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"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Moonlit Raven" Christopher Woods; www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/

I Am Like A Weed

By Renee Rod

Weeds. Just hearing the word makes us shudder. We don't like weeds. If we did, there would be no Weed B-Gone or Roundup, no homemade vinegar and jalapeno herbicides, and no weed whackers. But "weeds" is a subjective term. Weeds are like any other plants, except we consider them an unwanted nuisance. So we attempt to remove them from our lives in any way possible. We uproot the weeds, and the wind carries them far away. We pluck the weeds and discard them like toxic yard waste. We mow over the weeds and whack them without regard. And we initiate the final blow by dousing the unwanted weeds with pesticides, never permitting their return.

I am like a weed. I have been uprooted and transported to a foreign land, picked and cast aside, run over like a bulldozer, and sent packing for good. But then haven't we all felt like a weed at some point in our lives?

1. Uprooted

"We're moving to Omaha, Nebraska," my father announced, his handlebar mustache curls dancing as if he had won the lottery.

My sisters' eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, and my tongue fell out of my mouth. I clutched my heart to determine if my most vital organ stopped short upon hearing the proclamation.

"It's really nice there, at least what little I saw when I arrived for my interview. And we'll have a much bigger house and a huge backyard." My father nodded and grinned, as if attempting to sell a used car to a blind man.

Our blank stares engulfed our faces. Danvers, Massachusetts was the only home we knew. And I had spent my entire life there -- all four years. How could my father rip me away from the ocean, coffee ice cream, ginger ale, and my beloved Boston Red Sox before I could even witness a World Series victory in my hometown?

"But my friends live here," my oldest sister whined, the color in her face slowly returning. "Now I'll have to go to a new school."

"Yes, me too," my other sister chimed in.

"It doesn't matter as much for you," my oldest sister snapped, "because you're just starting school. But me, I've been at Thorpe Elementary for a few years." She paused. "And I'm doing well," she added.

"Don't worry. They have great schools there, even better than here."

"I will miss Grandma and Grandpa, Grammy and Zeide, Cousin Mark, Aunt Doreen, Aunt Judy, Uncle Mitch, Mary Ann from down the street . . ." And the list continued, as tears streamed down my cheeks.

“You’ll love it there.” My father winked, as he squeezed my hand. “And we can come back every summer and visit. It’s only a three day drive.”

Our jaws nearly fell into our laps.

“A three day drive?” my oldest sister shouted. “Where is Omaha anyway?”

“Let me show you,” he stated in a calming tone, as he unfolded a small, unspoiled map. Surely he bought the map right before his quick trip to Omaha because we never even had a need for one. After all, no one in my family had ever traveled west of the Catskill Mountains.

He positioned his finger on a tiny dot in the middle of the fold. The “Omaha” marker was barely visible, as his fingertip obscured not only Omaha, but also all of eastern Nebraska and western Iowa.

“See. It’s not too far. It’s only about one finger length from Boston to Omaha.”

I nodded in agreement, as my father was like a god to me. But my sisters were savvier than I.

“It’s practically on the prairie. It’s even west of the Mississippi River. That’s pioneer country out there,” my oldest sister declared, displaying the knowledge she absorbed at Thorpe in a feeble attempt to convince my father that we should stay in Danvers so we could all obtain a wonderful Thorpe education.

“I don’t think cows run through the streets, although there may be some cowboys. Perhaps I’ll get each of you a cowboy hat. Would you like that?” My father begged, as he tried to sweeten the pot.

Visions of a huge brim covering our eyes while we caught and killed our dinner did little to remove our pouts. Not even the heat and humidity of the late summer day could make our faces shine. We wanted to watch “Little House on the Prairie”, not live it. We left our father with his two finger length United States map and began to toss our toys and stuffed animals into our one allotted box, as we sniffled and fought back tears.

We began our journey the day after my aunt’s wedding. As we traversed the country, we slumbered in the luxurious accommodations of one star discount

motels in the exciting locales of Erie, Pennsylvania (The Flagship City) and Peru, Illinois (The Crossroads of the Nation in the Heart of Illinois). And because of my small bladder, I was forced to urinate into an empty mayonnaise jar while the car whooshed down the highway. We could not afford the extra time to stop at a rest area every fifteen miles -- three days would have become three weeks.

We settled into our new “spacious” three bedroom house, not quite the mansion my father had promised, and I prepared for pre-school.

The next day when my father pushed open the front door of the school, I wrapped my legs around his ankles as if I was safeguarding gold coins from pirates. I stared at the colorful floor tiles while he pried my tiny fingers from his wrist before I cut off his circulation. As a tear escaped from the corner of my eye, a perky, curly-haired woman in her late thirties bounced towards me. A smile plastered her face, as she knelt and threw her arms around my shoulders.

“I’m Helen,” she exclaimed, her mouth opening so wide that I could count almost every tooth. “And you are?”

“I’m Renee. I’m new,” I replied, looking down at my untied shoelaces.

“Yes you are,” she shouted, as she grabbed my sandwich bag that housed my carrot snack. “And where are you from?”

“I’m from Danvers,” I answered in my Bostonian accent, minus the “r” in Danvers.

Her eyes grew so large that I found myself gazing into an eerie whiteness.

“I’m from Denver, too,” she yelled.

“No, I’m from Danvers,” I protested, throwing all of my twenty-five pounds behind my high-pitched voice.

“Yes, I’m from Denver, too,” she proclaimed again while nodding and clapping her hands.

My eyebrow furrowed, and I shook my head. Denver? Where was Denver? I

could locate only two cities on a map -- Boston and New York. Well, three, thanks to my father. I knew Boston -- my hometown and the only city of significance. And I knew New York City -- a bad city inhabited by evil people (also known as the New York Yankees). But where was Denver? Perhaps in another country, or maybe the nice, creative lady made it up? Maybe she lived in a fantasyland at pre-school?

“No, I’m from Danvers,” I yelled, as I leaned my forehead into my palm.

It was then that I realized the consequence of being uprooted and hurled into a foreign land. It was as if I had spoken an indecipherable language. Home never looked so good.

2. Cast Aside

“Alright,” the gym teacher yelled at Jay. “Take your hands out of your pants and pick the last player for your team.”

The fluorescent lights flooded down from the trusses above and shined on me like a spotlight, as if I was the lead in the school musical. But, unfortunately, I was not the outgoing, gifted, and talented superstar of “West Side Story”. Instead I was the short, shy, gawky kid awaiting the “choice” that would seal my fate in the second grade. Either Lena or I would claim the dreaded “last picked” spot on the basketball team for gym class. I debated which was worse -- being chosen second to last by a wimpy kid whose hands were more intimate with his lower body parts than with his winter mittens, or being chosen last by a brutish kid who used the term “shrimp” to identify anyone under forty-eight inches.

“I’ll take Lena.” Jay pointed with his inactive hand.

“That stinks!” Scott protested upon realizing that a forty-two inch “shrimp” would fill the last spot on his team. He crossed his arms on his chest and thrust his fist into his breastbone as if he had been punched in the heart. “She’s almost a foot shorter than everyone else. Now we’ll never win,” he blurted.

“Scott,” the teacher shouted, a scowl spreading across her face. “That’s not how we show sportsmanship. Everyone is treated equally here. Just go ahead and pick Renee.”

But Scott, the rest of the eight year olds in the class, and I knew that everyone was not treated equally. The short kids were picked, spit out, and cast aside because they were different. The nerds, kids with glasses, and fat kids whose parents forced them to play the tuba also followed that pattern.

“Fine. Renee,” he mumbled, his squinting eyes piercing my soul.

I lowered my head and fixated on the wood grains in the parquet floor, as I shuffled to Scott’s team. The fact that I was actually quite speedy was of little importance to Scott. His undersized brain was likely consumed only with devising a plan to toss aside the “shrimp” he had picked.

As team captain, Scott determined the starting players, who averaged roughly fifty-two inches, a good ten inches taller than I. My company on the bench was a kid who actually looked like a basketball player. Genetics treated him well with a tall and lean body, but genetics also cursed him, as he wore glasses and constantly tripped over his own feet. He is lucky that his first name was David, not Tripp. I imagine that in Scott’s eyes, this kid was as useless as I.

As the game began, I entered into a dream world where I was a famous architect designing circular houses. Who needed basketball anyways? Surely I had no future in the WBL (Women’s Professional Basketball League).

After a few minutes I was transported back to reality upon hearing a shrill yelp and whistle from the teacher.

David sat quietly and dug his unkempt fingernails into a flaking scab on his forearm. His focused trance was quickly interrupted when I hollered at him.

“Do you ever play basketball because you’re tall, you know?”

“No. I’m afraid the ball will hit me in the face and break my glasses. It’s a big ball.” He paused. “And I’m a little clumsy.” The ends of his mouth curled down, and he glanced at the laces on his shoes. He returned to chiseling out his scab.

I nodded. I understood him. We both had been discarded like garbage.

3. Mowed Over

I waved a ten dollar bill above the bar as if it was a white flag announcing my surrender. Sadly, the money was the only part of me that was visible to the bartender. Most people of drinking age can comfortably place a beer bottle on the bar without standing on their tip-toes. In fact, the majority of people beyond the sixth grade can at least rest their chins on the bar. But not I.

As my eyes had nowhere to roam except to the huge, melon-like breasts of a statuesque sorority girl on one side and to the perspiration stained armpit of a shaggy haired, hulky frat boy on the other side, I shook my head and clenched my teeth. I gasped for air, as my nose was shoved into a moist, odorous cotton shirt. The stale air did not circulate below the shoulders of the average height bar patron. Still clutching the bill, I continued to fling my hand in circles.

“Excuse me. I’d like two . . .” I shouted, but I was drowned out by the surrounding raucous chatter and the live seven piece band, not to mention my voice was absorbed by the cotton shirt I was practically licking when I opened my mouth.

As I spun around, a razor sharp elbow tip jammed into my eye.

“Ouch! What the hell?” I shrieked, as I frantically tapped my fingertips near my eyeball.

With my one functioning eye open, I quickly focused on the offender -- the buxom, blonde sorority girl. She had grabbed her two bottles of beer from the bartender, and as if she owned the two square feet around her, swung her elbows wildly. Unfortunately, my eyeballs obstructed her free flowing movement. She turned towards me, lowered her head, and exposed her pearly whites, as she pushed her way through the crowd with chilled beers in hand. My gaze longingly followed the beers. After all, now I needed one to place over my battered eye to reduce the swelling.

I rubbed my forehead, took a deep breath, and flailed my arm in a last ditch effort to attract the bartender’s attention. As my nose pressed against the cold steel top rail of the bar, I spotted a javelin-like weapon about to spear my head.

“Holy shit! Be careful,” I roared, as the frat boy’s finger slipped while pointing and consequently jabbed into my ear. If I had not been so upset at the time, I would have sarcastically thanked him for cleaning out my stubborn ear wax.

“Oops,” he chuckled, patting his sweaty palm on my hair as if I was a lost puppy.

“Screw this,” I howled in disgust. I bit my lower lip and stashed the ten dollar bill in my wallet. As I took a step, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“What’s going on?” my friend asked, her voice escalating with each syllable. “You left ten minutes ago to get us a couple of drinks. And I got stuck talking to this creepy guy who kept touching my feet.”

“I tried to get beers, but instead I was squished, poked, prodded, and mowed over,” I exclaimed, shaking my head.

“I’ll take care of it,” she declared, her hand grazing my arm.

She gently shoved the frat boys and sorority girls to the side, as if she was parting the Red Sea. Suddenly an angelic, impenetrable bubble surrounded her. With her flawless face, flowing brunette curls, and voluptuous bosom all visible above the bar, the bartender immediately rushed over to her aid.

We took a swig of our beers and scanned the room for eligible men.

4. Permanently Destroyed

“What the hell is this?” I shrieked, pulling away from him one night.

Brian’s face turned as white as the ceiling.

“Uh,” he hesitated, as he looked askance. He could not explain this away -- it was like incriminating forensic evidence.

I took a few shallow breaths and cleared my throat, as the veins in my neck pulsated uncontrollably. “Did you sleep with someone else?” I yelled, not pausing to hear the answer. “You must have because you’re the only guy I’ve ever been with.”

He shifted his torso and squirmed on the bed, as he bit his fingernail.

“On the cruise I got really drunk and slept with someone. But that was the only

time,” he declared, nodding rapidly.

“You’re thirty years old and we’ve been going out for a year and a half. That’s what you do when you’re in college, not now.” My voice cracked. “I knew I couldn’t trust you on a cruise alone with your single friends. Do you even remember that great night we shared when you returned from the trip? What a fool I was.” I paused. “But that was four months ago, and you’ve got the problem now. Clearly that wasn’t the only time,” I cried.

“I’ve seen her a few more times,” he whispered, staring into my eyes.

My body quivered briefly, as I tried to hold in the tears, but a few burst out and slid down my chin.

“How could you do this?” I screamed, curling my fingers into a fist. “A mere two weeks ago I took you to my sister’s wedding. You even posed for family pictures and met my grandmother. You’ve ruined all of the photos now. And I was just about to buy a present for your twin nephews.”

“I wasn’t feeling the same anymore. I didn’t think we had a future,” he stated matter-of-factly, as if announcing the weather forecast.

“If you wanted to get rid of me, you should have just told me the truth instead of cheating on me and possibly giving me an STD. Did you know that the virus that causes this is linked to HPV, and that, in turn, is a cause of cervical cancer?” I shouted, as my hands shook and a bead of perspiration glistened on my forehead.

“Oh,” he mumbled, shrugging his shoulders.

“So the worst you’ll get are some nasty looking skin irritations down there, but I could get cancer. All because I stupidly slept with you for months.”

Scrubbing my hands with gobs of soap and gushing scalding water, I attempted to wash him away, just as he had rid himself of me. I grabbed my purse and scrambled to my car. Leaning on the rear view mirror, I dialed my phone as tears streamed down my face and onto the door handle.

“I need to make an appointment for an HPV test,” I told the nurse, who could

barely understand my words between wails.

My husband spends day after day furiously pulling weeds from our pristine and elegant olive blades of grass. But I don't mind the weeds. After all, they're just plants.

Digging to China

By Don MacLaren

When I was a kid my friends and I tried digging to China – which seemed like another world to us - but after a while we abandoned the idea. Eventually I figured that I could get there faster if I joined the Navy and went there on a ship.

I made my first overseas cruise in November 1979 on the aircraft carrier Coral Sea, and Pusan, Korea (pretty close to China) was our first overseas port call. I remember gazing at the islands off the coast and at the mountains of mainland Korea that jutted up out of the sea like huge rocks. The sun was beginning to rise and its rays framed the scenery in a way I thought romantic.

Climbing out of the boat that took us from the ship to the shore, we went to Texas Street, which was filled with a lot of American-like bars where American-like bargirls tried to cater to us. Though I wasn't ready to make love with a prostitute, I danced with one – only the third or fourth time I'd danced in my life. She was quite beautiful, with black hair down to her shoulders, and - except for the kimchi/garlic smell on her breath - a sweet, pure scent emanated from her young body. Somebody threw coins in the jukebox and I left my inhibitions at the table as she led me to the dance floor. As The Beatles sang "Ticket to Ride" I made up moves. I think I did a pretty good job: The Funky Pelican, the Flying Turtle, the Sprinting Octopus. I felt like a goldfish riding a bicycle by the time my bargirl stepped on a cockroach with a "crunch".

The song ended and I ordered a vodka and orange juice. My bargirl asked

me to pay her “bar-fine,” so I could take her out of the bar for the night, but I declined. Although she was a beautiful woman, the beauty added to my fears. I didn't want to fall in love with beauty only to end up discarded and alone on the western shores of the Pacific Ocean. And anyway, I didn't have enough money to pay her bar-fine.

So, instead of spending the night with her I rented a cheap room for myself near the bar. "You wan' girl?" the middle-aged woman who took my money at the hotel asked, looking up from her meal of rice, kimchi and meat, as she sat behind a partition. "No. Just the room," I told her.

"You no wan' girl? You sure?" she asked. "No wan' girl, wan' alcohol," I told her. So, shortly after I entered the cold, gray room, with torn, faded yellow curtains, she came back with a bottle of Korean soju – a drink stronger than wine, but weaker than whiskey. I pulled out the won I had in my pocket and she took what was needed to cover the bottle. I sipped the bitter liquor as I wrote in my notebook for an hour or so, trying to compose poetry. After I'd finished half the bottle I heard something scurry across the floor in the hall. I opened the door to find it was a rat. When it saw me it scurried into one of the other rooms that had its door ajar. I returned to my room and fell into a deep sleep on that cold December night. When I woke up a few hours later I went to the bathroom and found someone had vomited in it. Then I returned to my room to find two rats in the corner making love. I grabbed my things, went outside and bought some meat on a stick that a street vendor was selling. The meat tasted sweet and I thought it was spiced beef, but after I ate it another sailor walking by told me I'd just eaten dog.

I made my way down the street not sure of where to go or what to do until I looked to the hill west of the city. I decided to climb it. After 20 minutes or so of climbing what seemed to be an interminable number of steps that would lead me to my hometown on the other side of the world if I continued on them, I turned back toward the city and the Pacific waters beyond. As I did so, I recalled that someone on the ship had said you could get opium-laced wine in Korea easily and legally. After having read William Burroughs and listened to Lou Reed's song “Heroin” I'd become intrigued by opiates, (though scared of them as well) and I decided to look for that magical wine.

The Orient was an exotic place in my mind and still is in the minds of most

Westerners. China, Korea, Buddhism and opium, along with a little kimchi and soju (but hold the dog meat please) mixed together offered something to me that seemed an alternative, though perhaps not an answer to my dissatisfaction with Midwestern Catholicism, Calvinism, hot dogs and Budweiser.

It was my last day in Pusan and I decided that in addition to a glass of opium wine I would try to find a Buddhist temple as well. (It might be good to hedge my search for vices with a visit to a house of God, I reasoned.)

But in Pusan I never did partake of the opium wine, nor did I find a Buddhist temple. Instead, I found the biggest sailor from my division as I turned a corner. He was looking for a restaurant that served hamburgers. Though I wanted to be alone, I couldn't think of a way to shake him. He found a restaurant and ordered. I sat down, resting from my long walk and lit a cigarette. He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to reveal a tattoo on his right forearm: an "X" covering the faded name of "Lucy," and what appeared to be a mermaid bearing the name "Jenny" on his left forearm. He commented on how the hamburger tasted strange. I thought it might be dog but didn't tell him. While he was eating I drank two cups of tea and looked out at the harbor, where I saw our ship anchored.

After three days in Pusan we patrolled the waters of the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea before hitting Subic Bay in the Philippines.

Walking to Olongapo City from the base, we crossed a bridge that goes over what both Filipinos and U.S. sailors called "Shit River," a river that makes an impression on the olfactory nerve just as its name would suggest – because the river is full of raw sewage.

But as we crossed Shit River I saw the most beautiful woman in the world on the other side. She was smiling as she turned her face from me, and her white, slightly crooked, teeth and sparkling brown eyes remained in my mind's eye. Her dress blew softly against her legs in the sultry breeze as children in boats on Shit River called out for "Piso! Piso!" (the Philippine currency). But the further I walked toward the woman, the further away from me she moved. Since that day I have often chased after the vision of that woman, but she has so far evaded my grasp.

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After 18 days in the Philippines we pulled out of Subic Bay, went through the Straits of Malacca and headed to “Gonzo Station” in the Indian Ocean in January 1980. We then spent over a hundred days at sea without a port call, off the coast of Iran. Our jobs as Radiomen required us to work 12-16 hours a day, every day. Messages never stopped coming or going so there was always a backlog of work. I made copies, filed messages, making sure that all the immediate and priority messages were at the top of the stack, and called up the departments the messages were addressed to in order to notify them. I also had to do field day (sweeping and mopping the spaces). During the mid-watches (the graveyard shifts) I would stand up for hours without a break copying messages on a Xerox and distributing them in cubbyholes marked with the 30 or so different departments on the ship. Standing up for hours without a break my whole body ached from my heels to my brain as I began to develop sciatica.

At sea I read as much as possible in my limited free time. There was a tiny ship's library located on the deck below the hangar deck – near the enlisted mess decks - and I would often go to that library when we were in the Indian Ocean. The collection of books in the library was mostly pulp fiction, but there was a good collection of National Geographic magazines that I immersed myself in, reading the long articles. I also read the long articles and interviews with people like Joseph Heller, Bob Marley and Ed Koch in the issues of Playboy, Penthouse, Hustler and Oui that were sold in the ship's store. The library was staffed by a guy that blared “corporate rock” cassette tapes in his portable stereo throughout the day, thus making it difficult to concentrate on the reading and writing I did, but I managed nonetheless.

The Coral Sea had 4,000 men on it (women were not yet stationed on U.S. Navy ships) and our berthing compartment was occupied by about 70 men in racks three high in a space about the size of a small high school classroom. I tried to keep in shape while at sea, but because of the small amount of space available it was not easy to do calisthenics. Nevertheless, by positioning my body so that my arms fit into the narrow spaces between the sets of racks set perpendicularly against both the bulkhead and the narrow passageway that ran the length of the berthing area, I was able to do push-ups and sit-ups. After I finished those, I would go down the ladder one flight to the hangar deck, find a small, unoccupied space and jump rope, sweat falling from my body like rain in the extreme humidity of the

Indian Ocean.

Thirty push-ups, then beginning F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; forty sit-ups, then beginning Franz Kafka's *The Trial*; stretching while standing up – crossing my legs then bringing my palms to the floor and remaining there for thirty seconds, then beginning Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, writing poems of unrequited love, Grand Rapids, San Francisco and Shit River, then beginning Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*; trying to draw pictures of the demons that visited me in dreams and in real life, then beginning George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and going on to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and books of poetry by Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas and Lawrence Ferlinghetti; writing letters to the one or two friends I thought I had, writing letters to Mom and Dad that I rarely sent, writing letters to Magdalena, the girlfriend I'd made in the Philippines, that I could never seem to finish, then reading bits and pieces of Marcel Proust, William Blake, T.S. Eliot, Homer and Milton; jumping rope – three sets of a hundred, then reading W.B Yeats' "The Second Coming" and the Book of Revelation in the Bible again and again, and then trying to write my own versions – again and again – in my notebooks. More writings by William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, more work in the radio shack, more flight operations, storms at sea, men falling overboard in the pitch black of night then miraculously rescued by the helicopter we would launch; General Quarters drills followed by an hour of sleep; walking on the flight deck one day and seeing a whale, listening to an ex-marine in our division telling us about when he had to eat rats in Vietnam in order to survive in the jungle...

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The closest I got to mainland China in the Navy was Hong Kong in 1982 when our ship anchored off its shore. However, a little less than a month ago I moved to mainland China after three weeks spent visiting old haunts and old friends in Japan (where I lived for 11 years). I'd been watching CNN in my Tokyo hotel room before taking the train to the airport for my flight to Beijing, and the main topic of news was that China was about ready to overtake Japan as the world's second largest economy. Later, after arriving at my hotel in Beijing that evening I turned on the TV and watched the English-language news to find that indeed China had. It was as though the shifting tectonic plates of phases/locations in my life had drifted over one another in sync with the fate of the place I now called home.

I find myself lucky to begin another part of my life in China just as the country itself is experiencing a new phase of growth and discovery. Nevertheless, though I have finally reached China there is much more for me to learn, and I feel as if my digging has just begun.

Starting to Run- Again

By Noelle Sterne

That Christmas, my husband gave me a snazzy new pair of Nike Women's Road Terrors 4ZX 9560s. Six months later, with the grass a brilliant green, summer sun dazzling, and temperature threatening 90, my running shoes still looked abysmally new.

It mattered not that I lived a mere two blocks from New York City's Riverside Park. Nor that the park was a full four minutes away at a leisurely walk. Nor that I loved to stroll on Sundays through the lovely winding paths along the sparkling Hudson. Nor that after my infrequent paltry running spurts, I was sure I'd worked off the monster brownie that had waylaid me at lunch.

Many years ago the sports physician Dr. Joan Ulliyot observed, "The hardest step for a woman who wants to run is the first one out the door" (quoted by Jack Batten, *The Complete Jogger*, 1977, New York, Harcourt Brace, p. 113). Today running has become as accepted for women as voting; for me Dr. U. is still right.

Instead of opening the door to jog right out, I bargained relentlessly. Wouldn't yoga in the bedroom enlighten my whole being? How many laps around the living room sofa made a mile?

The few times I managed to sneak up on running, the obstacles seemed endless. First it was the clothes. Not what to wear but how much it would hide. In winter, the perennial fifteen excessive pounds got camouflaged enough under layers of t-shirts, a faded pair of loose overalls, and an XL sweatshirt. That summer, I unearthed a seasonal equivalent—an old pair of tent-sized Bermudas and oversized work shirt, tails out, of course.

Super Stumbling Blocks

The trials, though, were far from over. Those two blocks to the park loomed like a marathon in the Himalayas. Rather than cheering spectators, the route was lined with that special city breed, smirking building superintendents. They didn't sweep steps or polish brass, like supers were paid for and maybe even deigned to do in tonier neighborhoods. Instead, the supers on my street sat on the stoops, reclined against the double-parked cars, lounged in their doorways, and leered lasciviously at every woman who passed, even me. Lumbering along, I visualized running gracefully, trying not to contradict their bad judgment (or eyesight) at paying me attention.

The Competition

Getting by the supers brought the next ordeal. At the interminable light on Broadway, other female runners stretched or jogged in place. I saw instantly that they owned the streets.

Like the one I stood next to the last time I made it out the door. She had tousled blonde curls, a perfect nose, and no need for makeup, and her face shone a fine film of dew. With no hint of embarrassment or modesty, as if she dressed this way all the time, she wore high clinging nylon shorts and a nipple-sheer tank top. She was thin unto disbelief, with a pinched waist to die for and totally unconcerned in the lustful city.

She glanced up at the light, still red, and then stretched from the waist. Her

knees flawlessly straight, she casually rested her palms on the sidewalk. I wanted to kill, or least go skulking back home. Instead, I swallowed hard, tried to suck in my gut, and, when the light finally changed, kept chugging toward the park.

I managed this trial-by-sneakers maybe once a week, twice on good weeks. Nowhere near enough to claim the title of “jogger.” Then I thought, Make it easier on yourself. Find someone to run with.

A Friend Is Someone Who Runs With You

First, it was my husband. The lean sub-seven ten-miler with the muscular legs. After patiently demonstrating the proper way to lace my shoes, he shepherded me out the door and down the street. During the run, he kindly adjusted his pace. I envisioned a cozy shower later and some inside fun.

Back at our entrance, he announced, “Just gonna do another few miles.” And faster than a speeding subway, he turned and streaked back down the block toward the park. So much for meaningful companionship.

Next, I tried a neighbor. For weeks, I’d seen a pair of Adidas parked outside her door. When we met at the trash cans, I asked, “You run too?”

She nodded. “I’m very slow.”

“Me too,” I assured her, relieved. “How about Tuesday at 6?”

“Fine,” she said, “I’ll ring your bell.”

Tuesday evening at 5:55, socks powdered and Bermudas washed, excitedly I waited.

And waited.

After a half hour, I took off my shoes, shook out my socks, and did two half sit-ups. Then I fixed a big bowl of cocoa puffs, added a cup of salted peanuts and a heaping gob of marshmallow crème, turned on the TV, and sank into the sofa.

Several weeks later, elbow to elbow at the mailboxes with the deserting neighbor, I summoned my courage. “What happened that Tuesday night?” I asked.

“Tuesday? I rang your bell Monday night at 6!”

I remembered I’d been at the library. We avoided mutual reprimands—either of us could have picked up the phone—and made another date.

When we got to the park, we started amicably enough. But I soon found she was

too slow even for me. At the building, I politely declined her next invitation, strongly suspecting I wasn’t airing my robics.

Then I tried a friend. Not a runner, she nevertheless promised to cheer me on, promising to walk fast. We met at the park and started chattering instantly. I ran comfortably for a few minutes.

She lit up—I’d forgotten she was a chain smoker. Coughing between sentences, I tried not to breathe and thrust from my mind all grim admonitions about second-hand smoke.

After these failed attempts, I finally saw that to really stop starting to run,

I'd have to brave it alone.

So, early one morning, I pulled on my Bermudas and draped my work shirt tails over all. Walking to the park as fast as I could, I navigated past the supers and supple fawns and reached the promised path.

Peering People

More obstacles lurked: the people in the park. They appeared to be reading or watching the squirrels, but as you approached, their hawk eyes lit up.

A thin old man, bent over his paper to make it last all morning, squinted, stared, and muttered with disdain. A sausage-shaped woman clutching a jumble of shopping bags shook her head at my bouncing chest. Two tired-looking young mothers, pushing equipment-laden strollers and discussing teething biscuits, cast sidelong glances, jealous of my apparent freedom. A pair of stunning girls with red nails and elaborate hair giggled their dominance and stared me down over their sugared donuts and cigarettes.

High Inspiration

I held my head high and pushed on. Three blocks from the half-mile mark, my legs were giving out and chest caving in. Next to the path, against the park's stone wall, two dark street princes holding beer bottles slouched and watched. I dragged by, wheezing like an asthmatic. Suddenly one of them broke into a falsetto piercing refrain, as if from his yearned-for platinum single:

You Can Ma-aake It

If You Try-y-y

From where burst the sudden spurt of energy that sent me flying down the

last three blocks and back all the way home?

After this, I had to admit the people in the park weren't all bad. My next foray, a record two days later, more than confirmed this conclusion.

A Moving Role Model

As I panted by, legs feeling like lead bedposts, a father and his daughter came into sight. Tall and trim, he wore navy and white coordinated trunks and tank top. His daughter, no more than four, matched in kind: all got up in her pink and white shorts, tiny pink t-shirt, and baby Nikes. A white headband embossed with pink clouds peeked through her brown curls.

They ran on the grass, the father keeping his stride to hers. At each step, he repeated in strong, patient tones, "Lift those knees, lift those knees, at-a-girl, lift those knees." And with an earnestness encouraged by his love, she did.

Seeing them, my eyes teared. I envisioned her grown up. Whatever adult fears or ills might plague her, her father's words would carry her. This little girl, I knew, would never have trouble getting out her door to run.

Three days later, my running resolve again almost overtaken by habitual excuses, I thought of that wise tutoring father and his daughter. Untouched by starers, grouzers, or critics, they focused only on the goal and joy of achievement.

I jumped off the couch, laced up my Nikes, and tied my shirttails at the waist. And faster than a starter's gun, I opened the front door, lifted my knees, and sprinted out.

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