

1.

“You’re not going to make it.”

I don’t recognize the voice that has woken me.

I thought it came from the corner of the bedroom. There’s a figure there. Or it’s just shadows.

Most likely the voice was mine. Or it was in my head, part of the end of a dream. Part of my mind’s own dialogue. The result of my own self-doubt.

The red LED numbers on my clock read 5:02am.

You’re going to die attempting this.

“Probably.”

That was my voice that time. I said it to myself. Or I thought it. It doesn’t matter. It’s true either way.

“Who gives a shit?” I say out loud for sure. I said it to the figure that still looks like he’s sitting

there in the corner, draped in darkness.

I turn to lie on my other side and look out the window. The moonlight coming in through the window illuminates the pair of running shoes on the floor. The laces extend out away from the shoe, curved like worms. The front of the shoes stare at me like the eyes of some sort of bug.

You're not going to make it, they tell me.

No, that was me again. My doubts resurfacing. The shoes themselves aren't telling me no, they're telling me yes! They're telling me to do it. Run now. Run forever. Run and don't come back.

I flip on the light. It's blinding--like the blind ignorance of what I'm about to attempt: running such a massive distance while not having trained all that well. Running with the purpose to suffer.

Leaving everything. Because I can't stay here.

If I do, I will lose my mind.

I realize that what I'm about to attempt is madness. I haven't trained properly. But I must go and I must go now. The self-doubt is pointless. Self-doubt doesn't help anything. It's worthless. Even if I don't make it, I have to go.

Even if I die trying. Especially, if I die trying.

I think I hear a voice in another room say that I won't make it. I stop and listen carefully. Dead silence. I'm hearing things again. It must be the wind, or the furnace, or the voice of someone outside on the sidewalk walking past my suburban house.

I get dressed: dark-blue running pants, a white long-sleeve running shirt that reads 'Hoffman Oaks 10K.' I slip on my knit hat from last year's Chicago half-marathon. Through all this I continue to stare at the shoes. They will not last the entire trip. The average pair of running shoes will last only about a few hundred miles. They'll be beat up by the continuous impact on various surfaces, some worse than others: asphalt, concrete, stones, sticks, dirt, shards of glass, the puddles, dog shit, bird crap,

flattened-out roadkill that I didn't spot early enough to avoid. They will not make it all the way. I may not either.

I pick up the shoes and study them closer. I went with a bright light-blue Adidas something-or-other. The young woman who sold them to me said they're made of some sort of synthetic mesh. Great for impact and long distances. Whatever. I don't really care. The important thing is they're broken in—I had to be sure of that. Surprisingly, they still have that new smell: like a new car. For safety's sake, I put reflector tape on the back heels. They will glow red from headlights if I feel the urge to run in the evening or before the sun comes up. It will glow the same color as my blood on the pavement after I'm hit by a vehicle. I don't know why I bothered to do it. The next pair won't have such tape. And I certainly won't be running with a roll of tape in my pack.

I sit on the bed and lace up the shoes, double-tie them. I stand up and bounce on my feet. Although made for 'ultimate comfort' as the ad for the shoes proclaimed, I know at various points of my odyssey, my feet will ache, my skin will tear. I will sweat, blister, bleed.

And yet I will continue to run. Push through. Get far from here.

I'll have to run when hot and when it's cold, when it rains, and when strong winds push against me. I will continue onward even when I barely stand anymore, even when I have to gasp for air or when my rapidly beating heart gives me signs of impending doom. I will keep going, through pain and self-doubt. I will continue on with this trek even when my most rational sense screams to me, "For the love of God, stop! Turn back. Go home."

I will not turn back. I can't.

A quick bite: yogurt, a banana. Brush. Rinse. Hit the can. Grab money: some cash, blank checks. I grab my cell-phone with its cash apps. I double-check my pack to make sure I have the flash-drive. I

grab hold of it in my fist, remind myself to protect it at all costs. I return it to the pack, zip it shut, put my arms through the loop securing it on my back.

I loosen up my limbs and then go through my mental checklist. Am I forgetting anything?

“Probably,” I say out loud.

Screw it. It doesn't matter. Just go. Go Jason, before you change your mind. Leave all this, or you will go mad. Literally. Go now while the world sleeps, while there's no one around to talk you out of it. Go now before someone sees or tries to stop you.

#

I go downstairs, through the hall, not daring to look at the photos on the wall or the ones standing on the end table. I don't look at any of my family's belongings or anything that could trigger a memory. I do, however, stop at the fish tank, its light the only illumination in the dark front room. The neon fish swim through plastic foliage and behind a phony treasure chest at the bottom. I listen to the hum of the aerator and the popping of bubbles as they arrive at the top of the water. I put a pinch of flakes on the surface. They rise up to the top of the tank.

“Bye guys,” I say to them. “I'm sorry. You won't be seeing me again. I hope you'll forgive me, but this is something I have to do.”

I watch them repeatedly grab flakes and descend down. For a second, the memory surfaces of us—as a family—of the four of us going to get the fish, picking them out—

Stop it, I tell myself. Do not go there. I have to get going. People in this quiet neighborhood will be getting up soon, going to work. I can't stop and talk. I can't do a fake smile and a phony 'good morning.' That's not me anymore. That person is dead.

I step out onto my east-facing front porch. It's chilly, but perfect for running. Across the street, the sky behind the Tilman's house is getting lighter—a crisp orange. Our driveways and lawns are damp

from last night's rain. I cut over the lawn to my north to go over to my neighbor Dan's house. At the property line, my right foot steps into a low spot. Mud. I try to clean it as best I can by sliding my foot in the grass. It doesn't help much. Is this how my journey starts? An omen of things to come? Then again, do I really care?

Screw it. Bring on the misery. Bring on the hell.

I go up Dan's porch, glance again at the note I wrote last night.

Dan – Please do me a favor. My door is open. Please take my fish and add them to your own tank. Otherwise they'll die. Take the tank too if you want. In fact, take anything else in the house you would like.

-- Jason.

I slide the note inside the storm door then go back to my house. On the way, I see my footprint where I stepped in the mud. I wonder if it will dry like that or be washed away soon by rain. I go in my house and clean off the mud. I try to avoid looking at any of my surroundings in the house. I must expunge it all from my mind and from my life. I only came back in to clean the shoes. And I might as well go out the back door, since west is the direction I am heading.

I grab hold of the doorknob, ready to open the door, when a voice upstairs tells me to look back.

You can't run from this! The voice adds. I hear it laugh. I guess it wasn't the wind, or the furnace, or a person outside after all.

No matter how far or how fast you run. You cannot escape.

“Probably,” I say out loud.

I don't look back. I can't look back. I'm no longer the person I was—I can never be.

I turn the knob. Pull the door open.

Step outside into the cool morning air.