

Through The Canyon

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A collegiate runner ventures into a new place filled with doubt and uncertainty, and finds hope in the depths of a fall.

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Hell found me. Or more aptly, I had found it. It was high noon, and the sun beat down mercilessly, baking the canyon walls as well as my delicate skin. My watch chimed innocently; denoting two hours had passed into what was undoubtedly the longest run of my life. The beep also marked one hour since the last precious drop of water had been drained from my hydration pack, its soothing wetness greedily consumed by my dry mouth. Now, my tongue had shriveled into a large sandpaper like mass that cluttered my mouth; sticking vehemently to the sides like some vexatious beast, backed into a corner with no hopes of escape.

I trotted past the thin, scraggly desert plants that managed to survive this arid hellhole. Their species had spent millennia adapting to survival in this rocky, dry, dusty excuse for topsoil. I could feel their cynical gaze boring into me; swaying slightly as a stale breeze meandered through the canyon, their prickly leaves mocking my smooth flesh. They knew I did not belong here, few things did, and a lean, pale, freckle-faced runner did not appear on that list, no matter how many races said runner had completed.

Yet it was those races, the love of the sport, which had delivered me to this place. The training, competition, and coaching were all reasons I packed my bags and moved across the continent; along with my pursuit of a degree in environmental sciences. My previous, coastal home in the North East had left me confident in my ability to reign supreme over any weather imaginable. There, I had conquered cold, wet winds ripping through the streets; frigid, sightless conditions of blizzards that had the power to close businesses down for days, and monsoons that threw large items such as trash cans, park benches, and small trees around as if they were petty playthings. But nothing had prepared me for this. Fresh beads of sweat added a glistening sheen to my slender shoulders, and poured down my forehead. Every breath seemed to strengthen my premonition that the breeze blowing through the canyon was not composed of air, but morphing into the deserts aberrant concoction of glass like shards of dust, ripping down my throat like little demons with the guidance of none other the arid blasts.

As the day dragged on, the sun ceaselessly cast its blazing rays into the canyon, drying my sweat into a salty crust on my skin and loose-fitting dry fit clothing. I neared the end of my trek through the canyon, and my mind found new rhythm in the chanting of "ten more minutes, ten more minutes" for there was just over a mile left to this dry and dusty day. My feet trotted on, they had known the rhythm far longer than my mind had. The days, weeks, months, and years spent prevailing over the most rigorous training schedules had led them to commit this rhythm into deep muscle memory.

Nevertheless, all it took was one stone, one blemish on the otherwise smooth trail to disrupt the rhythmic stride. My toe hardly even grazed the rock, but it sent me tumbling down, down, down, into the depths of the ravine, and off trail. My mind went blank as my body limply rolled over rocks, desert shrubs, and other abrasive surfaces off the trail. Even as I came to a stop, I accumulated a growing amalgamation of bumps, bruises, scrapes, and cuts. Thirty meters off the beaten path, my rolling tumble ceased. I lied there, face down, on the canyon floor. My left cheek, and most of the side of my face, stung with what felt like the worst rug burn imaginable. I suppose that was because it wasn't rug burn at all, but rather rock burn. I knew my body was covered in similar cuts, but could not bring myself to examine them. Salty tears fell off my stinging cheek onto the canyons dusty carpet, perhaps the landscapes first encounter with water in months. In my peripheral vision could see all the rocks and vegetation I had rolled over to get to my present position, and knew they were laughing at me. They knew all along I could not make it, would not make it, through the canyon unscathed. They, and everyone else, would laugh at a fall. They would not help me. No one would. I now realized that in my haste to get out the door and begin the run, I had neglected to tell anyone where I was going. I was alone, a pathetic 120 pound heap of runner littering an otherwise scenic landscape. My pink shirt and orange shorts were a stark contrast to the earthly colors held by the canyon, and the clear, cloudless blue

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of the sky. To the world, I was a piece of litter distracting the natural beauty of the scene.

I struggled to sit up, feeling my appendages protest against the movement. Praying to God I was not broken, pleading that my legs be okay, I grasped them, searching for oddities and leaving a trail of bloody handprints down my thighs, calves, and ankles. Bruises and scrapes, but no breaks. Tears of pain and self-pity transformed to tears of joy as I continued my examination. My shoulders and arms had taken a beating, but the majority of the "rock burn" had been reserved for my hands. They were my subconscious's first attempt of preventing the fall, and had skidded recklessly over the course surfaces. I scrambled to my feet, brainstorming what to do. My hands needed the most attention, and I removed my shirt for an impromptu bandage to bundle my hands in. Slowly, carefully, I proceeded to climb back to the trail. My foot began to slip, threatening to drag me back to the depths of the ravine. My flailing bundle of hands clumsily, but effectively, caught hold of a boulder, saving myself from another spill. Now, more cautiously than ever, I crawled back to the trail. Sore and aching from the extended stumble, my body was hesitant to continue on. But the mind has the power to transcend the painful protests of the body, and one foot in front of the other I made my way back to the dorm I now call my home.

An overwhelming sense of joy washed over my battered and shaken body, as I had made it. My inner gymnast did backflips, cheering for joy "I survived, I survived!" I now knew I was going to be okay, and not just today, not just here, but anywhere, and anytime. God had spared me broken bones and serious injury, even after my pessimistic hatred of the canyon. I stepped onto the road home filled with pride. Pride that I was about to finish a 20 mile voyage through a new place; proud to have recovered from what my grandmother calls "A nasty, backwoods spill"; proud to be a student accepted into a prestigious school; and proud to be smiling. Ecstatic to be right here, right now, a ridiculous, beaming smile glued itself to my face. Cars slowed down as they passed by, causing me to realize I looked like a survivor of a car accident, or a victim of an attempted murder. I kept smiling, and attempted to wave my chaotically constructed pink package of hands at those passing by.

Having almost having completed my journey, an old white Buick slowly pulled next to me. An elderly woman, with short curly white hair and large black glasses pulled up next to me. Asking if I needed help, then an ambulance, and finally just a ride home, I smiled, replying with "No thank you ma'am, I'm fine". When a puzzled expression crossed her wrinkled old blue eyes, I followed with "It's a beautiful day for a run!" And it was. I realized no matter what life throws at you, no matter what happens, no matter what mother nature and father time present you with, one must always remember; it's always a beautiful day for a run.

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