

## Walking

Sliding gravel, clatter of falling rocks, a fine mist of red dust. When the man glanced back at the noise, the boy was sitting on the ground, examining a fresh wound on his knee. The boy frowned in concentration, his mouth ajar. He ran a finger along the trickle of blood, brought it to his mouth and tasted it.

“How many times,” the man said sharply.

The boy startled. He jumped to his feet.

“Come on,” the man said, and he ran further along the trail. The boy dusted himself, scrambling to catch up.

Their world was beautiful, if impersonal. Stubborn bushes broke the red earth; the hills loomed around them. The boy watched his feet, which seemed to move of their own accord. The shoes were red like the rock, busted in both heels.

The path took them up in switchbacks. At the elevation, the boy panted, sweat streaming into his eyes. The man stayed a dozen or so paces in front. The boy would catch his scent on the breeze, salty and slightly stale. The boy didn't like to smell him; he had never gotten used to that particular odor. The boy's knees, elbows, and left wrist all bore brown scabs. The red trickling down his shin seemed garish, in comparison.

“Don't tire yourself on the uphill so much. It's a long way to go,” the man called out. The boy muttered something even he couldn't hear.

The path crested a large hill into a landscape of meandering fields. Long yellow grass stood amongst dollops of snow in the shade. The surrounding mountains all showed slanted layers of rock - in the lurid daylight, they seemed naked. They were something raw, like the boy's bleeding knee. The path took the pair to an overlook. The more interior mountains were covered in snow. The man stopped, and the boy stopped next to him. The sky was a brilliant, late-afternoon blue. They didn't speak, but they looked upon the peaks, the waving pine forests that carpeted the valley below.

As the miles passed the boy started to feel vague, as if the stuff that made him had become fainter. The sweat had dried, leaving a coat of grit on his forehead. His legs pumped out of habit. The pounding wore at his bones, and he felt as if the hills were gnashing him into a fine powder. The expression on the man's face, when he glimpsed it, was a grim forbearance. Nevertheless, the boy had grown to admire the man's effortless spring. He noticed it now, the way he skipped along over roots, nimble as a jackrabbit.

The trail became a knife's edge, with a steep incline on the right side. A hundred feet below, a thin and swift stream ran. “Careful,” the man said, “watch your feet, Daniel.”

By the time they were back to the car, it was late afternoon. With the windows down, the wind made billowing *floofs* in the boy's ears. He pressed his finger into the new wound, already spongy and caked in places. A smear of blood came away on his finger. The man drove to a milkshake stand and ordered fries. They sat there, each ravenous. A little smile hesitated at the corners of the man's face, and he looked down at the boy. This was always the best part. The man watched as the boy, thinking himself sneaky, ripped an old scab off his elbow. The man passed him a stack of napkins. “Eat the last fry,” he said.

They spoke a bit more when they were back on the road: “Chemistry test tomorrow,” the man said.

The boy shifted uncomfortably.

“We’ll study your notes when we’re back.”

“I threw them away,” the boy said.

The man said nothing. It was in these moments, when he couldn’t think of something to say, that the boy could smell him most strongly. He could smell difference on the man like rust, like saltwater, like blood.

When they got home, the man told the boy to get his chemistry notes. “I told you, they’re gone,” the boy said.

“Get your notes,” the man said.

“They-“

“Get your notes.”

The boy fumed, “I never used to, he never made me-“

“I don’t care,” the man thundered, “how things were before. It’s not before. It’s after, it’s now. Get your damn notes before I get impatient.”

The boy stomped up the stairs, stomped back, and threw a pile of papers on the table. He looked in the man’s direction and made a noise like snarl. The man ignored this. “Let’s talk about the Ideal Gas Law,” he said.

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The house that they lived in was too big. The man had explained to the boy that it was the house the man had grown up in, that he inherited it when his parents had died. He said this in the spirit of apology, as if he too were offended by its size. It suited neither of them, and there were entire rooms that were unoccupied. The boy didn’t even have words for those rooms, and if the man ever did they had passed out of his usage.

Race days were the boy’s least favorite. The man would wake him before sunrise. This made the boy feel like a mistake were being made, an obvious error of biological grammar. He’d rub his eyes, believing each nerve in his body that he should still be in bed. They would sit together on the kitchen floor, and the man would set the timer on his phone. The boy wished that he could fall asleep at this time, but his body was a traitor. He’d sit cross-legged with his eyes closed and pray for sleep to find him again. He hated the man for knowing that he wouldn’t fall asleep.

The boy would sit, and he would think of the dark place around him. He would think that the house, in its rude darkness, was like his self, the sleepless black of his eyelids. He thought about how, somehow, this was the only difference. Something, or nothing. When the timer chimed, the sky outside would be bruise colored.

The meditation made the boy feel suspicious at school. Everything seemed louder, more abrupt, less explicable. The boy would sit during his free period and flinch at the locker doors slamming shut; the squeak of tennis shoes on tile; the nearby howls of migrating geese. The teachers had

never learned how to talk to him, and the other kids had invented their own ways. He sat alone at lunch; otherwise he was joined by a great crowd, generally led by a loud girl named Charlotte, who would blare questions at him in a tone that was meant to be kind.

The other boys on his cross country team bugged him. They were all blond and wan and didn't have much to say. He made this distinction in his mind; he might be quiet, but he always had something to say.

He did have one friend on the team, Matthew, who was exceptional: nearly albino, functionally mute, and six-foot-four-inches tall. He was somewhere between parody and avatar. Matthew was a Mormon, and he brought the boy along to church, where they sat together with Matthew's parents and six younger sisters. Each was simply enormous. This made the boy felt small and dark - like a pencil smudge, and imagined that he'd been granted permission to accompany royalty. He actually enjoyed going to the Mormon church so much that the pastor had, against his better judgment, tried to convert the boy. The pastor came away baffled and a little thirsty.

The boy didn't have to go to his last class on race day, which only implied extra homework for him later. He didn't cherish this as he bounced along on the bus. He'd distract himself by directing a stream of commentary toward Matthew. "I saw two squirrels fucking," he'd say, and then he would stare directly at Matthew and make him flinch. "Does it bother you, when I say fucking?" Matthew just shook his head, his eyes closed tight. "Have you ever noticed," the boy continued, "that it always smells like shit on race day? Like a big gross shit." Matthew continued to shake his head, but he also said in a small voice "yes." The boy grinned.

The boy would pace nervously at the start line. "Don't start too fast, Daniel" is what the man would say beforehand, holding him by his shoulders and looking him dead in the eye, "you always start too fast." The man had arranged to leave work early on Fridays to come to the boy's meets. The boy could feel him looking on as he paced. The boy muttered "not too fast, not too fast."

He would start too fast. Half a mile in, he'd realize that he was too far ahead from his teammates and that he couldn't undo what he'd started. The courses tended to involve rolling hills with dead grass, or gravelly paths in a prairie, or otherwise the neutered greens of a golf course. He'd stumble over his feet, a smear of red on the yellow or black or green, and the breath would grow tight in his chest. Two-miles in and the ground would start to feel too close, too heavy, too insistent. He'd fall behind. He'd lose.

For the boy, losing still meant doing reasonably well. It meant beating Matthew, who was the worst runner on the team. It meant crossing the finish line, and looking up at the man's face. The man never congratulated him, nor did he scold him. "You went out too fast," he'd say matter-of-factly. Later, when the boy was at church, he'd whisper at Matthew in the pew. "Thinking about Charlotte makes me want to masturbate. Do you think about her when you masturbate?"

Once, on the way out of church, Matthew leaned over, whispering into the boy's ear, "I think about your dead mother, fucking your dead father."

Some Saturdays, the man would have to go into work, and the boy would run by himself in the fields near the big house. Burrs would stick in his shorts, and he'd pick them out with little pricks of pain. He'd think about God on these runs - at least, God as he'd heard of him at the Mormon church. In his mind, God was 20 feet tall and blindingly naked. The boy would hold that thought in his head, and he would gaze with wide-eyes at the landscape around him. It was a vague terrain, studded with brown prairie scrub. Its only redemption was in the distant

mountains; its only sting the burrs. Cresting a hill, he would bark at the silence, echoing dumbly over the grass like a hyena.

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One Saturday, the boy woke up to snow. He smelled it before he opened his eyes - the dry cold in the air distantly reminiscent of fresh laundry. Yawning, he walked down to the kitchen. The man had laid out running tights, high socks, an orange.

“Seriously?” the boy said.

“Trust me,” the man said.

It was early enough that the road was empty. They arrived at the trailhead parking lot, and the boy slammed his door shut. He loved the way the snow muted the thud. The noises he made - the crunch of shoes on snow, his snuffles, the things he muttered under his breath - all sounded like secrets that couldn't escape. The pair stretched, jumped up and down a bit, and took the trail at a brisk walk. Rounding the first turn, they started to jog.

Though the snow fell steadily, it had only accumulated a few inches. Their steps made fresh tracks. The boy watched his breath steam out in front of him. As they climbed, he breathed harder, but his body felt comfortably warm. In fact, the air was like cool blankets; the flakes were soft and friendly on his face.

They topped the first hill, and the man stopped the boy short. An elk stood in their way, gazing at them. He was somehow both tense and perfectly at ease; a wilderness of poise. It was a kind of majesty, and the boy gasped. The elk turned and retreated into a copse of trees. The pair did not resume running, not right away. The fields in front of them shimmered in the snow. Blond grasses glimmered and swayed in a quiet wind. The mountains beyond shrouded themselves in thin clouds, passing here and there gaily. It was this quality of motion that stilled the man and the boy, as if they had interrupted a native dance of winks and gestures. “Come on,” the boy said, running ahead.

The running was, of course, no easier. They staggered up the hills. They slipped on patches of ice - the boy fell and got snow in his sock, numbing his ankle instantly. But the man had big flakes in his beard, and the boy giggled to himself, and at one point the man stopped and *bellowed*, and the boy could tell he really knew how to bellow; had bellowed a number of times in his life; had had a life worth bellowing over. The boy thought, then, that he had this sort of life as well, and he sent his voice off toward the peaks with all of his might.

“Did you ever come here with my dad?” the boy said.

The man was caught off guard and turned around. “Yes,” he said, “we did.”

The snow stopped. Gradually, the day grew duller, the light thin and parched. They ran through a wooded area, and the branches heavy and sagging. It was completely silent.

Beyond the trees, the boy caught his foot on a root. He fell spectacularly, landing on his right wrist, which he had held out to shield the impact from his face. He lay there, breathing the heavy air, stunned by the abruptness of it all. The pain came in two stages, quickly, from the stinging patch of his chin, and slowly, throbbingly, from his wrist. The man hadn't heard him fall, and he ran ahead. The boy stayed still, not ready to make a noise. His body grew cold and wet in the snow.

Eventually, he rose. He dusted himself off and examined his surrounding. They had just entered the boy's favorite part of the trail. Ahead were steep canyons, jutting rocks like teeth. Once, the boy had seen a bobcat here. Another time, a rattlesnake. For now, the scene was empty. He realized, though, that he had never seen this part of the trail with snow. It looked softer with snow. He felt like crying.

Once, the boy had asked the man why he made them go running. It was a few months earlier, toward the end of a sweltering summer. The croak of grasshoppers rose to a roar in the still air. They were stretching, sweating prematurely in the morning heat. The man had looked at the boy with a queer sad look in his eye.

"You like to run," he'd said.

"But why do we have to go together?"

"Would you rather we didn't?"

The boy shrugged.

"You know, Daniel, I do everything I can for you. But some of the things I do are also for me. Do you understand that?"

"I think so."

The man sighed. The boy knew what it meant. *No, you don't.*

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Probably only three minutes had past, but it felt like twenty. The boy kicked snow around, walking slowly down the trail. He threw a rock at a tree. He threw another one.

The boy suddenly wondered why he had never gone running with his own father. Or his mother, for that matter, who was thin but strong as leather. The answer came back to him immediately. He had been too young then. *But he hadn't been that much younger. Only a year.* But young didn't mean young in that sense, he countered himself. Young meant...it just meant before. That's what young meant.

The boy heard the man before he saw him. His feet sounded clumsy and uneven. When he rounded into view, his face was creased with worry. The boy felt a secret swell of pleasure at this worry, and the visible relief that followed.

"You fell?" the man asked.

The boy nodded.

"Just a cut, but you're bleeding."

The boy brandished his wrist at the man. It had swollen.

"Oh," the man said. "Can you run?"

The boy shrugged.

“We’ll go slow.”

They went slowly. The boy was in front of the man now. He felt OK, but he wanted to make the man feel bad for leaving him. He held his wrist out in mock gingeriness. He limped at times. This failed to cheer him up. He still felt hot in the middle of his skull, cold everywhere else.

The path narrowed as they reached a ravine. The stream below was steel gray.

“Be careful!” the man ordered, as the boy’s feet slipped. In truth, the boy had meant to frighten the man a bit, but he had gone closer to the edge than he expected. His stomach clenched at the near miss.

It was hard to stay focused on the trail. The landscape grew more drastic at every turn. The pair hugged the mountain - the descent on the right side was merciless, dotted with bleak granite. With its mantle of snow, the cliffs and valleys looked brilliant and clean. The boy wanted to shout again, but it seemed wrong. It was so quiet, and the boy felt afraid. Silence was not just a quality of the landscape but a rule to be followed. A crow flew by at a high altitude, and the boy wondered how it would be to move so effortlessly, to know of no geography other than the wind and clouds.

The boy didn’t see the man fall. The sounds behind him were indistinguishable from the sounds of running. When he turned around, his first thought wasn’t *oh, no*; it was *now I understand why he kept running when I fell*.

He wouldn’t have turned around if he hadn’t heard the noise the man made afterward.

The noise the man made was somehow childish, a little noise of innocent surprise.

The hot feeling in his skull went away. Now, he only felt cold. He pivoted, and the path behind him was empty. The boy ran to the edge, where the hill descended steeply.

“Are you OK?”

There was no answer.

“Are you OK?”

The man was sprawled in the snow about halfway down the cliff. He had grabbed onto a bush, breaking his tumble. The pair (man and bush) now hugged in a desperate equilibrium. Panic stung the boy. He considered the run of the decline. It was precipitous, but it wasn’t a sheer drop. He could make it down to the man if he charted the right course. He kept his bad wrist uphill, sat cautiously at the edge. He looked down at the gray water rushing in a thin chute. The boy took a breath and half-slid, half ran down the hill, halting a few feet above the man.

The man’s eyes were clenched shut, and he breathed heavily. It took a moment for the boy to understand what was wrong. His left leg had an extra joint between knee and ankle. A dark patch of blood was spreading. The man opened his eyes. He eyed the boy with alarm. “Daniel,” he said, “you should have gone for help.” The man shuddered in pain.

And then the boy did cry. Because he realized that he couldn’t safely climb back up the slick slope. Because now they were both stuck. “Help!” he yelled, his voice cracking stupidly. “Help! A man is hurt!” The surrounding hills were mute. The boy looked at the man. “What do I do?” he asked.

The man was breathing heavily. "Do you think you can make it back up the slope?"

"I'm not sure." The boy considered his swollen wrist. He considered the distance between himself and the path. "I don't think so."

The man winced. "OK, OK, let me think." He surveyed their position. He looked at the bush he clung to, stubbornly rooted to the rock. He glanced at the boy, wedged into an awkward pose a few feet uphill. He glanced up to the path, and down to the stream.

"Listen to me, Daniel," he said, "the first thing I need to do is to take off my shirt. Do you think you can do that? I don't know if I can safely do it in my position."

The boy nodded. He eased his way down to the man. With some awkwardness, he removed the man's jacket and his shirt. The man's torso was now bare, and he shivered in the cold. He seemed brittle, deficient in flesh. The boy replaced the jacket.

"Good. Now, take the shirt, and rip it so that it's just one long cloth." The boy did what he was told. "The good news is that it's not bleeding very much. Can you reach my leg? I need you to wrap my shirt on my leg above the break. Use a lot of pressure so that it stops the bleeding."

This was harder than it sounded. The boy had to maneuver beneath the man. As he tied the knot, he slipped and instinctively caught himself with his bad wrist. He yelled out in pain. He felt hot tears of frustration and fear, but if the man observed this he didn't react. The boy righted himself and finished the bandage. They spent a moment in stillness, both out of breath. The surroundings had a hallucinatory quality. A small part of the boy's mind sensed the beauty of the scene - the starkness of the hills, their violence, and the horrible fragility of man and boy clinging to the side.

"Alright, Daniel, this is the tricky part. I need you to do exactly what I say. You must slide down the rest of the hill. I'm going to try to get down with out hurting my leg. I need you to spot me from below. If I lose control, you have to catch me. We are going to walk out using the animal tracks along the stream. Do you understand?" The man's face was pale, an alarming shade of yellow against the fresh snow. The boy had never seen that look in a person's eye, simultaneously distant and urgent. He felt light, as if part of himself had remained up on the trail, stuck in a before that seemed as far away as the cliff.

"I can do it," he said.

The boy slid down on his ass. It was easier than he expected - the snow easing the descent but not accelerating it too quickly. He paused a few feet down. "OK, I'm ready."

The man shuffled the injured leg upward. The boy recalled a time when this graceless action would have been embarrassing for him to watch. The man worked to invert his body, the leg facing uphill and his head facing down. It was undignified, crude.

The boy thought to the day, the hour, when he learned that he would soon live with the man. They'd stood in the hospital, each filled with shame and embarrassment. They couldn't look each other in the eye.

The boy watched as the man slipped, losing a few precious degrees of inversion. "Grab with your left hand," the boy said, "like that, now push."

When the man was ready, leg over head, arms straining to hold the position, his eyes moved back and forth from the wound to the boy to the wound. His expression was distorted and gray.

“Drop,” the boy said, “I’ll catch you. Drop!” The man did as he was told with a grunt. He fell backwards, his leg posed delicately. In that moment the boy apprehended a sort of wild beauty, part surrender, part defiance.

The man’s weight collided with the boy, and the boy lost his footing. He tried his best to steady the man, but it was too much for him. Together, they skidded the down the hill. The boy grabbed the man’s shoulders, trying to keep him upright. The pair slid through brambles. The boy’s shins were cut on sharp rocks, which buffeted the man and knocked his leg, eliciting howls of pain. The boy lost his grip on the man and tumbled blindly the rest of the way.

They landed near the water. The man was sprawled on his back, panting back spasms of pain. The boy held his wrist, twice swollen and beet red. He had stupidly held it out to catch the man, receiving the full brunt of his weight. His whole arm felt stiff. White hot shoots of pain jolted through it. The boy looked on with a fascination he didn’t feel belonged to him.

It was even colder down here. Very little sun had penetrated to this spot. The icy water made the air smell like cold steel. It rushed by noisily, frothing like a rabid animal.

The man was not well. His eyes were half shut, and his expression was vacant. He barely registered the boy as he said, “Hey! What do I do now?” There was no answer. “What do I do?” the boy asked again, as if he were asking his chemistry teacher how to proceed on a lab.

When the man stayed mute, the boy walked to the edge of the water and stared downstream. An animal path that hugged the edge. The boy thought he knew this river. It was the same one that crossed under the highway. How far was that? The boy estimated to himself. He could make it. His backside was soaked from sliding down. His breath issued in small clouds. The boy didn’t feel terror or panic. Flying far overhead was a crow, perhaps the same as before. The boy wished he weren’t in such a low place. All he wanted was to be higher up, like before.

He turned back to the man. “I can’t leave you here, it’s too cold.” There was no answer. “I’m going to carry you.” Again, no answer, but the boy saw the man nod.

The boy lifted him. It was difficult - he had to be mindful of the leg . The man held onto the boy’s neck and shoulders. The boy took a few steps. The man was so heavy that he thought he might fall forward. His legs didn’t buckle, but it felt like they nearly did. The snow was deeper down here than on the trails. He staggered forward.

When he had lifted the man, the boy had realized that he had never been in such close physical proximity to him, had never felt the man’s body in this way. His scent filled the boy’s nostrils - saltly, slightly ripe. His beard rested on the nape of the boy’s neck. The flesh, the weight, the physical *body*-ness pressed the boy. He took another step forward. Something hot and wet was soaking the boy’s running tights.

The boy continued to walk. The sky was iron, lustrous and dull. It began to snow again. Fat flakes flowered on the boy’s face. He didn’t have a free hand to wipe them out of his lashes. The river rushed by carelessly. At times, the trail abutted the water so closely that droplets splashed onto the stumbling pair.

It stopped snowing. It started again. The sky changed - from gray to bright white, then a strange, sea foam color. The boy halted once, setting the man down, and tried a few steps. He could barely walk. The boy found some granola bars in the man’s pocket. They were reduced to crumbs. He shook the contents from wrapper down his throat. He offered the man the other, but he wouldn’t open his mouth. The man moved his head wordlessly. He had grown paler. The running tights over his bad leg were soaked through with blood, and the leg itself seemed frozen

in position. The boy ate the second granola bar. He picked the man back up, and he was twice as heavy as before. He took another step.

A little further on, the trail ended. The river had narrowed into a chute between two sheer cliffs. The boy considered his options. "Should I go in?" he asked, but the man didn't answer. Gingerly, he lowered the pair of them into the water. It wasn't too deep - maybe shin height on the boy. He had long since lost feeling in his feet. The water washed onto the man, but if it bothered him he didn't react.

It was hard going in the water. Each step threatened to overturn the boy's balance. The stones were slippery and moved in places. Once, the boy fell forward but held onto the man, afraid that if he let him go he wouldn't be able to pull him out of the water. For a moment, the weight of the man's body held him under, and he couldn't breathe. He forced himself to a kneeling position, then to his feet. The boy tried a step, and he fell again. Again, he forced himself up.

When the snow resumed again, it didn't stop. The sky dimmed. The boy's clothing had a sheen of ice. The trail resumed on the opposite side of the stream. The boy had to climb up a steep slope of frozen mud to get back out. He slipped again, this time landing hard on his face. His nose was bleeding - the boy could feel it streaming down. He didn't stop, though, to mind it. He didn't want to put the man back down. He didn't want to see him, however he was.

Yet they had made it back to the trail. The boy observed himself as if he were a spirit looking on from the bushes. He watched how he could still move his legs, even though he barely could feel them. He watched how he stooped under the man but didn't collapse.

He thought of his parents. The boy could think of the day of their death without the shock it usually would have given him. He thought of the doctor who had asked him to identify their bodies. The doctor had a kindly, idiotic beard, a bit of a paunch, wide nostrils. The boy could see the pores on his nose. He hadn't been able to identify their bodies. He had actually been *relieved* because he looked upon them and had been so sure that it was two strangers who had died instead. The boy made himself feel that relief again.

And even as relief coursed through him, the man entered the room. He confirmed that *yes, that's them*. The boy recaptured the anger he felt toward the man in that moment - anger at the carelessness of the man's verdict. If the man had only said otherwise, said that it was indeed two strangers, then the following events could have been averted. Even the present situation, the boy noted, could have been prevented.

The boy realized that he still felt angry toward the man. He realized he might always. He realized that they both might die today.

For a long time, the boy thought about nothing at all. He merely muttered to himself, mouthing indecipherable words. Dusk fell, purpling the hills. The snow stopped, and a tiny piece of moon was up over the thinning clouds. The boy registered the profound loneliness of the mountains. The boy was moving ever slower, each step a marathon of effort.

They reached the highway. It was pitch black, and the stars had come out in number. The boy collapsed shivering on the side of the road. The man was completely still alongside him. He knew he should force himself up the road. He knew his task wasn't finished. Still, he lay there, gazing up at the stars. He supposed the sky had cleared since the earlier snow. The Milky Way was a blur of color, silver and blue like a tapestry. Stars blinked wildly. For how long they lay there, he couldn't say.

For months after this event, the boy would wake up in the middle of the night, screaming. He would dream of those stars, and he would be unable to look away. In the dream, he knew the man lay next to him, dead. He couldn't look, but he could feel the coldness of the man's flesh, smell the sour rot of death all around him.

And the man would limp into the boy's bedroom, and he would grab him by the shoulders.

"I'm here," he would say. "Say it back to me."

"You're here."

"I didn't die. Tell me how it happened."

"I walked out."

"You walked out. You carried me."

"I carried you out."

"And then what?"

"A car came. It took us to the hospital. It saved us."

The man would hug the boy. "You saved us. Say it again, from the beginning."

And the boy would look at him in wonder, repeating and repeating.