

Michael Bogan

Five-Minute Mile

I.

EACH SEASON THAT PASSED I MISSED MY FATHER MORE. WINTERS, especially, with the brutal midwestern cold, the darkness that stretched to mid-morning, the dry-cracked furnace air force-blown through the house where I stared out the window for weeks at a time, shivering. I had been laid off from my corporate job of twenty-five years and was failing as a writer, my lifelong dream. My wife had returned to work and I stayed home to raise our one-year-old daughter, Violet, and tend our household of four children. I spent my days washing dishes, mopping up spilled milk, working on ABCs, cooking, settling arguments. In the evenings I collapsed in my chair, lost in my phone, ignoring my wife and kids as they talked about their day or played *Apples to Apples* or made up bad knock-knock jokes, always saying *I'm fine* when they asked what was wrong. I found my footsteps through the house to be noticeable, loud, my chest painful for no reason, my psyche drawn to the depths, and when I found myself alone I cried, or sat in the silence unmoving, or just let my eyes close and thought of my father and his death. He had shot himself in the head one afternoon a few years back, seventy-two years old, while sitting in his easy chair. No notes or last words. And with him he had taken any hints he might have given me as to why I was so sad now, or lost, or alone, and what I could do to possibly fix it. What he had tried, what had failed, what had worked. Advice a father might give his middle-aged son over lunch one day at a downtown deli, eating an egg salad sandwich, sipping iced tea, watching the traffic from an outside table. Because even though I was grown with my own kids and thirty years out of his care, I had questions still. And where I had never asked him questions as a kid, I found now that I was older, now that he was gone, I had more questions than ever. Nothing was joyful the way it was supposed to be, and while I found happiness in my children, in my marriage, in my house, in my day-to-day even, there was no joy in my life, which didn't make sense to me—did he know what I was talking about?

So I floundered. But then one spring, after a particularly painful winter, while running through the streets of the neighboring subdivisions, which was something I tried to do now and then to keep my anxiety levels low, I struck upon an idea. Running had always improved my outlook, so I decided that what I needed to cheer myself up, to move back towards the man I used to be, was a running goal. I needed something difficult, something that would really challenge me, where I'd have to go all out, train hard, really commit. I decided I'd

run a five-minute mile. That, I thought, might fix me. Might thrust me through this spring and into summer with strength and purpose. A five-minute mile was tough, but not impossible. I had run faster than that in high school, some thirty years before. And while I was twenty pounds heavier, with disintegrating knees and a wonky heart, I had kept running off and on through the years, and if I could find a way to stick to a training plan, get out on the track every day even when I felt down, and not injure myself, I thought I could succeed.

I became obsessed with my mile and its beauty. In the mornings while nestling Violet in my lap, before the sun had risen, when the rest of the family was still asleep and we sat together listening to the furnace kick on and off, or a mouse scratching from the kitchen, her head pressed to my chest, her eyes closed, feeling the two rhythms of our deep breaths—I dreamed of my mile. In the evenings while showering, I dreamed of my mile. At lunch while I cooked mac and cheese. While I busied about my afternoons. All day I imagined running my mile over and over—a hot summer day, windless, me on a nearly empty track, running the four laps, my legs as strong as sixteen again, my quarter-mile splits steady, growing faster even, 75 seconds, 74 seconds, 73 seconds. My family spread out around the track, cheering me on, my teenage sons Scout and Jack stationed at the finish line quietly calling out my lap times, my middle-school daughter Zoe racing me on the backstretch, my wife leaning over turn three with her loud voice and honest *go go go*, Violet playing in the infield, twisting the shoelaces of my trainers. I'm breathing a steady rhythm: breathe in two steps, breathe out two steps. And now my last lap, the last turn, my arms flapping wildly from exhaustion, I force one final ounce of *push* from my gut to surge down the final stretch. Everyone anticipating. I cross the finish line. 4:57. Scattered cheers from my family. I'm winded, queasy, my heart fluttering. I bend over, press my hands to my knees, and finally I smile.

Perhaps the slog of winter those years served as a necessary contrast to spring, an accelerator of appreciation to gild my happiness once I finally, finally crawled into April. Just when I thought I could no longer suffer the winter, the snow too rooted, the slush too wet, the earth too gray and cadaverous, a warm day appeared, a crocus broke through the crust, mourning doves and cardinals sang on the garden fence, when I woke the sun had risen already, and then spring ushered herself in with brief but slow pleasant evenings, car windows opened, soil overturned in the garden, a solid training run.

I bought new running shoes for my mile—top-of-the-line Sauconys with stability and cushion and maximum rebound. I bought special seamless socks to protect against blisters. I bought a sweat-wicking hat and a GPS running watch. I paid for a membership at a local indoor track for the days it would be too hot to run outside. I researched online about long runs, speed runs, interval runs. I learned to strengthen my ankles by running barefoot through the grass, to balance my quads and hamstrings with sliding hamstring curls and leg extensions, to gain mobility with *myrtles*—a series of hip and leg stretches. At night I read about the history of the competitive mile. While driving I listened

to a book about Roger Bannister and his quest to be the first man to break the four-minute barrier.

And I found a coach. Because I knew, when I was in the heart of my training, bone-tired at the end of a long day, worn out from cleaning up shattered water glasses and Go-Fish cards and puzzle pieces, when my wife and the older kids came home after their own stressful days and I still had to cook dinner, help with geometry, give baths—it would be easy to pretend to forget my workout. I needed someone to hold me accountable. I found a variety of options online—an Australian champion who offered three-month training cycles, weekly video coaching by a former Olympic miler, \$79-per-week customized plans from a coach who specialized in middle-aged men. But I wanted more; I wanted to reconnect back to when I first stepped out into the world myself, from when I had seemingly unlimited promise. I wanted to bring back my high school track coach, Donna Stone. I hadn't talked to her since high school, but through social media I knew she was still coaching, knew she had divorced and had remarried a professional bowler, knew she liked to reconnect with her athletes. I thought I could reach out to her, maybe go work out with her current high school team. She'd get me running fast again, get me back out on the track on those long hot afternoons, pulling off my sweaty shirt and throwing it to the infield grass, running in just the thin nylon of running shorts. The sprinters would be sitting in the grass by the high jump, stretching, the captain in the middle of their circle with one leg extended, the other bent back at the knee, leaning forward to reach his toe. One of them would tell a joke I couldn't hear, they would all laugh. Coach Stone would be setting up the low hurdles around the track, watching me from time to time as I ran my intervals. She'd have me running 200-meter sprints, with a 200-meter recovery jog in between. I'd be on my sixth sprint and starting to slow down from exhaustion. *Come on, Bogan*, she'd yell as I passed. But I would be *tired* and I wouldn't speed up. And, man, she'd be disgusted. On my next lap, my seventh interval, she'd jump into the lane next to me and start running. She'd be fast still—she was almost an Olympian once—and she'd be running with fresh legs, sprinting, challenging me, nearly taunting me. What, I couldn't keep up with my sixty-year-old coach? And here she thought I was fast or something. *That's* what I needed. She could get me to my mile.

I thought, even, we might become friends.

My spirits lifted with the commitment to my mile. I stopped worrying about the interest on my student loans, the muscle trembles in my left eye, the clogged dryer vent and mole trails in the backyard. I stopped worrying about who I was supposed to be and why I hadn't gotten there. Instead I built figure-eight train sets with Violet in the evenings. I read entire chapters of novels in bed. I made love to my wife with intent. I woke up each morning, cooked breakfast, started a load of dishes, played a little cheerful music, and participated in life.

This mile, I thought, might not just fix me—it might save me. This mile could absorb suffering. This mile would lead me somewhere with less gloom.

This mile was my savior. This mile was my probiotics, and it would clean my gut of the nausea I suffered every night. It would be my yoga, draining the tension from my muscles, my jaw, my back. It would be my Ambien blanketing me in sleep for seven, eight hours at a time, pure hours of drop-out sleep. This mile would be my confession and penance. My mile the benevolent. My mile the regenerant. My mile the hair shirt. My mile the beatification. My mile the absolution. My mile my return. I told everyone I knew. I wrote about it in e-mails. I monopolized the lunch conversation with an ex-coworker. I detailed it to my wife. I told my kids at dinner. I wrote journal entries every morning with the idea of writing a book about my success.

II.

In high school I didn't just break five minutes in the mile, I showed true potential. I qualified for the state finals as a sophomore in a shorter distance—the 800 meters—placed well, and was expected to win state and maybe more by my senior year. I wasn't running national-level times, yet, but at sixteen I ran fast enough for college coaches to notice and start calling. I knew then that if I could show up every day, not just physically but mentally, if I could grit through every interval, every sprint, if I could ignore the weekly doldrums of training and the drama-works of high school, if I could drag myself out of bed before my brother and sisters, my parents, my friends, the sun, even, and finish those long runs through Brookside and Ellenberger Parks, if I could somehow manage to preserve that daft attitude that allowed me to puke on the infield grass after my seventh sprint, then stand right back up from my knees and run the eighth one—I could someday run great times. Olympic qualifying times. 1:46 in the 800 meters. 3:38 in the 1,500 meters. I wrote these goals on my trigonometry homework, on a sheet of paper folded into my wallet, across the top of every page in my running journal. I lay in bed at night, in the dark, eyes closed, and envisioned crossing the finish line at these times.

But then, early in the spring of my junior year, I tore a ligament in my ankle playing pick-up basketball, spent three months propped up on crutches, and missed the entire track season. Still, I was young and recovered quickly. I channeled my disappointment into the promise of my senior year. I trained diligently through the summer, running in the early mornings before my job at McDonald's. I trained all fall, too. And in the winter I ran up and down the gymnasium steps in the mornings, spent afternoons in the weight room with the wrestling team, strengthening my abs and obliques. I was prepared and excited for the spring. But then practice started, I was voted captain of the team, and I just . . . stopped going. For no reason I can understand, even now, I just didn't want to run any more. I never ran a race that year. After a few more false starts in college, my track dreams slowly but steadily faded.

So I was worried how Coach Stone would remember me. Was I *the kid who wasted his potential*? Or was I simply *the quitter*? I hadn't talked to her since I quit, and she had never reached out to me. Would she demand to know why I

never returned my senior year? Would she ask for an apology? She had always been no nonsense. She didn't suffer kids who shuffled when they should be running, or mouthed off when they should be focusing, or skipped practice to sneak over to some girl's house whose single mom worked the second shift. She had to be tough—she coached at high schools where the goal was often just to get the kids to show up: to practice, to meets, to school. She coached kids who lived in the Eazy-8 Motel off Highway 40. Kids who bought fake IDs so they could drop out of school and get a full-time warehouse job before they were eighteen. Kids who were thrown out of school for jumping the swim coach and busting out three of his teeth. And here I had walked away with no excuse to offer. But still, I called her. And she answered.

"Mike Bogan, the runner?" she said when I told her who I was. "The 800 state runner, the 1:52, eighth place runner?"

"I think so," I said.

We chatted for a minute then I said, "I want to run a five-minute mile."

"Well, okay," she said. "You can do that. What do you want me to do?"

"I just want to talk. Are you still coaching?"

"Off and on. I coach, I quit, I come back again. I'm at Northwest right now."

"How is your team?"

"Well, none of them made it out of sectionals, so I'm done for the season. They just don't want to work hard."

"I want to meet and talk. About coaching then, about coaching now."

"I can do that."

We agreed to meet the next Wednesday.

"Let's meet out on the track," she said. "I want to see you work out."

"I have distance," I said. "But I'm old. I'm really slow."

"No problem," she said. "You've got your base, you just need some intervals. This won't take long."

"No, I'm really slow," I said.

"There's the thing," she said. "You've got to train your brain. That's all. Muscles are easy, but you've got to train your brain to go fast, then you'll be fine."

"You really think I can do it?"

"No problem," she said. "Let's meet at the Butler track, that's easy for me," she said. "Now be sure you give me a reminder call before then. I'm old now and I forget things. I got gray hair, black hair, white hair, all of them." She laughed, and we hung up.

III.

I functioned under a smolder of guilt those years. After high school I lived with my father for a summer, in his just-divorced, new-bachelor house. I slept in the spare bedroom, drove to work every weekday, to my girlfriend's over the weekends. He spent his days and nights alone, working from his basement. I

don't remember talking to him. I don't remember eating dinners together. I don't remember sitting on the back picnic table as he smoked, listening to his stories, or asking him questions, or just hanging out. I don't remember watching movies with him. I was twenty, still trying to leave home. A decade later, after he remarried and was busy with his new wife, working full-time, I told him, "When you had the time to talk and were lonely, I didn't want to. Now that I want to, you're not lonely and don't have any time!" My father looked at me. He wore his invariable plaid shirt and jeans, his baseball cap embroidered with *Bogan Instrument Repair*, his full beard. He just nodded.

Once, about a year before he died, I bought him a microphone and speech-to-text software. His body had broken down by then, from a series of major surgeries from both an aneurysm and a heart attack, and he puttered around the house all day, alone, no longer able to work, maybe vacuuming or dusting or napping, merely waiting for the late afternoon when his wife would come home from work. He had always loved to write but was no longer able to hold a pen or type—his hands shook and he had lost most of his strength and control. I spent an afternoon with him installing the software, teaching the software his voice, helping him practice. I told him I wanted to know about my grandfather who had fought in the Pacific in World War II. I wanted my father to write down those stories before they were lost. Then I drove back home. A couple long months later I received a letter from him, several pages of exactly what I had asked for—stories of his father storming the beach at Guadalcanal and shelling the Japanese warships at Leyte Gulf. But I was busy and didn't call that night. A couple days later I read the letter to my boys after school. Still, I didn't call. A full week later my father called me. "Did you get the stories?" he asked. And I said, "Yes, they're great!" "I thought you would have called," he said. I could hear his heartbreak. This letter represented all he had left. It must have taken him dozens of nights to dictate the stories, hunched in his cinder-block basement, alone, in front of his decade-old computer, painstakingly speaking the words, editing the words, printing the words. Addressing the envelope, mailing it. He had struggled, but he had finished the stories, and he was proud. I could picture him waiting for my call, hour by hour, every afternoon for the past week, until finally he broke down and called me. I tried my best to recover. "Write something about *you* now," I said. "About Vietnam. About growing up in South Bend." "Nah," he said. "That's enough."

Even before he was hobbled, my father never enjoyed running. Instead, after his kids grew older and moved out, he joined a hiking club, *volksmarching* across the state parks of Indiana. His favorite park was Potato Creek. He and his wife met on one of those hikes, hanging in the back. He wore a jean jacket tiled with patches from his major hikes and patches commemorating his total miles, 100, 500, 1,000. But near the end of his life he could no longer hike, could barely walk. He was constrained to his house, his living room, occasionally a straggled walk down the block and back. But I still remembered him as a powerful man in his mid-thirties, standing on a shed he was building in our backyard, balanced

on the naked rafters, a hammer swinging in his callused hand, T-shirt pulled off and tossed to the dirt, sweating. So when I saw him now, painfully shuffling from the car to the restaurant when we met for lunch, or struggling to limp from his kitchen to his recliner in the living room, I was always surprised.

Years ago I had bought him a poster with a quote from Jack London that read:

I would rather be ashes than dust. I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.

I was just a kid, maybe twenty, when I bought him that poster. He framed it, hung it on his living room wall directly across from his chair, and left it there for the next twenty-five years. After his death, I came to collect some of his things—his hand-bound copy of *Walden*, his Shelby Foote collection, his life-size cardboard cutout of Clint Eastwood. His wife asked me, “Do you want the Jack London poster?” I pictured my father in his final moments of life. He’s sitting in his chair, gun shaking in his hand, considering. His body has given up, his mind is weak. He can’t hike, can’t work, can’t read, spends his days now alone in the house. Lately he’s even been forgetting simple words. He looks up from the gun, across the room, and sees the words on the poster. “Okay,” he says to the poster—the one I gave him. “Maybe you’re right.”

No, I didn’t want the poster.

For my first workout on the track, I was supposed to meet Coach Stone at seven in the evening. But by six I was already standing in the parking lot, dressed, warmed-up, stretched, anxious, and ready to run. So I sat on a concrete barrier between the parking lot and track and waited. Dozens of kids crowded the track, middle school and elementary school age, running sprints and relays, jumping hurdles. A coach hollered, a pack of kids swept around one of the turns, another coach lined up hurdles on turn three. I watched every car that pulled into the parking lot. I waited through 6:45, then 6:55, then 7:00. Finally she rolled in at 7:03.

Coach Stone was shorter than I remembered, slightly overweight, with long beaded braids that swung and knocked as she walked. She wore bright clothes that nearly glowed in motion, yellow leggings that popped against her skin, a hot-pink and skin-tight tank top. She walked over to me, smiled, and we hugged.

“You look just like you used to!” she said.

“I gained fifteen pounds.”

“Well, I gained sixty.”

She still spoke as I remembered her, with a clipped voice at the end of her sentences that said *don’t doubt I’m right*. A voice that, just like thirty years ago, left no room for the wrong answer when it asked *are you ready to run*, or *you going to hit your times today*, or *did you stretch last night*. Her voice carried, hollered, almost mocked, never truly trusting that you were actually running, or

stretching, or in any way trying your hardest when she was looking the other way.

“We’re meeting a couple other people here,” she said as we walked to the track. “Faith, a high-school long jumper I’m helping this summer, and also maybe my son. He was an 800 runner, too. Won state with a 1:51.”

“Did he run in college?”

“Just one year,” she said. “But they worked him too hard. Had him running ten miles in the morning, then a second workout in the afternoon. I got a call one day from the doctor saying he was having issues with his heart, and that was the end. He’s thirty-two now. I want him out here running with you.”

I thought about this while we walked onto the track.

“Over here in the shade,” she said. We walked to the backstretch of the track and settled in around the third turn. The evening was hot, still in the nineties though it was after seven. We were sweating just standing.

“I told my husband I was coming out to the track and he got all excited,” she said. “He thought I was coming out to lose a little of this weight. I didn’t tell him it was to coach.” She laughed. We sat on a concrete ledge next to the track.

“So what have you been doing?” I asked.

“We got just a few minutes before Faith shows up,” she said. “Let’s talk about your running. When’s the last time you ran?”

“This week.”

“When’s the last time you raced a mile?”

“A couple weeks ago.”

“What was your time?”

“6:57.”

I saw her subtract the difference in her head.

“Well, okay,” she said.

“I know it’s a lot, but I think I can do it. I have a good base. I just don’t have any speed.”

“That’s just your core,” she said. “We can fix that. That’s why we’re here. When do you want to run this five-minute mile?”

“Any time,” I said. “Well, as soon as I can, but I don’t have a deadline.”

“Good, good,” she said. Then after a pause, “It’s okay. You were slow when I first met you. Could run far, but had no speed. I fixed it then, I can fix it now.”

While we were talking, a tall young girl walked across the track towards us.

“This is Faith,” Coach Stone said as the girl joined us. “She’s a long-jumper. I used to coach her dad years ago. Faith is going to win state next year, right, Faith? She’s got a coach, but she needs someone to push her harder. So I’m working her out this summer to get her ready.” Faith nodded hello.

Coach Stone turned to Faith and said, “Mike ran for me in nineteen hundred and ninety-two. Long time ago.” Then, “Mike you go run a slow mile while I talk with Faith about her plan.”

I left them and ran a warm-up mile. I shook out my arms while I ran, unclenched my hands, allowed my shoulders and jaw to go slack. I breathed a steady rhythm: breathe in two steps, breathe out two steps. I hadn’t run on

a track in twenty years but it felt exceedingly *right*—my shoes slapping the hot rubber, the coaches whistling and clapping around me, the kids' cleats clipping the tops of hurdles. When I finished my warm-up, Faith led us through a series of walking stretches—high knees, Frankenstein kicks, lunges. Coach Stone studied my movements through each, corrected my form. When I started breathing hard she said, "Mike, maybe you'd better sit this next one out." Faith glanced over at me, at my pale belly flashing from under my shirt, then looked down at the track and laughed. On the next stretch Coach Stone said, "You're doing it all wrong, but that's okay. That's okay. It'll still work." And on the next, a drill that tested the flexibility of my hips, she said, "You don't need a coach, you need a physical therapist!" They both laughed.

After warm-ups, she told me my workout: four 200-meter intervals, at 75 percent full-speed, with 200-meter recovery jogs between.

"This is what your body needs to get faster," she said. "Let's see how you do. Don't worry, I'll be talking to you on every lap, see how you're feeling, and we'll go from there."

I *was* worried, about injury, about pushing my body too hard too fast. I hadn't sprinted in decades. But I nodded, walked to the inside lane, and just started running. And for a moment I felt strong. I flew through the distance, my stride opening wide in front of me, stretching forward with ease, and my back-kick reloading high and tight for the next strike, my heels lightly brushing my running shorts. I finished the first interval under a rush of endorphins, by god running *fast* again after all these years. But then midway through my second interval the adrenaline burned out and my legs, starved for oxygen and out of shape, grew heavy.

"How do you feel?" she called out on my third lap.

"Slow and old," I said.

By the fourth lap I was ready to throw up. My fast interval pace had slowed to the same crawl as my recovery pace. I walked the last 200 meters.

"You're winded?" she asked and crossed her hands over her chest. "Here?"

"Stomach," I said, spitting out the word between breaths. She raised her eyebrows.

"I can do more," I said after a moment. I held my hands over my head trying to open my lungs and not throw up.

"I'm not going to let you," she said. "You're going to be sore tomorrow. Let's just see how you feel then. Run a half-mile cool down, stretch, then go home."

We scheduled another workout for the next week. On my way home I shifted in my seat, my right hamstring tender. At home, before bed, I stretched to keep it loose.

There was never any discussion about her being my coach again. There was never the question of would she, or did I want her to. There was never the question of money or payment. There was no hesitation or doubt. There was just this woman—kind, caring, doing what she loved. There was just—*okay, see you here same time next Wednesday.*

I had wanted to ask the details of her current team, ask who was the best kid she'd ever coached, ask what had happened to her own running career—she'd been a champion long jumper in college, one of the best in the country. I had wanted to ask about the difference between coaching city schools and suburban schools. Mostly I had wanted an opening so that I could explain why I was running, dump all the raw details on her. Raising kids. Being laid off. Wanting to write. I had wanted to tell her about the corporate world sucking my life away for twenty-five years. About how I couldn't sleep. About my father's suicide and how I was afraid I was walking that same path. How my life had never lived up to its promise. How I just didn't know if I could handle everything any longer. And how I was depending on this mile to save me. I wanted her to sympathize. Or tell me to suck it up. I didn't know which one, I don't know if I cared. I just wanted her to know.

But there was none of that. She was here to coach; I was here to run a five-minute mile.

IV.

A few days after my workout I drove to my doctor's office for a series of cardiac tests. For the last few years I'd suffered an ever-increasing number of heart-related scares, times when I was convinced I was having a heart attack, or total heart failure, or just *something* wrong with my heart. Times when I could clearly both feel and see my heart beating, when sharp pains radiated across my chest and back, when my heart palpitated, skipped beats, paused for several seconds to where I'd feel pressure building inside my arteries as my heart delayed, delayed, delayed, then suddenly *whomp* crashed back into service with a rush so hard I stumbled back onto the couch or my chair. Sometimes my heart felt chilled and drafty, and I'd press a hand to my chest to warm it. Sometimes my heart itched—not at the skin, but deep within my chest. Always, though, when finally I'd toss up my hands, saying *fine, maybe this time it's for real*, and drag myself to a doctor or, if I had waited too long and the symptoms had me truly panicked, rush to the ER, after just a few minutes of electrodes pasted to my shaved chest, or a couple vials of blood drawn and tested, I was simply fed a benzodiazepine and sent back home with a diagnosis of nerves—*anxiety, stress, panic*. Nothing was wrong with my heart.

But I had never quite believed the diagnosis, and running a five-minute mile would be more physically stressful than anything I'd tried since high school. And I had children depending on me, young children. I couldn't drop dead one Sunday morning on the back trail of the park, cold and pale with my tongue lolled out, some retired worker from the transmission factory walking his dog and stumbling over my body.

So I checked in at the office early in the morning and sat down to wait for my tests. CNN played on a muted TV in the corner, and I sat in my chair pretending to watch, keeping to myself, hands folded across my lap. Really, though, I was thinking about my father, and how he always hated watching the news. Minutes

passed quietly. Then an older guy, the only other person waiting in the room with me, who had been reading a magazine but had set it down, looked over at me and smiled. The guy—he was around the age of my father when he died, late sixties or maybe early seventies—shifted in his seat. Then he leaned forward and said, “You ever been to the race?” He pointed to the TV, which now played a local commercial for the Indianapolis 500.

“Yeah, a couple times,” I said, smiling back because he looked lonely.

“I went almost fifty times in a row with my dad,” he said. “Started when I was a little kid. We went together every year, never missed one. Even at the end when Dad could barely walk, we still managed to go. But I haven’t been since he died.”

The guy ran his fingers through his gray hair. He wore shabby clothes and a stubbly beard. He talked oddly—not with a lisp, or an accent, but with an almost imperceptible slowness each time he corralled his thoughts into words.

“He hated Mario Andretti,” he continued. “You know that? I always thought Andretti was a good guy, but Dad hated him. I saw Mario spin out on the track one year in the ’80s, his tire blew off. Well Mario ran out onto the track and got that tire before anyone could run over it. Knocked him flat on his ass twice trying to get it off the track, but he did it. I always thought he was brave for doing that. Might have saved someone’s life. Once I saw a piece of an engine nearly cut a man’s head off, some guy sitting just a few rows below me.”

I was thrown for a moment by his jumps in time, but the guy pushed on.

“But me,” he said, “I always liked motorcycles more than cars. I’ll tell you a story, and when I’m done you tell me what it means.”

I was quiet and waited for him to continue.

“In 1982 I was out riding my Harley, down off Brookville Road where it meets Southeastern, you know where that is?” I nodded. “Well I was coming up over a hill, and a semi-truck was coming the other way. He didn’t see me, I didn’t see him. I turned fast as I could, but that truck hit me head-on. Knocked me off my bike and knocked an eye out of my head, too. Now a nurse just happened to be driving by and she grabbed my loose eye, ran across the street and stole a bag of ice from the gas station, set the ice on my chest, set my eyeball on top of the ice, then put my hands over the whole thing. There I am just lying there holding my own eyeball. And then there was this doctor—a real son-of-a-bitch—that later sewed that eyeball back in. Ow, you can’t sew an eye back on! But he did. He was a terrible man. Just disgusting. I’ll tell you about him later. You know they pronounced me dead at the scene? And then again when I got to the hospital. But I don’t go easy. When I was in a coma seven more doctors said I wouldn’t live. That’s nine times they said I was dead. Then they said I’d never walk. Then I’d never see again. Then I’d never carry on a conversation. Well here I am thirty years later, doing all three in front of you. Now what do you think of all that?” He smiled at me.

Just then a nurse called out my name. “That’s me,” I said, and stood. I hesitated—I didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t know what he needed from me. I didn’t know if he was looking for validation, or for a conversation about

God, or for answers as to why he survived. Or maybe he was just lonely and needed to talk. I didn't know. But I knew what *I* needed—I needed to walk back to the other room, get my tests over with, and know I was okay. Still, the guy had dropped his smile when I stood, and I knew I was leaving him alone. So I paused, gave him a kind nod, and said I was sorry I had to go, but yes, his story really was incredible, and he was a blessed man, for sure.

I thought about all this while the nurse inside laid me back in the chair, pulled up my shirt, smeared cold jelly across my chest, and with the echocardiogram wand pressed against my skin showed me a live feed of my beating heart. She hooked the probe deep under my bottom rib, asked me to breathe, hold my breath, breathe, now spit air as hard as I could. My heart pulsed in black and white on the monitor as the valves opened and closed. The room was quiet. I closed my eyes and imagined again running my mile, finishing in 4:57, 4:58, breathing hard, my arms outstretched through the final steps, Scout and Jack calling out my times, my wife at turn three, *go go go*, Coach Stone watching me, Violet twisting the shoelaces of my trainers. And I pictured the guy sitting in the waiting room, alone again, reading his magazine with his sewed-back eye. And I thought of my father who, like the man in the waiting room, almost died a couple times. Once, living alone in his forties, he choked on a thin mint, passed out from not breathing, and fell so hard his diaphragm compressed and blew the cookie out and across the kitchen floor. He broke his leg from the fall but lived. Once an aneurysm burst in his stomach, which almost always means certain death, but his aneurysm burst inwards, the abdominal muscles stemming the flow of blood from the ruptured aorta just long enough for the ER surgeon to open up my father and save him, though his brain never quite recovered. Still, he had a 1 percent chance of surviving—and he did, for a few more years, until from seemingly nowhere he took his own life. Depression can sneak up on you like that, slowly, slothily, plodding along over the years, then in one moment undoing all your pluck and pushes to the contrary.

The nurse monitoring my heart interrupted my thoughts. “Okay,” she said. “Now hold your breath one last time.” She stopped sliding the probe. “See here—that’s the aorta,” she said. I opened my eyes and focused on the *beat beat beat*. She pressed down on my chest to get just the right angle. “Of course, the doctor will have to check these out,” she said. “But from here you seem healthy.” She lifted the probe and handed me a towel to wipe off the gel. As I cleaned off my chest she walked to the door, turned on the lights, and waited for me to rise.

My results were fine, promising even. My VO₂ max—the maximum amount of oxygen my body could consume—was excellent. My max heart rate was above average. Even my anaerobic threshold—the level of effort I could give before lactic acid flooded my bloodstream causing my muscles to cramp and give up—was high for my age. My heart was a model patient—no irregular beats, no arteries blocked with calcium, no grumbles of any kind. I had the physical ability to run this mile, and no excuse not to.

For my second workout with Coach Stone I again showed up early, and kids again crowded every lane on the track, jumping hurdles, stretching, handing the relay baton back and forth in robotic slow motion. I ran my warm-up while I waited. A coach teaching block starts clapped two boards together as the starting gun. Each time I ran by he was adjusting the placement of the blocks, positioning the kids' feet and hands, clapping the blocks *clack-clack*. I weaved through the crowd. Two older women walked in the outside lane, one of them walking the wrong direction, both in sharp red and blue tights. A baseball game was being played on the field next to the track, and a relief pitcher, instead of using the bullpen, was using the track infield to warm up. His catcher missed every third or fourth throw and the baseball bounced across the track and rolled to a stop in the grass. Over and over the catcher rose, ran across the track, picked up the baseball, and threw it back.

When Coach Stone showed up she told me, while we walked together to our shady spot, that she couldn't stay long today, because she had just cooked a meal—spaghetti with lots of sides—for her husband. He'd been grumpy lately because she hadn't been cooking. "He's happy now," she said, "but he's waiting for me to eat. We'll have to make this a quick one."

"He's a bowler, right?" I ask.

"We met at the bowling alley. He came up to me and said, *You're good, but you could be better*. I said, *You don't even know me, how you gonna talk to me like that*. And now we've been married for a year."

I stretched for a while in silence, then said, "You know, I'm out here because I've been really down lately. I don't want to take any medicines for it. I thought maybe this would help."

She nodded. "I took a blood pressure medicine once that nearly killed me. I swelled up, couldn't breathe, was minutes from dying. Found out later it wasn't supposed to be given to African-Americans."

"Hey, Faith," she suddenly called out. Faith was walking across the track. Coach Stone said to me, "Faith should have won state last year. Twenty feet would have won it and she could jump that. But she fouled three times in regionals and didn't make it out. If I was her coach, that wouldn't have happened." Faith smiled when she joined us.

My workout was a challenge—400-meter repeats at race pace with recovery laps between. I ran the repeats, surprised to hit my goal times and yet still feel fresh. My recovery laps, too, were easy, relaxed; I caught my breath quickly. When I finished the intervals Coach Stone said, "Now let's run some strides in the grass. Take off your shoes and socks, we're going to work on strengthening your ankles and feet."

I took off my shoes, stuffed my socks inside them, and set them in the warm grass.

For my strides I started at one end of the infield, running an easy pace, then accelerated slowly, focusing on form, on driving my arms forward, on lifting my

knees high, on forgetting my distance form and adopting a sprinter's form. I continued to accelerate every ten yards until I was halfway across the infield and at a near sprint, then I reversed the pattern and slowed to a jog as I reached the other side. I ran five of these strides, barefooted through the soft grass, without problem, but midway through the sixth and final stride, just as I was opening my legs to near top speed, something *popped* in my right hamstring. I immediately slowed down and limped the rest of the stride, coming to a stop next to Coach Stone. I reached down and rubbed the back of my leg. The pain was already swelling, already bullying itself into each step. If she asks me to do another stride, I thought, I'll have to say no.

But she didn't. I don't know if she noticed my limp, but neither of us mentioned it. "Okay, that's it," she said. "Go jog a slow 800 to cool down. Good job."

While I cooled down, Coach Stone led Faith to the long jump where they practiced jumping from the takeoff board. I ran around the track, leg in pain, alone. When I swung by the long jump pit I saw them, engrossed in the placement of Faith's feet on the runway. They laughed together at something Faith said. The kids were still on the track, just halfway through their practice, coaches, parents watching. The two ladies who had been walking in different directions were leaving the track together. The pitcher and catcher were long gone. I finished my laps, looked to Faith and Coach Stone to wave goodbye, but they were lost in their work. I limped out alone, to the parking lot, dripping with sweat, my hamstring throbbing.

At home I took a couple Tylenol, sat down, wrapped an ice pack around my thigh, and looked up hamstring injuries. I had a level one strain. Not serious, but close. I needed rest. The dull pain in my hamstring persisted through the evening. It hurt to go up and down stairs. It hurt to sit at the dinner table. It hurt when I showered. Most of all it hurt in bed when I tossed around trying to find a position that was comfortable, any way to bend my leg so that I could fall sleep.

A few days passed, then a few more. I rested and waited for my leg to heal. Each day I watched for a message from Coach Stone, but she didn't reach out, not to schedule our next practice, not to ask why I hadn't messaged her. I thought maybe she was tired of our workouts, or was disappointed in me, or I wasn't who she thought I would be, or maybe she just had better things to do, which I'm sure she did. Faith would probably make state the next year, probably set the state record. The kids at Northwest needed Coach Stone—some of them, I'm sure, wouldn't graduate, but maybe one or two would because she pushed them. That's what she did. That's why she didn't coach in the suburbs, at some school that would give her money for indoor tournaments in Kentucky, for new uniforms, for Gatorade and bananas at the meets. Because, yes, she made state champions. But she made state champions out of the kids who had nothing else. She was straight from a Hollywood script—she took kids who would have dropped out, maybe to heroin maybe to east-side gangs, maybe just to a factory

job, and kept them in school a little longer, showed them just a glimpse of what hard work looked like and what it could accomplish. She was tough, and she pushed them; that was what she did. She didn't need a middle-aged guy having a midlife crisis. She didn't need a friend. Maybe I needed her, but she didn't need me. What did she really have that I couldn't give myself, anyway? I could run this mile without her. She didn't message me again, and I didn't push it.

VI.

But none of that mattered. Because a week later I was standing at the kitchen island reading a recipe for corned beef hash. Violet was lying on the couch in the living room, just a dozen steps away, napping, when suddenly she woke up, startled, rolled over, and teetered on the edge of the couch.

I dropped the cookbook and ran to catch her, but I was in socks, on a tiled kitchen floor, and my feet spun cartoonishly, desperate for traction but unable to grip, and Violet and I both fell at the same time. She landed with a soft thump on the carpet and cried, I collapsed onto the cold tiles with a violent pain and shudder from the back of my right leg. I ignored the pain and pulled myself across the floor to Violet to make sure she was okay, held her for a minute until she stopped crying, set her down softly. Then I rolled over onto my back and breathed through the pain. Breathe in two seconds, breathe out two seconds. This was it—I could tell by the sharpness of the pain that I had finally, fully, pulled a hamstring. The pain was all-encompassing. I was looking at months before I would run again, maybe more. There would be dozens of early mornings spent in rehab, stretching, twisting, pushing; months of limping up the stairs to bed, constant shifting in my chair at dinner, never being able to adjust the driver's seat in my car to an angle that didn't press painfully against the back of my leg; months of follow-up doctor appointments and ice packs. And when I finally healed—maybe half a year from now, maybe a full year—I would be in worse shape than ever, older, knees weaker, my muscles even more degenerated, my hair more gray, my stomach flabbier, and now burdened by an injury that would never really heal, not at my age. This was the end of my five-minute mile.

VII.

I've been thinking, lately, about need. How need isn't always revealed loudly, or clearly. How need can instead be an abstraction, a quiet understanding, built from small gestures, small requests, curious word choices. And I've been thinking about my own need, how I show it or don't show it, and how when I'm older, like my father, I'll probably look to my own sons, quietly, to be a friend. To talk to me about their lives, to ask about mine. To share with me the small details, the way the new girl they met in Chemistry lab laughs through her nose, or how their infant son is *almost* saying words now. And when they see I'm lonely to drive me to the park, walk with me once around the lake, watch the ducks paddle and bob, the herons lift and flap their wings from the water,

long crooked legs trailing, watch the afternoon joggers push the miles behind them. Just to hang out. Just to let me know I'm not alone, even if it feels that way, even if I've become frail and sick and my mind is going and the books never make sense anymore; and yes, they only call me once a month, only see me once every other month, but that doesn't mean they don't need me too. They do. And when I say—out loud and clearly and with no other interpretation possible—*I'm lonely*—they should say, hell, let me fix that, you shouldn't be lonely, why don't I come over more often. How does every Tuesday afternoon sound? Then the next afternoon knock at the door with a surprise sack of burgers and fries, a couple chocolate milkshakes. We'll eat outside on the patio, on padded lawn chairs. Wind chimes. Gas grill. Watch the squirrels, listen to the traffic from the interstate, drink a cup of coffee. Nothing really. Just let each other know that someone loves us. That's what I'll need. What I should have done. And then they'll touch my arm or hug me, and even if they need to leave just thirty minutes later, that thirty minutes keeps me valid for another week, another month, until the next time. When I tell them I'm lonely, they should do those things, not, like I did with my father, just say, yeah, I bet, and then a few minutes later stand up from the chair, saying, welp, I have a meeting better get back to work, then walk to their car, drive away. That probably wasn't enough. It probably won't be enough. But it will have to be.

Here's that sack of burgers and fries, Dad, and a couple chocolate milkshakes. I know you're not supposed to be eating this crap, but it's just every once in a while, right? Let's unwrap the burgers, squeeze out some ketchup from the bottle in the fridge, sip our milkshakes out on the front patio in the shade. Pickles will fall onto the wrappers. Mayonnaise will splatter. My throat will be cold from drinking the milkshake too fast. You'll be quiet, talk only now and then, maybe tell me about your latest project remodeling the bathroom, or the peach tree out back you nearly had to cut down because it needed to be trimmed so badly, or how the empty lot next door which you cleared paths through and tried to turn into a town park is now being sold to a developer and who knows what will happen. You even cut a baseball field for the neighborhood kids. Even though you know kids don't play lot baseball anymore, not like you used to. But still. And only then you'll remember your friends had this rule that a ball hit over the fence was an automatic out, because half the time you'd never find the ball again, and you were all too poor to buy new balls. Then you'll laugh and say, *A funny thing to remember, isn't it?* You'll say, *I had forgotten all about that rule.* Then you'll say, *Man, that sure was a long time ago.*

VIII.

Summer passed. Then fall. My hamstring finally, after months and months, stopped hurting when I sat down. Then it stopped hurting when I stood. Then when I walked. Then once again winter settled in, its systemic blows from every angle. And I didn't start running again. The battery for my GPS watch died, and I put it in the kitchen junk drawer. My running shoes sat under my boots in the

unheated garage. My running clothes worked their way to the very bottom of my dresser. I read that Faith set a new state record in the long jump. I read that Faith won the state championship.

From time to time I saw social media updates from Coach Stone—she needed volunteers to help at an indoor track meet, her husband bowled another 300, her church was hosting a basement pitch-in. But I never messaged her, not about practicing again, not about my injury, not about why I was or wasn't running. And she never reached out to me. The arms-outstretched image of me crossing the finish line, Scout's watch at 4:57, the hot track, Coach Stone, my wife, my kids, clapping for me, lost its potency and finally faded away for good. And in its place appeared a new vision, one that would settle in deeply as I approached my fifties. A vision of my father, seventy-two years old, no longer able to work, no longer able to read. His kids are grown and moved away. His tools are sold off or rusting in the basement. His vacuum is unplugged and shut away in the closet. My father in his armchair, counting breaths: one breath in, one breath out. The book he's been trying to read laid open on the coffee table. His eyes closed. His self-written obituary and army discharge papers arranged on the kitchen table. His glasses folded on the opened book. The promise of the afternoon sun just visible through the window. Here is my father: seventy-two and shaking, reclined in his easy chair, a gun trembling in his hand, a towel draped over his favorite lamp to keep it clean.

*Note: Some names and identifying details have been changed
to protect the privacy of individuals.*