

THE AGONY AND THE AGONY

I ran track when I was in high school, and was pretty good at it. For years, in fact, I was known by the nickname "Flash". Along with my friends Alex "Blitz" Bevernick and Bill "Whizzer" Willett, I was a founding member of the Speedy Nicknames Club, an organization which has always had exactly three members and whose only activity is telling people about its existence, so that I can say with confidence that the Club is as active as it ever was, based on the evidence of the present sentence.

But I'm not as active as *I* ever was. Exercise takes time and energy, and I don't always manage to get the two of them together in the same place at the same tune. However, when I'm in the interior, with no kids, phone, traffic, and faxes, I usually have the time and sometimes find the energy to go jogging, as I did recently one evening in Boké, leaving my hotel and turning left on the Sangaredi road. As I trotted along, I came across a Guinean guy running on the same road in the same direction as I was, so we greeted each other and ran along together.

Sometimes when I exercise, I forget what body I live in these days. It's some sort of hormonal thing. The dormant seventeen-year-old still living in me gets reanimated. I started to measure myself against the fellow I was running with. It became a matter of some importance to me to be able to run as far and as fast as him.

Surreptitiously glancing at him, I assessed our relative strengths and weaknesses. To my oxygen-deprived brain, we seemed to be about evenly matched. On the one hand, he was twenty-five years younger and fifty pounds lighter than me, so in terms of gross physical characteristics, I had to give him the edge. Also, he happened to mention that he ran ten kilometers a day; since it takes me an entire presidential administration to run that far, it was likely that he was in better shape too.

On the other hand, I had more expensive jogging shoes. Comparing all these factors objectively, I figured I could keep up with him.

We ran along together until we came to a crossroads. "We can run around the field there", my companion suggested, giving me a choice, "otherwise the road leads up the mountain". His tone of voice seemed to suggest that the "mountain" might be a little too much for me. He was either being polite or else he was concerned about what his responsibilities would be if I died. In any case, by this point my brain had stopped providing any useful services to the rest of me: "Hunh, hunh," I panted, "Let's go. Hunh. Mountain."

As we ran up a steep and endless rise, my running partner showed signs that, just maybe, the ascent involved some effort on his part. But mostly he just chatted on and on.

Him: I run here everyday.

Me Hunh.

Finn I like to run in the evening when it's cool. How about yourself?

Me Hunh!

Him Do you live in Boké?

Me No. Hunh. Con- Hunh! Hunh! -akry.

Him. Wow. How about that! Gee, this is a good hill, isn't it? You sure get a lot of exercise running up it.

I actually made it to the top and down again, at which point my friend wished me a nice day and sprinted off, no doubt to play a couple of quick games of soccer. By then the testosterone had worn off, the endorphins were kicking in, and, awash in male bonding, I smiled warmly and waved good-bye.

I might as well admit it that running has become more a social pursuit for me than anything else. Everyone understands what you're doing when you go running. In fact, lately I've been thinking of getting in touch with Blitz and Whizzer and maybe inviting this fellow to join us. We need some new blood.

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