

Story Number Two

I walk the track at dawn every morning, hat flapping. It's cold now and sometimes the rain falls with venom but other times the day rises clear and bright. If you want to walk the marathon you have to train, and train I do. I watch my caloric intake. I take care of my upper arm strength, which many people forget to consider. I think I have as good a shot as anyone.

At the shelter I consult my team. You need a team to cheer you on when the track stretches for miles and you lose heart. Then you lower your heart rate and hear the cheers of the team in your head. My team consists of Road Block Mary, dandruff Phil and the guy who goes grr. I used to have a really good coach, Miguel but he's dead. It's just the way it is. I didn't let it get in way of my walking when it happened and I don't let it now.

Some of training for a marathon is simple math. 4 laps at the track equals one mile and its 26 miles to finish. Of course I want to finish with a decent time, though some don't finish at all. My biggest obstacle is boredom. Second to that is starvation and third to that is having to sleep on the street. My primary choice outside the shelter these days is either the underpass or the tunnel. I can go to the river but sand is not ideal for the marathon walker. Runners, that's another story. The tunnel is great for pull-ups but bad for reps. The underpass is good for skipping rope. It is shaped like a skip rope, but you will often have the rope stolen. Also it is cold and very hungry out there. I need a strict 700 calorie day, every day without fail if I am going to maintain my ideal marathon weight.

I only sleep in the street when the shelter is dangerous, which usually coincides with my stopping wearing my invisible cloak. Also I have a lot of appointments each day and fitting in my training takes real determination. The one appointment I cannot miss is at the health clinic in client services. My doctor is Angel Blair. This time I took Road Block Mary with me because I don't like to ride public transport without my cloak and nobody blocks Mary. She was the team member who got me my hat, which has really helped my speed. Heat escapes primarily through the head and heart area and that's why I always wear a hat when I train and I always wear a lot of newspapers around my chest. I'll tell you though, and this is the truth, when I wear that marathon number on my chest I will feel as naked as the day I was born.

I was glad to be seeing Angel Blair. I am always reassured to see she is still on staff. I have a lot of fear for Angel's employment. She is like a burning ember among the big buckets of dirty ancient water that make up client services staff—many of them on the low end of the IQ scale and lacking in the most basic social skills. I'm not sure where Angel comes from, because she does tend to mumble. But I am very sure her name is not Angel. It is merely her designation.

“Mister Charles,” says Angel. “You haven't checked the box that indicates you are taking your meds.”

I nodded. It was hot as hell in that office, which is one way I knew I was in hell. “I would like to talk about Phil first and pleased to report I have resolved my issues with the guy who goes grr. Mary is fine. She’s my rock. Miguel, as you know, is dead, although I often hear his voice in my head.”

“You hear his voice?” said Angel, her brow wrinkling a little bit. Her eyes are clear and pale as sea glass. She has a serious nose. This day she was wearing a cute sweater and in her hair was a tiny tartan bow, though I judge her age to be forty plus.

“Not like that, doc,” I said. Not *those* kinds of voices. Athletes have to be careful what they say. They are often misquoted by a hostile media. For example, I am pretty convinced everyone hears voices in their heads. The difference is who listens to those voices and how. “Not like the ones I hear when I remove my cloak of invisibility.”

“It’s not a cloak, Mister Charles, it’s a pill and you need to take them for your own safety. If you won’t take them for yours, how about doing it for me?”

Her voice was reasonable but we hadn’t covered Phil yet. I know she is on a time crunch and has only an allotment of seventeen minutes per client. I also know a medical emergency can be stretched to twenty-five. I wasn’t certain that I qualified but sometimes luck is with you, Luck has a surprising history in sports. It is part of the great mystery of what turns our bodies around and around.

We sat and looked at each other for a while. I admire her ability to make luxuries of the smallest things.

“I will take them,” I said finally.

“OK, then, what about Phil,” she said. She tilted the computer screen away. Outside her dirty office window I observed the usual coven beginning to gather around a little tree they had set on fire.

“He has been a part of the team for so long,” I said, “But good runners aren’t loose. They are tight. They bounce. The race is only in five months and my times are OK, but they are not great. I feel bad to replace heavyweight Phil but I think his own body problems are getting in the way of my success. Yet is that harsh? What do I owe his loyalty? I often think that if I replaced him with someone who understood tightness, I could really ace this thing and then, at the end, he’d forgive me because winning is the goal. I mean, finishing, but maybe even winning.” I pretty much sweated through this whole speech because I’d written it all out, but Road Block Mary had made me trade it for her grocery list.

“Bag of Cheetos’s,” I finished weakly.

We both sat back then, after I shook her hand. I like the formality of the free clinic. I'm a little bit of a conservative guy and I think modern life has really lost something with its casual Friday's; it's dress-like-roadkill-Tuesdays. As if she could read my mind (and there's every reason to think she can) Angel Blair reached behind her desk and then handed me a little cup of water and a pill.

"It's Christmas," she said, "Do you want something?" She pointed out her office window where I could see a forlorn and naked ham being chased by several of the larger women.

"I would like to use your calculator," I said and she went off to get one because I guess no one calculates anymore except conservatives like me. She came back with one that must have been for blind people or something because it was just enormous. The numbers on it were the size of chocolate bars. "From the store room," she said.

I grabbed the calculator and went to work. I thought I had done the math correctly but I really needed to know. The guy who goes grr times my laps with his penlight but what is my overall? It's really been driving me crazy. Miguel warned me about the importance of the overall. You're gonna get so wrapped up in the lap finish, you'll lose sight of the big win; you won't be judged by the many seemingly huge ways you have totally screwed up your life, he said. A good coach will tell you like it is. I meant to ask him: How will I be judged? But he died before I could learn. I tried to hand the calculator back to Angel but she demurred. "Would you like to keep it?" she said. Like I really needed to walk around with an enormous calculator that will make me look like a total nerd! But it was Christmas and Angel had done so much for me. "OK," I said, "Merry Christmas." Training is not as selfish as it looks, when you consider how it has already touched so many lives.