll come and that gives me enough drive to run some more. I have to breathe carefully through each step so the pain will not overwhelm me. I wonder what my face looks like. I can feel the contortions. I can feel that I look…ridiculous. I can’t put all of my weight on my left foot so I am limping as I run. *Just keep running. Just keep running. Run. Run. Run.* I am chanting to myself. I will my feet to move against their will but I’m in control. I make them go. I make the pain. I make the movement.

At fifteen miles I fill my water bottles and go to the bathroom. I try to find a reason to stop, to sit down and rest, but there isn’t one. The Gatorade will come on the next road. I have to keep moving. I am running slowly, barely moving it seems. Time keeps up with me. When I am fast, time moves, the seconds tick away to the beat of my

shoes. When I'm slow, the seconds count with my rhythm. Three minutes is agony, eternity. But I do them. I run three minutes and then I walk. I'm so tired. I'm so tired.

And then I see the truck, the blue of my husband's truck, coming toward me. We chose the truck because it was Superman blue and in this moment I am Lois Lane and he is Clark Kent and he has ripped off his tie and is swooping down to save me. The elation I feel is mingled with emotional fatigue. My brain no longer wants to compel me to go. The truck is relief; it is a break; it is cold red electrolytes. Dave backs into a driveway so I can come right to the window. My four year old, Abigail, sticks her head out of the window and yells, "I love you Mommy. You can do it." My other children in the truck hold up their Slurpees and give me a toast, "You can do it Mommy." "You are doing great." Their sweet faces smile out at me. Jared gives me his hand for a high five. Dave kisses my cheek, "You're doing great. You can do this." He smiles and I don't want them to drive away. I want them to stay with me.

I try to run again and my knee buckles. It will not cooperate. I am pushing seventeen miles. I am pushing my way towards it. I walk. I continue to walk struggling to reconcile the time. Walking is not fast enough.

As I approach an intersection, I see a car accident and for one moment I panic. I look for the truck. *Please God, let my family be safe.* I expect that in this moment when I love them the most. Love them for coming to rescue me and support me, then surely they will be taken away from me. Then I see that it is two cars. Two ambulances. Two fire trucks. Two women are gathering their personal items from one of the vehicles. I say a silent prayer for those in the accident and then turn the corner.

I cannot make my legs do what I want them to do. They are not listening. I walk for a while trying to convince myself that walking is ok. I try to convince myself that I am still going to make it. It has taken me nearly thirty minutes to go a mile and a half. This is not going well. I think of the things I could have done this morning to fix it. I could have gotten ibuprofen. I could have had extra energy drink. It would have been good to slow down in the beginning. I know the pain is from fatigue. I pushed myself too hard at the beginning. I wish I had one more week to train but the marathon is in seven days. This is my last chance to run a long run before I do the race. This is my last chance to prove to myself I can do this.

I am still walking at eighteen. If I had pain reliever I could so keep running but I don't so I can't. I am pouting, crying, smiling. Each step is a new emotion and a new perspective. I run through my options: call Dave to pick me up, call my friend Natalie for ibuprofen, just walk the rest of the way, try to run some more. I want this last one to work. I want to run. I desire it.

At eighteen and a quarter, I crumble. The pain in my knee is a blood curdling scream. I can actually hear the pain pounding in my ears as I try to make it to the path through the park. I have been in the sun for thirty minutes and my skin is hot. I turn toward a bench gingerly stepping and wincing, stepping and wincing. I sit carefully trying not to bend my aching knee and as I ease myself onto the bench I begin to sob. The pain is unbearable. I can barely walk. It's not just the pain in my body; it's the pain in my spirit. Failure has gotten the best of me and eats away at every previous success. I tell myself I can still walk but my body does not respond. I begin to sob as I fall to the bench. This is the wall that I have heard about—the one that exists in your mind—the

one that tells you that you suck and you are already defeated and this pain, the pain that you feel, is evidence of your suckiness. Ms. Perseverance is nowhere to be found on this park bench. So, I just weep into my lap with my feet dangling back and forth.

I sit on the bench for a few minutes rotating my ankles and bending and straightening my legs. I try to decide what to do. I have less than two miles to achieve my goal. Less than two. Surely I can do this. With resolve, I stand and limp to the trail. I begin to run again. It hurts but I keep going.

I continue to run. I continue. I am headed toward nineteen miles. Smiling makes me feel better and I look up and watch the trees wave at me as I pass them. I hear Abigail's voice in my head, "I love you mommy. You can do it." I know then that I will not go home until I have completed the run. I will not go back to my children and tell them I quit. I take short thirty second breaks but I run. I keep running. At nineteen miles I put my arms up over my head and yell. I am gonna do this thing.

I have decided U2 is powerful enough to push me through this, push me over the wall. I know now the wall is in your mind. It builds itself on insecurities, on doubts and worries. It builds itself on pain—the body's signal that something is wrong. I know I have felt the wall before but not like this. I really don't think my knee will finish the mileage.

However, miracles happen—they do—and in the twinkling light coming through the trees I begin to sing. "Like the desert needs rain. Like a town needs a name. I need your love. I need your love." I am singing aloud in the park as I am smiling my way through the pain. "Like a needle needs a vein. Like someone to blame. Like a thought unchained. Like a runaway train. I need your love. I need your love." I have no tears because all the salt and moisture in my body is oozing out of my pores. Like Jared said,

“tears and sweat are the same thing.” And I feel it. I feel the tears dripping from my skin as though squeezed from a rock. I am singing for Dave. I am singing for my family. I need their love and as I sing I run. I keep running past my three minutes and into the final mile. My spine is shivering with delight as endorphins are released in response to the extreme duress I am subjecting my body to. I see a squirrel lying in the path. He is spread out against the concrete and I know he is resting from the heat. He doesn’t know how to push through the pain. But I do. I finish my training run hoping it is enough to finish the race.

I found out I was pregnant just one semester after I left home to go to college. In the final years of high school, I moved in and out of my parent's house several times. When I was nineteen, I finally had a job, a steady boyfriend and a plan. I moved to Arlington, Texas just a four hour drive from my childhood home. I felt in control of my life for the first time. I was on my own. I was doing it.

Unfortunately, it did take long for me to realize that I had no idea how to be on my own. Instead of going to class, I slept in and instead of going to work I would party. By the end of the first semester I was broke and my roommates were ready to kick me out. My efforts to become an adult backfired. For so long I believed that I was so mature, so much smarter than everyone else. Faced with rent and groceries and bank accounts, my fantasy crumbled.

I met Christian in the middle of the destruction. He was a cook at the IHOP where I worked as a waitress. He joked with me and flirted with me as we took on the night shift together. We began spending time together after work and after a while he was calling me his girlfriend. In many ways, I felt sorry for him. He had dropped out of high school and did not read well. He told me stories about being in gangs and how he wished he would have stayed in school so he could have a better life. I found myself in the knight role and told him I would help him study for his GED and help him get on the road to success.

When I showed him the pregnancy test, he was excited. He said he was looking forward to having another child.

"How many children do you have?" I said with sarcasm.

“Nine,” was his reply. My mouth hung open in disbelief.

“You mean, this is baby number ten for you?”

“Yeah, I mean I don’t see most of them. The mothers, see, they won’t let me around.”

“How many mothers are there?”

“Six.”

This news was not what I had expected. I had a baby coming and a man who donated sperm to repopulating the greater DFW metroplex telling me he was excited about this one. It didn’t take long for me to call my mom to come and get me.

She arrived at my apartment and loaded her car with my few belongings. We didn’t talk much. She listened when I felt the need to speak. She allowed me the space to work out my plan. I was almost twenty years old. I needed a good plan. I was going to be a mother.

When we arrived home, I moved back into my old room with my sisters. They accepted me, didn’t treat me like an invader. I was grateful to have them. Years had passed since I felt like I was a part of them—that the family saw me as part of their group. Once after I had run away I came back to the house. I crept through the back yard and stood in the trees, covered in shadow. I watched my family, sitting at the dinner table. Like a silent film, I saw them laughing together, sharing their meal and moving around in a very ordinary way. I watched them for a long time before I slunk back out of the yard. Being embraced after such a long struggle of absence comforted me.

The baby growing inside of me in 1997 made me question everything. I was no long flippant. I no longer felt in control or confident. Yet, I was no in charge of someone else's entire fate. There wasn't anyone to rescue me from motherhood. There was no escape. I had to find a way to rescue us both. I could only live with a few of the options available to me. Despite my humble circumstances, I was still proud. I wanted to do it all myself. My first couple of months I enrolled in school; I tried to be independent. My mom fussed around me but never forced me to any decisions. She drove me to my doctor's appointments, continued to feed my growing body and we settled into a family-like existence.

When I told her I was going to place my baby for adoption, my mom nodded and cried in silence. She accepted the grief and acknowledged how difficult it would be for me. As I began to understand how difficult it would be to separate myself from my own child, a mystery suddenly became clear. My mother had suffered being apart from me. My family missed me when I was gone. My mother had suffered the same sense of loss when I ran away from her that I felt in placing my baby with someone else. Now I was asking her to take on the weight of grief for her first grandchild.

"You are doing the right thing," she encouraged as we walked into the adoptive parent's interview. She squeezed my hand and steadied me. I was very nervous to meet the people who were potential parents for my baby. I was far enough along that I knew she was a girl; I could feel her stir inside me.

When we settled in and were introduced I began to feel more at ease. The mother had the same shoulder length hair cut as my own mom. Both women had blue eyes and a determined square jaw. They hit it off immediately. During the interview, my

mother asked a lot of questions. She drew out qualities she knew I was looking for (and that she was concerned about as well). In the years that I had been so selfishly focused on my own happiness and growth, she was growing stronger too. We carry the same name my mom and I, Miriam. It can mean bitterness and rebellion but it can also mean strong waters. I realized in that interview that the strong water part of myself came from her. We both had developed the strength to change the landscape of the lives around us.

When I went into labor, my mom stayed the night at the hospital with me. She talked me through the contractions.

"When you think you can't take it anymore, it'll be almost over," she said to me as I grunted with pain, "You can do this." Through the whole day and night, she held my hand and told the nurses when I needed anesthesia. She was my coach and my advocate.

After my daughter was born, we held that little girl together. We talked to her. We loved her. We were mothers together. The night before my discharge, I sat in the hospital bed with my daughter lying facing me, propped up on my legs. I wrapped the white blanket with the pink and blue stripes tightly around her. She had rich blue eyes and thick black hair. I talked to her for a long time, running my hand over her head. I told her that families are not always who you are born with. Families are made. I told her that I was grateful that she made me a mother because motherhood was a noble thing. That night I entered womanhood—the kind of womanhood that is accountable to others.

Jeanette and I are keeping time. We have passed the point where we thought we would hit the wall but we are struggling. At the end of our walk time, we both have trouble picking it up again and I am calling time a little sooner than I should for the break. I am talking to her about my family. A car passed us at mile twenty and I thought I heard my name. My sister, brother and dad honked as they passed. It refreshed me to hear their voices cheering me.

When we get closer to the aid station at mile twenty-one, I see a figure on the side of the road stretching. I scream, “Todd,” and run faster toward the tall man that is my little brother. He looks like a frat boy in his plaid shoes, marathon T-shirt and boat shoes. I am so happy to see him I nearly start crying on the spot. I introduce Jeanette as we get some Gatorade and bananas.

“The bananas are so wonderful,” I say as I peel back the thick layers to eat the soft flesh underneath.

“I’m glad you like them,” he smiles, “I cut like a thousand of them last night.” He gives me a side hug and says, “you ready to get going again?”

“Are you coming with us?” I ask wondering how he is going to run in boat shoes.

“Yeah, we couldn’t find you. You were supposed to call us and tell us where you were.”

I take my phone from my pouch and see that I have some missed calls. Oops.

I am ready. Jeanette hangs back. I wonder if she feels I have my brother now and she should run alone.

“You ok?” I call.

“Yeah, I’ll catch up.”

Todd falls into my rhythm. I’m pretty sure he could run circles around me. Our ten year age gap makes a difference. He is also fresher although he hasn’t slept. I am so moved by his willingness to run five miles with me that I can barely keep going.

“How has it been?” he asks making conversation. His movements are easy and he is looking at me instead of the road in front of him.

“It’s been pretty good. I’m surprised but I have felt so good. Jeanette has really helped me stay focused.” She has caught up to us and is running on my right side with Todd taking the left flank.

“Nah, your sister has been a life saver,” she says to him. I feel solidly anchored to this project. It’s only a few more miles. “I wish my family could be here too.”

“Where are they?” Todd asks.

“They had to attend a funeral today. They might make it later,” she says this nonchalantly but I wonder how much she is missing her children. I wonder what my children are doing. They seem so far away. Dave is perfectly capable of making pancakes and keeping tabs on them but I miss them. I wish they were here. I want them to see that I can do hard things. I want them to know that when things are painful that you can push through the pain, that it is temporary. I tell myself that the pain in my knees is temporary. I tell myself I can do hard things.

“Can you believe we have gone twenty-one miles?” Jeanette asks.

Todd responds, “I’m amazed that you are still smiling.”

I am in awe too. We are running along the road watching the traffic pass us. People have started their day. Its eleven a.m. on a Saturday morning. People are running errands. They are taking care of their business and I am running a marathon.

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Two days before the race, Rachel and I decide to go for a walk along the Provo River. It is high for this time of year she says. Severe flooding has plagued the Utah Valley in the past few weeks. The water is high but I don't know the difference. This park with its winding trail against the side of the mountain produces in me a sense of infinite smallness. Up close the park has the appearance of a shady man made oasis along the road. If you step back, however, if you give yourself some distance and perspective you can see how small man's efforts are against the backdrop of the indomitable mountain and swollen river.

The banks of the river slope toward us in a tangle of branches and fallen trees. The water rushes clear and frothy. It is so beautiful that I keep turning my head as I walk. I love the sound of the water as it cascades over rocks and around obstacles. The water does not get held up by small pieces of stone in the way. However, the river is deceptive. Even just last night we watched several news stories of tragic deaths—all children—who have been swept away by the rushing waters. It is on my mind as we walk quickly, breathlessly through the swaying trees and rising canyon walls. I am awed by the magnificence of the Utah terrain.

While this visit has the marathon as its purpose but that is just the pretense to see Rachel and Todd. The marathon is an opportunity to grow closer to them, to be adults together. As they have gotten married, I feel the need to be a part of them. It is

time now as they are starting their families for me to enter their lives and for us to get to know each other.

As we walk I am reminded of a dream I had when Rach and Todd were just toddlers. The dream pops into frame quickly and I have the feeling immediately that it is significant but the details are hazy. The woods in my dream are thicker than the ones around us on the walk. The tall trees are reminiscent of the woods in Little Red Riding Hood. Leaves float in the air with the quality of weightlessness being pulled to earth by gravity. There is a bridge in my dream, a wooden one, with a fairytale curve and an ornate railing. We are there, the twins and I, and we are playing along the banks of what is just a shallow creek. What happens next is convoluted but the image that remains is haunting.

Rachel lies at the bottom of the creek. It is shallow so she shouldn't be drowning but she is. I look around and I have lost Todd. I fear the woods all of a sudden. The quiet is palpable and my body will not move. For some unreasonable reason, I cannot just reach in and grab. She lies just out of reach. I try to grab her or call out to her. How does she not hear me or move? Oddly, as happens in dreamscapes, then I am looking down into the creek from the bridge. I see Rachel clearly in the water below me and I want to jump in and get her out. My panic has risen and I know I am responsible for this terrible turn of events. It is my fault she fell in. It is my fault Todd is lost. It is my fault she might be beyond help. She is not moving but her long blond hair has floated out from behind her and is waving in the swirls of the eddies around her.

I save her in the dream. Before I wake up I find a way around the bridge and the strange feeling of being blocked from getting to her. I get her out of the water and she is

fine. Her little body is wet and limp but she breathes deeply in my arms. She doesn't even choke.

Inexplicably, we are walking together. Rachel is no longer a toddler and we are talking and moving, moving and talking. It's difficult for me to wrap my head around her adultness. My sister has grown into an incredibly beautiful woman. She takes good care of herself. She does service and she has matured far beyond my capability when I was her age. As we move we share stories. The movement loosens the bolts in the brain that have anchored memories in their place. I know things Rachel doesn't know about our family because she was so little. She knows things too different things and the shared movement helps those things to coalesce. We share a great love for art, my sister and I, and it seems we do not run out of things to talk about. After about twenty minutes, I mention that my knees do not hurt as we are walking—they feel fine.

"Do you want to jog a little to try them out?" Rachel asks.

"Yeah, just a bit," I say as I pick up my feet. For the first few steps they feel springy and I have a glimmer of hope that the soreness has passed. But soon I am reminded of their weakness. I stop running.

"Nope, still there," I say as I shake my head, "maybe I should get some braces." Rachel knows where we can get some and we are quiet for a minute.

"It's so frustrating," I explain, "I love running. I love the meditation of it, the beauty of the movement. I hate feeling so limited doing it."

Rachel runs too. She understands what I mean even though she is not running with me.

“It’s like yoga,” I continue, “You center yourself and dig down deep enough until your mind, body and spirit become one. This is what I imagine immortality is like. If your body and spirit cannot be separated you could live forever. That is what I love the most about running.”

Rachel nods her head as she listens and I think she understands the drive I have.

I chuckle, “Of course, you don’t get that without some serious suffering.” She laughs with me as we head to the car. I’m not worried about finishing the marathon. I’m worried that my body will not do what it is supposed to do. I’m afraid I cannot really simulate immortality and that my body, human as it is, will fall apart, break down and not finish.

Rachel is waiting for me at mile twenty three. Todd smiles; he is in on the secret.

“Have you slept?” I ask as she falls into step next to me. She dances back and forth from foot to foot as I slow to get a drink.

“Yeah, I laid down for a bit,” she says, “I’m ready.”

We head down the road together. Our camaraderie grows as they tell me jokes and try to keep my mind off of my exhaustion.

“Do you remember when you made us eat those hot peppers?” They are telling Jeanette a story from when we were kids. Erin and I told the twins to eat some chili peppers that were growing in my Grandmother’s flower beds. They were ornamental so they tasted terrible. We laugh at the story. Jeanette looks haggard but determined. She does not speak but just keeps her eyes forward and nods to show she has heard what is being said. The miles feel short and long at the same time. They grow and shrink each time we walk. When we take walk breaks I catch my breath and I try to talk but my siblings start shushing me, telling me to focus on just moving.

In some ways, their maturity exceeds mine. As they keep me moving I wonder who the older sibling is really. When I was their age, I felt so lost. Dave and I were first married and I lived far away from home. My circumstances were similar. My husband was trying to get his career going and I had enrolled in some college courses. However, compared to my siblings, I had no idea what I wanted from life. At that time, I wasn’t even sure I wanted children. We lived in Maryland and had a nice dog. I worked part time and spent my free time jogging near our apartment. For the first time, I didn’t have someone looking over my shoulder. I didn’t have to be anywhere that I didn’t want to be.

When Dave came home from work we ate dinner together but we didn't have a strong sense of purpose.

It is only now in the marathon that I contemplate how deliberate our family has grown. For all our weaknesses we have managed to create a family, one that we work at together. It hasn't been easy to do but I couldn't do it alone. I know that I am lucky to be married to someone who is willing to work on our family. I know that because I have that support things run smoothly

When I went to purchase my tennis shoes from a local outfitter I met a man named Ed. His wizened face made it difficult to place his age. He was short and lean and wearing very short shorts. He looked serious—a serious runner—and I was a little intimidated by him. He didn't ask many questions just brought out some shoes for me to try on and walk around the store. The process wasn't what I expected. I was waiting for something scientific, something to measure. I thought he would use some kind of equipment that gave him the details of my gait, the pressure of my walk and the height of my arch, all of which would lead him to the perfect shoe that would end the painful shavings of bones scraping against the muscles in my shins.

He spoke with me for a long time asking me questions about my family and my lifestyle. Ed was personable and friendly but I remained in awe of his wiry limbs and knowledgeable answers to my questions. He brought shoe after shoe. I wore the same right shoe the whole time and tried different left shoes to compare them. The process was brilliant. I had a standard of comparison. Each shoe on the left foot was measured by my experience. Rather than assessing some arbitrary scale from a computer he allowed me an hour of trying left shoes and walking circles around the store until I found the one that felt just right. I knew what I was looking for by the end of the visit. When I put the shoe on and said this is the one, he boxed it up. I was struck by the way he let me choose, without pressure, what felt most comfortable and suited the shape and contour of my foot.

At the register I said, “What I’m the most frustrated by is that I do not feel as though I’m dying. And I expect to. What I feel is fatigued when I run and like my muscles can’t keep up with how fast I want to go.”

“Structure comes last,” was his reply, “your aerobic stamina will increase quickly. You will feel like you can run farther than your legs will be willing to carry you. Structure comes last.”

This statement has lived with me—shown itself in the way I approach running. Things I have not understood are just beneath the pool waiting to settle to clarity. When I think of the times I have run, run away, and run to I wonder at how the structure has come last. The things I longed to grasp hold of are being built as I approach middle age. The structures of life come later in life. Running backward makes sense then. Building each structure needed to finish. Discouragement and failure offer beams to gird up that structure, if you know where to put

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Dad and Erin are standing at the mile marker in front of me. I can see them hopping up and down in anticipation of my arrival. Todd has been making me laugh, distracting me, for the last couple of miles. Rachel is steady on the other side, keeping me in rhythm. I know Jeanette is behind me but when I see Dad and Erin I forget that I am in the race. I forget that I am running the marathon. All I can see is my family, in slow motion, calling my name, beckoning me toward them.

Dad falls in next to me and his face is squarely focused on mine. He is running sideways looking at me with a smile that I don't recall seeing before—pride. I know he is happy to see me reach my goal but in this moment I can feel it. I can feel the power of his love and his joy at seeing me accomplish something hard. Watching me finish, running alongside me, Dad is exhilarated. Proving myself seemed, at the beginning, the only reason to spend all the time training. I thought that I was only focused on my own satisfaction. When I see my Dad's face, transformed from an aging fifty-eight year old to a giddy young man, I realize that I feel young too.

In fact, all of a sudden I feel great. The exhaustion that I felt at mile twenty three has waned slightly and as I see their faces I am lifted up out of my slouch. I straighten my back as I head towards the finish line. My clothes have dried somewhat and I don't feel overly drenched from the sweat. Nothing hurts—not my knees or my shins or my back. My body has forgotten the strain as it confronts the elation of spirit I feel as I run with my family. In fact, I am ready to sprint the last mile. I pick up the pace and begin to pound out the steps. I can hear their voices cheering as they fade to the side, moving around to go ahead of me to meet me at the finish.

Erin is there too with her flip-flops in her hands. She is running barefoot and she is laughing. The five of us are headed toward the finish line and Erin looks as though she is flying next to me. We were supposed to run together. Like so many things in our life we had planned to do this as a team but when she got pregnant I had to run alone. She has flown all this way—left her older children and her job, traveled with a newborn baby—to watch me run one mile. Her three month old baby is in the stroller with my mom at the end and she is running with me as though she has run with me for the last twenty six miles.

That's when I realize that she was.

For the last six hours, they were with me. The people in my life who have watched me fall and cheered me to get back up. I flew to Utah to run alone. As we finish together, I realize that all along they were running with me as a family.

-26.2-

I ran the marathon in six hours and seven minutes. The finish line was a giant blow up sign that the runners passed under and received their medal. My mom was there standing to the side waiting for me. When she's excited she does a little dance, and when she saw me she danced toward me. She held me in her arms so tightly I didn't even try to wench away. I rested my chin on her shoulder and closed my eyes. I could feel her shudder as she was overcome with emotion and I joined her as I let go of all of the tension and focus of the race. We stood like that for a long time, as one, just being connected.

My crew stayed close to me watching as I gingerly settled my aching legs into a Jacuzzi of ice water. The euphoria of the finish had me laughing and making jokes and looking around at the faces of my family. The finish line was alive with people and we could hear in the background the awards for the winners. I listened as the voice declared the first place runner and threw my back with a sigh. I didn't care that my name wasn't on their list or that no one knew who I was. The people that really mattered were standing around me smiling and congratulating me.

My dad had to leave to head to the airport. I got a text from him later that said, "Running the last mile with you was a great experience for you dear old dad." The look on his face when I hit mile twenty-five will always be in my memory. His pride, his awe and his warm love envelopes me when I think of it. In that moment we healed a great rift in our relationship. One that I didn't even know was there.

Months later I have run very little. I have not pushed myself or made time away from my family to pound the pavement. I miss it. I miss the exhilaration of adrenaline

and the head space created by the increase of oxygen to my brain but mostly I miss my family. Training became a connecting thread that wove itself through my daily life. The tissue of mileage anchored me to a plan that everyone supported. I may not ever be a fast runner. I may not ever win a race but I know now that I can be a part of a family.