

## Old Moves

(Originally Published in *Sport Literate* 9:1)

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Late in August around 9:30 the sun had finally gone out. Half an hour later it was still ninety degrees and especially humid, so between brief drinks of water I told my wife I was going to take off my shorts and finish the last few miles naked. She laughed a little then as I leaned on a darkened tree, tugging at the wet trunks, working to pull my leg free from the mess of black fabric. Then finally, standing there in the woods—the jumping white light of our headlamps, the breezeless quiet of the grass and leaves, the salt crusting crystal on our skin, and the whole of my body revealed to the moon and plants etc.—she said nothing, and just ran off down the trail.

There were only two people in the woods that night and they were us, so I had little concern for modesty, or fear of turning a corner and becoming sudden-surprise-sex-offender. We'd been there an hour already, running the sweaty trails as the long day was drawn back lazy behind the horizon. Now under the black lattice of branches the trails had become primordially dark; everything in the forest, heavy with heat and moisture, seemed at rest.

Except us.

And because we moved so quick and quiet through the trees and over the pools of silent water, around nearly every turn we were met with the waiting lighted eyes of deer—expectant of so many things except the pale hurrying limbs of two people running by. They looked, the eyes, with near interest and then turned away. Because we were come and gone so quickly—disappeared so completely—we may as well never have existed.

There were the other things too. There were the hundreds of curious specks of light alternately shining and dimming along the trail. When I stopped running and, on my hands and knees, looked to see what they were, they darted out of the way, because what they were were all the nebulous mirrored eyes of so many hungry spiders reflecting in the electric light of my lamp. There was the owl that flew across our path, and the ubiquitous moan of toads around the marshy areas, and the long, sturdy silence as we ran higher up into the hills. And except for the shoes to protect my soft feet and the light to direct my dull eyes, there *I* was, naked for it.

Because it was hot, and clothes were a burden, and because it felt good to feel the air trace across the fairest parts of me, it was too easy to pretend myself something feral—to conjure the thought that there was really nothing to distinguish me from the dirt and heat and darkness that grew around us.

*I was a thing from the earth, and wherever I moved, I was home.*

And because I wanted this—wanted to belong, wanted to disappear, wanted for once to not blindly ruin every delicate thing sewn across my path—I held onto the idea, let my sweat stink with it.

But it was not the nakedness that had done this. I had been naked before. There was nothing illuminating or profound or subversive about naked. Naked was maybe the easiest thing to be. Nature expected nakedness.

But *running*.

For a minute I lost her. She was faster than me, and in the dark it was hard to tell the trail we'd just come down from the trail we were supposed to take forward. I had to stop, turning out my light that I might better see hers cutting between the squat columns of black wood.

Immediately my skin became host to all variety of tiny winged animals. The mayflies and mosquitos and moths who were either instinctively drawn to my humid stench or, like me, were too blind in the dark to see where they were going. I stood for a minute while the bugs had their way—slipping their fragile mouth parts beneath my outer layers, vacuuming the salt fluids from behind my ears, burrowing together below my waist for sex and rest and the protection of an unmoving, oblivious body.

A *body*. There were so many fine things to do with a body—laying it in the sun, making it naked with other bodies, putting it in cars with windows down and hurling it across minimum-maintenance roads in perfect humming spring afternoons. But *this* thing, running, was perhaps the most pure, the most immediate, the most uncomplicated way to be alive that we had access to. It was also, happily, a rather perfect offense against sleep and death and the general numbness that so much of the rest of the world ran on.

“Hey!,” she yelled to me from somewhere above, “Go left!” So I did, bounding along the incline, rising closer to her with every stretch of my legs. And with one move I left the static of hovering insects behind me; their short lives going ahead as planned—my fleeting interruption having proved as inconsequential to them as the breeze.

In nature, swiftness was necessity. But in a world made of cars and Internet and drone-fired warheads, physical speed had become, at best, an obsolete advantage. Now, technological speed chose the heroes, made the trades, won the wars. For most of us in the First World, modern life barely required anything more strenuous than getting out of a chair, let alone moving anywhere with anything resembling deliberate haste.

Once we were back together we came fast down a hill, my wife in front and me behind. Every time she jumped to avoid some snag in the trail she shrieked and shouted back to me:

“Watch it!,” which I did. But as we closed in on the end of the trail we were moving too fast. Now our eyes could hardly keep up with our headlamps. Now the muscle and tissue and rubber bands in our legs were less propelling us forward and were only, more desperately, holding us up.

Running required moving your feet quickly across the ground, but curiously, most of the experience was spent in the air, between strides, touching nothing. It was a small taste of that vestigial dream of flying, the fantasy of a total, graceful kind of freedom. There were other ways to feel untouched by the world—skydiving, bungee jumping, drugs—but they were all just various states of falling, of letting go. Running was different. Running was the opposite of letting go. Things like yoga and gardening and cold rooftop beers were good ways to remember how to be slow and deliberate in the world, but running does the other thing. When you're tearing down a steep path in the woods in the dark with so many rocks and roots waiting to trip and pull you down, and you're bouncing and volleying back and forth across the narrow lane, every action becomes automatic, without thought, *indeliberate*. And soon it becomes very difficult to think of yourself as anything nobler or more complex than a hot and breathing body of living meat simply trying not to break a leg. Going fast helps all of this, facilitates these responses, uncovers the old reflexes.

But then she fell. Unlike me she had no one to follow, no one to tell her to watch it, so when the trail buckled before a washout, she tripped. And all I saw was the lamp on her head drop and roll and then stop, shinning up beyond the trees until it dissolved into the night and clouds and indiscriminate stars above us. And back somewhere on the ground there was my wife, groaning “Shiiit.”

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Of course she was fine. She was always fine. Too fit and strong to ever be otherwise. She wiped the blood from her knee onto her hand and then onto her shorts and kept going. When our trail ended at a patch of concrete where the car was parked she was the first one there.

"How long are you going to stay like that?" she asked, nodding to my pale and sweaty penis when I finally arrived.

The city of Bellevue, Nebraska calls the woods we had come through Swanson Park. It is 350 acres of forest and grass, stretched across uncommonly hilly terrain amidst the somber corn fields surrounding. A few decades earlier, the place had a different name: The Sarpy County Landfill. For thirty years the land was home to nothing more than an enormous collection of trash—domestic waste of all types, sizes, and odors. In 1989 the guys in charge of the place deemed the landfill complete, covered the whole of it with fifteen feet of soil, strung barbed-wire fencing around the perimeter, and left it alone.

Because the trash will remain, for generations, only a few shovelfulls below the surface, no foundations can be poured here, no infrastructures built, no foods planted, no animals grazed. Today the only hint that the hills and valleys of the forest are actually variously-sized mountains of garbage is the occasional black shopping bag that pokes through the bluestem, or the glinting bits of shattered glass sporadically decorating the soil, or the purposeless white crags of hard plastic puncturing the dirt trails—stubborn things all of them, refusing the melt of entropy and decomposition for dozens of years already and hundreds of years yet to come.

We were breathing hard in the parking lot and didn't really have much to say, so we carried the quiet of the trees with us. How quickly the dark had disappeared though. Looking over my shoulder, the forest was a featureless hue, containing all the blackness and silence that

had seemed so complete from inside. I turned around though and there were the tall unblinking lights of the street, and beyond that the homes and stores and cars of all the other people, still awake, right where we had left them.

My wife can remember the years joining her dad as he directly disposed of their family's old couches, diseased toasters, and unforgivably-ugly carpeting at the landfill. Now that her wasteland had become our playground those days could only appear especially distant. This was how the world was made. First the grass, then the small woody shrubs, then the trees, and in short order there were the birds, and deers, and foxes, and whatever else wanted to find itself at home there. It was only fair then that we should do the same. I owned a car and money enough for gas to get us there, so we were eligible, we belonged: trash-loving animals running through a trash-loving forest.

I finally put my shorts on in the stale heat of the car then turned the engine. The radio had been left on very loud and, reflexively, I turned it down.

The best thing about running was that it was pointless. It was one of those rare perfect gestures—the totally unnecessary achievement. Granted, all that exercise did help make for a well-oiled heart and lungs, but this was only an ancillary reward; the real prize was in all that energy burned, all that time wasted, all that pain spent with absolutely nothing at the end to show for it. Most sports have a scoreboard, mountain climbers have their peaks, quilters have their quilts complete, but running's most lasting awards were things completely intangible. It is a difficult but completely fruitless pursuit, which is why it also happens to be such a potent act of resistance to the psychotic productivity and gluttonous pleasures keeping this particular society afloat.

Plus (did I say this already?) it hurts. Your lungs get to feeling like stretched and burstable sails, and weird corners of your legs or groin or toes that have never before enjoyed so much as a twinge are suddenly pissed and throbbing. And if you let it hurt bad enough, and for long enough, it all eventually bleeds into a kind of general heat and awokeness, and then it becomes quite reasonable to imagine yourself not yourself, but instead the dumb and healthy animal you once might have been.

Of course, this is not generally the tone of slogans shouted at marathon finish lines. As with all activities codified enough to sustain a sub-culture, certain details of the dream inevitably begin to get a bit ridiculous. And because in America everything—even this *great* thing—was eligible to become another opportunity to buy something, there is an entire industry devoted to the rapid placement of one foot in front of the other. There are the special shoes and socks of course, but every other conceivable article of clothing too has been specially tailored: running gloves, running hats, running sunglasses, running skirts, running utility belts carrying specially-designed running gels, powders, and liquids, all manufactured to the end of moving further faster. There are the magazines too—*Runner's World*, *Running Times*, *Trail Runner*, *Ultra Running*, *Women's Running*—publications still finding words to print (some after four decades of existence) about what is ostensibly one of the most basic functions of the human body.

My wife didn't start running until a few years after we were married. Actually, if she had been a “runner” when I met her we may never have even dated. I was only eighteen then, and having only recently escaped the caste system of high school I still harbored an old aversion whenever I met a person who flaunted their athleticism. I was sure a person had to be either a narcissist or simply dim-witted to want to spend so much time at the gym, to wear sweat-wicking

fabrics at every social occasion, to advertise the number of kilometers they once ran on the back of their Subaru, to be swayed by the testicle rhetoric of Nike.

She wasn't like that though. We were eighteen and nineteen, scrawny and greasy-headed. Her idea of a nice evening involved canned beer and clove cigarettes shared in the mist of a long hot shower. I liked Woody Allen movies and didn't even own a pair of shorts. No one could ever mistake us for athletes, and for that we were glad. We were in love. Too interesting for exercise.

Somewhere it had been decided that every experience could be turned into another opportunity to measure our relative success or failure. Karl Marx and Jesus reminded us that money is a particularly unbecoming way of establishing a person's worth, so other metrics had to be invented to determine who among us was best. Eventually, every possible thing—every trait and enterprise—was made ripe to beget new species of ambition, and in a country as sedentary as America, the condition of our bodies became an obvious opportunity for selecting winners and losers.

I didn't want to play this game. Down that road lay weariness. Even at eighteen, when there were so many things I could not know about the future, there was still that one certainty we all shared: no matter how much we'd won, our bodies will inevitably fail us.

And the real bummer was this, before our meat and bones really begin to fall apart completely, there would be so many other small failures to endure. When Dr. Mehmet Oz, a T.V. physician, was asked to explain, on Oprah Winfrey's program, how one might recognize the passing of an ideal turd if one was ever lucky enough to experience it, he said: "You want to hear what the stool, the poop, sounds like when it hits the water. If it sounds like a bombardier, you know, 'plop, plop, plop,' that's not right because it means you're constipated. It means the food is

too hard by the time it comes out. It should hit the water like a diver from Acapulco hits the water. Swoooosh!"

Remarkably, even our feces are not exempt from the scrutiny of success. Even the bathroom had been made into a proving ground. This was it—we had arrived at the era when even our poop could betray us, outing us as failures, deficient to the core.

During the weeks surrounding this naked night in August I was marginally employed as a writing tutor and generally had a lot of time on my hands. Every morning I woke up, fed the dogs, fed myself, tied my shoes, and ran away, pushing myself to go some measure further than the previous day. I had printed a map of the northern neighborhoods of Omaha where we lived and every morning, after coffee, I selected obscure intersections seven, eight, ten miles from our front door and then ran to them.

Many people living in Omaha consider the north end of town a violent ghetto, a blighted community populated by crumbling people and ruined buildings. Unfortunately, this is not an entirely unfounded opinion. While I was writing these very pages, a five-year-old girl, living two blocks away from me, was killed by a stray bullet while she ate her breakfast cereal. It was 9:45 in the morning and the sound of the errant shots had not compelled me out of the chair.

*It is a violent area. And many people making their lives here hold the same opinion of the place as those from neighborhoods further west—people who would prefer to never drive alone down Lake Street at night or through Miller Park (“Killer” Park) ever. To believe the wisdom of popular opinion: ours was less of a community and more of a slowly materializing riot.*

“You live off Bedford?” Ron, a fifty-something, lifelong resident of North O, asked me when I told him where we had bought a house.

“Well that’s the edge of it,” he said. “Most the gang affiliated dudes in Omaha stay right on Bedford between 33<sup>rd</sup> and Fontenelle Boulevard.”

This may have been true, but to me those blocks were just the first quarter mile of my run every morning. I couldn’t have avoided it. And despite any dangers, there were a great number of lovely, underappreciated details making up that scene. For one, there was no more dynamic architecture in the city than here. Here, where there were entire streets of meticulously-sodded, uniformly-painted public housing intersecting rows of hundred-year-old brick mansions in various states of repair. There were too, the vacated, unowned, unsellable empty lots gracing every block, with concrete stairs leading grandly from the street to—not an absence of life—but a tangle of volunteer trees and grasses and full-blossoming weeds where cats and opossums thrived on trash and smaller mammals. There were the various bodegas and bars and paint-peeling churches, places that looked so inhospitable they might close out of sheer boredom, but which were still managing to service the hungry, thirsty, faithful.

I knew that everything about me was conspicuous as I ran through these places, down the tire-strewn alley, past the dialysis center, around the unvisited and inconspicuous monument marking the birthplace of Malcom X. Most striking was the fact that where so many others worked—driving trucks, filling potholes, tending stores—I had found time to play. Yes I was white and shirtless and iPoded, but the thing that really distinguished me from my surroundings was the running.

Mine was the kind of life that afforded this kind of waste. I had energy and health and unencumbered hours enough to pass much of every working day of the week in pointless pursuit of some arbitrary point on a map. I had a college degree, a garden full of kale, two dogs

sustained on dehydrated, free-range, bison nuggets, and the way I chose to spend my summer vacation was in exploring the bombed-out corners of the Black neighborhoods.

We were nothing if not gentrifiers. Even my leisure—my totally free, ambitionless exercise—seemed rank with privilege. On 22<sup>nd</sup> and Lake I would often stop and admire the masonry of a handsome Tudor building, erected in 1906, once home to American Bell Telephone, then the Urban League of Omaha, and then most recently the Great Plains Black Museum. I could try and see through the wrought iron on the windows, I could admire the ivy disappearing the place in green, I could climb the grand stairs and pull on the heavy wooden door, but I could not go in. The sign was still there but the museum was long locked, unable to pay the bills since 2001. Whatever history remained inside was not mine to explore.

Running was always about competition. The slow ones are always the first to be eaten. The act of moving your legs quickly was rendered a sport well in time for the very first Olympics in 776 BC. Body was pitted against body, and at the finish line there could be only one winner. The competition is rarely so straightforward today though. The more recent invention of obsessive self-competition—PRs, training plans, timed races—seems a unique achievement of a bored, late-twentieth century America. Garmin, a company that has made GPS mapping devices since 1989, introduced the “Forerunner” in 2003, a wearable GPS tracker that allows athletes to measure the distance, speed, terrain, and overall success of their work-outs. It was a huge hit and led to eighteen different, newer, better, models in just the last ten years. Along with this innovation came certain websites—mapmyrun, dailymile, strava—virtual places for runners to log their miles and times. Critically, these sites allow you to track your friends too (or perhaps more satisfactorily, your enemies) and contrast figures, determine winners, see whose is longest.

I know from experience that mine is an unpopular position. I know that thousands of very passionate people would take opposition to this. They would talk about the value of achievements, of pushing yourself, of overcoming this or that obstacle for the sake of just doing it.

But running is so much more powerful than this. These things—success, winning, overcoming—are exactly the bullshit that lulls us into thinking that the only thing that matters is how much we do or do not accomplish in life. It's the selfsame trap that says work is good because money is good because buying things is good because buying things helps keep the death away. Running is better than this. It is, at its most basic, an act akin to prayer, and prayers are only beautiful when they expect nothing in return. Like a forest with garbage in its roots, with no greater goal than to grow and change and become anything other than what it once was, it is best not to make demands of such simple things.

I don't know why my wife started running, but when she did, she quickly made it part of her identity, and waiting in the wings was a whole industry lining up to help her do so. But despite the corrosive pressures of marketing, running will always be a subversive act. Even though it is now such a widely popular pastime, it is still countercultural. It is still contrary to the vapid cycle of progress and distraction, progress and distraction that our economy depends on.

I may have stayed stubborn a lot longer than my wife, but the first time I tried it I knew. *Fun*, that was the sublime goal. To ask anything more was about as wrongheaded as setting up shop right there, on the very steps of the temple.

We left the woods in our car. We were dehydrated and hungry so we drove to Burger King and asked for milkshakes and onion rings to be made for us. In some other decade the

Burger King was built next to a high-school football field, and on this night a game had just ended and the parking lot was crowded with excited kids. I parked and was walking around the car to get my wallet from the trunk when out of the asphalt din a voice proffered in my direction that most hostile of teenage epithets.

“Faggot,” someone said. Behind this was a rejoinder of other young voices, laughing at what must have seemed, to them, an easy target.

There I was, hair pulled into a sweaty ponytail, bent over the trunk of a car with no shirt or shoes, in shorts which were *very* short, and, most damning of all—my socks, which were pink. Of course I already knew there was a reason every discount bin at every running store is full of pink men's socks. The teenage boys at Burger King already knew it too—it was their job to know—only faggots wear pink.

We pulled into the drive-through and I talked to a girl through a black speaker in an illuminated screen. We rounded a corner and in a few minutes there she was, that same girl. She smiled as she took my money, and while closing the sliding window between her and me she smiled again, singing brightly, “Have a nice night!”

We ate the ice cream and fried onions in the white buzz of a street light and talked about whatever we felt like. My wife said something funny to make me laugh, and I laughed. Then I did the same for her and she laughed too. We were still dehydrated but the salt and fat tasted so perfect we ate everything without pause, like animals. It was yet another pleasure we felt our bodies deserved and which we were only too happy to provide, as long as we were able.

We were back. It had happened so quickly too, returned to the realm of concrete and fake food and other people and the things they said. It was a world almost too incongruous to believe.

When we had finished, I threw our cups and napkins and unwanted plastics in a bin, never to be seen again, and pointed my car in the direction of our bed.