

Excerpt from *Once a Runner*

## Chapter 17: Breaking Down

Cassidy had been through it before, every one of them had at one time or another, but it had never been quite this bad. Denton called it "breaking down," although Cassidy preferred the nomenclature of certain Caribbean quasi-religious groups; walking death was much closer to it. Quite a bit more, really, than the simple exhaustion of a single difficult workout, breaking down was a cumulative physical morbidity that usually built up over several weeks and left the runner struggling to recover from one session to the next.

The object, according to Denton, was to "run through" the thing, just as he maintained one should attempt to "run through" most of those other little hubcaps life rolls into your lane; everything from death in the family to cancer of the colon.

Breaking down was not a required checkpoint on the road to competitive fitness. In fact, many coaches warned against it. But Denton viewed it as an opportunity to leapfrog over months of safer, less strenuous training, thus tempering survival-hardened muscles. The alternative, total rest, was too much the other extreme, the easy way out. That wouldn't do.

The toll on the runner, however, was high if he chose not to slack off. Psychologically as well as physically, he paid the price. He became weak, depressed; he needed 12 to 14 hours of sleep a night. He was literally desperate for rest, spent his waking hours with his legs elevated, in a state of general irritability. He became asexual, rendered, in the words of the immortal limerick, really quite useless on dates. He was a thoroughly unpleasant person.

But then his life was most certainly focused on The Task. And hadn't he decided at one time that he would do whatever was necessary to become ... whatever it was he could become? Perhaps. But at this juncture, many a runner begins to reexamine some of the previously unexamined premises. The question that plagues the runner undergoing breakdown training is: Why Am I Living Like This? The question eventually becomes: Is This Living?

From the crucible of such inner turmoil come the various metals, soft or brittle, flawed or pure, precious or common, that determine the good runners, the great runners, and perhaps the former runners; for those who cannot deal with successfully (or evade successfully) the consequences of their singular objective will simply fade away from it all and go on to less arduous pursuits. There has probably never been one yet who has done so, however, without leaving a part of himself there in the quiet tiled solace of the early afternoon locker room, knotting his loathsome smelling laces for yet another, Jesus God, ten-miler with the boys. Once a runner.

Cassidy always felt that those who partook of the difficult pleasures of the highly competitive runner only when comfortable, when in a state of high energy, when rested, elated, or untroubled by previous exertions, such dilettantes missed the point. They were the ones who showed up at the beginning of the season, perhaps hung on for a few rough periods, maybe ran a race or two. But Cassidy noticed that their eyes always gave them away; the gloom, one could tell, was too much for them. It would soon engulf them. They would begin to ask themselves the questions too many times. Soon they would miss a workout. Then a few in a row. Then they would chicken out on themselves during the tough, stupid, endless middle of a bad race. And you don't easily hide such things from yourself, much less your teammates. Soon when the questions were posed, there would be no answers. The runner would begin to feel self-conscious around the others knowing

that he was no longer one of them; eventually he would drift off, and be a runner no more...

Quenton Cassidy's method of dealing with fundamental doubts was simple: He didn't think about them at all. These questions had been considered a long time ago, decisions were made, answers recorded, and the book closed. If it had to be re-opened every time the going got rough, he would spend more time rationalizing than training; his log would start to disclose embarrassing information, perhaps blank squares. Even a self-made obsessive-compulsive could not tolerate that. He was uninterested in the perspective of the fringe runners, the philosopher runners, the training rats; those who sat around reading abstruse and meaningless articles in Runner's World, coining yet more phrases to describe the indescribable, waxing mystical over the various states of euphoria that the anointed were allegedly privy to.

On the track, the Cassidys of the world ate such specimens alive.

Cassidy sought no euphoric interludes. They came, when they did, quite naturally and he was content to enjoy them privately. He ran not for crypto-religious reasons, but to win races, to cover ground fast. Not only to be better than his fellows, but better than himself. To be faster by a tenth of a second, by an inch, by two feet or two yards than he had been the week or year before. He sought to conquer the physical limitations placed upon him by a three-dimensional world (and if Time is the fourth dimension, that too was his province). If he could conquer the weakness, the cowardice in himself, he would not worry about the rest; it would come. Training was a rite of purification; from it came speed, strength. Racing was a rite of death; from it came knowledge. Such rites demand, if they are to be meaningful at all, a certain amount of time spent precisely on the Red Line, where you can lean over the manicured putting green at the edge of the precipice and see exactly nothing.

Anything else that comes out of that process is a by-product. Certain compliments and observations made Cassidy uneasy; he explained that he was a runner; just an athlete, really, with an absurdly difficult task. He was not a health nut, was not out to mold himself a stylishly slim body. He did not live on nuts and berries; if the furnace was hot enough, anything would burn, even Big Macs. He listened carefully to his body and heeded strange requests. Like a pregnant woman, he sometimes sought artichoke hearts, pickled beets, smoked oysters. His daily toil was arduous; satisfying on the whole, but not the bounding, joyous, nature romp described in the magazines. Other runners, real runners, understood it quite well.

Quenton Cassidy knew what the mystic-runners, the joggers, the runner-poets, the Zen runners and others of their ilk were saying. But he also knew that their euphoric selves were generally nowhere to be seen on dark, rainy mornings. They primarily wanted to talk it, not do it. Cassidy very early understood that a true runner ran even when he didn't feel like it, and raced when he was supposed to, without excuses and with nothing held back. He ran to win, would die in the process if necessary, and was unimpressed by those who disavowed such a base motivation. You are not allowed to renounce that which you never possessed he thought.

The true competitive runner, simmering in his own existential juices, endured his melancholia the only way he knew how: gently, together with those few others who also endured it; yet very much alone. He ran because it grounded him in the basics. There was both life and death in it; it was unadulterated by media hype, trivial cares, political meddling. He suspected it kept him from that most real variety of schizophrenia that the republic was then sprouting like mushrooms on a stump.

Running to him was real, the way he did it the realest thing he knew. It was all joy and woe, hard as a diamond; it made him weary beyond comprehension. But it also made him free.