

3.

The Morning Run

ON THE THIRD FLOOR of Doobey Hall was the room in which Dick Doobey had slept as a child. Now its battered oak door held two three-by-five index cards neatly thumbtacked one atop the other.

The top one said in Smith Corona pica:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run—
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

—Rudyard Kipling, 1892

The other card read:

Rudyard Kipling was a 4:30 miler.

—Quenton Cassidy, 1969

Inside the room, the one true Quenton Cassidy slept fitfully as dawn approached. In a damp orb of his own worst fears, he nightmared with a certain grace. It was an old and familiar theme with him: the last lap of a footrace found him being soundly thrashed by every man on the track. He was running in peanut butter up to his waist as they all glided by easily. He tried to use his hands to grab something to propel himself along, but it was useless. What was wrong here? Was his training inadequate? Where was his kick?

Mercifully, he awoke. Before the alarm, moist from his fretting, but forgetting the dream quickly. He sat on the edge of the bed wiggling his toes thoughtfully as the cobwebs of anxiety slowly melted away in his shaggy head. In the waking world his whole being centered around covering ground quickly on foot. At this he really had no equals save a few dozen others scattered about the country and world who also woke to such disquieting dreams. Quenton Cassidy knew every one of them by name.

Wearing only the weightless nylon shorts he slept in, he ambled stiffly to the dawn-lit window and stood momentarily, drowsily enjoying the pale orange-yellow glow that suffused the blackjack oaks outside his room. A slight breeze was chilly enough to raise goose bumps on sleep-warm flesh. He did not much like this early morning business, but the idea of forgoing it, even for one morning, never crossed his mind.

Quenton Cassidy was six foot two, his meager 167 pounds stretched across his frame in the manner dictated by the searing daily necessities of his special task. Beneath the tight skin, a smooth musculature glided with fluid ease, giving the impression of elastic, lightweight power: a featherless view of a young falcon.

There were no inefficient corners or bulges; the form was

sharply chiseled as if from sand-worn driftwood, fluted with oblique angles and long, tapering ridges, thin products of his care. Even now, as he stood perfectly still in the early morning glow, inverted-teardrop thighs and high bunched calves suggested only motion: smooth effortless speed.

Stretching with a lovely kind of pain, he turned from the window and sat again on the edge of the rumpled bed to put on his worn Adidas Gazelle training shoes. His face was ruddy, even in the soft light, with a Scandinavian nose and sharp cheekbones; its attractiveness was debatable. Ragged brownish hair, bleached by hours of sun, tumbled in no particular pattern as he double-knotted his shoes. He washed his hands in the sink (the shoelaces, repositories of ancient sweat, smelled like something that had died behind the refrigerator) and with a grunt he was out the door and gone.

Quenton Cassidy was a miler.

OUT IN THE EARLY MORNING STREETS, the small group of runners made its way down University Avenue and turned north on Thirty-fourth Street; they would traverse a large seven-mile square known interchangeably as "the Morning Loop," "the Seven-Mile Course," or "the Bacon Strip" (for a series of undulating hills). Cassidy ran in the back of the pack with a loose stride that approached awkwardness. For a miler the 6:30 pace was a stumble, but with his accumulated fatigue he wanted nothing more challenging. He chatted quietly with Jerry Mizner, a thinner and darker runner who had the look of a true distance man. He and Cassidy had been through what they now called the "Trial of Miles." As with shipwreck survivors, hostages, and others in dire circumstances, duress fosters an unsentimental kind of intimacy. At times Cassidy and Mizner seemed to be able to read each other's minds.

"I don't think it can be done, really," Mizner said.

"It's absolutely true. I can sleep for at least the first half mile. I'm sure of it. They say soldiers can march when—"

"Nah . . ."

"Well, it *feels* like I'm sleeping, that's good enough for me."

"Feeling and doing are different. Plato said that. Or Hugh Hefner. One of the philosophers anyway."

For Cassidy there was no joy at all in this morning routine. He slept hard and woke slowly. The morning people who claimed to like these dawn-lit forays really annoyed him. But the gentle conversation made it easier, a social occasion of sorts, for just as rank has its privileges so indeed does the barely comprehensible conditioning of good distance runners. They gab like magpies.

At paces that might stun and dismay the religious jogger, the runners easily kept up all manner of chatter and horseplay. When they occasionally blew by a huffing fatty or an aging road runner, they automatically toned down the banter to avoid overwhelming, to preclude the appearance of showboating (not that they slowed in the slightest). They in fact respected these distant cousins of the spirit, who, among all people, had some modicum of insight into their own milieu. But the runners resembled them only in the sense that a puma resembles a pussycat. It is the difference between stretching lazily on the carpet and prowling the jungle for fresh red meat.

"I suppose we'll soon know who's nice and rested from the weekend," Cassidy said. They were nearing the halfway point.

"Three guesses," said Mizner.

Despite the standing prohibition against racing during long runs, a practice that rapidly got out of hand, a younger runner would occasionally light out for cheap glory.

"Get a load," Cassidy said, gesturing ahead. Mizner looked up and gave Cassidy a grin and an I'll-be-fugged shrug.

"Monday Morning Scalders," Mizner said jauntily. The reference was to Jack Nubbins, twenty yards ahead of the group and still pressing. A promising freshman from the scrub-pine terri-

tory north of Orlando, he had been courted by a number of schools until his transcript revealed some troubling deficiencies. When Nubbins arrived at Southeastern on probationary status, he proceeded to tell his other first-year colleagues at Doobey Hall: "Nubbins is the name and I cut the mile in 4:12.3 but I ride a horse better'n that, an' in the fall I hunt wild hog with my granddaddy, sometimes employin' a whepon, sometimes not. Nice ta meetcha."

The other runners, albeit distance men and accustomed to a certain amount of weirdness, judged him loony as a gull and fascinating as all get-out. Cassidy liked him okay, but thought he laughed too loud and got too much mileage out of idioms like "hog-tied" and "gut-shot." Additionally, he appeared to lack a certain . . . *respect*.

"I don't think he is going to be able to restrain himself this morning," Cassidy muttered irritably. Some of the other runners were trying to pick up the pace to catch Nubbins and the group was starting to string out. The unspoken rule against racing had a sanction: those who persisted at it might well find themselves in a death match with an upperclassman.

"You did twenty-seven yesterday, didn't you?" Cassidy said.

"Yup."

"You wouldn't want to come along anyway, would you? Just for grins?"

"Nope."

"That's what I thought. See ya."

"See ya."

NUBBINS HAD BEEN A PRODIGY in high school; he had indeed run the mile in 4:12 and had very nearly broken 9:00 for two miles. These were impressive accomplishments for a schoolboy athlete and gave Nubbins unarguable status among his young peers. A strong runner such as he, unfettered by a sense of unity and left

unrestrained, would simply destroy most of his teammates. Soon he would represent to them the pinnacle, the ultimate competitor; he would forever be the ceiling of their accomplishment. If his were a certain kind of personality, he would accept this responsibility with love and great modesty. As long as he was undisputedly their vanquisher, he would laugh and joke with them and pound their backs in ribald camaraderie; then daily on the trails or roads or track, he would casually stomp them into submission. Mizner called it the "Top Dog Syndrome."

Everyone was competitive with his fellows to a certain extent; being bested in a daily workout by one's teammates did not portend well for the time when one went out to take on the rest of the world. But Cassidy was trying to bring the younger runners along without resorting to humbling daily comparisons. He was stronger than they were; he wanted them to know it, but not to dwell on it. There is time, he would tell them; time and time and time. He wanted to impart some of the truths Bruce Denton had taught him, that you don't become a champion by winning a morning workout. The only true way is to marshal the ferocity of your ambition over the course of many days, weeks, months, and (if you could finally come to accept it) years. The Trial of Miles; Miles of Trials. How could he make them understand?

Nubbins was nowhere near a slouch. He was fast and courageous and mentally tough and he had nine state high school titles to prove it. Like all good runners, he gave away nothing. Cassidy knew he had long taken winning for granted, that he was accustomed to looking over at an opponent with a kind of detached pity and then surging off with great style.

The gradual sense of despair Nubbins now felt was a new and discomfiting experience. He had never run with a nonnegotiable shadow before. He picked it up just a tad more, but Quenton Cassidy (his T-shirt read: GAUNT IS BEAUTIFUL) just looked over and smiled back pleasantly.

"You feeling pretty good, Jack?" Cassidy asked on the exhale.

"Not too bad, I reckon." Nubbins tried to grin.

"Good," Cassidy said, as he kicked the pace down about ten seconds a mile. A minute later, just as Nubbins was almost accustomed to the now alarming pace, Cassidy threw in a thirty-two-second 220. They were now all but sprinting along the early morning sidewalk. Nubbins's face was both tight and pale. His expression said that he was a man with a problem.

They flew along at sub-five-minute pace, quite fast enough to startle pedestrians. They blew into the last mile, came upon and passed on either side of a sleepy coed bound for first-period class: reams of biology notes filled the air.

MIZNER TROTTED UP to the front porch steps of Doobey Hall where Cassidy sagged in repose.

"Well," he said, "is he a believer yet?"

"Hell if I know. Jeez, he's a tough little bastard. Next time you take him. Did you see him back there anywhere?"

"Yeah, passed him half a mile back. Said he was turning off to go lift weights at the field house. That what he told you?"

"No, all he said to me was: 'Aaack.'"

"Aaack?"

"Aaack. And then he bent over and grabbed his knees and commenced serious air sucking."

IN THE WORLD OF THE RUNNER, as in the ocean, there is a hierarchy of ferocity. In the sea the swift blue runner is eaten by the slashing barracuda, which is eaten by the awesome mako shark. In track, such relative positions are fixed more or less in black and white and are altered only at great and telling expense. Pride necessarily sprouts and grows; a pride that can only come from relentless kneading of unwilling flesh, painful months of grinding and burning away all that is heavy, all that is strength-

sapping and useless to the body as a projectile. The runner becomes almost haughty. He looks to those stronger with respect and fear, to those slower with sympathy or tolerance (they tread ground he has long since covered). The jettisoning of but a single second is announced like a birth in the family.

Quenton Cassidy had run one mile in 4:00.3 and despite the near indifference of the sporting world, four-minute milers are still very nearly as rare a breed as, say, astronauts. The name "Cassidy" appeared in the school record books eight separate times counting the various relays. Though Jack Nubbins was a talented young runner, Quenton Cassidy had viewed the Specter; when he reached down through the familiar layers of gloom and fatigue he generally found more there than a nameless and transient desire to acquire plastic trophies. He and Nubbins were not even in the same ballpark.

"GOOD MORNING, Captain Cassidy," called Michael Mobley, the all-American shot-putter. He surrounded his table as if it were a toy.

"Good morning, Captain Mobley," Cassidy called back. "Join you in just a moment." Cassidy had probably started this exaggerated politeness among the tricaptains. He had a helpless affinity for harmless traditions.

The dining room at Doobey Hall was suggestive of what might happen if a cargo plane full of raw sirloin were to crash in Lion Country Safari. Several dozen athletes screamed, laughed, cajoled, and punched one another in the easy fond intimacy that sports give to young men in groups and that they would consciously or subconsciously miss for the rest of their lives.

The good-humored pandemonium was considerable as they consumed caloric numbers more befitting a small town. The relatively thin distance runners ate more than you would expect (Cassidy loaded his tray with three scrambled eggs, two pan-

cakes, sausage, nearly a quart of milk, and two doughnuts for later). A colossus like Mobley, however, simply ate with a vengeance. With unswerving deliberation and concentration, he sat and *consumed*.

"Got to keep up my strength, right?" he would say. "Otherwise you gotta go to anabolic steroids and I don't want my nuts to shrivel up like peanuts, right?" He laughed like a bass drum.

The weight men were cocky, masculine, and actually fairly gentle; they never needed to bully, such was their looming physical presence. These specimens made their particular way in the world by heaving sixteen-pound iron balls great distances, tossing fiberglass plates out of vision, whipping sharpened aluminum shafts to the horizon. They were the most direct throwbacks to ancient times when such arts were cultivated to bash and puncture the armor of one's enemies; to spill blood from a distance. They were the heavy artillery of old. The confidence of those who do such things well is enormous and needs no bravado for support. They feared only one another.

The distance runners were serene messengers. Gliding along wooded trails and mountain paths, their spiritual ancestors kept their own solitary counsel for long hours while carrying some message the import of which was only one corner of their considerable speculation. They lived within themselves; long ago they did so, and they do today.

There was great unspoken respect between the weight men and the distance runners that was understood but never examined closely. They all dealt in one way or another with the absolute limits of the human body and spirit, but the runners and weight men seemed to somehow share a special understanding, and there were good friendships among them.

The sprinters and jumpers were quite another story. Their art revolved around a single explosive instant during which all was gained or lost. They were, perhaps, the spiritual descendants of the assault troops who leaped trenches and scaled bar-

ricades to lead the attack. They were nervous, high-strung, either giddy with success or mired in swamp funk. They were the manic-depressives of the track world. They constantly puffed themselves up with braggadocio, either to bolster their own flagging courage or to intimidate their opponents. The intensity of their competition was ferocious, almost cruel. A high jumper is in the air less than a second and a half. A sprinter's race takes ten seconds. A pole vaulter stands with fiberglass catapult in hand and contemplates his task far longer than the three seconds he struggles in the aspic of space. Cassidy pitied them the intensity of their contests, but at the same time was envious. One would grunt with the enormous effort, elastic muscles responding from years of weight training and explosive exercise, soaring up, up, and turning on an axis of perfect technique (so quick you would miss the beauty of it if you did not know what to look for), an awful moment of hate-filled glaring at the dreaded black-and-white bar—a fragile, shame-bearing obstruction, loathsome to the touch—and then a free fall (throwing your fist with joy and relief) back to earthly cares. Yes, there was something to that, Cassidy would think, particularly on a hot spring day when he had to run fifteen or twenty quarter miles on a sticky track shimmering with heat.

In any event, Cassidy's table companions made for lively dining. He and Mizner, still damp from the shower, finished filling their trays and sat down across from Mobley, who gave the impression of eating with both hands.

"Heard you guys were scalding dogs this morning," Mobley said, without halting the intake.

"Now just why the details of a morning run would be of interest to a member of the gorilla corps is certainly beyond me," said Mizner, who well knew that Mobley reacted to no brash comments. The giant, all six feet six, 265 pounds of him, scarcely stopped chewing. He looked up with an expression that was something less than annoyance.

"Just be sure to keep those little dweebs in line, please, Captain," he told Cassidy, shoveling in half a pancake. He gulped. "We've got a chance to win some big brass at conference this year and your pond birds are gonna have to get their points."

"Pond birds, is it?" said Mizner, pounding his spoon like an impatient child. "Pond birds? I have a good mind to pump up for a couple of months and take your young ass on." The imagery evoked by such a notion caused considerable merriment around the room.