

Run

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Writing the Journey

Running the Styx

There comes a point of saturation when I go running in the rain. A point at which my clothes cling like a suffocated web over my limbs. Water pours along the ridges of my scalp and strips my face in a sheet. When I wipe it away with the back of my hand, I disrupt the flow only for a moment. The rain picks up again as the next cloud passes overhead, new droplets sizzling on warm pavement. Steam rises up beneath my feet and I wonder if it would be warmer to just stop and lay down in the thick of it. Not to give up, but rather to wonder—what would happen if I were to stop dead in the middle of this forsaken road?—and then continue.

We tread along in the middle of the Tasmanian wilderness—an island off the south coast of Australia—as part of a trip for our study abroad program. It was one of those programs that incorporates a lot of travelling, so we'd spent the better part of the last few months flitting around the west coast of Australia before hopping across to Tasmania. And for the majority of the trip, while most of the other American students remained in the tent cabins, I would roll out early with Lena, a runner like me, each and every morning to go for a jog.

I slow and turn—Lena is choking on water or on breath, I am not sure which. We are four miles out from camp, in the tiny town of Maydena, the rain as furious as it has been all week. Headlights pierce through the mist from behind us and we burrow ourselves against a tree along the road as a truck hurtles by. We watch as the vehicle plunges around the next corner, then keep on. The rain has soaked through our shoes, the last great barrier, and can do no more harm. My socks squirm

beneath the balls of my feet. The skin on our hands crinkles into raisins and our cores pump fire through our breath.

It is the worst kind of run, by most accounts—brutally cold, legs sore after days cramped in a tour bus, the road steep and hair-pinned and unevenly paved, and our view blocked by cloud and dense rainforest. We have spent the majority of our time in Tasmania aboard a bus, zipping along from campsite to campsite, to see all the sights with minimal movement, and our bodies are stiff. Yet there is something remarkable about running along the same Tasmanian highways, surrounded by nothing but wavering Eucalyptus and the acoustics of our footsteps against the tree trunks. There is something exhilarating in knowing that we are the first and only people to run this section of road as opposed to drive it, and thus the experience of it is ours. People don't seem to run in this part of the world. Everyone else sees the valley through a car window, while we are pioneers, smashing through the glass in this rhythmic beating of heart, breath, and step.

People talk a lot about pivotal life moments—moments in which they snap around a 90-degree corner and start hurtling down some new path that ultimately changes the outcome of everything that comes after. I started running at seventeen—four years before that run in Tasmania. It was more of a 180-degree turn around for me, and I remember the exact moment it happened with a strange clarity. I was sitting in the passenger seat of my best friend's Honda Civic, at a stoplight.

“What are you going to do?” my friend asked me in the same way she'd asked me so many times before. I slouched in my seat. At the time, I had no idea. I thought

I'd tried everything. I had depression. Serious, crippling, undiagnosed depression—and no way of pulling myself out. The only instances that I ever left my house were to ferry myself to and from school and soccer practice, or to buy myself meal and nibble at it solo. When people asked—which they rarely did, because I was a social recluse and had a chip on my shoulder about it—I told them that I was busy applying for college and keeping up with classes. But most days during high school, when I got home, I would make myself dinner and retreat to eat it in my room. I wouldn't resurface until morning.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be going out in crop tops with boys and plastic water bottles of Smirnoff Vodka. It wasn't that I didn't want to go to the beach on Saturdays, or to have go-to friends to make immediate eye contact for group projects assignments. I was like this horrible spiky creature shuffling around high school with a blindfold on—too rough around the edges for anyone to touch, and terrified that no one would ever try. People could feel my distress hang about me like a wraith, and if that wasn't enough to scare them away, my scowl usually did the trick. A spikey, scowling girl who hid a flowering muffin top and a distaste for bras beneath softball sweatshirts and ripped jeans and who never spoke to anyone beyond one of three friends unless spoken to. Unapproachable barely scratched the surface.

“Why is this traffic light taking so long?” I blew out sharply in my friends car. She shrugged and drummed her hands along the steering wheel. Tomorrow was Sunday. The white picket sign would be sitting on our driveway come morning—*Open House: Sunday 11-2pm*. It was the root of all evil in our household. Marcine, our

realtor, would stream across the entryway with over-the-knee boots and enough botox in her face to float to China and stick us to the walls in her syrupy voice. Instead of going to church on our Sunday mornings, selling the house became our prayer, our crusade, our hell. My mother led the charge.

Clean your room, walk the dog, mow the lawn, move the furniture, dust the cabinets, stop being a goddamn slug, vacuum the rugs, repaint the walls, light candles, put on nice cloths, don't you dare talk back to me, take your brother to practice, be grateful, tell your father to get off his ass, ask him why he won't help me, get him to help me, help me, you're doing it wrong, pick up our divorce papers, do it better, you're an ungrateful bitch, do it perfectly, will someone in this goddamn house do something for anyone other than themselves for fucking once in their goddam lives?!

We were going on three years of this shrieking, every Sunday morning, and the house hadn't sold. I looked at my hands. They looked swollen, puffy, like the rest of me. I touched my thigh and winced. I was repulsive. I was repulsed.

"I've got to do something," I said finally. The light turned green. I couldn't be in that house anymore. I couldn't stand the screaming. I couldn't stand seeing my mom collapsing in a heap on the floor, gripping a mop like a cross, sobbing everything she had onto the hardwood, begging for something that none of us could give her. She didn't want to give up her home. None of us wanted to give up our home. My brother and I wanted to turn back the clock and go back to Sunday morning pancakes and throwing baseballs around in the park. We wanted to go back to when my dad had a job, and when my mom knew how to smile, and when my brother played with Legos instead of pipes. We were all so miserable and scared

and lonely, all on our own. Instead of reaching out to each other, all anyone could do was shove away. Every single Sunday, not just pushing, but slamming as hard as we could against each other—away, away, away. Our situation went unchanged, and we remained stagnant. Now, at another stoplight, I had to get moving.

“I’m going to go on a run tomorrow,” I said abruptly. My friend turned to me, eyebrow raised.

“And eat some salad,” I continued, and she chuckled. I hated salad, and she’d been in my P.E. classes long enough to know that I could barely finish my mile around the track. Something in my tone, however, resonated.

“Keep me honest. Please?” I asked. I remember the words, although small, echoing as we rolled into the intersection. I was too exhausted from battling our circumstances to continue hating myself too. I couldn’t change our Sunday mornings, but I could change myself. I could start with taking care of my single ship, in body and in mind.

The next morning, while my dad watched 49ers reruns and my mom screamed in the kitchen and my younger brother smoked pot in the yard, I took off. I went until I couldn’t, and then kept going. My feet hurt and my knees creaked and my lungs burst, but I kept going.

I ran until the house sold. I ran until I got into college. I ran until I graduated from high school, then until I left home for Vermont. I ran until I started making friends, and until my parents began to rekindle their relationship at home. I ran out of one of the darkest periods of my life in a cotton t-shirt, outdated sneakers, and a watch I dug out of a cereal box. I kept my head up. I had taken a 180, and the right

track was finally in sight. It trembled in front of me, glimmering, hopeful. I ran faster and farther. I was still running, three years later, when I found myself in the sticks of Tasmania, Australia, with Lena Miller.

Lena and I tuck into our pace and continue along the side of the valley. Towering to our left, the giant trees of the Big Styx Nature Reserve sing toward the sky like a cathedral, twittering in bird song and rain-snow fall. Down the valley to our right, the Styx River warbles, hidden behind the temperate rainforest that lines the road. As we turn, the undergrowth covering the slope to our right breaks just for a moment, revealing the valley sprawled below. I breathe into our pace and we slide on along the guardrail, eyes to the sweep of greenery and the sky that opens up like a great window beyond. The view is ours and ours alone.

Vapid

I used to believe that only vapid women have eating disorders. That the vanity of anorexia is for models and dancers and self-centered teenage girls.

“That’s so dumb,” I would hurumph, curled at the foot of my mom’s bed while devouring episodes of America’s Next Top Model. She thumbed through her magazine. The women on the television, their bodies skeletal and boyish, pulled at skin around their pelvises as if it were fat, chained to the mirror, their greedy eyes wolfing down food they could not eat. *Tasha is eating too much. She’s going to blow the competition. Melanie just passed out in the dressing room—*

I watched the models glide down the runway, dresses and hair billowing, breathless and beautiful. They were colorful cranes, long legs delicate, arms cast out like wings as if to take flight. Even my mom’s eyes lifted from her reading. The show would end in backstage scuffles and fight, and one girl voted off for not being perfect enough—being too thin, or not thin enough. *You girls have to take your body seriously. Treat it like a temple, not a garbage can.*

“I hate girls like that,” I would say, in the heat of my tomboy phase. I liked to feel strong and competitive. I thought that the girls who liked to talk about boys and clothes and makeup during recess were one of the most hellish things about elementary school. I couldn’t imagine why anyone would give up their ability to win a game of ultimate tag during lunch just to avoid getting sweaty and to impress the boys. My mom cozied up next to me as I rolled onto my back.

“That’s the price they pay for bodies like that,” she murmured, grinning as she moved to tickle my belly. Round, white, soft. “And anyways, I like your buddha belly.”

Horse, truck, bull, ox, train—these were the words that coaches and parents used to describe me during softball and soccer games. I always had a thick body with strong legs, fast hands, and absolute fearlessness about throwing my weight around in a game. I was tenacious. I hated losing. I thrived. I could knock anyone I needed off the ball in a game, or smack the ball over the Little League fence without thinking. I could run a mile as fast as the boys. My body type was everything it needed to be for athletics. And when I was playing, I loved myself.

At school, however, I struggled. *Do you even own a pair of jeans? You’d look funny in a dress. Try to look nice for once.* Kids can be mean, and girls don’t often get attention for scoring goals or slapping in homeruns. You get attention for being thin, and for being social. Since I was neither, I grew up distasting both my body and my gender, despite how far my size got me as an athlete.

After too many years of feeling insecure about my body, things took a turn. I was a senior in high school, in the depths of a harrowing year of depression—we were in the middle a move and my parents were on the brink of divorce. I picked up running as a means of getting out of the house. It was my first time exercising for myself outside of the context of sports. Sure, I had trained on my own to get stronger for softball season, but it was a means of playing better, and not just to be fit. I started researching nutrition, and filled my plate with veggies rather than the bagels, pasta, and bread that had been on the table since I was a kid. I limited my

Snapple and yellow Vitamin Water intake. I packed lunches to school to avoid the temptation of fried chicken and pizza at the cafeteria. I worked hard at it.

For the first time in my life, the weight fell off. I was diligent, sticking to my routine, getting outside as much as possible, excited to catch myself in a mirror or window reflection. It worked like magic. Everything I had always felt like I was missing, happening right before my eyes. Clothes started looking good on me. People complimented me. My dad told me he was proud of me. I started challenging myself—running a little bit farther, a little bit faster—just to see where I could go.

And then, just when everything seemed to be improving, life took another nose dive. After two years of trying to sell our home, my family finally got an offer on the house—an offer that was nearly 20% less than our asking price, which had already dropped significantly after so much time without a bite. Desperate and exhausted, my parents were forced to accept. We had already been living out of boxes, so the final push out didn't take long. We drove away in anticlimactic tears.

While we looked for a new home, our family of four stayed in a one-bathroom, one-bedroom rental 'home'—which was a really a shack—with the dog and the cat and all of our things piled in the living room. For three months, I fell asleep on the couch to the sound of my parents shrieking at each other in the adjacent room, timed to the tinkle of wind chimes on the porch.

To escape, I threw myself into this new fitness routine I had designed for myself. I cut more things out of my diet and pushed myself for longer at the gym. I stayed late after practice and would run extra drills with my coach. I'd get to school an hour early to run laps around the track. I got stronger. Nothing was wrong.

Depression didn't matter, the fighting didn't matter, the failed attempts to buy a new home didn't matter. I had my body, tight fit and ready, smooth muscle sliding over bone. Nothing else made a sound. The days flashed by.

"You've skipped our Sol Food date three times now," grumbled my friend Allie one evening, over the phone. We had a tradition of going to this Puerto Rican café that was famous for its fried plantains and authentic bistec sandwiches. I explained that I had been really busy, and promised to make time. The words felt hollow, even to me. She blew out on the other line.

"I never see you anymore, Em. Figure it out." The line cut out. When we did finally go on our date, I packed my food in a Tupperware container.

"I'm trying to save some cash," I lied. I just needed to lose five more pounds. I would stare at myself in the mirror, turn, grab my stomach, turn again, frown. Five more. Easy. Then I'd be done—set to maintain my fitness and focus on other things. Easy. Five pounds later, and the little pooch on my belly that I wanted gone still remained. So I set my mind to five more.

"Hey, Emily—" I was rounding the corner of the dugout midway through the spring season, heading for the water fountain, when one of my teammates' mothers stopped me. She was one of those moms who treated all kids like one of her own, who always wore oversized floral prints and bright lipstick. She had wide hips and a wider smile, but today she approached me with upturned eyes, worried.

"Are you all right?" She asked it in that sincere, concerned way, her voice soft and warm, not at all prying. I watched her eyes drop, ever so slightly, to take me in. Later, in pictures, I saw that my softball pants hung like harem pants past my knees,

my jersey like a bright blue sack. My skin shuddered gray, pulled taught across my cheek bones like wax. But at the moment, I brushed her question off and smiled and told her that I was great, and that I was almost on deck. Yet her question stung, my first reaction bitter, resentful. *What right does anyone have to judge me and my lifestyle?*

I wasn't all right. I had gone in to the year depressed, and was still depressed. Nothing about the situation was all right. Even when our family did find a new house, and moved all of our things into it, nothing changed. I was still miserable and isolated and so skinny that I no longer had the energy to swing the bat, let alone run and hike and be the active happy human being I enjoyed being. I was overrun with exhaustion, always cold, my hair falling out in the shower, crabby and irritable in my interactions, toting around ziplock bags of carrots and protein bars and the "I already ate" excuse instead of eating regular meals. I convinced myself I was fine, that I was still in control.

My friends resented me for never spending time with them, and I think my parents resented me for trying to "make myself the victim, you bitch," as my mother once put it, ever so kindly. I resented all of them, for not supporting me and my relationship with my body, and for trying to keep me from living how I wanted to live and eat and exist. The tension erupted in the car one evening, when my mom was driving me home from a game. As per usual, there was a lot of screaming. It ended with the "you're a selfish witch if you think being anorexic is the only way to get attention" and "you're seeing a counselor and a nutritionist tomorrow or we're kicking you out of the house."

I honestly didn't think I was sick, and that in itself is probably the sickest part of disordered eating. When you're in the thick of it, you can't see what's happening, and you always think you're in control. You're intoxicated with the control. You convince yourself that you can stop whenever you want, that you're almost to the goal and that you'll stop when you get there. When you look in the mirror, your brain is programmed to see bumps and fatness that aren't actually there. A skeleton stares back at you, wasting away, while you see a large, imperfect, soft self grimacing at you. It's repulsive. You repulse yourself. You can never be happy, but happiness feels just out of reach. Yet almost tangible.

I wasn't the model trying to be thin. I wasn't trying to get people to like me. I was never that concerned with being skinny. I just wanted to run away from home, to be healthy, to escape for a little while. I wanted to make my family proud, to have my dad pat me on the shoulder and tell me I did a good job. I wanted to take control while the rest of my life spun horribly out of control. Instead, I lost what little hold I had on reality. I was too weak to exercise or to run. I developed a heart problem.

An eating disorder is defined as any of a range of psychological disorders characterized by abnormal or disturbed eating habits. *Anorexia Nervosa*: a serious physical and emotional illness in which an abnormal fear of being fat leads to very poor eating habits and dangerous weight loss. *Orthorexia Nervosa*: an obsession with eating foods that one considers healthy in which the sufferer systematically avoids specific foods in the belief that they are harmful.

These words, like my body, were hollow and unhelpful. They carry superficial connotations, and they hardly cover the depth of the psychological

weight they carry. They don't account for the mental warfare. They don't talk about how the fear of gaining weight, the terror of eating too much, the obsession with control, never leaves their victims. They don't talk about the process of getting healthy. The excruciating pain in your abdomen as you try, day after day, to expand your stomach, to eat more. They don't talk about the instinctual chaos of bingeing eating—the way your brain just turns off and you devour everything and anything in sight in a blind rage, even if it makes you ill and miserable and hopelessly lost afterward. They don't talk about how mean people get, as you gain weight, about how you look and change. *Have you gained weight? You eat like an animal. What's wrong with you? Stop worrying so much about food.* They don't talk about the guilt. They don't talk about how, five years later, it haunts you like a ghost, even when you don't expect it. How on bad days, when you eat a little too much chocolate, or a little too much granola, you feel like your soul as been crushed, just a little, at the corners.

I was lucky. I got help. It was a slow and laborious turn around, met with a lot of walls and denial. There was a lot of anger. And to be honest, the reality check of having a heart problem isn't really what did it for me either. It wasn't really fear that made the difference, in the end. It was support. It was love and affection and nurturing—things that I didn't feel I was getting at home, yet desperately needed to pull myself up.

When the summer after senior year rolled around, one of my best friends a year older than me moved back into town. We'd always been close—he'd been in a lot of my classes growing up, and we ran in similar social circles—but we'd never been seriously involved in each other. But when he got back, one thing led to

another, and we started dating. I will never forget the way his eyes widened when I stepped out of the front door to greet him after so many months of being away. It was like he was looking right through me. I waded down in my prettiest sundress and new leather sandals but his eyes were on my skin and on my thin hair and on the hollowness of my cheeks. His glance held a sort of terrible fear that even I hadn't recognized in myself.

He wasn't the greatest boyfriend in the world, but he did something right that summer. He took me under his wing and loved me and took me on every adventure imaginable. He saw how miserable I'd become at home, so he sought to fill my time with things elsewhere, to keep my mind off of the chaos. He taught me to love food again too, in a strange and sometimes uncomfortable way, introducing me to all these restaurants and cuisines I had never heard of. We had so much fun that I no longer needed to distract myself with the food or the exercise or the obsession to keep moving forward. I could just bathe in the present, warm and loved and calm. We did everything together. We went everywhere together. He saw that I needed a crutch and lifted me right off the ground.

I saw a counselor too, and a nutritionist. I found both to be about as unhelpful as the symptom checker on WebMD—but that didn't matter as much. The point was that once *I* realized I had a problem, once *I* wanted to get better, I could put myself back on track. Making the effort to see a counselor was just trimming, a sign that I was doing better. I gained weight, got myself healthy, worked pretty hard at it. It was more about the depression than it was a problem with eating, so once I started finding ways to enjoy myself, to let loose and start spending time with friends, it all

sort of fell into place. It wouldn't have been possible without the help my boyfriend had given me, and although I feel a little pathetic admitting it, I'm also incredibly grateful.

During my long "recovery"—which is a word about as stiff as the diagnosis it stems from—I started to run again. Not in the same fitness-obsessed way, because that would have been inappropriate but in a genuine attempt to connect with my body and to my surroundings. Every now and then, just to feel strong. Not about the calories or the cutting, but about celebrating my body. I felt whole.

In college, as I've tapped into the community of runners, I've found that my experiences with disordered eating were hardly unique. Nearly every girl I've ever met has had an issue at one point or another. Runners especially, I've found, struggle in their relationships with their body. Like me, a lot of runners used running as a way to feel balanced and grounded again after falling into some form of body dysmorphia. For others, running led them straight into the bad habits of the disordered eating.

"As a cross country runner, there's just this weird tension between the need to accept the curves of being a real woman and the pressure to maintain this twelve-year-old, little boy body that's fast and good at running," explained Kate Cosley to me once, a friend and runner at Middlebury College. "And I don't want to be that kid anymore! But it's hard. It's a balance."

Kate started running cross country at age 11 and competed on the Middlebury team for two years before making the move to quit. It was a decision largely influenced by her health, and the realization that her relationship with

running had become much more toxic and much more about body than it needed to be to succeed. She didn't want to slap a name or a diagnosis on the issue she had—the names are too sharp, too rigid—but she acknowledged that she is fighting against something, one way or another.

“There's a fine line between pushing and punishing in running—and I was punishing myself. Hurting myself. And not enjoying it anymore.” Kate still runs, but she's cut back, doing it for the right reasons, when she wants to, when her body is in a good spot. Like all of us, it's a delicate relationship. But she's strong. We're all strong. It's a daily battle for nearly 95% of college-age girls and for the 30 million people diagnosed with clinical eating disorders in the United States. It's a battle that is often lost. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses. They perforate everywhere.

I used to think that anorexia was something for vain and vapid people. I used to think that only models and actresses developed eating disorders. I don't believe that anymore.

Wheels

A lot of people run to feel better. They run to power through emotion or vice or regret or hardship. We run because our lives are inherently chaotic, and our step and our breath—those are things we can control.

This, however, is not the case for her. When she runs, it's a scar. When she runs, everything must be perfect. She must win, she must go further than anyone, her stride must be perfectly symmetrical, her head level, eyes forward, dust gathering at her heels. When she runs, she slams her body against nature simply because it is in her way.

She has obsessive-compulsive disorder with a flare of manic-depression and panic-anxiety. She counts nine cucumbers with dinner, thinks Uggs are the eighth greatest sin, and believes that “free-time” is an unutilized resource that no one should waste. She talks about her life as if growing up as the daughter of two wealthy professors was unusually difficult, and falls back on the excuse of “I’m from the south” whenever she misses social cues. She loves to debate, and to be honest, it is one of her greatest skills. I used to tell her that she should be a lawyer, but I think she has since settled on psychology, like her parents:

Did you flirt with that boy last night? Her, at breakfast, the following morning.

No. Me.

You are definitely lying.

No, I'm really not.

You lied about this last week, so you're definitely lying about it now.

I don't think I've ever lied about this, I went to bed early last night.

You're the white lie queen. You're lying right now, I can tell. Like when you said you liked mustard yesterday.

I love mustard.

No, you don't.

Maybe you're thinking of mayonnaise?

No, you hate mustard. And if you're lying about condiments, how do you expect me to believe you about this boy?

You're left standing with your mouth slightly ajar wondering what happened and what you'd even been fighting about. I think she likes to wedge people into a corner, to see how they squirm and then to prod them with words as pointed as weapons. I think she does it because she gets so uncomfortable herself whenever she is around other people, and somewhere in her brain, she feels like she needs to level the playing field. If everyone around her feels as anxious and insecure and self-conscious as she does, then she isn't an outlier. Then she can contend. Then she can win.

Maybe I'm making her sound like a horrible person, but she's not. She's beautiful. She can read people's insecurities and troubles like a map, and knows exactly what to say to make their problems seem fixable, trifle, even silly. Her smile is infectious. She loves to run around in the sun and chorus *Call Me Maybe* during that period at the end of a hike when everyone is loopy and exhausted and a little high on endorphins. She helps her friends with their goals. Bad relationship with your parents? Here's what she would do. Have a problem binge-eating granola in the

dining halls? Here are twelve steps to put that in the rearview. She loves to take care of people. She loves to feel needed, necessary, important. She likes to think of herself as a good friend. And she is, when she wants to be. She is the best friend. She can be the best person.

I imagine my brain to work like a series of wheels, and as I go about my day, all of these wheels spin furiously to power everything I'm thinking about. My friends, whether my nails are painted too bright for March, if I'm going to be late to a meeting, whether or not I'll run into my crush—each thought gets its own wheel. It's exhausting and distracting to keep them all going, but managing the wheels, and finding ways to balance them all, is something that everyone must do, on some level. Just little things to turn down the volume on all of these anxieties and extraneous thoughts that spin about in your head. Just for a moment, to be able to focus on one's hands as they wipe a dish, on the papery film of a newspaper as the page turns, on one's feet slapping the pavement, entirely in the present. It is a beautiful sort of silence. Some people turn to hobbies like yoga, fitness, and meditation to turn off the wheels, while others turn to alcoholism or additional forms of self-medication. She and I run.

When I go for a run, it takes about ten minutes for the buzz of these wheels to quiet. I let my mind wander, picking through all of the wheels like clothes on a hanger, until I settle on one. Sometimes the wheel is a new novel idea, other times it's a problem I'm having with my friends or my family. That one wheel, fortified with the strength and energy usually dispersed among all, surges stronger and more quickly than it could before. With all of the other wheels quiet, I can focus so intently

on this one thought that the possibilities appear limitless. The wheel shoots me along this path, piecing together all of these thoughts and ideas, until I reach some kind of conclusion that satisfies me. Like when I have to write an assignment, I'll go on a run, and return with an outline and thesis, waiting restlessly in my head. My legs might be exhausted, but my mind is never more energetic.

She and I used to finish and expand on each other's metaphors. It was a sort of game we would play, and when I came up with the wheels analogy, she dutifully played her part. She told me that her wheels functioned differently than in most people. She has all of these same wheels, spinning just as loudly and just as quickly during the day, but she has an extra wheel that sets her apart from the rest of us. This wheel is large and greedy, tearing through her energy voraciously, overpowering her thoughts until it is all-consuming. Everything else gets drowned out, and even when she runs, this wheel spins furiously on its hinges—and it never stops. While I only get hyper-focused on any single wheel while I run, I can relax when I stop and allow all the other thoughts to stream back in. Her brain, however, always works within this hyperactive, hyper-obsessive wheel.

She knows it is there, knows it drowns out everything else going on in her head, but she can't shake it. Sometimes, she does not even acknowledge it. She can only focus on one major life pursuit at once. Whether it is a new relationship, or a new running goal, or a large academic project, she cannot do more than one at a time. So if you are not that one wheel, that one friendship that she feels like pouring all her energy into, then you get swept to the side. You don't matter.

I met her on my third day at Middlebury College. The orientation team had set up a fun run for new students, to show them the trails around the area, so I signed up. She was there, and she immediately introduced herself. She speaks animatedly and cheerfully, and when you speak, the way she tracks you with her eyes and bobs her head gives you the sense that she is actually interested in what you have to say. She was one of the first people I met at college to make me feel good about myself. Like I didn't have to feel judged for wanting to wear hoodies and jean shorts every day, or that I didn't need to feel bad for maintaining a long-distance relationship instead of drowning myself in shots of Crown Russe five nights of the week to make friends with senior guys. I could just be me.

We went running pretty frequently. She had run cross-country in high school, while I'd only picked it up the previous summer, so her short days were my long ones. She never pushed the pace, always asked lots of questions, opened up about her life in a way that people just hadn't done with me since I was home, in California. We both operated in different social circles, and she loved to give me all the details.

At the end of our freshman year, she had a breakdown. It was her birthday, we were out at a party. It was one of the first times I'd gone out with her and her "other" friends. I'm not really sure what happened. There are a lot of different accounts, a lot of different angles, and a lot of different feelings, muddled up by the three years that have passed since then.

What I do know is that I woke up at 3:46am with my phone buzzing on my bedside table. I answered and rolled out of the dorm in my pajamas to talk with campus police in the dark. She'd run away and tried to kill herself. A Public Safety

officer found her at 4:52am, sprinting up the stairs of one of the tallest buildings on campus. She'd made the mistake of buzzing into the door with her key card instead of waiting for a late-night studier to let her in. The "mistake" saved her life.

Moments like that, waking up in the middle of the night to discover in a text message that your best friend is missing, haunt you. No matter how fast that wheel spins while you're running, it can't go far enough. There isn't an answer to those kinds of feelings—there isn't a logical, step-by-step guide for how to deal with the confusion and worry and pain that comes with *not being a good enough friend to make your best friend's life worth living*. No amount of "I care about you, I love you, you're my best friend in the world and I'm so sorry that you've been feeling this way and I'm always here for you, I promise that you'll get through this and that everything will get better" quite cuts it. So you're left there, while professional psychologists and doctors and therapists try to piece your friend back together and think to yourself: isn't that my job? Is there really nothing more I can do?

She started training for a marathon that summer, after she'd started to recover. She flew out to visit me in California, and we went on this run in the hills. The ocean gleamed on one side, the Marin Headlands rolled dry and golden on the other. She told me as she charged along, just ahead of me, that she wouldn't have a lot of time, when we got back to school, to do anything other than train. At the time, I didn't really take notice. You make time for the people you care about, and I assumed that was how it would always be.

When classes started in September, I didn't really see her. Her focus had shifted from the friendship-with-me wheel to the marathon wheel, and it would

never slide back. From the marathon it would go to a boy, and than another slightly older boy, and then to running her second marathon, and then to launching a new student organization on campus. One amazing goal to the next, each time, and each time, I slid a little farther back.

Three years later, I see her around campus now, and it is as if she has never seen me a day in her life. She breezes by, in running clothes, head down, eyes forward, one new wheel, whatever that might be, overwhelming all the others.

The Fox Trail

By 8:30am, the Tennessee Valley trailhead parking lot is full. By 9:00am, cars line the shoulders of the road up to a half-mile down the road. And by 10:30am, a ranger directs traffic away and offers suggestions for alternative hikes. Tourists on Blazing Saddles rental bikes flow in and out of their lane while cars with crazy license plates tap away impatiently. It is one of those rare, sunny Saturdays in the midst of winter, and despite the mildness of the cold in San Francisco, the jump from 50°-and-foggy to 60°-and-sunny is worthy of celebration. The trail gurgles with life.

My dad and I arrive a little after 7:00am, joining the early runners and hikers that slide joyously from the parking lot to a not-so-secret beach like little colorful beads. We lace our shoes by the picnic benches, half-ass some hamstring stretches, and fiddle with Garmin watches strapped to our wrists. My dad's always finds the satellite signal before mine, the shrill beeps coming one after the other. I redo my hair for the third time, the wisps no less out of my eyes than on the last attempt. My dad pulls up his compression socks and grumbles something about his calf, hip, and left heel in that order. Today he adds a comment about his eyes, the sun shining too brilliantly for him even in the early morning.

I've been home from college only for a few days, and he's a lot more stiff than I remember. He's slower to get to the trailhead, less eager to move from stretching to moving to running. It wasn't so long ago that he was the one waking me up in the morning, pulling me out of bed to fit in five miles before work. Now I am up first,

dropping the cat on his chest to rise him out of bed before grabbing a PowerBar out of the pantry to keep him moving.

“How long are we going?” he murmurs at the trailhead, preoccupied with the strap of his watch. He knows the answer, but asks as more of a hope that I’ll prove him wrong. I point to the hill farthest from us, just as expected, where a thick band of creamy fire road slices across the dry vegetation. The Fox Trail.

Today, the trailhead is lined with orange tape, and beside the main trail entrance stands a shaded Powerade booth advertising the Marin Ultra Challenge. It’s a 50-mile race that snakes from the Golden Gate Bridge north through the Marin Headlands and then to Mount Tamalpais. It’s a small race, catering to the elite of the elite, that goes on quietly and without much press attention every March. The course crosses the Tennessee Valley Trail in several spots, marked by little orange signs, before continuing toward Point Reyes.

My dad approaches the booth, as eager for a way to put off the large stretch of rocky elevation staring at us from across the valley as he is to find out what the fuss is about. As he strikes up a conversation with one of the neon-clad race volunteers, a wiry man rips through the parking lot from an adjoining trail and flashes by us. His shorts cling to his upper thighs, feet barely brushing the ground in his long, deer-like strides, a small Camelback lashed to his back tightly. Severe orange sunglasses shield his eyes from view before he disappears as quickly as he came down another side trail.

“Water?” falters a race volunteer. She shrugs to herself when the runner doesn’t reply and returns to my dad.

“That’s Dean for ya,” she informs him, tipping back the paper cup she had intended for the runner into her own throat. A subtle giddiness in her tone says we should know what the name means. I perk up.

“Karnazes,” she responds to my look, nodding proudly. Dean Karnazes, the Ultramarathon Man, and the only ultramarathoner I’d ever heard of. He wrote a book about his experiences running fifty marathons in fifty states in fifty days—a book that both popularized the marathon as well as rocketed his name into relative fame. My shoulders fall slightly.

A lot of the “real” ultramarathoners—the guys and gals running for hours on end with or without the draw of the spotlight—shake their heads at Dean’s name. Although Karnazes’ achievements are jaw-dropping to us civilians, many hardcore runners believe that he is taking credit for things that other athletes have not only done better and faster than him, but also long before him too. He’s in to running for the profits, for the fame, and for the business of it—something that, within a community of people who are more often driven by self-actualization and happiness, is far less honorable. I’m far from being an ultra runner myself, but I tend to agree with them.

“The Dean attention can hurt athletes like myself and other individuals performing well,” explains rising ultra star Scott Jurek in an interview. “There are athletes like us doing all kinds of amazing things and somebody else is walking around and actually accepting these titles and awards . . . This is a prime example of how a lot of media is working in this country these days, grabbing onto somebody

who has a great publicity machine, great sponsors and media outlets. I would rather earn my titles and the recognition I deserve out on the race course.”

Scott has a point. For me, running has always been a wildly personal thing. Run when you feel like it, go for however long seems best at the time, push yourself for the personal fulfillment of accomplishment, and never stop exploring. I’m competitive, but mostly with myself. I don’t care about fame, and I certainly don’t care about the money, but I like to push myself. And I enjoy getting a t-shirt and a finisher’s medal at the end of a race like any other amateur. Beyond that, it has never occurred to me as being something worth turning into a business. Yet that’s exactly what Dean has done.

The International Association of Ultramarathoning (IAU) was recognized for the first time in the 1980s, but it wasn’t until even more recently—when characters like Dean came into the spotlight—that ultramarathons and marathons became as popular as they are today. Thanks largely to Dean’s *Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner* as well as Christopher McDougall’s acclaimed *Born to Run* (2009), there has been over a 210% increase in marathon race participation since 2008. I want to add my name to that growing list.

Back at the trailhead, my dad and I tuck into our own pace. My father is slow to warm up, and we weave through strollers and families before finding where the Fox Trail branches off from the main trail. The trail rolls along next to a creek before, without hesitating, launches up the side of a hill toward the ridge. Loose stones make the steep slope slick and sinister. From the bottom, the sun barely pokes over the top of the ridge, dousing the dust in shadow.

It takes us about ten minutes to scramble over the crest to the ridge. My dad trots ahead while I linger to catch my breath, allowing myself a moment to feel the pride of reaching the summit before tumbling along after him. I'm lucky, and I think a lot about that luck when I run. I'm lucky to be born in a time and a place where female athletes flourish. Yeah, women might not get as much recognition or respect or sponsors as male athletes, but at least we can get out there. At least we can have dreams and hopes and accomplishments and work our tails off and feel like there's actually somewhere we can go with it all. We can make something of ourselves as athletes, feminists, equals, or at least part of the movement to get to that point. It's empowering, beautiful, simple. On the trail, my feet pound against the earth in sneakers designed for women, my clothes meant to hug curves in a way that is both breathable and fashionable, my head crammed with facts about form from my coaches of the past.

One of the first recorded trail running dates back to 1968 in Braemar, Scotland, nearly 75 miles north of Edinburgh, Scotland. King Malcolm II needed a reliable post system and used a race up the 1764-foot Creag Choinnich hill as a sort of job interview. The first runner to reach the top and raise a standard won, and it became a sort of tradition. The race was for men only, until an Irish hero of lore by the name of Fionn mac Cumhaill decided to stage a women-only race to find himself a wife. A woman named Deirdre won, but upon finding that Fionn was an old and slimy sort of creature, she eloped to be with her younger, and more attractive, lover. Not too much is known about Deirdre, but she seems like the kind of running female role model I can get behind.

Back on the trail, I catch my dad just as he slows to a walk. His hip is bothering him again, and he agrees to take a shortcut while I go on for a longer loop and meet me at the beach. Many months later, he will undergo hip replacement to solve his hip problem, but at that point we both disregard it as a tight IT band. Pretty soon he's far behind me as I hurry off into the hills, the whispering of the wind in the grass and the crunch of gravel underfoot as my only music. It is a sweet song, and the ocean glimmering along to the west adds a silent, harmonizing note. I enjoy the isolation of it, the liberty of the step, as free as my mind.

My dad appears as a smudge on the ridge behind me. I keep him in my peripheral, even as he starts down the single track toward the beach below. He has never quite connected with me beyond the realm of sports, even now. As a kid, it was only through soccer and softball that we ever became close. Beyond that, I find he retells a lot of stories he reads or hears from other people. It's interesting, but sometimes I just want him to tell me what's really going on in his head. To tell me what he's scared of, or what he's unhappy with, or that he cares about whether I come home for my breaks from college or not, or if he thinks about me at all. I know he does, but sometimes I just want that reaffirmation. He's hard to read. I think he always wanted a tough and athletic, super-star son to go along in his footsteps, and he got me instead. I did my best to fulfill that role. Run faster, work longer, eat better, try harder. But there's only so far I can go, only so much I can do, because I'm not a boy. I'm a daughter. And as much as I hate to say it, that gender barrier is just that, a barrier. And I can't get over it—nor can he.

As recently as 1967, female marathoner Kathrine Switzer was banned by the Amateur Athletic Union after registering for the Boston Marathon under a male name. Although race officials attempted to pull her off of the course during the race, her boyfriend body blocked them, and she managed to finish in 4:20. She was still banned. And sports bras? They weren't invented until 1977. And it wasn't until 1984 that the women's Olympic Marathon made its debut in the Los Angeles Summer Olympics when American runner Joan Benoit became the first ever female gold medalist in the event. Those days are only a breath behind me. Today I sprint up the hill without thought, the Nike Women's Marathon registration receipt glowing in my email inbox.

I reach the beach just as my dad is hitting the sand, and we both take a turn walking across the sand. At this time in the morning, we are joined mostly by other runners and early risers. The sand is dark and grainy, the slope into the snarling waves steep and unforgiving. Large cliffs of sandstone, a dark rusty color, loom on either side. We sit down somewhere in the middle and listen. My heart hasn't yet quieted, and it thumps in a way not quiet timed with the waves.

The Seawall

Each morning in Wooli, Australia, I left the house without a clear intention for where I would go, but only a comfort in the knowledge that I would, somehow, end my run at the sea wall. I would roll out of bed, swallow down some coffee, stretch, and slide out the back door.

I laced up my shoes in the gravel driveway, the morning glazed over in pinks and oranges, a dreaminess no more awake than I was. Black cockatoos screamed from the palm fronds and streamed through the air in threes. And then I was off, shaking the sleep off with each step. My ankles and shoulders crackled and released. I jogged down and across the dirt road in front of the house, up and over the sand dune, through the scowling bushes, then down onto the beach. The sand glowed like a crescent moon, the sun just pulling itself up over the horizon.

I'd spent my whole life on the California coast, looking west over the Pacific.



Now that I'd come to this little Australian town as a student, I was looking at it from the east, for the first time. I was there as part of my study abroad program—alone for five weeks in a town in which

the average age was in the sixties. I was the only American and practically the only young person. Wooli is a fishing town of roughly 400 people, tucked away at the end

of a small peninsula separating the Wooli River from the ocean. It is surrounded by untouched and somewhat dangerous National Park lands, and the nearest town with a grocery store is fifty minutes away by car. Wooli serves as a vacation spot for Australians during the holiday season, and most of the homes remain empty for the majority of the year. I arrived with just my suitcase, my homestay mother kind enough to drop me off before handing me the keys to her second home.

“Enjoy!” she’s chirped promptly before speeding away in her truck. The house was perfect—small, refurbished kitchen, yellow floral decorations right out of the seventies, and a fluffy king sized bed just for me. The beach right on the other side of the dune, the river glistening out the kitchen window. I romanticized it at first. While so many other students bounced off to internships and jobs on farms and projects in cities during that part of the semester, I squirreled myself away to the bush. I spent the majority of my first week regretting my decision. The first night I took a shower, found a giant toad behind the shampoo, and broke down in tears.

So I went on a run that morning, my first morning, to catch the sunrise. I tumbled down onto the sand, leaping up and down through the drifts toward the water. The beach stretched for eleven miles to either side, a creamy crescent moon welcoming the warmth of morning rays. My feet sunk into the sand like soft fabric, the water nibbling at the shells alongside me. Gulls turned lurching figures overhead while the black Sheerwater birds sliced across the waves and surfing along the updrafts. The air hummed and the sun rose. I turned south and ran along the lingering line of wet sand, then removed my shoes, walked, and ran again. There

were no toads on the beach, nor any Huntsman spiders to run at my ankles, nor anyone other than me and my own footprints to guide me.

I talked to myself, sometimes, when I was on these runs. Just to check in, see what's up. Sometimes I'd have conversations at people too—friends, exes, family members, halfway across the globe. All the things I wanted to say, couldn't say, might never say. No one was there to hear me, but saying it out loud made the thoughts real, and once they were real, I could let them go. I would just walk along with my hands in my pockets and spoke openly, without a filter. Sometimes I liked what I said. Other times, I would scream at the clouds until I had no words left to say.

Once the sea wall began to take shape against the southern horizon, I always quieted down and sped up. The sand shifted from a silky cream color to a harsher gray, the grains audible underfoot. The dunes that separated the beach from the main strip of the peninsula flattened and the trees thinned and were replaced by stubborn shrubs and weeds. The river just beyond snaked into view—a sapphire, crystalline blue with black swans drifting upstream, paddling along with crimson feet. Beyond, the giant sand hills and rusty forests of Yuraygir National Park lingered and disappeared out of sight.

And still the sea wall loomed into view—a great wall of giant stones, piled on top of each other, jutting out into the frothing surf and shielding the channel for passing boats. Little figures crouched along the edges, plenty of room in between, tending to buckets of bait and bobbing lines. At the end of the wall, a flag pole looms

proudly, the banner of New South Wales quivering in the wind. I reached the rocks, touching one with my hand, then doubled back for home.

I was in paradise, yet that first week in Wooli dragged. I had never lived on my own before, and the reality of it terrified me. Even at Middlebury, everything is structured and convenient—meals prepared, friends next door, classes to keep me occupied and my family just a phone call away. People check in and go looking for you if you skip a meeting. In Wooli, no one would go looking. If I wanted to do something, I had to make it happen myself. I had to harass a neighbor to drive me in to town if I ran out of food, or schmooze with the older lady at the post office for directions if I wanted to hike. I had always considered myself somewhat of a follower—I find that my friends always have great ideas, and letting them plan just takes the pressure off. But now it was just me—my own leader, and who was this Emily when she is all by her lonesome? No one knew who I was, let alone care enough about me to make sure I was alive. It made me feel cast off. I had never realized how much I had defined my own self based on the people I surround myself with, and the isolation made me turn inward. I became my own companion, and at first I faltered.

I would end my runs at the seawall and end my days in my own bed with my laptop on my stomach, streaming Skype calls and American television. I struggled most with the nights. The old windows of the house would hum during the windy nights, and the doors would rattle on their hinges. The dark swallowed me, and I would go to bed with just a touch of anxiety, ready to flee at a moment's notice. But during the days, I flourished—I wrote stories, practiced yoga on the beach,

started painting again. I soaked up the sunshine, read in the yard, and went on walks into the bush.

Although I craved for someone to share all of Wooli with, there was a certain pride in the individuality of my experiences, and in knowing that my little piece of Wooli was a one of a kind sort of thing. No American had ever waltzed into town quite like I did, and I think locals will still remember my fleeting little presence, hopefully with fondness. Something, however, was still off. Despite the paradise of it, I was lonely. Not unhappy, but not quite happy either—simply existing, enjoying the present, yet always wary of my isolation.

The next morning, I picked up the phone and called Kate, my homestay sister, and Maureen's daughter who lived in a town called the Channon several hours away. In her usual brusque fashion, she told me plainly that I needed to 'loosen up, drink some goon at the pub, and make friends the old fashion way'. When I stayed silent on the line, she chuckled and gave me the number of someone to call.

Although I'm terribly uncomfortable around strangers, fortunately that "someone" ended up being her uncle, Peter Saye, who lived with his own family in Wooli, five minutes away from my temporary abode. Kate made the call, and shortly thereafter, I was invited over for dinner at the Saye household.

Peter's wife Brenda opened the door—a willowy woman whom I learned to be as prone to gossip as she was to exaggeration, and their daughter Kelly, who was my age, hopped out from behind her. They ushered me out to the back porch, where Peter manned the grill. I plopped into a chair, a glass of wine fell into my hand, and a shrimp cocktail pushed in front of me. Everyone beamed, smiled, genuinely engaged.

Kelly peppered me with questions about living in the States, and Brenda punctuated fits of excited babble with trips to smoke cigarettes. Peter rubbed his belly and rambled about four-wheeling through the Park, and about running into dingos and boars on his bike. They saw that I wanted to know about their world, so they flung open the doors and pulled me right inside.

Beer flowed freely while we ate, the stars twinkled across the river, and the black swans rustled along the riverbank with the cicadas. The Sayes were the first people who didn't question my presence in Wooli. They didn't make me defend my decision or try to explain what had compelled me to go to such lengths to be on my own. They didn't because they had made nearly the same decision. We'd all started off in different corners of the world, yet had all ended up in this little fishing town, where the buildings looked like they would fall apart at any minute, where the only place to buy food sold exclusively raw fish or French fries, and where, on a warm good day, you could walk out onto the beach in the sunshine and have bliss all to yourself.

I set out to Wooli because I wanted to terrify myself. I *wanted* to push myself beyond my comfort zone and to see if I could live in this little pocket of sunshine in the middle of the wilderness. I wanted to have an amazing time, to show myself and everyone else in my life that I was a strong and capable and creative little person. But mostly, I wanted to step back from the whirl of the real world, to whisk myself away from the globalized, fast-paced jargon of the world I was used to. I wanted to go to a place where everything happened just a touch slower. I needed to breathe.

The Saye family knew all of this about me, just by looking at me. Most of Wooli understood it, for that matter. They welcomed me right in like some lost sibling who had finally found her way. And after a couple hours of banter at the dinner table, Kelly and I were attached at the hip, Brenda decided on the spot to adopt me for the month, and Peter promised in his stoic grumbling way to take me out on his boat, whenever I so desired.

That night, I threaded my way home barefoot, shoes swinging in my hand. I nearly cried for joy, and was asleep right upon hitting the pillow. Three years later, I still get regular letters from all three of them, and a picture of me, Kelly, and the family dog hangs over my bed at Middlebury.

Several days later, while Kelly was at school, I ran to the sea wall at low tide. We'd gone on hikes and adventures and surfing trips with her family, and had even more on the schedule. On the run, my pace soared, my knees felt fresh and oiled, my skin tanned to the point of glow. The pelicans were out that day, clustering around the end of the wall, chuckling loudly as the sun, like the fishermen, beamed at them. I clambered over the rocks until I reached the thin trodden path that ran along the ridge of the wall out toward sea. I tiptoed on. The water roared around me, pounding on all sides, all the fury of the Pacific bent on knocking me down. A riptide screamed to my left, the entrance to the channel a battle ground between river and sea, a clash of salt and fresh waters slashing away at each other in ribbons of green and turquoise. I passed fisherman reeling in their catch while a dinky boat putted away from shore. The wind stung my face, chilling the sweat that clung to the edges

of my face like ice. At sea, past the wavering ocean, the several islands nestled into the horizon like misshapen old horns.

I reached the flagpole and wrapped my hands around it. Salt had weathered away at its surface until it was as rough as gravel. I exhaled, holding my gaze for just a moment as the sun dwindled toward the islands, then turned and jogged back toward town.