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Toeing the Line

I like to call it “The Oprah Effect.”

Oprah said to us: *If I can do it, anyone can.* She had excellent professional trainers, and she did it surrounded by a coterie of helpers. But even the richest woman in the world couldn’t pay someone to run a marathon for her. Oprah Winfrey had to take every step of the 1995 Marine Corps Marathon on her own. She finished in 4:29. This feat, heroic in its way, spawned a cottage industry of silly tee-shirts that said “I beat Oprah.” But Oprah encouraged scores—hundreds, thousands—of middle-aged women, who looked in the mirror and did not see the whippet-thin shape of a distance runner, to hit the roads and start training for a 26.2 miler. Oprah inspired a bunch of swaggering men to want to go out and beat her time. Al Gore ran the same race two years later. He finished in 4:58.

Anyone can do it. It’s all in the preparation. If you train properly, you should be able to hit your marathon goal—plus or minus five minutes—on race day without a problem. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t hard, or that 26.2 miles isn’t a long darned way to go. If you don’t train well, you may still finish, but it won’t be pretty. Or fun. After crossing the line at the New York City Marathon, squeaking by in less

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than a minute under three hours, a ragged Lance Armstrong said the marathon was “without a doubt the hardest physical thing I have ever done.”

Some run a marathon to cross it off their life checklist. For others, marathoning becomes an obsession, a habit of mind and body. For me, starting to run was not about losing weight or getting healthy. I began in order not to be excluded; I ran so that I wouldn't be left behind. I've never been much of a joiner, but when I found something I loved doing—and realized that there were other people who shared my enthusiasm—I joined a running club. There are all kinds of different subcultures: gardeners, fly fishers, philatelists, economists, collectors of pig figurines. These are often solitary pursuits, but when clusters of zealots find ways of coming together—Internet chat groups, conventions, races—we turn into a herd, a pack. We recognize ourselves in each other.

By becoming a runner, I was welcomed by strangers as a comrade, and I gained, as my legs got stronger and my lung capacity increased, an increased and more complex capacity for friendship, especially with men. I have always had a handful of women I hold close—whose intense friendships I rely on, where we sustain and support each other. Through running I learned not to be one of the boys, but to be myself, a woman among men. I'm not a small talker. I tend to talk about big things, or speak not at all. Running gave me a *lingua franca*, a common language to share with new acquaintances.

This book is about how I evolved from a bookish egghead who ran only to catch a bus to a runner of ultramarathons. (Ultras are defined as any race longer than the marathon distance of 26.2 miles.) It was a pretty straightforward process and not that unusual: First I got my butt out the door and jogged for a while. I entered some shorter races, and then some longer ones. Then I just kept going. Once I'd done a handful of marathons, I started hanging around with a bunch of guys who used 26.2 milers as training runs for ultras, and poof: I was an ultrarunner. Bothered by the fact that running is a narcissistic

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activity—it's all about me, me, me—I got to a point where I wanted to shift the focus from myself. I found ways—pacing, coaching, helping others achieve their goals—to share my fervor that provides rewards beyond anything I could ever have imagined.

While I do not believe that there is such a thing as a runner's worldview—there are, I would argue, as many ways of thinking and feeling about running as there are runners—we do share certain things. Watching a big marathon is a remarkable experience. Depending on your vantage, you can spot individual runners, sure, but you also see the way in which we all come together as an organism, moving in unison, sharing a common goal. Here, in chapters that alternate with my personal record of becoming a runner, are meditations, examinations, and celebrations of the nuts of bolts of how we each hook into the pack. I look at and think about various aspects and accoutrements of a runner's life: clothes, food, races, racing, injuries, my watch (I love my watch; you will learn how much I love my watch). The things we all share; the things we all have.

I wanted the structure of this book to suggest the shape of a marathon. The way the early miles tick by, quick and light. How the middle part can get slow and hard. Like most difficult activities—writing books, learning to play an instrument, building a relationship—there's a pace. The middle portion is always tough: the transition of moving from something that seems easy at the start to an endeavor that becomes so hard it requires enormous will—in addition to strength—is challenging. It helps to have other people along. At a certain point, it becomes clear that you will make it, though, in a marathon, the last two-tenths of a mile are not trivial.

Running is the act of catching yourself before you fall. It is about keeping yourself upright as you move forward. The faster you go, the more there is at stake. You strike a balance between how hard you can push yourself and still remain in control. You straddle the line between fearless and reckless. At times, even if you are doing everything right, you fall.

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During long races, you think about something for a while—sometimes it's a passing thought or random insight, other times an attempt to work out problems—and then you move on. The thinking is not entirely linear. After a while, you accept this. After a while, you settle in. And then, the mind goes its own way—slowing down, wandering more freely, giving itself over to the body, and finally, ultimately, to the heart.

Reasons Not to Run

In college I was a pretentious little intellectual. I wielded my mind with brute force, inflicting my opinions and ideas with speed and dexterity, bruising those who got in my way, but inhabiting my body only incidentally. Fortunate genetics, the metabolizing effects of an overachieving restlessness, or perhaps, simply, the will to power, kept me slender. I did not exercise. I never saw a reason to run. But many of my friends did.

Angular, blond Jacki, her face red from frequent washings with Clinique soap, would scrawl a note on my door: *Going out for a run. Back in twenty minutes. Dinner, then?* I would read some more pages of Henry James, James Joyce, George Eliot, and when she got back, we would go to the big freshman Commons dining hall to eat. She'd played field hockey in high school and was, it seemed, in the habit of running. I preferred my habit of reading too much.

Jacki read a lot as well, but mostly in Latin or Greek. She was a beautiful, sharp-edged girl from Philadelphia's Main Line, where, when she was at home for vacations, she would go to the Laura Ashley store with her mother and the two of them would shoplift, layering expensive dresses under baggy overalls. She dismissed most of our classmates

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as boring and drank her black coffee out of a glass. She made me feel like I could never keep up. Jacki did her running solo.

Junior year my roommate Val would come back, change into shorts and tee-shirt, and head out the dorm room door. She would meet up with others. They would go for—what? thirty minutes? forty? an hour?—and she would be showered and dressed before dinner. She did it—why? for exercise? relief? social contact?—and I never asked about it. I also never asked about her Chinese homework, and she rarely asked me about Milton. We did what we did. We were who we were.

Val was that special kind of Chinese American good girl. She was *guai*. She ran the way she did everything: deliberately, and with discipline and care. She played piano, didn't smoke, drank only occasionally and then temperately, got good grades and test scores, wrote thank you notes, kept her room clean, sewed tight loose buttons, spoke in Chinese to her grandma, circulated with ease and grace among different social groups, and she ran. She enacted the Greek ideals: mind and body, both sound; everything in moderation. Val worked hard. Jacki would have dismissed Val as boring, if she had bothered to talk to her. It took me some years to figure out that Val was a proper role model.

There's nothing like the laziness of a person who has gotten away too long with being smart. I coasted and did as little as possible. I drank some, tried the drugs that didn't scare me. A couple of times I went to the gym with friends, because they went. I slept with boys, slept with men, got good grades and praise from my professors, read books. I read lots of books; I lived in my brain.

After college, I settled in New York City and entered the workforce, toiling in the mind fields of scholarly publishing. Sarah worked in the production department and had to run two laps of Central Park every morning—6 miles—and on the weekends had to do three. She talked about it like that: she had to run. Olive-skinned and short-limbed, inclined to argue, subsisting on bagels and coffee, she was solid and striving to stave off fat. It worked. Sometimes she talked about how much she would run if she didn't *have* to. The answer seemed to be not much.

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Andrew and I were introduced by a mutual friend when I moved to North Carolina. I was on the edge of thirty. He was a couple of years older, finishing his medical residency. Andrew had run track when he wasn't playing basketball in college. He'd run a 4:30 mile. I didn't know what that meant. What was the world record for the mile? Something like four minutes? Was an extra half minute a lot or a little? I had no gauge. When he told me that he'd been able to high jump six and a half feet I was more impressed; that I could visualize. Andrew is five-ten if you rub his hair with a balloon.

Most days before we could get together for dinner, Andrew would need to go for a run. This irritated me. I'd come home from work and be eager to get started on play. But instead, as in college, I'd be waiting around for someone to finish running before I could eat. It made me cranky. Andrew assured me that it was better for both of us if he got to run. He needed the exercise. I couldn't unpack this. Wanting to exercise—maybe. But needing? No.

Andrew and I went on vacation with Val and her then-boyfriend. We rented a big house on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Above the door hung a sign that said, *Ancient Marnier*, a cause of delight and jokes: Was it the ancient mariner drunk on Grand Marnier? Really, really old liqueur? We spent mornings eating breakfast and days lying on the beach planning dinner. Then the three of them would go off for a late-afternoon jog. I stayed on the deck in my black bikini, eating Oreos and reading a nineteenth-century novel. I liked that Andrew was able to share this time my friends, but I didn't want to have anything to do with it.

I knew the litany, the multiplicity of reasons why people ran: that it was good for them, in some physical, emotional, or even soul-enhancing way; that energy and frustrations needed to be sizzled out, like the fat in bacon; that many people, and most women, were raised to be dissatisfied with their bodies, no matter what they looked like, and running was an efficient trade-off for brownies and ice cream; that we are social animals, some of us, and want time with others, even if it is at ungodly early hours of the morning and in weather that is not fit for

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those who do not grow fur; that solitary time is a necessary condition for hard thinking; that competition is endemic to the human condition and harnessing it in innocuous ways and at appropriate venues will, perhaps, keep violence at bay.

I knew all of this, understood it in some intellectual, if not visceral way. I remained unconvinced. I did not want to run. Perhaps it was the tinge of fatalism that comes with reading too much existential philosophy, coupled with the callous, pig-headedness of healthy youth. More likely it was plain old laziness—not wanting to bother, not liking to sweat. I did not run because I did not have to.

Years later, thinking back on my beginnings, I see that while eventually I came to understand that running would be good for my body and for my mind, it took me longer to know what it would do for my heart. Not the knobby muscle that pumps blood through the body, the organ that keeps the physical self alive, but the notional place where feelings pool and clog and eventually spring free. What I didn't realize, when I first started lacing up my shoes, was that for me, running would be so much about love.

Running with another person is an intimate activity. Run with someone for long enough at a time and you will be stripped bare. Modesty falls away with the miles. The body—its functions, its excretions, its wants—cannot be ignored. The heavy breathing, the sweating, the soft talk that comes after exertion, the hours spent together—running with another person is an intimate activity. It's hard to keep the heart uninvolved.