

## **Run for Your Life**

“You wanna try to pace this time?” Ryan asked, adjusting his watch as the team got ready. The runners around them were taking last drinks out of bottles, and attaching or removing pieces of clothing.

“We'll see how this goes. I'm usually good at distance, but its been a while since I ran ten miles.” Spencer admitted.

The two of them started their watches.

“Lets do this shit!” Randal yelled, the twenty or so people following him.

The run started well at least. The initial parts of it snaked through the town, running up the dreaded hill and coming back down the other side, but since it was early everyone managed it fairly well. JV slipped behind pretty quickly, and by the second mile they were down to the ten or so people in varsity.

In front of him was a smaller subgroup within varsity, comprising of Randal and the rest the people who actually placed. The distance between them and the rest of the team was small now, but Spencer knew that it would only grow as the night progressed.

The town was depressingly silent. Pale moonlit clouds hung over the mostly dark houses. The suburb had become a common spot for rich families from the city escaping the summer heat of the baking streets, and he knew that not all of the houses were even occupied at this time of year. And so, it was mostly on empty buildings that the moonlight illuminated as that orb revealed itself on the streets of the town. Despite himself, Spencer had to look up as the clouds parted.

It really was quite beautiful the way it simply hung there in the sky. He could make out the details of craters and darker areas all around the orb. Its majesty was so incredible, it was hard to believe that all that light was actually reflected.

Well, it wasn't quite a full moon. He stared up as he ran, focusing on the celestial body, free to run down the center of the deserted streets. There was a bit of it missing, which kind of spoiled the perfection of the scene.

He shook his head and looked back to the group. Sure enough, Randal and the rest of super varsity had put some distance on them, probably because of his day dreaming. Even Ryan was a bit ahead of him.

He turned back and was surprised to see that none of the other runners could be seen. Was JV really that far behind? And where was the rest of slower varsity?

Ah, no matter. Plus there were better things to worry about. Like how Ryan was still gaining on Randal's group. I guess he really wants to be part of varsity. All the more power to him. He'll regret that in a couple of miles when he cramps up.

And then it hit him.

“Fuck me.” He yelled, grabbing his side in surprise and pain. Ryan and the rest continued off into the distance.

“Fucking hell!” He cried, slowing to a crawl. Something had shifted in his stomach or intestines, and now it was positioned poorly for running. He had no idea what physically made a cramp hurt, but it sure felt like part of his left side had just been atomized by a particularly painful laser.

He grabbed his side harder and tried to focus on something else. Yet now, the night was irrevocably tainted. The moonlight was too harsh in its shadows, the black shadows of trees rustling chaotically in the silver light. The weather just a bit too warm: his breath seemed to cling to his mouth, as if a bubble of exhalation was stuck right up against his face. He was almost five miles in, and his clothes were covered in sweat, the exterior of his body freezing where the shirt touched his skin, which was hot as fire.

The street stretched long in front of him, silent and empty; the rest of the group had left him in the dust.

He continued on, feeling like a small section of his side was being surgically removed by red hot salad tongs. Sweat ran down his face as he tried to mentally compensate for the overwhelming pain. He ran around a bend and stared down the street. The road came to a stop.

Ahead, a dark expanse of forest rose above him, at the edge of the road was a small white fence, the entrance of which was open and shining in the light. Beyond it, a path continued into the woods, although it transformed into gravel a short ways in.

Right. This was the path around the lake. But was this the right way?

A quick look behind him revealed no one; he still outpaced JV, a fact which didn't console him in the slightest.

He wiped sweat out of his eyes as he jogged down the path. The momentary change in thought had given him a reprieve from his side, confirming what he had always thought, which was that cramps were somehow tyrannically psychosomatic in some way.

Yet of course, no sooner had the thought gone through his head then the pain returned, somehow deeper and harsher than before.

Fuck! Through the god damn lake path it was! Ten miles is ten miles, even if it isn't the way everyone else went.

He came up to the end of the street, his pacers thwacking against the pavement, before rising briefly to get over the curb onto the gravel path.

His feet crunched on the stones, his legs adjusting to the new terrain. In front of him the path went further inward, until presumably it turned to run parallel to the water.

After a few moments, and two or three surges of new found pain in his side, he came out onto the lake. It stretched almost half a mile or so outwards, its mostly still surface reflecting the moonlight off its depths. If he hadn't been in complete agony, it might have been beautiful.

He was inhaling manually now. From experience, breathing in slowly and over many footsteps lessened the effect of the cramp somehow, and so he found himself sucking in air, trying his hardest to focus on anything other than the intense pain.

Minutes ran glacially by. His feet hit the ground again and again, the pain in his side ebbing then returning.

The path turned to packed dirt beneath his feet and lowered by a foot or so in a quick dip which disturbed his cadence.

No sooner had it done so than a puddle appeared right in his path. Annoyed, he ran to its side, only to be presented by another.

Frowning, he continued on the degraded trail, trying his best to keep his feet dry, an attempt that lasted all of five minutes. Beside him, the lake distanced itself from the path and ducked behind tall reeds which obscured it from view. The increased wetness took to the air as well. Cold sheaths of fog hung close to the ground, off to the side of the path and on the lake itself. For the first time in the run he heard sounds other than his team or himself.

Off to his side an insect sounded, a loud cheeping noise that continued on and off. The sound was joined by others, until they were all around him as the path ran through the marshy area. Frogs joined the symphony with their dull croaks.

His feet pounded the ground, splashing the mud onto his shoes and legs, their now wet soles slapping against the ground. Yet as he listened to them, he realized that something was off about the sound.

In some bizarre cognitive dissonance, his physical footsteps didn't seem to line up with what he was hearing. It took him only a moment to realize that he was actually hearing two pairs of steps, only slightly out of synch.

God damn it! He really had screwed this run up hard if JV was catching up to him. Who was leading them again? Partha? Of course. She was almost as good a runner as he. She must have left the other suckers in the dust if she had caught up to him.

Well, at the very least it meant he was on the right path.

Pain momentarily gone, his competitive nature rose inside him and, using the sound of the footsteps, he tried to pull ahead of Partha. He pumped his arms and did his best to look upwards at the slowly waving tree branches above him. He could totally do this.

Yet, not five minutes later, he realized that Partha had matched him. That was to be expected, they still had at least four more miles to go, and the easiest way to get a good time would be to pace off someone else until the last mile or so, and then pull ahead, which was probably what Partha was trying to do.

However, Spencer was never one to enjoy matching pace with someone else. If you did that, there was always the chance that they would, as they planned, pull ahead at some point in the future. And that was important, because there was a huge psychological advantage in passing someone.

Fortunately, there was also a morale boost in leaving someone else in the dust. Spencer smiled somewhat. Partha was varsity, but certainly slower than him. He picked up his pace, tearing through the darkened path.

The world was forest and moonlight, shadows running across gravel, the briefest hint of water reflecting light in the reeds next to the path, breathing, sweat, footfalls and of course, the dull simmer of pain lingering right beneath the surface.

He listened harder again, satisfied that he had outpaced her.

It took a moment to get the proper read on the footfalls, but after a moment of listening, he realized they were still in line with his own. That meant she had kept up with him!

A frown ran across his face and he looked backward. Maybe they could run together if she was going to go all out...

The dark path looked foreign as it disappeared behind him, only the smallest trace of his footsteps in the thin mud told him that he had once been there. The trees were getting thicker overhead and he had a hard time making out anything in the darkness behind him, especially as he was running.

Well, this certainly wasn't the outcome he wanted, but he was willing to run with her, especially if she didn't hold him back.

He listened for the eventual sprint that would come when she closed properly.

Yet as he listened, he noticed something odd about the footsteps. He had been running on the packed dirt now for what should have been at least a mile or more, and had gotten used to his own feet hitting the hard packed dirt and occasional mud. It made a distinct sound, the impacts low in tone due to the dirt absorbing most of the sound as opposed to when they had been on the asphalt. Yet the sound of the other set of footsteps behind him was more of a slapping sound, as if the person were running with incorrect posture or with soaked shoes.

While this thought was going through his head, an opening appeared in the reeds, if only for a second.

Ice ran through his veins, his eyes widened, his heart raced, and the world slowed to a crawl. He was suspended in time, with his footsteps hitting the mud beneath him. A sudden and animalistic fear ran through him. For across the lake, illuminated briefly by a streetlight on the other side, was the unmistakable form of JV.

He wrenched his head backwards and stared in fear at the footsteps following him. They continued, twacking wetly against the mud. The darkness shifted and shimmered in the moonlight, never quite allowing him to see far enough.

He was on the wrong side of the lake! The run had gone around the lake but he was on the wrong side! If he was on the wrong side then who was following him, and why did their footsteps sound so off, like someone running barefoot? If it was another varsity runner, how had they gotten behind him? If it wasn't, and it was another person, what were they doing running after him?!

His brain raced wildly as he sped up. There had been some stories in the paper about some crime lately, nothing too serious, but the town had certainly seen better days. A shocked realization ran through his mind.

There was no one around. There were no lights, no cars. There was plenty of brush nearby and of

course the lake itself. Oh god, hey were going to mug him! How could he have been so stupid? They were going to get him!

Pain completely and suddenly suppressed by adrenaline laced fear, he pulled ahead, his feet racing over the mud, the warm air cloying at his mouth.

And yet he could not shake the footfalls behind him.

Who could do that? Not some random homeless person or drifter; they had kept up with him for what was now surely two miles and he was sure that by this point they were running under a seven minute mile. Crazy Joe off the street couldn't do that right?

The footfalls slapped behind him, sounding closer.

And it wasn't just the footfalls. It was other sounds as well. The insect hum had risen to a new high, a constant buzz all around him. Deep beneath them, the frogs had taken on a constant barrage of calls. And other sounds as well, long plaintive cries of some bird or other creature, the chattering of what could have been squirrels, and some sort of deeper humming? He had no idea what kind of animal that was...

The path straightened and revealed a long empty straight away. The footfalls sounded louder behind him.

He suddenly felt very alone. He wished for, begged for another opening in the trees so that he could call out to the group across the lake, but the trees and marsh were uncooperative and he was afraid of calling out and having no one answer him.

And he was the only person here.

If possible, his fear increased in a single nonsensical yet unshakable thought. What if he *were* the only person here.

If he was the only person here, then the thing behind him, the thing that had been following him was...

He could see it now in his mind; a mind which had nothing to do for the last five miles, having ample time to hone its imagination: something following him, its footsteps smacking against the mud because of its webbed feet and wet from crawling silently from the lake. Scaly yet slimy skin of a kind known to animal rather than man, yet running implacably on two legs in some horrible mockery of human form. Better than human, the thing was superhuman, its skin stretched tightly over bulging deformed muscles, shifting grotesquely as it sprinted.

Sweat poured off his face as he now broke into a sprint, having fully formed in his mind what must be coming after him. He dashed through fog lying on the ground, through mud which sucked at his shoes, trying to grab them as he ran, through wet warm air, choking his breath.

The footfalls sounded closer. They were real. He could hear them. Thwack, thwack, like someone wearing divers fins, yet impossibly quick.

There was no escaping it!

A cry sounded from the forest beside him, a sudden piercing yell sounding disturbingly like a woman screaming. His mind didn't have enough time to process the call before it was gone, its impression and the steady thwack of footsteps the only things left in his head.

It was gaining on him.

The pain, gone for so long finally returned, piercing his side like a lance of pure agony. He clutched the area forcibly, gathering the flesh of his side into his grasping hand, desperate to run quicker, faster, somehow!

It felt like the upper half of his body was being separated from his lower half by jaws made of pure fire, reverberating outward and backward through his back. He was bent over now, still sprinting as best as he could, even through the pain.

The thwacking sounds stopped.

Fear and uncertainty ran through him for a brief moment. Perhaps he had finally outran it? Perhaps it had given up the chase?

He turned his head to look behind.

---

Partha jerked up suddenly as a strange and disturbing sound came from across the lake. Grabbed from her own thoughts, she nearly jumped in shock.

“What the hell was that?” She exclaimed to the JV members still following behind her.

One of them cracked a grin and wiped their forehead. “Ha, that? Its a fox! Crazy though huh? It really sounds like a person doesn't it?”

Partha listened for a second call. But none came as she continued running along the well lit path on the other side of the lake.

“Are you sure? That sounded pretty... real” She said, breathing during the question, half out of necessity and half out of discomfort.

“No, I'm pretty sure. It was just a fox. The only thing we have to worry about finishing this damn run.” The JV member said with a laugh.

“Huh...yeah.” Partha said with a faked grin of her own, as she recalled the cry.

“Yeah... just a fox...”