Chapter 6

July

Jeff ran easily under a periwinkle sky; the persistent soreness of May

long gone, his depression shoved back to a quiet corner of his psyche.

Running, what he did, was no longer a struggle. Today was the weekly long

run, the linchpin of his training week. A good two to three-hour run to

start the week and the remainder of the schedule became much easier. By

the weekend, his mileage would add up to 120, 130, even 140-miles. The

three digits created an efficient stride and well-tuned energy system that

allowed him to compete at the highest level. Today’s workout called for

19-miles. His track club partners would run 13 with him for company and

support. They had obligations he did not; namely church and family. Jeff

admired their dedication and pondered the balance, chasing a dream versus

real life. One day, he would choose, but not today.

He ran easily, upright and fluid, taking in the lush display, the result

of late spring rainstorms and early summer heat. Bright orange Daylilies

crowded the roadsides while white and pink Azaleas marched along the

borders of verdant green yards. Shade was provided by a gaudy crimson and

white Crepe Myrtle canopy.

Jeff glided into the municipal park near the YMCA. He hailed his three

friends who stretched lazily in the morning sun. He took several long sips

from the fountain, starting off slowly to follow his teammates out of the

park. They ran silently at first, eager for the work and time together. The

pace was easy, a conversational pace, the warm-up before the real work.

Gradually, their time dropped, mile by mile, just enough to get their heartrates

in range and qualify as real work without becoming anaerobic. The

more challenging runs would come later in the week; shorter, faster, and

more demanding on his muscles and respiratory system. The four wound

up Buena Vista, difficult to distinguish one from the other, shirtless, wearing

only light nylon shorts and running shoes. Jeff ’s friends wore high-end

Nike’s which they could afford, each gainfully employed. Jeff wore slightly

inferior Converse trainers, though his shoes had advantages his friends’

didn’t; his were free and he had boxes of them at home. The four slipped

through the shadows of the tall oak trees along the serpentine street.

“How are the legs today?” Bob inquired. Jeff and Bob were closest

among the four. Their friendship had jelled several years before at the

Southeastern Marathon Championship in Huntsville, Alabama. The four

unknowns from a local club all ran personal bests to beat the larger Nikesponsored

teams. It was a landmark day for Jeff, his first time under 2-hours,

20-minutes, his first national ranking and an indication he could run at the

highest level. Converse called soon after with a contract offer; shoes, other

gear, and a small stipend to travel.

“My legs feel great for my second week over 100-miles, just the normal

weariness in my quads, but good. Nineteen this morning, then five more

tonight. I’ll finish with twenty-four for the day.”

Bob whistled. “Glad it’s you and not me. I’ll have just started my second

Miller Lite while you’re still out there getting it done. Aren’t you worried

about that kind of mileage so soon after the Trials?”

“The time in the mountains did wonders. Besides, I only raced 16-miles

at the Trials. I figure I should be able to build on that foundation. If I run

high mileage the rest of the summer, I’ll have a good shot at a top finish

this fall.”

“So when you taking another shot at the ‘thon?” Ed asked.

“I don’t know. We haven’t figured that one out yet. Charlotte’s too hilly

and Huntsville too far. I could run Milwaukee again. It’s fast, but I need

to make the podium. That rules out New York, too big. Marine Corps is

number one right now. It’s fairly flat, and I would have a good shot to win.

It’s only a day’s drive so Libby could go with me.”

There were side glances and snickers. Ed wolf-whistled. “Okay guys,

remember, wives and girlfriends are off limits.” Their pace slowed with the

laughter.

The miles went by quickly, from the light mood and banter. Running

down the narrow state road, they were guided by the tall, bald head of Pilot

Mountain on the way out and the downtown bank buildings on the way

back. They finished back at the park, slightly faster than they started.

Bob asked, “So who’s the new coach?”

“His name’s Bill Atlee. He won the 1928 Olympic Trials in Baltimore.

Ran the marathon in the Amsterdam Games.”

“Wow, an Olympian living in Winston?” Ed exclaimed. “How come

I’ve never heard of him?” The three gathered closely around Jeff, drinking

from the fountain.

“I think he’s new or just moved here. We met at the Trials, and he

offered to help me. I think he can make a difference and help me structure

my training. He says he’s a fan.” No one laughed. Distance runners could

be quirky. Guys would run brilliantly one day, then disappear into obscurity

the next. Bill certainly fit the mold. “I don’t know much about him

other than he’s from Baltimore. He’s pretty old and ran most of his races

in the ‘30’s.”

“Might be in witness protection or a child molester,” Will added with

a sinister glance. “I’ve got friends downtown if you want me to check him

out.”

Jeff laughed. “No thanks. We’ll just see what happens. I’ll introduce

you guys sometime or see if we can get him to talk to the track club. He has

some great stories. I have to get moving. See you all next week.”

Jeff high-fived his friends and trotted off, headed back towards campus,

navigating the city blocks and manicured suburban yards. When he

reached his car, he pulled out a dry T-shirt and draped a towel over his

shoulders to save his car seat from the sweat that covered his torso. He

took a long drink from the Gatorade stashed in the cooler. A gentle breeze

caused goosebumps to run down his arms and legs.

He surveyed the empty practice fields and bleachers, looking for Bill.

Jeff shrugged, the fatigue of the run replaced by hunger. He needed to

refuel.

One of the compensating factors for the mileage was food. Jeff could

eat what he wanted when he wanted. Today was barbecue at the legendary

Simoes on the industrial side of town. The old brick building was smoke stained

and sat between two empty warehouses. The darkness inside was

disorienting after the bright summer day. The smoldering oak wood,

roasted pork, and vinegar bombarded his senses. Jeff put in his order for

two chopped sandwiches with slaw, hushpuppies, fries, and a large sweet

tea to continue hydrating. He indulged in a frosted mug of Budweiser, a

small reward for the day’s work as he waited. He watched the hefty barbecue

boys in white aprons mop and chop the half sides of pork. He picked up his

meal in the greasy brown paper and walked to the car. The hush puppies

never stood a chance on the short ride home.

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The reward for the work was a couple of cold beers at Penelope’s later

that night. Jeff felt accomplished as he entered the bar, twenty-four miles

in the log-book, five of those at race pace just an hour before.

The workout was a tempo run at 70 to 80-percent effort. The miles

flew by, close to sub 5-minute pace over dirt trails. He ran under a large

orange moon that lit the way, finishing at the football fields for sprints.

He ran ten, 100-meter strides on the soft grass, jogging just a minuscule

amount after each stride. He wrote the word ‘invincible’ in his diary, his

body responding like a well-oiled machine. After a quick shower and two

bowls of spaghetti, Jeff joined Matt at a favorite bar for cold brew and

conversation.

“Save me a seat.” Matt headed to the back of the bar. He’d spotted an

old girlfriend, striking up an animated conversation with the woman. Jeff

laughed, happy for his friend. He motioned to the bartender for a mug of

Stroh’s dark.

“Do you mind, lad?” Bill stood just behind Jeff in his big coat. A funny

smell had filled the bar.

“Please.” Jeff patted the barstool. “You sure get around. How’d you

know I would be here?”

“I was finishing dinner when I saw you come in. The Greek dishes

remind me of home. We had wonderful Greek food back in Baltimore.”

“You want a beer?”

“I would love a National Bohemian. It’s my favorite.”

“Natty Boh is one of my favorites, too. I threw a bunch of those little

brown bottles out my car window in high school.” Jeff laughed. “I don’t

think they have it here. How about a Stroh’s Dark?” Bill nodded. Jeff signaled

the bartender for a second draught and slid it over to the old man.

“So how did the workouts go today?”

“Great. I put in 19 this morning with my friends. We ran easy, 7:00 to

8:00-minute pace.”

“Good. How about the tempo run this evening?”

“It was fantastic. I don’t know what it is about running at night. I was

flying under that big moon, five-minutes or faster, then striders. I could

have done another five.”

“Easy, lad. Five is perfect. You’re teaching your body to respond at the

end of a race when you’re tired, switching to a faster pace for the finish.

Don’t overdo it. There is a balance, and you have to learn to save something

for the actual race.”

“Okay, I’ll hold back. I felt so good.” Jeff couldn’t decide which he

was more excited about, his mileage that day or that he was sitting with

an Olympian. He asked. “Tell me about winning the Trials in Baltimore?”

“It was amazing. Baltimore was the final Trials race. There had been

two others, one in Los Angeles, and the Boston Marathon. Garvin, a good

runner I’d competed against before, took the pace out. I felt great the whole

way, and bid my time amongst the leaders. The Millrose boys had come

down from New York, so it was competitive. It was also warm, which was

an advantage for me. I wore a wetted handkerchief on my head to keep the

sun from wilting me. It looked a bit odd, but the trick worked.”

Jeff sipped through the foam in his mug.

“I pushed Satyr Hill at eighteen as we came back from the hunt

club. No one could stay with me. I took some water from my handler at

20-miles. After that, the win was a formality. They cheered me all the way

in, the people, my people, were out in the street. The police cruiser cleared

the way. They called me ‘Sun Paperboy,’ from my early days with the paper.

That’s how I trained when I started. My paper route was 10-miles. It took

two hours each morning and each afternoon. I would jog the entire route.

Largest in the city. The race finished at the town hall in front of hundreds.”

He paused, remembering.

“Unbelievable. What was your fastest race?”

“2:32 at Baltimore, the Maryland record at that time and my last marathon.

I beat DeMar that day and it was hot. I was 30 years old and had

to go to work. I would have liked to run sub-2:30, but I concentrated on

winning. I won 263 of 284 races in my career. I guess that’s enough. I’m

satisfied.” He paused again.

“That’s an incredible percentage. I can’t believe I’m having a beer with

an Olympian. I met Emile Zatopek once at Frankfurt. He was a real gentleman

and one of the greatest of all time. Do you remember him?”

“I do remember him. He ran in the 50’s and was invincible then. I was

working at Sparrows Point by then and retired but read about his victories

in the paper. It was a difficult time for me, no longer racing.” Bill stared at

his beer in silence but became reanimated quickly. “In my time, the greatest

was Paavo Nurmi. I met him in Amsterdam. It’s all changed since my day. I

don’t envy you with the competition today. These African chaps seem born

to run.”

“Tell me about it. The Kenyans and Ethiopians can go ten deep in the

bigger races and I can’t do anything about that. All I can do is train as hard

and as long as possible, even if I don’t win. I’m okay with that outcome.”

“There’s another way now that we didn’t have back then. Some athletes

use supplements to recover faster and run longer. You might be able to be

one of the best in America and even beat the Africans with supplements.

I’ve seen the effects they have on good athletes that become national and

international champions.”

“Are you talking about drugs and suggesting I dope?”

“Is that what they call it now, doping? Funny name.”

“They’ve started testing for steroids. I won’t do it. I finally got rid of

my acne and wouldn’t risk that or the other side effects. If I finish top ten

or even top twenty but clean, then I’m fine with those results.”

“You’ve just passed your first trial, lad. I wanted to see if you would

take the easy route and you didn’t. We’re going to work fine together. There

is no substitute for the road, the hills, and miles. I want you to consider

running Baltimore. I know you favor Marine Corps, and the DC race is a

good one. But I think you can win Baltimore in December. They would

pay your way as one of the invited runners.”

“What about Satyr Hill? We always avoided it in school, but my bus

drove up every day. It’s a monster.”

“I won on that hill, and I think you can too. You’re a strength runner

just like me. Baltimore will suit you well. Just think about it. It’s the

first weekend in December, so there is plenty of time to prepare, and the

weather should still be good.” Bill stood and put on his hat. “I’ll leave you

now. Enjoy your night out. Not too many of those.” He pointed at the

two beers, his still untouched. “Take two easy days to recover, and we’ll do

hill repeats on Wednesday. I’ll meet with you after that workout.” Bill left,

followed closely by Matt’s friend. A breeze blew into the bar, clearing the

musty smell.

Matt sat down where Bill had been sitting. He eyed the mug. “You

ordered for me? How thoughtful.”

“It was Bill’s, but he didn’t drink any. You can have it. Did you see

him?”

“I wasn’t paying attention.” Matt still had a big grin. He slurped the

beer. “We only looked over once. She wanted to get a look at the famous

Olympic Trials runner, Jeff Dillon. Don’t let it go to your head. I told her

you were just a poor house painter.”

 “Bill is odd, the way he pops up everywhere. He said he just happened

to be eating here. We talked about training, the Olympics, and the

Africans. Oh, and we talked about doping.”

“He wants you to dope? Don’t let Randy hear anything about drugs.

He will blow the whistle in a heartbeat. We can’t have even a hint of doping

around the program with the NCAA.”

“Bill said he was testing me. It was just a strange way to go about asking

me or finding out what I thought about steroids. I told him no, so I guess

I passed the test. Well, here’s to old loves and even older coaches, both can

drive you nuts.”

Jeff clicked Matt’s mug and savored the moment; the beer cold, the

light jazz, and the reassuring quiver in his muscles from the 24 miles under

sun and moon.