

The Race I Didn't Know I Was Running

Finally the tunnel of light was looking closer and closer with every step. My mind is telling me to stop with big flashing lights, and I can feel my body preparing to shut down. At the very least it needs water to keep going. But by this point, the water is gone and the end, so close and yet still far enough away to make me suffer, has been described as a spectacular array of lights, sounds, and sights that I could have never imagined.

As I look to my side all I can see is people trailing behind me. Some are walking while others jog. Some even talking to their friends with cups of water in their hands. I regretted how much water I drank half way into this 5k. The site of the beautiful glowing cups of water were just too tempting. How was I suppose to know that they would make me feel like I was running while carrying a 5 pound kettle bell strapped around my stomach?

I should have known better when I first announced to my family about this cool new 5k that was coming to town for Easter, and would be the perfect bonding experience for all of us. I should have known better. Looking back on it, in this moment, I wish someone had spoken up about not wanting to run a 5k. But that's not my family. My family are pros at playing chicken the fitness edition, and in this round nobody quit. Before we knew it, the family had matching shirts and outfits to run together in the 5k as a team.

“Come on babe, we have a quarter mile left. You got this, you can do it,” shouted Sam as he ran alongside me trying to keep my spirits up.

The one thing I hate more in this moment than the fact that I am running this stupid race still is the fact that Sam and my cousin have already completed the race and have circled back to come support us

girls that are almost finished. The boys are the only reason I might finish this race, but they are not the reason I have persevered this long in the race. My cousin's darling wife, Lacy, was the cause of that torture. In the beginning she made a plan that we were going to be race buddies and finish strong with only a few walking breaks. That went out the window real fast and halfway through the first mile I was ready for a break. "Ok, this is the plan. We are going to keep finding the hole in the groups of people, and we are going to do interval running of a 3:1 break. Sound good?" Lacy questioned as we walked through the first design of lights.

"But aren't we going to stop and enjoy all the lights and design. I mean isn't that the point of the race?". I remarked as Lacy began to count down to our next three minutes of running. She stopped and looked at me for a second, trying to give me a serious face but failing. "The light designs and areas are awesome, but its better to get through the race then to be stuck wandering and never finishing it. Now RUN!".

I am not in shape. I know what I feel like when I am healthy and active, and I know that at this moment in time, I am not in shape. My entire family, though, has become refocused in their own health and wellness and has decided that our number one goal should be to create a healthier lifestyle that will enrich our future. My parents' approval means the world to me. They are my role models. I have realized over the years that not everyone is perfect, but when it comes to my parents, they are pretty damn close. So when they began to refocus their energy on fitness and the health of our family, I was on board for the adventure. Then I went to college. My parents urged me to go to the gym when I still lived at home. They kept me active every week. But in college, mom and dad were not there to drive me to the gym, or run with me through the park. I was alone and without fitness buddies.

All I want to do is get through college, and sadly my way of releasing stress is by binge watching Netflix on the weekends and eating. Then again, the idea of running the Electric Run, a 5k that is at night with different areas of electric lights, was mine. I am still not sure why I would ever suggest doing something so cruel to myself. I suppose that at the time the race was a few months away and I figured I could start running by the time the race rolled around. This never happened. I downloaded apps to my phone hoping that something would motivate me to go running, and still all my free time was dedicated to Netflix and pizza. As the days and weeks flew by, I slowly began to regret this decision of participating in the race. My mother could sense my hesitation and tempted me into staying by agreeing to buy the girls matching tutus that would blink so we could stay together during the race. I was sold. Only on race day did I slowly begin to realize the mistake I had made in accepting this tutu.

The worst part of this whole situation was that all my teammates, my family, were in better shape than me, and I was the one without a job. My cousin Vicente was in the military, while Lacy was working as a middle school teacher. Even with their busy schedules, they made it a point to at least run three miles every other day with their dog, Gibson. Sam was working at the time, and making sure to hit the gym at least three times a week. Having just recovered from a rough back injury, Sam was making sure to take things slow and enjoyed running at least 2 miles as his warm up before lifting weights. Every time I visited my cousins, or Sam was in town, they became reminders of the fact that I was not getting into the shape I needed to be to run this 5k.

Though the outfit was perfect, my health conditions were not. I had not run in weeks, and the furthest I had made it in my training programs was less than a mile. What had I done to myself? Why would I be this stupid with my time? I knew that I was going to make a fool out of myself, and yet I knew there was

nothing left to do. Though I had failed multiple times at getting myself into shape, now was the time that I had no choice and I was going to have to run.

“its better to get through the race then to be stuck wandering and never finishing it. Now RUN!”

Lacy’s words hit me hard. I was lost. I had lost myself to junk food and television, and needed to refocus on the race I had chosen after high school, the race of education. In the past semester, I had gone from an A/B student to a B/C student and my GPA was slipping. It seemed as though that with every weekend of binge Netflix and junk food, I had grown a lack of concern with my educational career. With every shaky step I took to finish the race, I grew stronger and more confident on how I wanted to change my outlook and attitude in my race of education.

After the water break, I lost all brain function, though, and this actual 5k seemed like a lost cause. Lacy began to really give up on me, and I had forgotten that she was keeping her own time and wanted to actually run the whole 5k. Shortly after we rounded the corner on the bend before the last quarter mile, the boys found us and we split off to finish separately. With a huge smile on his face, Sam pushed me to keep moving and to not give into my fatigue.

“You are so close to being finished. We just need to keep going a little bit further”, he told me.

By this point Lacy and my cousin Vicente had been consumed by the crowd in front of us and were nowhere in sight. Knowing that Lacy was getting her own race done helped me realize the one important thing I had been missing for the passed few months: I did not need to hold on to the fact that I was not in shape; all I needed to do was gain some urge to train myself. Though I could be discouraged in a class or at the gym, that didn’t mean that each time I showed up that wasn’t a little victory. By showing up at the gym at all, I was proving to myself that I wanted to make a change for the better.

Soon I begin to see the tunnel of inflatable arches and lights, and I can begin to hear the techno music that could or could not have been playing the whole time. All I know in this moment is the feeling of accomplishing a goal that I figured to be nearly impossible. I was running my first 5k and had not died of a sudden heart attack or asthma attack. I was finishing something I started, and I was going to finish it stronger than I began. At the finish line I could see an area of light figures that I could take pictures with and water in the glowing cups. As Sam urged me to keep strong on the final stretch I laughed. I knew that nothing he could say to me at this point could help me feel the way I felt about myself in that moment. I was the only person that could make me finish that race strong.

Soon we are at the finish line and all I could do from not collapsing was grabbing a cup of water and keep walking in circles. The race had defeated me, I kept saying in my head as I waited for Sam to start telling me how to improve my running style or what I need to eat or drink after the 5k. But that is nowhere near what Sam blurts out after I have calmed down and regained focus.

“You were amazing,” he proclaimed, hugging me and giving me a kiss before I could slink away because I knew that the last thing I was in this moment was attractive. “I’m so glad you pushed through and finished strong.” This brought a smile to my face as I heard the sincerity in his voice.

That night I was able to finish the Electric Run before my parents and my younger brother but by the time they did reach us, the boys were ready to burst with pride over how well Lacy and I had done in the race, and how proud we had made them. Though the race was a ton of fun, I realized as I ran the course just what I wanted for myself. That the lack of motivation I had been experiencing towards my fitness was actually something I was experiencing towards my academics as well. The fact that my grades were slipping, and my attitude toward classes was getting worse were all signs that I needed to

change. From the point on my attitude towards college changed, and I refocused on my purpose at Southwestern. Even though my fitness has not improved by much in the past year, I know that my parents are even more proud today because of how far I've come in my own race of education.

Author's Afterword:

My inspiration for this narrative came to me after looking through my phone at a picture of Sam and I in our race costumes. I say costumes because the outfits we wore for that 5k were less about running the race and more about the theme of the race. I'm a very visual person. Looking at that picture pulled a lot of different emotions back from the past helping me relive the race. The picture was taken as we were waiting for the sun to go down the evening of the race. We had gotten to the course pretty early and since it was taking place at night, we had a lot of time to mess around before hand. Though it was not the only picture we took that night, it is one of my favorite because we had done the same pose a few months earlier at Disney World.

Looking back on the race, I'm not sure if I would of finished it if it had not been for my family standing by my side the entire way. The same can be said about my college experience. I would of left Southwestern by now if I did not have my cousins so close to me. Countless of times I have needed a place to spend some time alone and all I have to do is go to their house. They have been here for me through thick and thin when all I had was them. Now Sam lives with me in Georgetown, and my parents spend more time visiting then they did before each supporting me as I finish school. I know that if it was not for this support system I have, I would of failed in college. My personal race has been blessed with love and support by my family.