

“Sucking Wind” and “A One Man Rapture”

Sunlight. It pours in through the window. It's a silent intruder and doesn't knock over any vases or picture frames skulking into my bedroom. It's just there. Through the blinds and under the midnight blue curtains.

My eyes are already open. Normally they snap wide awake, like Dracula in the movies. I think the Count had the right idea: stay out all night, sleep all day.

But I haven't really slept. Too excited. Dracula could sleep all day. He didn't have a race this morning but I did.

A five-kilometer race on a Saturday morning. It's a chilly fifty-five degrees outside. I'm always amazed at how good an idea sounds before you actually have to do it. I'd call myself a dumb ass but why punish myself? Three miles would be doing that for me soon enough.

“You should get checked out by a doctor...”

My mom stood in the doorway of her bedroom and spoke caution. Her voice was soft as if she feared stopping my heart in my chest. Dropping me right in front of her. She has fear in her voice. The fear of burying another child.

At Purdue Calumet, it's brisk. Everything's moving kind of slow as I walk through the parking lot. There are people stretching, congregating and talking.

There's a charge in the air, like Christmas shopping.

We line up.

Moving past everyone in line is like walking past buzzing hives. Every individual is popping on the inside. Aside from my sheer excitement there is also my horror at the bright yellow shirt I'm wearing. It was given to us while registering and I needed long sleeves because the air is cool and brisk.

The golden color is bright, like someone bled out a dandelion. Black people don't wear yellow. With coffee bean brown skin and a bright yellow shirt I look like a giant bumblebee. I am sure people would cover their pop cans if I stopped at a picnic.

We line up, the hardcore runners up front. The walkers in the back and the giant bumblebee in the middle. My weight-lifter friend Don passes by me. We shake hands and wish each other luck. He looks at me and says, “I'm going to try and set my pace. I want to get some kind of decent time...”

He means well. But the no-neck basically told me that I'm too damn slow.

Does he see a turtle instead of a giant bee?

There's the countdown. We lean into running stances in slow motion.

The air's silence and cold is broken by the starting-gun crack. Feet pound in unison. Muscles pump and coat over in warm blood and newfound tension.

We're running. At some point, a second or minute ago, it started.

The first mile is grueling because it is boring. I cannot gauge how fast I'm moving and that is a problem. Part of my brain dedicates itself to constant swearing. There's very little I like about this whole idea. But I started it and I'll finish it.

Partially because I'm determined.

Mainly because I'm parked by the finish line.

I see one of the hard-core runners at a distance mark. He's nagging me and annoying me but that's what he's like, nagging and annoying. Rail thin and hyperactive.

His constant energy and bony build remind me of those scavenger animals on Discovery. Hyenas would be proud they have a hardcore running type of mascot at Purdue Calumet.

I do SO want to kick his ass and I'm about six times stronger so I could do it.

I just couldn't catch him.

The mile mark is hit and I'm told I did it in under ten minutes. I'm impressed.

Not cocky or arrogant but impressed because I remember being unable to run. I remember being an overweight child. If we drop the political correctness as did so many on the playground and in the gym, I remember being a fat kid.

Time rolls back and I can hear the taunts, the fat boy taunts. I can feel the laughter against me.

And I run.

Maybe away from what I was. Maybe towards it. Some old ghosts don't leave unless you chase them out. In this case, maybe I'm running them out.

But what if they can run faster than me?

In the past, they always could.

By the second mile, things are slowing down.

The mile marker guy tells me I've hit twenty minutes. Still not bad.

I'm walking more than running. People are passing me by and giving me that "keep up!" and "You can do it!" runner-psycho-babble. Part of me wants to strangle them because I don't see the fun they must be having. And if I could keep up and if I could do it, wouldn't I be neck and neck with them rather than lagging behind?

They obviously do not see the devil and angel on my respective shoulders. Both are dressed like bumblebees just like me.

Funny because they both agree. I should stop this race and go home.

I ignore the celestial agreement. I keep running.

Some people walk out of their houses and root us on. I'm running alongside a girl in gray. She passes me. I pass her. Between us, there is nature. Between the pain of moving past my muscles' ache.

Between the hissing of crisp April air slicking down my throat.

There is the silently defiant presence of nature.

Knickerbocker is a street that wraps itself by its belly's end around a park. Where there are trees.

Where there are leaves.

A squirrel looks at me and I swear it shrugs its furry little shoulders at me. For a second I understand squirrel speak and I know what it's saying. *"What the hell is that guy trying to prove? I thought they had invented cars...."*

The drying descents of fallen foliage crunch under my gym shoes. The sky's the kind of blue you only see when you color as a child.

The sights look as if it's my first time seeing them. There's little smell save for the palette my nose pulls in of cut grass, wood bark and animals. The air is pulling in so fast that I have little time for aromatic investigation.

I have a race to run.

I may have seen Jesus. No, not Jesús, a Latino male but Jesus, the Lord Almighty. I believe He may have looked upon me, this sheep that is running., and shrugged His shoulders. I was the one man at this Rapture.

I wonder if I'll see Ganesh next? I have many Indian friends and if my exhaustion punches me past my religious icons and into a whole other divine pantheon than I am really doing badly. I am really sucking wind.

My feet are pounding the pavement like jackhammers. It feels like miniature shockwaves hitting me from the ground up with every step.

But I keep the form. Cannot afford to get sloppy because that costs me energy and I'm using all I have.

Two miles and a half. I think of Val.

She's been gone for some time. There's a slice of sorrow because she couldn't be here running with me, which, I guess, would be two miracles.

One returning from the dead and two, Val never ran when she was alive. The notion is sorrowful but not without sweetness. I know Val is somewhere better than here and it's a place of wonder and peace that I cannot imagine.

But I can imagine Hell because I'm coming up on three miles and it can't be worse than this. At least Hell has that guy in a boat to get you from one place to another. Here? Right now? I've only got my two feet and a quarter of a mile to go.

The buildings and homes are silhouettes of brick and rooftop. The surroundings are colored blurs. Green layers out on the lawns and in rounded groupings crowning barked stems. It's as if the grounds were spilled over with emeralds.

My lungs are pulling air in great handfuls. I'm reminded of watching people sandbag a perimeter. The effort and strain to pull massive volumes from one place another. It's like the wearied workers of Egypt are straining in my chest, exhaustingly building a pyramid of oxygen that my next huff tears back down.

Legs? I used to have legs. Now? Tree trunks that are barely responding. My thighs are tight like drum skins. If they could, I know my upper leg muscles would burst from beneath, tear loose like a raging infant.

As unresponsive as my body is feeling, it's still there. Pushing when I say push.

I would've stopped a long time ago. Partially because I would have had to. Partially because I would want to. But this morning, I'm running because I can and because I never could before. The little quiet fat kid is gone. Not thrown down inside but protected and absorbed into whoever I am now. Maybe I'm the wheat and my old ghosts are the chaff. Maybe I'm the good born from the prodding and the jokes.

Whatever I am, this morning I'm a runner.

I come up on the rounding edge of 173rd street. I pass it daily in my car. It looks so different from this angle.

People are waving me on. Cool, because they don't know me but they're rooting for me like they do. But this morning, in the Purdue Calumet Spring Fling race, they're supporters and I'm not a color but a runner.

A runner who's doing this because he wants to and because a challenge is usually a good thing. Of course it's not while you actually do it. Yet before you get into it? It sounds like a really great idea. I could still be in bed or watching the *Soul Train* line.

I bet none of those black people are wearing bright yellow. Well, maybe. It *is* Soul Train after all. How fast can Don Cornelius run three miles?

I'm pushing this body because I can and a little bit because Val can't. She's removed from all pain but also, sadly for us, removed from life. So I run for her and with more than enough pain for the both of us.

I slow down another trot to a walk. Sweat is like hot beads coming down my face. Down the inside of my shirt. Slicking me against the woven cotton. The call of a hot shower is the beckoning of a siren.

There's a rhythm behind me. I turn back, looking for the runner coming up on my right. Is it the girl in gray that has been neck-and-neck with me? I know it's not Don, the anti-turtle. He was long gone and is probably by my car now, both resting at the finish line.

It's bad: the runner just a few steps behind me is quite possibly the oldest man I have ever seen. Especially outside of a wooden casket.

I've seen him at the gym before. He's always in bright colors. T-shirts and sweats. Age spots and wrinkled legs. Headbands on his balding head. Devoid of any facial hair, he is adorned in large dark framed glasses. He looks like an owl, a thin old owl. An old owl that is about to beat a young bumblebee.

Is this a fable Aesop failed to record? I expect to see the tortoise and hare alongside us.

The old owl has a look of absolute concentration. It's a look that is hard to decipher because he always looks determined.

Mostly because he has a permanent full-toothed grin on his face.

None of us in the gym know if he's straining his aging body or smiling because he's made it to the age of seven-thousand-and-three.

I start running again. There is no way in Hell old giant-lens-grinning-owl is going to beat me. My body curses in muscle throb and burning lungs.

I don't care. The only line the running relic is going to cross before me is the mortality line.

I stop my quickened pace. Smugly sure that I've left him behind me. Far, far behind me where I am now a brown and yellow spot.

No such luck. My ears catch the call of a bird in the sky, the whisk of nearby traffic and the rhythm of the old man running.

The race comes to me again or maybe I go to it. I leave him in my wake and at the rate I am breathing, he may be at *my* Wake.

More people. These know me. They call out to me. Push me on. The scrawny-jackal-hyperactive - runner I know is yelling at me for walking. Cackling. Heckling. He's loud and obnoxious by now. I'm aggravated.

In between wheezes, I give him the finger. The rude gesture cost me seconds and energy I don't have but it was worth it.

The clock at the finish line is reading in large red digital numbers. It says thirty something. This is all a straight shot now. More people are cheering. More people are clapping. But I block it out. I blur it out.

It's just me. Running.

I did it.

Hands extend out and shake mine. Pats on the back as I slow down. Nearly taking out the rails set for the finish line. Stopping and stopping *gracefully* are two totally different things.

There's Don, smiling and congratulating me. He's been at the end of the race for about nine minutes before me. I smile back and call him a "bastard."

I call my mom and tell her my time. She says "Boy, you know I don't know nothing about no running..." But she says I did good right after her disclaimer. I tell my girlfriend (later on my ex-girlfriend.) She's proud but she layers it under her usual sarcasm.

There's the inevitable appointment I have with the ground.

Gravity still works and I'm going to use it to my advantage.

I sit in the grass. Well, crash into the grass but "sit" sounds more dignified.

Thirty-three minutes. I ran five kilometers in thirty-three minutes. Fastest I've ever been. Not bad for a bumblebee turtle. I wonder where my old nemesis, old giant-lens-grinning-owl, is.

I smile because I know where the fat kid is.

Gone but not forgotten.

I think the same of Val.

The air is so cool on my hot face. There's a little bit of joy. I never knew thirty three minutes would sound so sweet.

Bliss and joy. Just for me.

In the grass. Smiling.

Sucking wind and a one man rapture.

Dedicated to Jennifer Hamilton, running in Heaven

“A title we held with distinction” and “Ghosts and Rats”

“Why is it called East Chicago?”

I always got that question thrown my way like I was the official rep of the city. That’s one of the two ways you could tell someone wasn’t from around the way. They were bewildered by the concept that my town had the legendary big Windy City in its name but was not in Illinois. The other tell-tale sign that someone was not a local was the obliviousness to the difference between the Harbor and East Chicago.

Same city but different places, sharing the same zip code didn’t mean a thing.

East Chicago was the overall city’s name but to us Harbor kids it was also the dissimilar place over the bridge. It looked different, felt different and, much like Oz, was where the palaces were. City Hall, the big restaurants and the biggest high school were in East Chicago. The Harbor had Guthrie, the skeleton of Main Street and the hospital.

The harbor was for function. East Chicago was for exhibit.

Weekdays as a Harbor Rat (a title we held with distinction) usually meant being in-doors and doing homework. Growing up in the 80’s we saw the spreading fears of kidnapping children

shadow over playing until the streetlights snapped on. Of course, growing up across from a park made a lot of afternoons fun and on many occasions, gave my mouth a taste of playground sand. Sand crystals crunched between baby teeth.

Columbus Drive, Indianapolis Boulevard and Chicago Avenue were the big streets. Every other road begged to reach their regal status but never did. None of us spoke with reverence about Alder or Cardinal, Huish or Evergreen. They were kiddie streets yearning to stand next to their older and bigger siblings.

Columbus Drive was a good street to learn how to drive and a better street to learn how to cross. It was the joining link between the Harbor and East Chicago. It was the link between us and the cops’ kids and the politicians’ alleged homes. Growing up, we rarely saw the politicians living in our neighborhoods.

Columbus had the Walgreens for us Rats and the ever-changing video store that became a check-cashing place and a tax joint. The drive’s main jewel was the Zel’s on the corner of Euclid. Amazing roast beef sandwiches made any East Chicagoan’s mouth water.

Chicago Avenue was a strange strip. You never really walked down its short sidewalks near the water tower or the numerous auto spots. It wasn’t a street where you really grew up on or lived.

It was a local business throat and we saw it when our parents drove for new tires or headed for other towns. The avenue was the smallest of the three and the least appreciated.

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Indianapolis Boulevard was the big brother street. It didn't run from point A to point B like most avenues. It lie (or lay) on my city with a immense regality that dared any to cross it, master it or deny what it was: the main valve to my town.

The street actually ran from Chicago, through East Chicago, Hammond, Munster, Highland, Schererville and so on. It was a spine, miles of cement, street stripes and stop lights. I had friends that lived on the behemoth rather than in neighborhoods. Businesses perched themselves on its edges; Garibaldi's served comida all day and all night. Our only KFC successfully battled any little food shop that popped up next to it and the bigger McDonald's shined golden arches at the outskirts of town.

Then there was Cline Avenue. It was the mother of all roads. For those of us who called Northwest Indiana home, Cline was the big league driving. The high-speed street allowed us to say we had driven the expressway while still quaking in the presence of 80/94 and Chicago's monstrous arteries.

The avenue even had its own phantom, the Lady of Cline. Chicago had its Resurrection Mary and every city with bathroom mirrors had Bloody Mary.

But the Lady was ours.

Every one of us knew the story but the details always changed. She was a woman in white, a ghostly traveler, who appeared every Halloween. At night, she would wait for a lover that never came. Instead she settled for some wayward traveler heading into the Harbor's embrace. There was even talk that she would simply appear in your backseat, staring into the rearview mirror with dead eyes and an accompanying wolf or white dog.

In the junior high school next to Cline's ramp, there were stories by the older kids of a teacher who died after her first day. Rumors ran that she shook chains and danced in apparition's sheets in her old class, a room that supposedly was locked and never used.

That was my city, full of ghosts and Rats.

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