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THE RACE OF LIFE

- a short story -



Against all odds, he would look death in the face, and finish on his own terms

“Basically, the condition will cause your heart to stop completely” the Doctor told me, but while he looked at my mum. She was starting to cry, and I stared out the window, not really understanding what had just been said.

“Now Peter, do you understand what I’ve told you today?” the Doctor asked me with half a reassuring smile. My mother placed her left hand on my shoulder, and her arm was cold and shivering wrapped around my neck.

“I’ve got... sys-tomic heart failure?” I asked, and saying out loud suddenly made it real.

“*Systolic* actually, I’m very sorry to tell you that” the Doctor said, pulling his thick, black glasses off. “There’s not easy solution for this condition. We can put Peter down on the waiting list for a donor heart, and until that happens, there are various medications we can try to see which one works best.”

“But how long is the wait for a heart these days? And how long might his heart keep working?” my mum asked.

“We can never predict how long it can take for a donor heart to arrive, and with his condition... heart failure can occur in 12-24 months, or even as long as eight years in some cases” the doctor said positively, like that was still good news.

“He would only be twenty by that point” said my mum.

I’d heard enough. I stood up, walked backwards towards the door as the doctor continued to talk and looked at me suspiciously. Once my mum realised I’d moved from my seat, she whipped around.

“Peter...where are you going?” she asked, and I opened the door and stood half way out in a flash.

“Out” I said, and I ran down the hall. A sharp left and down another hall to the glass doorway into the foyer.

“*Peter*” I heard my mum call out, like she was crying and trying to yell. The woman behind the desk, stood up to watch me push the double doors into the foyer open, and I booked it down the stairs. No bad heart was going to stop me. I kept running, as fast and as far away as I could. No idea where I was going, just away from the bad news. I got some funny looks from people, I guess because I was running like a crazy kid on a city street and it was a school day. If a cop saw me, he might stop to ask what school I was in and think I was wagging class. I needed to get off the main street.

I didn’t really know where I was, as I had not paid attention in the car as mum drove us to the doctors. She was quiet and tense in the car, and I just flipped through my current book. I had been told there was “some news” to be had, but no idea what that would end up being. Suddenly, I was mad, and continued to run, but slowed down a bit, looking behind me. No cars following, didn’t hear my mum calling me, and I felt I was now far away enough to slow down. Gliding down the pavement, it didn’t feel like I was running. If I had a bad heart inside me, I couldn’t tell that right now. I felt fit, but my anger was turning into fear. I was scared. Scared knowing I would die young, before my life got going. My eyes watered up, and not from the cold air hitting them as I ran, but for the sad reason. I got more funny looks, from women pushing prams, so I veered off this pavement and ran down a quiet street. I didn’t want to be found, so I was happy to get lost.

It must have been five minutes I was running for, or maybe it was ten? I slowed down a bit more, because now I was getting tired. Up ahead, I could see water, the surface shining in the sun, and I picked that as my spot to rest. There was a bench on the pavement, overlooking the river and some tall buildings on the other side of the water. I reached the bench and stopped dead in my tracks, my body lunging forward, and out of breath. I spat a massive amount of saliva out which had a weird pink colour to it, and wished I had a drink of water. Sitting down, I threw my head back and placed my hands on my stomach and side. I had a stitch now, which felt sharp and throbbing. I was able to stop thinking about the fact I was going to die soonish, and began to hope my mum would actually find me. I pictured her crying like she always did, and driving frantically around the city streets, calling my name out her car window. This kind of amused me, which was fine as it distracted me from the promise of death that was ahead of me. Was it common for kids my age to get heart failure? How long till I got my new heart, if it ever did arrive? Who could I talk to about this? I stopped dwelling on the unknown as it was a heavy weight on my head, and thought of my mum again. I know I shouldn't have run out like that, and no doubt she mum was worried sick. I seemed to be alone sitting by this side of the river, until I saw a man in a yellow t-shirt and black shorts running down the pavement in my direction. The number fourteen stood out on the front of his shirt in large black numbers. He looked at me, smiled and started to slow down. He came to a stop right in front of my bench.

"It'll be okay mate" he said to me, and I took a second to register he was actually talking to me.

"Pardon?" I asked

"You look like you've had a rough day"

"You could say that"

"Yeah I can tell, Just a feeling I get sometimes, you know? I see a young guy like you sitting on this bench staring out at the water, and you're alone. Something on your mind?" he asked with a friendly smile. His voice was young sounding but his face was old and worn out. I guessed he was maybe 25, or thereabouts. Hard to tell.

"Lots of things on my mind" I said, but didn't feel all that comfortable talking to some man I didn't know, and there was no one else around. So I changed the conversation. "Are you running in a race?"

"I was. In a marathon actually. It's finished now. I won, but couldn't stop running. Felt like it was going to be my last race, so I kept going"

"Well you've running stopped now. Where are the other runners?" I asked, trying to sound smart.

"Way back there" he said, pointing back over his shoulder "Something told me to keep on running, and then I spotted you so told myself, there's a young guy who needs some help. Would you like some help?" he asked, and suddenly I didn't feel uncomfortable around this guy. He started jogging on the spot, getting himself ready to move again.

"I just learnt I'm sick, and I don't have long to... live, basically. Bad heart or something" I said, which didn't feel so bad when telling this guy.

"That's rough mate. But you ran down here didn't you? So it can't be too bad right now?"

"How did you know I ran down here?" I asked, curiously.

"You looked like you've had a run. Short of breath, holding your belly. Got a stitch?"

“You’re pretty smart mister. I should go and find my mum now” I said, trying to be polite, and stood up, looking around me. A couple of cars passed on the road behind me, but none of them were mum.

“Can I say one more thing to you before I go?” the man asked me, and I turned back to face him. His face was certain and confident, and his jogging on the spot got faster. “You might have a bad ticker, but that doesn’t mean your heart is useless. In fact, that’s where your courage comes from. So find what you love to do, be brave enough to do it, and don’t let anything stop you. People might tell you not to, but don’t listen to them. Just believe in yourself, and maybe you could run a marathon like this one day?” he said, and laughed a little. “I’m PK, and it was nice talking to you”

Then he continued running. I watched him move quickly down the pavement along the river, which took a bend to the left, and he disappeared around the corner. After he was gone, I kind of wished he would come back, because I was starting to enjoy the conversation. But he didn’t return, and as I looked back up the trail where he’d come from, no other runners followed. The marathon really must have been miles away? And on a weekday too? That seemed strange.

Not sure what to make of the conversation I’d just had, I decided it was time to find my mum. I began walking back to the doctors, and kept playing the conversation with the man over and over in my mind. Something was odd about it. It’s like he knew me already, or either he was just smart and worked out something was wrong. I don’t know.

Twenty minutes later I arrived back at the doctors, and walked in to see my mum was sitting in the foyer, with two police men standing over her taking notes.

“Mum” I said, and she ran over and hugged me.

“Peter, thank God you’re alright. Where did you go?” she asked in a panicked tone.

“Just... out. I needed to get out of here, that’s all”

“It’s okay, I’m not mad. I know that was scary for you. I’m just glad you’re okay. Let’s go home” she said, and we did.

After mum spoke to dad and my two younger sisters about my bad news, I went to my room and watched TV. I caught the end of the news, which was talking about the days sports news, but there was no mention of a marathon. So where did this mystery marathon man come from I wondered. Why did he keep running, and where did he go after he spoke to me? I was intrigued and confused, but also inspired by meeting that man. On the day when I received the news I was going to die from a bad heart, I chose not to get sad about it and wait for that day to come. No thanks. I was going to take that mans advice and just live my life, bad heart or not. And what better way to do that than take up running?

“No, no, no” my mother said at breakfast the next morning when I told her my plan; only that I was going to take up running. I didn’t mention anything about meeting the man. “You need to rest Peter. You’re in no condition to run”

“But mum, if my heart is going bad there’s nothing I can do about it. I might as well just enjoy it, right? Don’t you agree dad?” I said, looking hopefully at my dad. But he looked at mum plainly, then back to me.

“Your mother is right Peter, now is not the time to take up anything too physical. The main thing is you attend your appointments, and take care” my dad said, and mum started to cry again.

Against my parent's wishes, I took up running anyway. And getting *so* into it, sometimes forgetting I actually had a bad heart. I ran to school, I ran at school to get to class and around the sports oval at lunch, and I ran home. I even ran with my dog instead of walking with him, which he loved. Like Forest Gump, "If I was going somewhere, I... was... *Running*". Feeling okay to begin with, I went and had the tests at the hospital like I was supposed to, and listened to the doctors say things to me but looked at my parents again, and I tuned out. The doctor would ask me questions about the symptoms I was having, and there were some. I was more tired in the mornings, even after a good night's sleep. I would cough a fair bit, and my phlegm was a pinkish colour. But even speaking to the doctor all I could think about was running. Our family had a weekend at the beach coming up, and I imagined myself running along the sand, then running into the water and swimming out to sea, finding a desert island, then running a lap around it. That kind of stuff, you know?

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A year passed. I was watching the news one evening in the living room with my dad. The man on the TV said, "This year will see the first City Marathon take place. Big crowds are expected at the first marathon, which welcomes runners of all sorts, as well as a few professional runners and retired Olympians" he said, then went on about some other story.

"Doesn't he meant the second time the City Marathon has been run?" I asked out loud. My dad looked up from his book.

"No, I don't think so Peter. It's the first time our city has hosted a marathon in a long time"

"But I met a marathon runner this time last year in the city. He stopped and talked to me. Said he had won the race but he was still running through the city for some reason. He had a shirt with a number on it and everything"

"Maybe he was just practising, but I'm fairly certain this is the first marathon in the city in a long time" my dad said, then looked back down at this book.

So no marathon last year? *Who was this guy?* I asked myself.

My running had gotten good since starting a year ago, and I wanted to try for the marathon, but I wasn't ready. I set my sights on next year but, six months later, my health took a turn, and I nearly died. My heart stopped beating for a moment, and I went into shock. I spent two months in hospital that year, and stopped running. There were twice as many tests following that heart attack as I called it, and running took a back seat. But only for a little while.

By the time I was seventeen, I had experienced nine more episodes where my heart slowed down considerably and almost stopped all together. My medication increased to about sixteen pills a day, and I was *still* on the waiting list for a new heart. But I was told the wait could be a while longer, and it was very risky to attempt any surgery replacement. Aside from that shit going on, I managed to finish high school, and chose not to go on with further study after school straight away/ I was also getting more tired by this point, sleeping long hours, and taking a while to get up and going. I tried to sneak in a run here and there, but I could only get about fifty metres before my whole body started to hurt.

When I turned nineteen years old, I started having this very strange, recurring dream.

I was running through our city, but all the streets were deserted. No cars, no people, no noise. Empty and silent. And instead of posters for movies, bands or products plastered all over the buildings and bus stops, there were pictures of me. But it was me when I was twelve years old, around the time I got told I was sick and would die by age 20. In the pictures, I was smiling, and looking at myself running. As I run, I got faster and faster and never got tired. Then I was running with my feet above the ground, and I rose off the street, and even over the tops of buildings. I would get higher and higher, looking down on the city shrinking, and just as I was about to break through the clouds, I would wake up. Always at that very same moment. I had this dream five more times in the next few months, and couldn't work out what it meant. One morning, after waking up from that dream, I sat at the kitchen table, ate my breakfast and took my pile of pills, which over the years had included such things as Cozar, Diovan and Zebeta. I called them 'My Russian Friends' because of how their names sounded, but they weren't very friendly. After gulping down the usually few in the morning while reading the paper, I flipped to the back section as I usually did and saw a full page ad for the City Marathon, which was now taking applications. The same marathon the Mystery Marathon Man had won eight years ago. It was coming up in about four months. I would be twenty by then, so maybe dead, but possibly still ticking. What did I have to lose? In my mind, I had nothing to lose. My heart was already losing, but that wasn't going to stop me. I was going to run in this marathon, and I planned to win it.

Having kept my running a secret from my parents for so long had been an achievement but not an easy one. I knew I couldn't hide the fact I was going to run in a marathon from them, so I fessed up about it. Now that I was twenty years old, they couldn't tell me what to do, even though I was living at home and I still had to help clean the house, but this was different. This was my life's dream, and I told them how I met the Mystery Marathon Man that day, and how he said something to me that changed me. My dad looked angry, but it was my mum's reaction that surprised me the most. Expecting her to cry her eyes out as usual, she just breathed in deeply, let it out and smiled, saying. "Go for it Peter. As long as you let me pick your number for the race. I've got a lucky number I want you to have"
"I think they assign me a number mum, but I can probably wear two I suppose"
"I hope so" she said, looking at me hopefully.

I also went and spoke to my doctor about my plan to run the marathon, and he advised me purely from a professional position not to do it. But I told him I was going to, and no one was going to stop me. I explained my training plan, and he shook his head in disbelief, then acknowledgment. This was the main doctor I'd had for the past eight years, and he knew me; once I was committed to something, there was no stopping me. So he prescribed me some extra medication, and told me to get plenty of sleep in between my practice runs. I took that advice and thanked him.

My application was sent in, and I was going to run the marathon. With two months to go, I started training. Even though it hurt, and I had to stop regularly to catch my breath, I trained almost everyday for two months. Fortunately, I didn't have any attacks, so I kept pushing myself. That was, until about two days before the marathon.

I had my biggest heart failure incident, and had to be resuscitated. I woke up in hospital, with my mum, dad and sisters in the room. Mum was crying, and dad stood behind her, looking sad. My sisters sat in chairs to the side, just staring at me in shock. Being much younger, I guess they never knew what to think of it all.

“Glad to see you back” my mum said “We thought we lost you there Peter”

“What happened?” I asked, with vague memories of the incident.

“You were at home, getting ready for a run, when your heart stopped. Your dad resuscitated you, but you were unconscious. Then you were brought here”

“Thanks dad. I nearly missed the marathon” I said, smiling. But my parents didn’t smile back.

“Peter, you can’t run in the marathon. The doctor has told us you have to cancel your run, and you must stay here. He’s coming to talk to you, and – “

“I think, we should let the doctor tell him dear” my dad said interrupting mum. She wiped back a tear.

“Good morning everyone” said a voice from the door. It was my doctor, standing there in a suit and tie. “Hi Peter, how are we feeling today?”

“Okay. What’s the scoop Doc?” I said

“Straight to the point I see Peter, like always. Okay, I’ll cut to it” he said and walked over to my bedside “You can’t leave the hospital I’m afraid. After this latest incident, I am certain the next time your heart stops, it will stop for good” he said matter of factly, and my mum burst into tears.

“For real this time?” I asked “Like clockwork. Eight years, like you said”

“I’m afraid so Peter. But we will move you into a private room. It has a large TV so you can watch the marathon” he said, trying to be sincere. But I had no intention of watching it on TV. I was going to run it. If my heart would stop for good next time, I was going to run the marathon I had been preparing for since the day I learnt I was going to die. So I played along with the doctor and my parents for now, and quite convincingly said, “Okay”.

It was the morning of the marathon, and I woke up feeling very light. My body was not tight and heavy like it had been lately, and somehow my hearing was stronger. Everything around me looked whiter and brighter, and I smiled just at a painting on the wall of my room. There was a peaceful, calmness in the room, which I had all to myself, and the nurse brought in my breakfast. Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, orange juice, and she left it on my table. Everything a marathon runner needs. I turned the TV on, and there was coverage of the marathon. The countdown clock on the TV said forty-five minutes till the race started. There were thousands of people near the starting line. I watched enviously, and my urge to be there just grew stronger by the minute. My room phone rang.

“Hi Peter” said the voice of my mum. “How are you feeling today?”

“Pretty good thanks. Just about to watch the marathon” I said, trying to sound convincing.

“Oh good. That’s important to you I know and I’m sorry you couldn’t run it Peter, I really am. And did I ever tell you my dad was a runner?” she said. This was the first I’d ever heard of my now deceased grandfather being a runner.

“No, when was that?” I asked

“Oh, years ago, when he was a young man. He competed in a few marathons and won them all too. He had a few tricks to help him win as well. He would wear his own number on his shirt, and his shirt was always a light colour. Sometimes white, or yellow. He said it made him feel lighter and run faster wearing that colour. And he would always put his name down as his initials. You were named after him, as you know. And his surname was Kenneth, my maiden name. His number never changed. He believed it was good luck. It was the number I wanted you to wear” my mum said, her voice sounding distant like she was recalling a fond memory. As I listened to my mum say all this, and watching the marathon gearing up on TV, my mind went back to that day when I was twelve. Sitting by the river all alone, and the man came running down to me. Then it hit me. The man wore a yellow top, and told me his name was PK. *Could it have been my grandpa?* I asked himself.

“Mum...” I said slowly “... what was the number grandpa wore?”

“Well it was his lucky number. The date of his birthday, how old he was when he met your grandmother, the street number of his first house, and – “

“The number mum, please?”

“Sorry Peter, it was the number fourteen” she said, and I smiled.

“Mum” I began to say, wanting to tell her about what I saw, but I stopped myself. She wouldn’t have believed me, and if she did, she might cry again.

“Yes Peter”

“Umm, what time are you coming to visit today?” I asked.

“About noon if that’s okay. Just got a few things to do this morning. Can I bring you anything sweetie?” she asked

“No thanks. I’ll see you when you get here” I said with my mind already formulating a plan, that I didn’t even say goodbye to my mum before I hung up. This was the moment my life had been leading to. The day I found out I would die from heart failure, my grandfather visited me. He died as an old man when I was eight, but this was the spirit of him as a young man, when he was a runner. And he came to tell me to be runner. I had to run in that marathon today, and I would have my grandfather’s spirit on my side.

Getting out of bed, I went over to my wardrobe, where a few spare t-shirts were hanging up. Blue, green and yellow. My mum had also packed my black shorts, but I couldn’t figure out why. Maybe she thought I wanted to wear them while watching the race? My mum was considerate that way. Thanks mum, I would wear them, but I wouldn’t be watching the race. To me, it felt like this was all meant to be. Next, I needed a number to be a runner, so I asked the nurse walking outside my room to bring me two pieces of white paper, some sticky tape and a black pen. She looked at me curiously, as I told her I just wanted to draw. Five minutes later she returned with the goods. I took each piece of paper, writing “14” on them in large black numbers, and stuck each page to the front and back of my t-shirt. It was makeshift, but it would do. I got changed into my gear, putting my runners on, and then wrapping my hospital gown around myself. I wasn’t allowed to leave my room unsupervised, so I pressed the button to call a nurse. She arrived seconds later.

“Yes Peter?” she said.

“Yeah, I wanted to go for a walk to the courtyard if that’s okay? I need some air”

“You really shouldn’t be walking, but I could arrange a wheelchair and take you there if you like?”

“Sounds good. Just want to get out of this room for a while” I said, hoping this nurse wasn’t clever enough to work out what I might be doing. I knew she was new to me, so probably didn’t know about my history of running with a bad heart.

“I’ll be back shortly she said. I looked at the TV, and the time to the start of the marathon said thirty-seven minutes. I had to get moving.

About ten minutes later, the nurse walked slowly back to my room with a wheelchair. She was in no hurry, and I couldn’t tell her I was, as she would suspect something then for sure. I felt like I had all the energy in the world, but pretended I didn’t.

Sitting down slowly into the chair, I put my feet on the stirrups, and the nurse gracefully turned me around and pushed me down the hall.

“It’s a nice day to be in the courtyard, lots of sun” she said

“Perfect” I said, but thinking about the marathon. Running in the wide open, with the cool air and sun shining down on me. But I won’t like I was feeling anxious as hell, that I could drop dead in the middle of the race. Anxious, but kind of excited too.

Either way, I was about to go for the run of all runs. The perfect way to spend my final hours, if that was going to be the case. I felt motivated, and bloody scared too.

As we approached the next corridor to go to the courtyard, I saw my chance to break for it. “Can we stop for a minute? I need to use the toilet” I said, and without saying a word the nurse wheeled me over to the toilet to the right. She headed for the disable toilet, opened the door, and wheeled me in. “I can manage” I said to her, and she walked out.

“I’ll just be down the hall, and back in a few minutes”

“Take your time” I said with a smile as the toilet door closed. I waited about one minute, then reopened the door. I looked both ways down the hall, and the nurse was nowhere in sight. I pulled off my gown, and left it on the toilet floor. I was going to try and pass for a visitor at the hospital; a visitor who was dressed in running clothes, but a visitor none the less. And I had to get out of the hospital without drawing too much attention to myself, but quickly enough to make the start of the race. So I walked down the hall, towards the elevators. Got in the elevator, and hit the button to go down three levels to the main floor. The door opened, and as I got out, two doctors walked in, but none of them I knew, thank God. The exit was in sight, and I walked briskly for the door. The woman behind the check in desk looked at me like I was an impostor. I just smiled at her and kept going. Outside the hospital now, I was feeling good and ready. I started to jog, for the first time in about two months, away from the hospital, onto the pavement, and down the street into the centre of the city. It would take me about fifteen minutes to get there, and the race started in nineteen minutes. My plan was to just jump in undetected and run it, with all the rest of them. Easy right?

I had to stop twice on my run through the city, and each time I beat my chest twice with my fist and said “Come on. Work!” I knew it could hear me, and we had to work together now. The heart was in charge of course, but I could still use it anyway I wanted. I owned my heart, it didn’t own me. Mind over matter, right?

As I approached the starting area of the marathon, thousands of people were gathered, and I saw a bunch of marquis where no one was standing, but large signs above said

“ALL RUNNERS CHECK IN HERE TO REGISTER”. I had to keep running, through this check point and beyond, without being stopped and if my timing was correct, I would join the other runners just as the gun was fired and the marathon would begin. And so I did. I ran straight and steadfast, and all I concentrated on was the large mass of people about a hundred metres ahead of me. I ran through the space in between two marquis tents, where the last two remaining staff stopped talking to each other, and put their hands up in the air, looking shocked.

“Excuse me sir, you need register first” one of them said sternly.

“Just put me down as PK, number 14” I said, and kept running. I said that loud enough for them to hear, but would they write it down, or just have security chase me? I kept running and figured I’d had a bloody good warm up to start the marathon. I slowed down slightly as I approached the back of the group, and as I did, the starting gun went Bang! The couple thousand people in front me, huddle in so closely together there was just a sea of coloured t-shirts and black numbers moved like a herd of cattle. I saw a few spaces in the back of the group and darted through. I got held up in about the middle portion of the pack of runners, and kept my head low here, running with the group. I was in the marathon, and so far, the old ticker felt fine. No turning back now, but surely with the nurse probably having the hospital searched and my parents getting called, they would be onto me soon enough. Plus, there were TV cameras everywhere I looked and my plan was to break out of this pack, make it to the front of the line and charge my way through to the finish line. And win! Which meant TV cameras capturing my victory, which meant the news reporting on me, and my parents coming down to the finish line to capture me and take me back to the hospital. I was okay with that, as long as I got to finish the race before that.

Swiftly, smoothly and without breaking a sweat or yet feeling tired, I ran like the wind. That lightness I felt when waking up this morning was there. I was like air running on air, light on my feet and graceful, respecting the other runners around me but also not letting them hold me back in the pack, or take the lead. I could see pockets of space in between every runner, and an imaginary red line zigzagging through them like it was guiding me where to go. I could hear the cheers of people along the side of the road, with the sun shining down on my face. I could hear the comments of other runners like whispers on the wind.

“Slow down, there’s miles to go”

“Look at him, he’s moving fast”

“That guy better pace himself”

They said, in unison. I heard them, but didn’t listen to them. Just words rolling off my back that meant nothing to me as a wave of certainty came over me instead and I thought back to the day I got the news. The doctor’s diagnosis of my death still sounded clear as it did then, but his words no longer haunted me. Instead, I found myself saying “Thank You”. I then recalled the conversation I had with the Mystery Marathon Man, finding out from my dad a year later there had been no marathon in the city that day, then my mum’s story about grandpa. It all made sense. I knew the man I had met that day was my grandfather, visiting me on the day I discovered I was going to die, telling me to keep running the race. The Race of Life. I took his advice, and I thought back to my training over the past eight years.

It was all coming back to me like instructions. *“Breathe. Let your heels hit the ground and spring off your toes. Let your arms move together in a rhythm with your legs. Think of nothing else but your breath and body, allowing it to guide you to where you*

need to go". And that's what I did. I thought I would be thinking about my family in this moment, but I didn't. I couldn't allow myself to, because that would distract me. This was my moment to shine. Sure, my parents would be upset, even mad, that I was running this race, but if I was about to have my final failure of the heart, I was going to go out on a victory run. And that was quickly becoming the case.

As I continued to run, the amount of bodies running alongside me thinned out. I was breaking through to the front. The runners there were different from the pack behind me. Whereas the runners behind me were average Joes and Janes, I was now in the company of who had to be real athletes. Men and women whose muscular backs and legs were sculpted to perfection. Their shirts were stamped with logos and made of a nice, synthetic material, and they ran so smoothly, they were only inspiring me to run further. There were about twelve in front of me as I counted, and as we neared a bend in the road, a sign to the left read "Final five kilometres". I was in distance now, and if I could break through in the last two kilometres, I would win this race. The reality of this was sinking in. I had made it this far, despite all the odds; multiple heart failures, doctors and parents telling me not to, and standing on death's doorstep. And that's when I started to get tired. And heavy. My legs were stiff, I was thirsty as hell and the pressure was on me. My final moments of strength were being called up, I knew that, so I pushed harder and harder, until the pain was gone. It also felt like I had stopped breathing for a moment, but I knew instead it was because I was so aware and present of what I was doing, the breathing was just working away in the background.

The sign for three kilometres to go. I had passed about six professional runners, and swear I could hear one of them say "*Who is that?*" and that made me smile. Now only four in front of me. My strides were long, and even though I'd run this far, to me it felt like I was just getting started. When I would cross the finish line, maybe I could just keep going? As long as my heart was pumping blood through my veins, I was alive, and I was going to make the most of the rest of my life, however long that would be.

Now, I was neck and neck with one other runner. A black man, who looked like he might be from Kenya. His skin glistened with sweat, and he seemed to float across the ground as he ran. I was right beside him for a few hundred metres, and I could see the finish line in sight. The crowds along side us grew in numbers and got louder. The cheering was immense, and two motorbikes appeared from behind and drove in front of us, each with a guy sitting on the back pointing a camera at us. I was on TV now, and I knew it. In my mind I could hear the voice of the commentators in some booth asking themselves "*Who is this Mystery Marathon Man?*" and I hoped they were. I also hoped my parents had realised where I was, and were coming to meet me at the finish line. I'm sure they would be mortified of course, but still extremely proud, and I wanted to run over the finish line and give them a hug.

As I pushed myself for the last five hundred metres, I could hear more feet running behind me. I took one quick glance back, the first time I had looked behind me for the whole race, and saw the eight runners I had passed before now creeping up behind me. The Kenyan man was just a metre behind me. That was as long as I allowed myself to look, so whipped my head back around and yelled out "*Let's finish this!*" and I began to sprint.

Running faster and faster I heard a runner behind me say *“That’s impossible”* which just fuelled me even more. I maintained a steady sprint and knew I was going to win. For the first time in this race, I started to feel my heart beat in my chest. It was slow at first, and then got faster, then slow again, like it was now being put to work. I knew in myself I didn’t have long. So just finishing this race was no longer an option. I was going to run until I dropped dead, with the sounds of thousands of strangers cheering and in my mind, my family there to hug me and hold me as I closed my eyes for the last time.

The finish line was just metres away, and I could feel the Kenyan breathing down my back. He wanted to win this as badly as me, and was probably furious that some young guy came out of nowhere with a fake number on his back to take over and win the marathon. And then I realised, I wouldn’t technically be the winner, because I hadn’t registered. I just rocked up and joined in, recalling I yelled out my grandfathers initials PK to someone at the marquis, hoping they wrote my number down. They would probably use that information to hunt me down and have me arrested or maybe just fined for not entering the race. But I didn’t care. When you’re going down, go down in a blaze of glory am I right?

I crossed the line to win the marathon, and the hands of spectators on either side rose up in the air with the roar of their cheers. I saw the faces of people I would never know, some smiling and others looking on like a deer frozen in headlights, wondering who the hell this guy was. And as I slowed down slightly after crossing the line, I looked around for some familiar faces; mum, dad and my sisters. But they were nowhere to be seen. I did see another three cameras lined up along the side of the road and they each tracked me as I continued to run. *“You can stop now”* a voice yelled out from the side, but I didn’t comply. Up ahead was a red barrier with a bunch of people in green t-shirts and white caps, standing in a line like a blockade. Event staff I assumed, ready to apprehend me, demand to know who I was and tell me that I hadn’t actually won the race. But I had won, and I wouldn’t be stopping for them.

To the right of the road was a park, and a short stone wall up to the grass. I darted across the road, yelling *“Excuse.... Me... Please!”* The cluster of people parted in a moment and I charged between them, and leapt up to the stone wall, using it to propel myself over it and landed softly on the grass. I kept running, through the park, now covered by tall trees looming over, providing a cool, comforting shade. I had to be swift here, and followed the park trail for a while, then cut through some bushes, which brought me to the far side of the park. Then I was on a city street, and followed that down. I continued to run, but slowed considerably, as my heart was beating slow, but loud, and now I felt tired. But despite the pain in my body and heart, my head was clear and in this moment everything just made perfect sense. I thought of my family, I thought of the city and its people and I wanted to find a place I could sit down and rest, for good. If these were my final moments, I was ready.

Now running aimlessly down the street, if I was about to drop dead, I didn’t want it to be here, so I cut across an intersection, dodging two cars in the process, and down a narrow side street where I came to a wide pavement. To the right of that pavement

was the river, and lining it on the other side were buildings. The sun glistened on the surface of the water, and I felt very relaxed. As I ran further down the river, moving away from the buildings and flow of traffic, I was suddenly alone. Empty benches along the side of the pavement all looked inviting to sit on for my final moments, but something pulled me further down that river. My heart beat started to slow again, and I could see a bench ahead in the distance but it wasn't empty. A young boy sat on it, starting out at the river. As I got closer and he came into view, a smile grew on my face. He was looking directly at me, and sadness was all over his face. Then I stopped running and walked, gradually getting closer to him. That's when it hit me. The boy sitting on the bench, was me. The day I had just received the news about my impending death, and I ran away and found this bench by the river. Somehow, I'd gone back in time. It wasn't a case of my younger self travelling to the future to meet himself eight years later. Because I remember that day. I was at the doctors, I ran out and away from my band news, and came to this bench. Then this guy rocks up in his marathon gear, and talked to me. It was me all along, and not my grandfather. As I approached the bench, he looked at me curiously, and I said the first thing that came to mind.

"It'll be okay mate". Then we talked. The same conversation word for word, as I had experienced it eight years ago on this day. I didn't need to think what to say, it just flowed out. I wasn't in control of my own words. Someone or something else was speaking through me, and it all flowed out perfectly. I looked down at the younger version of myself, and the experience was nothing short of surreal. This time, I knew it was myself I was talking to. Looking down at the twelve year old version of me, I can only describe it as looking at a moving picture of yourself, where you recognise the face and the eyes looking back at you as your own, but they also seem like a stranger at the same time. And I can't explain or how I had travelled to the past, but I was here. And it filled with so much inner peace that I knew this was where I, and we, as in myself and me, were supposed to be. And I also knew my time had come.

I bid myself farewell continued running down the side, around the bend and further into the past. I chose not to run back the direction I came from, assuming whatever doorway of time I slipped through would still be there. I didn't want to go back. All that was waiting for me in my time was being restricted to a hospital room until I died. No, this was where I belonged, as bizarre as that felt to me. But I took comfort in knowing that my younger self would get the same message I got and start to run his way through the tough years that lay ahead for him, and maybe, just maybe, his journey would be different. I entertained the thought that he could live longer than me. That was my final thought, and it stayed in my mind like a picture, and it was bright and strong. The river trail was still quiet, with no other soul around, and in the next few strides of my run, life stopped.

My heart ceased, and I couldn't feel my legs, then all the feeling left my body. I continued to running for a few more strides, then I fell forward, collapsing and landing on my face. The smack of my face to the ground was loud, but there was no pain then like a leaf in the wind, I rolled over the trail and onto the grass, which was a downward slope to the edge of the river. My body rolled down the grass, and the world around me started to go fuzzy. I couldn't hear anything, but I could sense the water enveloping me, as my body plunged into the river. I went straight under, and my body turned slowly in the water, full circle, so I could then look up and get my last

glimpse up to the surface, glistening in the light and the ripples moving in a motion that was like a goodbye wave to me. I sank to the bottom of the river, where it got dark, and landed on the surface. My eyes closed a moment later, and in that final moment, my entire life flashed before me.

Memories flooded back as water filled my lungs, weighing me down to the murky bottom. In white flashes, I relived the day at the doctors. Getting the bad news. My mum crying. Running out of there and through the city. Stopping at the river. Meeting the man running down the trail. Becoming a runner. Countless hospital visits. Preparing for the marathon. Escaping the hospital this morning. Running the race. Winning. And then meeting my younger self.

I couldn't explain the events of today, but I knew what it meant. I had to make peace with myself before passing on. I hopped from one time to another, and imparted the wisdom I received, and saw a bright future ahead for young Me. And with my body dead, my eyes closed for the last time and with no control over my body at all by now, I somehow managed to form a small smile at the bottom of the river. I was okay with what was happening. It was my time to go. I had made my mark. I had run the race, and won, facing death on my own terms. Not in some hospital room, but after running the greatest run of all time. After all, I was the Mystery Marathon Man.