

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 56

THE LONG PART



C H E W - Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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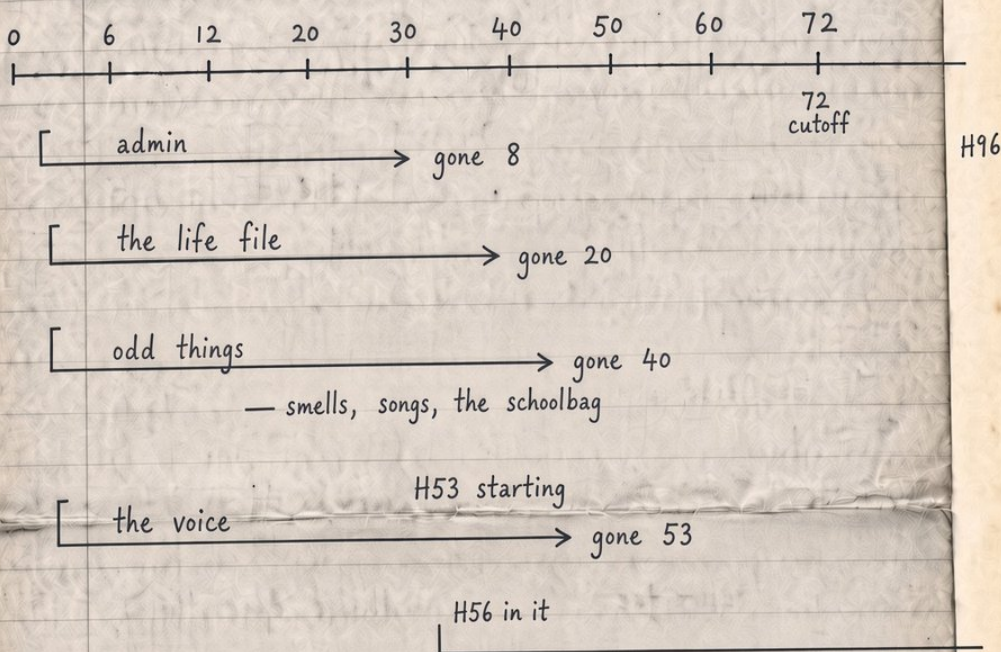
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feet good



the long part

feet good

she couldn't look

SYNOPSIS

Rudabeh Sarrafi crossed a border on foot at thirteen and arrived in a country that could not pronounce her, so she let it call her Ruby. At forty-one, for reasons she refused to explain to anyone including herself, she started running. By forty-nine she was one of the small number of people in the world who could stay awake and moving for three days.

Her daughter Katie crewed every race. She was the one at the finish with the folding chair and the thermos, the one who counted the hours, the one who watched her mother go out into the dark and come back a little further away each time.

The Long Part is assembled from Ruby's training logs, Katie's crew notes, two interview transcripts, and one notebook that does not belong to either of them. It is offered as a practical account of how a person prepares for something like this, and what happens to them hour by hour when they do. The instruction in it is real and should be followed.

The rest of it the reader will have to decide about.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

When I was a boy I saw a dervish walking on the road outside my grandmother's town. He was very tall and his beard came down past his chest and everything he owned in the world was in one cloth bag over his shoulder. I remember being told not to stare. I remember staring. He was not begging and he was not hurrying and he did not look at any of us. He was simply going, and had been going for a long time, and would keep going after we had all gone inside for lunch.

I did not think about him again for thirty years. Then I read about a race in which people run for six days on a one-mile loop, and about the monks on Mount Hiei who walk a thousand days over seven years and, at the midpoint, go nine days without food or water or sleep, and I understood that I had seen something ordinary. There have always been people who walk until something happens. Every culture has made a place for them, usually a holy one. We are the first culture to give them a bib number and a cutoff time and no explanation at all.

This book is about one of them, and about her daughter, which is the same subject looked at from the other side.

I want to say something about why it is written the way it is. The body keeps the score. It is a phrase from clinical work on trauma and it means, roughly, that the things that happen to us are not stored as stories. They are stored lower down, in the way we breathe and flinch and hold our shoulders, in the parts of us that do not use language and cannot be argued with. A person can tell you they are fine in a completely honest voice while their hands are doing something else entirely.

An immigrant mother is a person carrying a ledger nobody has ever asked to see. Rudabeh walked a long way when she was thirteen. Nobody timed it. Nobody was waiting at the end of it with a chair and a thermos. There was no distance posted anywhere, no marked route, no one clapping. She got to the other side and started a life

and was, by every measure anyone applied, fine.

Thirty years later she began paying money to walk a long way in the dark.

I do not think she was reenacting anything. I think she was correcting it. She wanted a route with a distance on it and a person standing at the end. That is not a small thing to want, and I have come to believe it is not a strange thing to want either.

What happened after that is the book.

The running detail here is accurate. I have not invented the hallucinations of the second night, or the weeping at the second sunrise, or the monks, or the loop in the dark with the light six feet wide. Those are documented, and where they are documented I have followed the documents. Where the documents stop, I have kept writing.

I would ask you to notice where that happens. Most people don't.

Chew Z

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AFTERWORD

I. BEFORE

1. WHY ANYONE DOES THIS

Start with the thing everybody gets wrong.

People think it is about pain. They hear that a woman ran for three days without sleeping and they picture three days of suffering, one long unbroken stretch of it, and they think: why would anyone choose that. And because they cannot answer the question they decide the answer must be something unpleasant. Ego. Self-punishment. Some hole in the person that needs filling.

It is not about pain. Pain is only the toll. The road is somewhere else.

Here is what actually happens, described as plainly as I can manage.

For the first several hours you are yourself. You are the person who woke up that morning, with all of that person's opinions and worries and running commentary. You are thinking about your job. You are thinking about whether you started too fast. You are having, in other words, the same conversation with yourself that you have been having every waking minute since you were about four years old, the one that never stops, the one you have never once in your life managed to switch off for longer than a few seconds.

Then the hours pile up, and something begins to go quiet.

It goes in order. The first thing to go is the future. You stop being able to think about the end of the race, because the end of the race is too far away to be real, and the mind will not hold something it cannot reach. Then the past goes. Not your memories — those come back later, and they come back strangely — but the recent past, the part where you were fresh and it was easier. That stops being available too. What is left is a narrow band of time about ten minutes wide, and you live in it, and it moves along the ground with you.

Then the commentary goes.

This is the part people cannot be told about, only shown. The voice that has been describing your life to you since you were four gets

tired before your legs do. It runs out of things to say. And when it stops, what is underneath it turns out not to be nothing. It turns out to be a kind of enormous and completely unbothered attention, which was apparently there the whole time, and which has been listening to the commentary the way you would listen to a radio left on in another room.

That is what people mean by the runner's high. It is not a chemical reward. Nothing is being given to you. Something is being taken away, and what is left is what you actually are when there is nothing left over to talk with.

People come back from it and say *I felt like myself*. They mean the opposite. They felt like themselves minus the part that keeps saying *I*.

You cannot get there by wanting it. This is the first practical fact in this book and the most important one. The commentary does not stop because you decided it should. It stops because it is exhausted, and to exhaust it you have to go past the point where wanting anything is still possible. Every method humans have ever found for this is the same method: repetition, attrition, and no sleep. Walk the same mountain a thousand times. Circle the same building. Turn on the same spot for hours. Run a one-mile loop for six days.

It is not a trick and there is no shortcut, and if there were a shortcut the state would not be worth reaching, because the emptying out is not the price of arriving. It is the arriving.

Now the second thing everybody gets wrong.

They think the hard part is going out.

— — —

2. RUDABEH

She was thirteen and the war was in its last year and they left at night, which was not dramatic at the time. A great many people left at night. Her mother had sold a ring and then a second ring. There was a man with a truck for part of it and after that there was walking.

She was never able to say afterward how long the walking was. She could say how many nights, because she counted nights, but a night is not a distance. She said it was four nights and that on the third one her feet were bad and her mother did not look at them, and that this was correct, because there was nothing to be done about her feet and looking at them would only have made them a subject.

That is the entire content of what she was willing to say about it for most of her life. Four nights. Her feet were bad. Her mother did not look.

They were in Turkey a long time after that, in two rooms, waiting for papers. Her mother worked. Rudabeh learned that the waiting was harder than the walking, which surprised her, and which she filed away without examining. Then there were papers and a plane and a city in America with a great deal of sky in it, and a school.

At the school a woman with a clipboard asked her name and she said it, and the woman said it back wrong, twice, and then said, kindly, *how about Ruby?*

She said yes. She was thirteen and she had been walking for a year and a half by then in every sense that mattered and she said yes, and it was easier, and she was Ruby for the next thirty-six years.

Her daughter would eventually make a great deal of this. Ruby herself would not. When Katie was in college and had discovered a vocabulary for things, she came home for a weekend and said something about erasure, about what it costs to have your name taken, and Ruby listened to the whole thing with real patience and then said: *It wasn't taken. I handed it over. I was tired.*

Katie said that was worse.

Ruby said, *It was easier, and there was a lot to do*, and got up to deal with something on the stove, and that was the end of it.

— — —

Here is what she did not say, and what has to be reconstructed from the shape of the rest of her life.

Nothing about the four nights was witnessed. There was no route. Nobody had measured it and posted the distance at the start. There was no cutoff, no officials, no one at any point along the way handing her anything or telling her she was doing well. There was no finish line, because a border is not a finish line — a border is a place where a different kind of waiting starts. And there was nobody standing at the end of it, because the only person who could have been standing at the end of it was walking beside her with her own bad feet, not looking at anybody's.

She did all of it and then she was fine.

She was fine for thirty-six years. She finished school and she married a man who was decent and left anyway, and she raised a daughter mostly alone, and she took a job on the night shift at a hospital and kept it for two decades because the differential was better and because, she said, she had never been much of a sleeper. She was not a haunted woman. This is important. She was funny and impatient and a very good nurse and she had a way of ending conversations by standing up that her daughter inherited exactly.

She was fine in the way that the body does not agree with.

She did not have nightmares. She had a heart rate that would not come down in a way that made her doctors interested and then, when nothing was found, made them lose interest. She had shoulders that lived up around her ears. She could not be in a room where she couldn't see the door, and she had a whole architecture of small habits built around this that she did not know she had, and that Katie could have drawn a floor plan of by the time she was nine.

And she could walk. God, she could walk. She walked when she was angry and she walked when she was thinking and she walked after her shifts at seven in the morning when everyone else was going in the other direction, and she would come home two hours later having no idea where she had been.

At forty-one she signed up for a road race. She told Katie she wanted to lose ten pounds. That was not true, but it was not a lie either. It was simply the first available sentence.

— — —

3. BASE

Now the practical part, and I want to be careful here, because this is the part of the book that is going to get used.

Everything that follows is real. It is what she did, in the order she did it, and it is sound. If you are reading this because you are thinking of trying something long, follow it. If you are reading this for other reasons, follow it anyway, because you will understand the rest of the book better if the instruction is in your legs and not just your head.

Build the base slowly and boringly. Eighteen months. That is the honest number for going from ordinary fitness to something that can survive a day and a night. Most people want six. Six will get you to the start line and not much past it. The tissue that has to change — tendon, connective, the deep architecture of the foot — changes on a schedule that has nothing to do with your motivation. Muscle adapts in weeks. The stuff holding it on takes a year and a half and does not negotiate.

Her log opens on a Tuesday in March, eighteen months before her first hundred. The whole entry is:

4 mi easy. Fine. Feet fine.

That is most of the entries. There are hundreds of them. This is not a discipline that produces interesting writing, and that is the point.

Run slower than feels honest. Almost all of it should be at a pace where you could hold a conversation without effort. It will feel like cheating. It will feel like you are not training. This is the single most common mistake and it is the reason most people who attempt long distances get hurt in month four rather than starting month nineteen. You are not building speed. You are building the

ability to keep going after speed has stopped being relevant, which happens somewhere around hour nine and never comes back.

Walk on purpose. Everyone walks in the long races. Everyone. The winners walk. Practice it so that it is a gear and not a defeat — practise walking fast up hills until it is boring, because at hour thirty it will be most of what you have.

Get one long day a week and make it stupid. Not fast. Long. Six hours, then eight, then twelve. Do them tired. Do them in bad weather, on purpose, because the weather at your race will be whatever it is and you do not get to be surprised by it.

Learn your feet before they teach you. This is the whole game and it is unglamorous. Find the socks. Find the shoe a half size up, because your feet will swell and at hour twenty they are not the feet you started with. Learn to tape. Learn to change socks quickly while sitting on something that is not clean. If your feet fail there is no strategy, no willpower, no philosophy — you stop, and you stop at the exact moment the thing you came for is finally getting close.

Practise eating while moving. Your stomach is the first organ to quit. Find four things you can eat when you feel sick, and one of them should be savoury and one should be liquid, and none of them should be something you love, because you will not love it afterward.

Salt. Drink to thirst and take salt with it. Do not drink constantly on a schedule; people have died of too much water in these races, genuinely, more than have died of too little. Thirst is not a broken instrument. Trust it.

That is nine months of the log in one page. There is nothing else in it. There is no secret.

— — —

Katie was nineteen when this started, and what she remembers is not the running. It is that her mother became easier to be around.

Some of that was obvious and physical. She slept better, some nights. Her shoulders came down. She stopped being unable to sit

still in restaurants, or she was better at it, which from the outside is the same thing.

But there was something else and Katie only found the words for it much later, which is to say after it was over. Her mother, for the first time in Katie's whole life, was *going somewhere and coming back*. That was the change. Ruby had always been a person who left the house and returned, but only in the way that a shift ends. This was different. This had a start and a distance and a time, and there was a place where it finished, and at the finish there was a folding chair with Katie in it.

The first race Katie crewed was a fifty-miler in the fall of that year. She had a thermos and a camp chair and a printed sheet with estimated arrival times that turned out to be wrong by an hour and forty minutes, and she sat in a gravel lot in the cold getting more frightened than she wanted to admit, and then her mother came around the corner of a building looking like something that had been dropped from a height, and saw her, and started laughing.

Katie thinks about that laugh a lot.

She was there. That was all it was. She was there, at the end, and her mother came out of the dark and found her exactly where she said she would be, and something in her mother's face came loose that Katie had never seen come loose before and did not have a name for.

She was nineteen. She thought she had just watched somebody finish a race.

4. THE MACHINE

There is a temptation, when you start going long, to think of the body as a thing you are riding. A vehicle. You are up here and it is down there and you are asking it for things.

Get rid of that idea early. It will kill your race and it is also, as it turns out, not true.

What actually happens over a long enough distance is that the arrangement reverses. The body stops being the thing you are riding and becomes the thing that is telling the truth. Somewhere

around hour fourteen your opinions about how you are doing become worthless — you will feel destroyed and be running well, you will feel wonderful and be about to fall over — and the only reliable information left in the world is coming up from underneath. How the feet are. Whether the stomach will take anything. Whether you are actually warm or only think you are.

Ruby put it in a way that stayed with everyone who heard it. She said: *After a while you're not the driver. You're a passenger with a very good view.*

So: the maintenance, plainly.

Feet. Change socks before you think you need to. Not after. The window between a hot spot and a blister that ends your race is about twenty minutes long and it closes while you are deciding whether to bother. Sit down. Take the shoe off. Look at it. Yes, it costs eight minutes. The alternative costs everything.

Stomach. It will turn on you. When it does, stop taking anything sweet and go savoury and warm — broth, salted potatoes, soup. Small amounts, constantly. Never sit down to a meal; you will not get up.

Cold. You will be colder at hour thirty than the temperature justifies, because there is nothing left to burn. Carry more warmth than seems sensible. People do not drop out of these races because they are tired. A surprising number drop out because they got cold and stopped being able to make decisions, in that order.

Chafing. Not a joke. Deal with it at the first hint.

Your head. Keep the headlamp bright and carry a spare battery you can change without taking the pack off, because a dying light at hour twenty-six will do more damage to your mind than to your eyes. When the circle of light gets small, the world gets small with it.

None of this is difficult. All of it is boring, and all of it has to be done while you are stupid, which is the actual challenge. At hour thirty you will have the decision-making capacity of a tired child. So you do not decide. You have a list and you follow the list.

Write the list beforehand, when you are still a person.

— — —

Katie's crew notes from the second year are already in the form she would use for the rest of it. Time, distance, and then three words.

14:22. Mile 61. Ate, good, cold. 19:40. Mile 78. Wouldn't sit down.

02:15. Mile 94. Talking a lot.

The last one is not a compliment. Ruby, ordinarily, did not talk a lot.

— — —

5. SLEEP

Here is where the honest instruction and the story start pulling in different directions, and I am going to let them, because you should see it happen.

The standard advice is straightforward. Bank sleep for the week beforehand — you cannot store it exactly, but going in rested measurably delays the worst of it. In the race, if you are going past two nights, sleep. Twenty minutes. Lie down somewhere, set an alarm, let someone wake you. Most people find one or two of these will buy them an entire extra night of competence.

That is the advice. It is correct. It is what every experienced person will tell you and what every crew is trained to enforce.

Ruby did it for the first three years. Her logs record the naps: *20 min at Deer Camp, felt like a new person*. Then they record shorter ones. Then, in the fourth year, they stop recording them, and there is no entry anywhere in which she says she has decided to stop, because it was not a decision that got made at a particular moment.

What she said, when asked directly, was this — and this is from the first transcript, and it is the closest thing to an explanation that exists in her own voice:

It's not that I don't want to sleep. I'm not tough about it. It's that you spend all that time getting out there. Thirty hours, forty. And

the sleep doesn't take you back a little bit. It takes you all the way back. You wake up and you're just a person on a trail again, and everything you paid for is gone, and you have to pay for it a second time with the money you've already spent.

The interviewer asked what "out there" meant.

She said: *The long part.*

He asked her to say more about it and she said no, not rudely, the way you decline a second helping. Then she said one more thing, which he only kept in the transcript because he had promised to keep everything:

Everyone who's been calls it that. I don't know why. Nobody agreed on it.

II. THE FIRST NIGHT

6. HOUR ZERO

Nobody tells you that the worst part is the morning of.

Everything is done by then. The bags are packed and repacked, the drop boxes are labelled in her handwriting and taped shut, the list is written. There is nothing left to prepare and eleven hours of race in front of her and no way to start it early. This is the only part of the whole undertaking that Ruby admitted to hating, and she hated it consistently, for eleven years, at every single race.

She would be sick, usually. Not dramatically. She would go behind a building and be quietly sick and come back and drink something and be fine, and Katie learned by the third year not to follow her.

The field stands around in the half-dark in the cold with head torches on their foreheads not switched on yet, and everybody is extremely friendly, and nobody is listening to anything anybody says. The friendliness is real and also it is a way of not being alone in the last twenty minutes. Somebody makes a joke about the weather. Somebody's crew is taking a photograph and the person in it is trying to look like a person.

Ruby's ritual was to find Katie, put both hands on her upper arms, and say the same six words. She said them at every race from the fifty-miler onward.

I'll see you at the end.

Katie said, *I'll be there.*

That was the whole thing. Then Ruby would go and stand near the back, because she always started near the back, and the horn would go, and two hundred and eleven people would shuffle forward at the pace of a supermarket queue, and it would begin.

— — —

7. THE EASY HOURS

Hour 1. It is absurd how good it feels. This is not a metaphor. The first hour of a two-hundred-mile race is one of the pleasantest experiences available to a human being — cold air, a lightening sky,

a line of small lights going up a hillside ahead of you, everybody chatting. You feel like you have got away with something.

Ruby's log:

H1. Perfect. Going too easy on purpose. Passed by everyone. Good.

Hour 3. The sun is properly up. The field has strung out. You are running with two or three people you have never met and you know what they do for work and whether their marriage survived their last race. Conversations at this stage are absurdly candid. Nobody will remember any of it.

Hour 6. First real hill. First moment of the day where the body sends a memo: *we are aware of what is happening, and we have questions*. You eat. You keep the effort down. Nothing hurts yet and everything has begun.

Hour 9. The first quiet. Not the big one. Just the point at which talking becomes more expensive than it is worth, and the group you were with dissolves without anybody saying anything, and you are running alone in the middle of the day.

H9. Alone since the creek. Legs fine. Feet fine. Very happy.

Hour 12. Heat. Stomach's first opinion. You go savoury early — this is the advice from chapter four, and this is where it earns itself. She had broth at the mile-forty-eight aid station and walked out drinking it.

12:10. Mile 48. Ate broth, good, chatty.

That is Katie's note, and *chatty* is neutral this early. At mile forty-eight it means nothing at all.

Hour 14. The light goes long and orange and then the temperature drops out from underneath the day, which it does very suddenly at altitude, and everyone stops to put on a jacket at approximately the same time, and this is the last collective act of the race.

Then you turn your light on.

— — —

8. SIX FEET WIDE

Everything I need to tell you about the first night is contained in one fact: the world becomes the size of your headlamp beam, and it stays that size for a very long time.

It is a circle on the ground about six feet across, moving with you. Outside it there is nothing. Not darkness — *nothing*, which is different, because darkness is a thing you can look into and this is a place where looking stops. The trail arrives into the front of the circle and leaves out the back of it. Roots arrive. Rocks arrive. A pair of eyes arrives, at knee height, and then goes.

You stop being a person crossing a landscape. There is no landscape. You are a small lit disc travelling through an absence, and the only evidence that you are moving at all is that the ground under the disc keeps being different ground.

This is where the emptying begins in earnest, and it is not mystical. It is that there is nothing to look at, nothing to think about, no future you can reach and no past that helps. The commentary starts running out of material.

H17. Nothing out here. Feet good. Changed socks at 62 like the list said. H19. Cold hands. Ate. The circle.

The circle is not explained anywhere in eleven years of logs. She assumed she would know what she meant.

Hour 20 to 24. The slow part. Everything gets harder in a way that is not dramatic. Your pace drops without you agreeing to it. Small climbs become negotiations. You have been going for a day.

Hour 26. She is in the aid station at mile ninety-one and there is a photograph of her from this stop, taken by somebody's crew, that Katie has never been able to look at for very long. Ruby is sitting on a folding chair with a cup in both hands and her head slightly forward and she is not looking at anything. She is not distressed. That is what is difficult about it. She looks profoundly, restfully absent, like a house with the lights on and nobody home, and she is smiling very slightly at something.

Hour 28. Four in the morning.

Everybody quits at four in the morning. This is so consistent that experienced crews plan for it as a scheduled event. The body's temperature is at its lowest, the sleep pressure is at its highest, and the mind produces — reliably, in almost everyone — a completely convincing argument that this is stupid and always was.

The argument is very good. That is what nobody warns you about. It is not whining. It arrives in your own voice, calm and reasonable, and it points out that you have nothing to prove, that this costs money and toenails and time with the people you love, that you are forty-nine years old, and that there is a car.

You do not beat it. You cannot beat it, because it is correct. You just keep walking while it talks.

H28. Bad. Kept walking.

Hour 30. Then the sky goes grey behind the ridge, and something is handed back to you that you did not earn and cannot account for. Everyone reports this. You are not less tired. Nothing has been repaired. But the sun comes up and the argument that was unanswerable an hour ago simply stops being interesting, and you find you are running again.

Ruby, in the second transcript, on the first sunrise:

It's a trick. It's just light. You know it's a trick and it works anyway. That's the part I like — that it works anyway.

— — —

9. A THOUSAND DAYS

I want to put something beside this before we go into the second night, because otherwise you will think what she was doing was invented recently by people with sponsorship.

On Mount Hiei, outside Kyoto, there are monks who walk.

The practice is called the *kaihōgyō* and it is a thousand days spread over seven years. In the first three years, a hundred days each year, about thirty kilometres a night, on a fixed route around the mountain, stopping at hundreds of small stations to pray. Then

longer years. Then, in the fifth and sixth, two hundred days without a break, and eventually a stretch where the daily distance goes up to something close to eighty kilometres, night after night, for a hundred nights.

They walk in straw sandals. The sandals do not last a single night in rain.

The man who undertakes it carries a cord and a short blade. They are not symbolic in the way that most such things are symbolic. They are there because the vow is to complete the thousand days or not to return, and the monk carries the means of keeping the second half of that promise on his person for seven years. Very few have done it. Since the eighteen-eighties, fewer than fifty.

And at the midpoint, after the seven hundredth day, there is the dōiri.

Nine days. No food. No water. No sleep. No lying down. He sits in the hall and recites, and twice a day he walks a short distance to a well to fetch water — not to drink, to offer — and that walk gets longer every day as he gets weaker, and by the end it takes hours to cover a few hundred metres. Attendants sit with him to make sure he does not fall asleep. His breath changes. His skin goes translucent. He can, by the seventh day, reportedly hear ash falling.

The purpose of the dōiri is not endurance. It is stated plainly in the tradition and there is nothing coy about it: you go nine days without food or water or sleep in order to get close enough to death to be changed by it. That is the entire reason. It is a door, and the walking is how you get to the door, and the walking has to be that much walking or the door does not open.

Nobody on Mount Hiei is confused about what they are doing. It has a name and a history and a robe and a mountain. When a man comes out of the dōiri he is met, and the meeting is part of it.

I put this here because Ruby had read about it. It comes up twice in her logs, both times in the same flat way she recorded her mileage, and once in the first transcript, where the interviewer asked

whether she thought of her running as spiritual and she made a face.

No, she said. *They've got a mountain and seven years and a reason and somebody waiting at the door when they come out. I've got a loop and a bib number.*

He asked her which she thought was better.

She said: *Theirs. Obviously theirs.* And then, after a moment, in a tone he described in his notes as *amused, not bitter*: *But we're going to the same place. That's the funny thing. They built a whole religion around the door and I just found it in Oregon.*

III. THE SECOND NIGHT

10. DAY TWO

The second day is where the race stops being a race and becomes a job.

Nothing about it is exciting. The sun comes up and gives you back something you did not earn, and you spend that gift within about three hours, and then it is nine in the morning and you have a hundred and ten miles behind you and ninety in front and the whole thing is simply work, in the way that a double shift is work.

Your feet are not your feet. They have swelled a half size, which is why the shoes were a half size up. Your hands have swelled too, and your face, and if you take a photograph at this stage you will look like someone recovering from an allergic reaction.

Eating has become the hardest thing you do. Not unpleasant — *hard*, a task requiring planning and courage, like a difficult phone call. The mouth is sore. Sweet is finished. Everything tastes of the packet it came in.

H33. Mile 121. Eating is the problem now. Broth ok. Potatoes ok.

H36. Hot. Slow. Feet good though. Feet good.

She wrote *feet good* four times in the second day. She had been taping since hour two.

Hour 38. The middle of the second afternoon is the least documented part of any long race, because nothing happens in it and nobody has the energy to record anything. Katie's notes for six hours of it are three lines.

15:05. Mile 131. Ate half, quiet, slow. 17:40. Mile 139. Ate, quiet.

20:02. Mile 147. Quiet.

Quiet is the word that will do a lot of work from here on.

Hour 42. The light goes long and orange for the second time. Everybody puts on a jacket. There is no collective feeling about it this time; there is hardly anybody left near you to feel anything collectively with.

And then the second night starts, and this is what the book is actually about.

— — —

11. WHAT COMES OUT OF THE TREES

Let me say clearly, before anything else, that everything in this chapter is documented and ordinary. It happens to nearly everyone who goes past forty hours without sleep. It happens to sailors and pilots and soldiers and new parents. It is not a sign that anything is wrong with you. Crews are trained for it. Runners joke about it afterward in the way people joke about anything that frightened them.

The mind, deprived of sleep long enough, begins to do its sleeping while you are still awake, in pieces, without asking. Dreaming leaks into the room.

What comes out is remarkably consistent, and I want to list it, because the consistency is the whole hinge of this book and I need you to see it before it matters.

People at the edge of the trail. Standing, not moving, usually just outside the beam. Often described as waiting rather than watching. Almost never threatening. Runners routinely say good evening to them.

Buildings that are not there. Cabins, churches, lit windows, sometimes whole small towns off in the trees. These are extremely common and very convincing. People have left the trail to go to them.

Animals that resolve into rocks, and rocks that do not resolve at all.

Conversations. Full ones, with people who are not present, sometimes people who are dead. These are usually described afterward as pleasant and unremarkable at the time.

Text. Words on the trail, on trees, on the ground. Never quite readable.

And the presence. This is the one that is different from the others and everyone who has had it knows it is different. There is somebody with you. Not seen — *known*, the way you know somebody is in a room behind you. It travels at your shoulder for hours. It is uniformly described as benign, and often as helpful, and mountaineers and polar explorers and shipwreck survivors have been reporting it for as long as anybody has been writing things down. It is old enough to have a name. They call it the Third Man.

None of this requires an explanation beyond a tired brain. I want to be very clear about that here, at the start, so that you remember I said it.

— — —

Ruby's second night, in her own hand:

H45. Man in a brown coat by the burn. Said hello. Didn't answer. Rude. H47. Church. Lit up. Not a church. H49. Somebody with me since the ridge. Fine. Company.

H51. Dad, for about an hour. Talked about the car.

Her father had been dead nineteen years.

H53. Feet good. Very quiet out here. The long part starting. H56. In it.

And Katie's notes, from the aid station at mile one hundred and seventy-two, timed at hour fifty-four:

02:41. Mile 172. Wouldn't sit. Ate three spoons. Said my name twice then stopped. Said "you don't have to keep doing this" — I said doing what — she said "waiting." 22 minutes. Out at 03:03. I keep thinking about the drive home.

Both of those pages describe the same hour of the same night. One of them is the best experience of a woman's life.

I have put them next to each other and I am not going to tell you which one is the true account, because I do not think that question has an answer, and I think the belief that it must have one is the

reason so many families of long-distance runners are so quietly angry.

— — —

12. CONVERGENCE

Now something worth noticing.

I began, at this stage of the research, to collect accounts of the second night from other runners — thirty-one of them, from six countries, most of whom had never met each other. I was looking for the shared features I listed above. I found them all, exactly as expected.

I also found something I was not looking for.

They use the same words.

Not similar words. The same ones, in the same places. Nine of the thirty-one, independently, describe the state past hour fifty as *the long part*. Not “the long stretch,” not “the deep part” — the long part, definite article, both times, every time. Four of them add, unprompted, that they do not know where they got the phrase.

Six describe the figures at the trail edge as *waiting*, and when pressed on what they are waiting for, five give a version of *for me to be finished*.

Three, in three different languages, describe the moment of entry with an identical image: a door that is not in a wall.

Now. There are ordinary explanations for this and I want them on the page before anyone gets excited. Runners talk to each other. The community is small and extremely online, and a vivid phrase travels through it in a season. Human brains under identical stress produce identical output, which is precisely why the list in the last chapter is a list at all. Convergent experience produces convergent language. This is not mysterious.

I was satisfied with that. I wrote it up that way.

Then Katie gave me the notebook.

— — —

13. THE NOTEBOOK

It is a hardback ledger, the sort sold for accounts, with a marbled cover and a cracked spine. It was in the bottom of a box of Ruby's things, and Katie had assumed for two years that it was her mother's, because the handwriting is small and upright and looks — genuinely, at a glance — like her mother's.

It is not. It belongs to someone with the initials E.M.F., and it records a six-day track race in Sussex in September 1978. Eighty-eight laps a day on a cinder track around a cricket ground. No trail, no mountains, no scenery, nothing to look at, nothing to navigate. Just a loop, and the counting of it, for one hundred and forty-four hours.

The point of that race, for our purposes, is that it removes every variable. No terrain. No altitude. No solitude in wilderness. Nothing but repetition and attrition and no sleep.

Here is the entry for the fourth night.

2.40am. Men standing at the rail by the pavilion, four of them. Not spectators, spectators have gone. They are waiting, I think for me to be finished. 3.15am. Feet bad. Nothing to be done. 4.00am. Into the long part now.

Ruby had read it. There are pencil marks in the margin in her hand, and a single word beside the last line, which is yes.

I do not know when she found it or how it came to be in her house. I have not been able to identify E.M.F. from the entry lists, which are incomplete for that year.

What I know is that a woman in Sussex in 1978, on a cinder track, with no possible connection to a trail race in Oregon four decades later, wrote down the same three words for the same thing.

That is where I stopped being able to say that this book was about sleep deprivation.

— — —

14. HOUR SIXTY

The second sunrise does something the first one does not.

The first is a trick and works anyway. The second one takes the lid off. Almost everyone who goes through two nights reports that at some point in the second dawn they begin to cry, without warning and without any accompanying sadness, and cannot stop for some time, and are not distressed by it. Crews see it constantly. Runners describe it as the most peaceful experience of their lives and cannot explain why it involved weeping.

Ruby's log, hour sixty:

H60. Crying since the meadow. Nothing wrong. Everything extremely clear. Feet good.

And there is a thing about her logs from this race that I did not notice for a long time, and that I am putting here rather than later because I want to be fair to you.

After hour fifty-six, she stops recording aid stations.

There is no entry saying she has decided to stop stopping. The mileage keeps climbing, the hours keep being numbered, the handwriting stays steady. But the small notes — *20 min at Deer Camp, broth at 48, changed socks at 62* — simply are not there any more.

Katie's crew notes have her coming through at mile one hundred and eighty-nine at hour fifty-nine.

Ruby's log for hour fifty-nine says:

H59. Still going. Haven't stopped.

IV. PAST THE BOOK

15. WHAT TALKS WHEN NOTHING TALKS

I have put off writing this chapter for a long time, because it is the one people actually want and it is the one the material fights hardest.

Everyone asks the same question. *What do you think about?* Two hundred miles, three days, no music, no company. What is going on in there.

The honest answer is that it happens in layers, and they come off in order, and each layer is convinced it is the whole of you until it goes.

The first layer is admin. Hours one to about eight. You think about your split times, your feet, whether you ate, whether you started too fast, the hill coming up. Practical, dull, continuous. This layer believes it is running the race. It is doing something more like reading a dial.

The second layer is your life. Hours eight to twenty, roughly. When the admin runs out of things to check, the mind goes to the big file. You will find yourself conducting an unhurried and remarkably fair audit of everything you have ever done. Not anxious — this is the strange part. Nobody who has been out there describes it as anxious. Old arguments come up and you look at them and think, calmly, *ah, I was wrong about that*, and let them go, and they do not come back. People apologise to you and you accept it. You apologise to people. Some runners do the entire grief of a marriage in a single afternoon and arrive at the next aid station lighter.

Ruby, second transcript:

I forgave my ex-husband somewhere around mile ninety in a race in 2019. Properly. Not the thing you say. He wasn't there and I never told him. It just got done, the way you finally clean out a drawer.

The third layer is inventory. Hours twenty to forty. The life file empties and what comes next is smaller and much stranger: the mind starts producing things you did not know were kept. The smell of a corridor in a building you were in once. A song your mother sang badly. The exact weight of a schoolbag. These arrive

unsorted and mean nothing and are enormously vivid, and you understand, dimly, that you are watching something being emptied out rather than something being remembered.

The fourth layer is the commentary itself, and when it goes, it goes without ceremony. There is no moment. There is only the discovery, some time later, that you have covered eleven miles and nobody was narrating.

And underneath it there is something that has been paying attention the entire time and has never once needed to speak.

That is the long part.

— — —

Here is what I can tell you about the inside of it, assembled from her logs, her transcripts, and the accounts of the others, all of whom describe it in near-identical terms and none of whom can improve on them.

There is no “I” in it, but there is somebody home. Everyone is emphatic on this and everyone finds it difficult to say. You are not unconscious. You are not blank. You are extremely awake — more awake, most people insist, than at any other time in their lives. What is missing is the one who usually stands slightly behind the awareness having opinions about it. There is seeing without a seer. There is walking and nobody doing it.

Time is not passing. Not slowed — not passing. Hours are gone with nothing in them, and this is not experienced as loss. Ruby: *I didn't lose four hours. There weren't four hours.*

Everything is obviously fine. Not fine as a judgement. Fine as a fact about the world, at the level of the ground being solid, and this includes the things in your life that are not fine, which are also fine, and which you will find are still not fine when you come back, which is one of the harder aspects of returning.

And there are conversations.

This is the part I most want to get right. The conversations of the second and third night are not raving. Runners describe them

afterward as the most natural exchanges they have ever had. There is no strangeness at the time. Somebody is walking with you and you talk, and later you cannot always establish whether they were there.

Ruby's logs record four people.

Her father, repeatedly, always about small things. The car. A job he had. Never anything significant, and she noted this herself with what reads like disappointment: *H51. Dad again. Won't talk about anything real. Same as before.*

Katie at about eight years old — not Katie now, specifically the child — who walked with her for a long stretch on the second night of a race in 2019 and asked her where they were going.

A woman she did not know, small, in a cardigan, who did not speak. And, in the last two years, herself.

H63. The girl again.

The girl is thirteen. She is on a road at night carrying a bag that is too big for her, and she is walking a few paces ahead, and she does not look back, and her feet are bad.

Ruby walks behind her. That is the entire content of it. Over four separate races, across two years, that is all that ever happens: a forty-nine-year-old woman follows a thirteen-year-old girl along a road in the dark, at the same pace, unable to close the distance, and neither of them speaks.

Once, in the last year, there is this:

H68. The girl. Tried to tell her it's four nights and then it's over. Couldn't get close enough. Feet good.

— — —

16. HOUR 74

The Ridgeline has a seventy-two-hour cutoff. This is printed on the entry form, on the website, and on a sign at the finish. Runners still on the course at seventy-two hours are recorded as unofficial

finishers or as DNF, and the aid stations begin closing at sixty-eight.

The race we have been following was her second at that distance. She finished it in sixty-six hours. What follows is from the two logbooks after it.

Ruby's log continues.

H74. Still going. Very clear. Nobody out here now. Good. Feet good.

I want to be careful and slow here.

There are ordinary explanations and I have pursued all of them. Runners lose track of time — of course they do; it is the most reliably documented feature of the entire experience. Logs are reconstructed afterward from memory and the hours get scrambled. She may have been writing these entries days later, at home, with the numbers wrong. That is not only possible, it is likely, and it is what I assumed for eleven months.

What I cannot get around is that the handwriting does not change, the entries are in ink of the same colour and pressure as the ones before them, and the hours are sequential and correctly spaced with no repetition and no gaps.

And that the same is true of the next race. And the one after.

H79. Passed the water tank twice. Or it's twice. H81. Someone at the rail. Not a rail out here. Fine. H84. The girl stopped. First time. Didn't turn round.

— — —

17. THE LAST TIME SHE WAITED

Katie was twenty-five.

It was the following spring, the third of the two-hundreds and she had done every one of them, and by that stage the crewing had a shape that ran on its own: the folding chair, the thermos, the rug from the house over the back of the chair because the nights were cold and it was the warmest thing they owned. She had the

estimated times. They were always wrong. She had learned to add four hours to everything and sit.

Her mother came in to the mile one-seventy aid station at half past two in the morning of the third night, walking, in the reasonable steady way she always walked at that stage, and Katie stood up and said, *Hi, Mum.*

And Ruby looked at her.

This is the part Katie has told exactly twice, once to me.

She said her mother's face did the thing a face does in a shop when someone says hello and you are certain you know them and cannot place them — the small polite scramble, the willingness, the wanting to be equal to the moment. Ruby smiled at her. She smiled the way you smile at a stranger who has been kind to you, warmly, with real gratitude.

She said, *Thank you so much. You've been so good to me.*

Katie said, *Mum.*

Ruby said, *I'm sorry, I'm not — I'm having a bit of trouble. You've been so good.* And she patted Katie's arm twice, and it was gentle, and she was entirely present and entirely herself and completely courteous, and Katie has said that the courtesy is the thing she cannot get past. It would have been easier if her mother had been raving. Raving is an emergency. This was a nice woman being polite to somebody who had helped her.

Then Ruby drank half a cup of broth, and put the cup down, and said — to no one in particular, in the tone of somebody remembering an errand —

I'll see you at the end.

And walked back out.

She finished. She came in at hour sixty-four, and at the finish she knew exactly who Katie was, and hugged her, and cried, and said it had been a good one. She had no memory of the aid station at all. When Katie eventually told her, months later, she went very quiet and then said, *Well. I came back, didn't I.*

Katie did not crew again.

She has said she is not sure whether she stopped because she could not watch it, or because she had understood something that night about what she was actually doing there — that she was not support, she was the thing at the end of the rope, and that the rope was getting longer every year and one day it was going to run out and the running out would happen to *her*, at a folding chair, in the dark, with a thermos.

She said: *I was twenty-five. I wanted to be somebody's daughter. I didn't want to be the reason she came back.*

— — —

18. HOUR 96

Ruby entered four more races after that, and crewed herself, which is to say she did not have a crew.

The logs are shorter and the hours get longer.

H88. Clear. Very clear. H91. Cardigan woman closer. Still doesn't say anything. Kind face. H93. Understood something about Mum and the feet. She wasn't ignoring them. She couldn't look. That's all it was. She couldn't look. H96. The girl turned round.

That is the last entry in the last complete logbook.

There is nothing after it. Not a torn page — the remaining pages are blank and clean.

She finished that race. The results have her at fifty-eight hours and change, ninth woman. She drove home. She went to work on the Tuesday.

I have the finisher's photograph. She is holding the buckle and she looks tired and pleased and fifty-two years old and completely ordinary, and there is nothing in her face that anybody could point to, and I have looked at it more than is good for me.

V. AFTER

19. THE LOOP

The last one was not a race.

In the April after her final finish she drove four hours to a place she had run before, parked at a trailhead, and started walking a loop of about eleven miles that she had marked out herself on a paper map. There was no entry, no bib, no cutoff, no officials, no aid stations, and nobody knew she was there. Her phone was in the car.

She had left a note on the passenger seat with the loop drawn on it and the words *back Sunday*.

A hiker found her on the Saturday morning, which was somewhere past hour seventy, on the trail, walking. She was moving well. She was polite and lucid and answered questions and did not want help. He was worried enough to walk with her for twenty minutes and then, by his own account, felt foolish, because she was plainly fine — thin, filthy, entirely coherent, and completely uninterested in stopping. He asked if she was in a race. She said no.

He asked what she was doing.

He wrote down her answer later, when the police asked him for a statement, because it had stayed with him. She said: *I'm nearly there. It's the last bit that's long.*

She walked out to her car on the Sunday afternoon, drove home, and went to work on the Tuesday.

She died eleven months later, at home, of a stroke, in her sleep. She was fifty-three. There is nothing remarkable in the medical record and no one has ever suggested that the running caused it, and I want that stated plainly because otherwise the reader will do the arithmetic on their own and get it wrong.

In her sleep. I have thought about that more than is reasonable.

— — —

20. ON PREPARATION

I have one thing left to tell you and I have been dishonest by omission for a hundred pages in order to be able to tell it here.

The instructional chapters in this book are not mine.

I did not write them. I have never run further than a road marathon and I have said nothing in these pages about training that I would have been competent to say. Those chapters came out of the box that Katie gave me, typed, on loose sheets, unsigned, with no title and no addressee, and I reproduced them nearly word for word because they were better than anything I could have assembled and because I told myself the reader would understand them as a synthesis.

They are Ruby's.

I did not think this was significant. Writers borrow structure from their subjects; that is most of the job. What I did not do for a long time, because there was no reason to, was look at the paper.

The sheets are from a ream she bought at a supermarket in the March of her last year. The receipt is in the box, because she kept receipts.

That is after the final race. That is after the last logbook, after the girl turned round, and eight weeks before she walked out onto her own loop with a note on the passenger seat.

Which means that in the last spring of her life, having stopped racing, having no student and no plan to take one, a woman sat down and wrote a careful, patient, entirely correct set of instructions for how to prepare a body to go past two nights without sleeping.

She wrote them in the second person.

Build the base slowly and boringly. Run slower than feels honest. Walk on purpose. Learn your feet before they teach you.

I have read those pages perhaps two hundred times. There is nothing in them that is not sound and nothing in them that is not kind. They are the work of someone who wanted whoever came next to have an easier time of it than she did.

And I have come to understand that I am not the first person to receive a set of pages like this. There is a ledger in my house with a marbled cover, written by a woman in Sussex in 1978, and the last thirty pages of it — which I did not mention earlier, and I am sorry — are not a log at all. They are advice. Practical, patient, second person. How to manage your feet on cinder. What to eat when the sweet things stop working. How to keep going through four in the morning.

Ruby had underlined most of it.

I do not have a theory. I have a sequence: a person goes out far enough, comes back changed, and then writes down, very carefully, how to get there — and then goes again. And somebody finds the pages.

I began running in the autumn after Katie gave me the box. I told myself it was research and it was research for about a year. I have a logbook now. I am on my second one. My handwriting has got smaller and more upright, which I noticed last month, and I have not looked at the 1978 ledger since.

I do not know what this book is. I set out to write an account and I have produced something that has the shape of an account and functions, as far as I can tell, as an instruction.

You have read it. The instruction is in you now. It is correct and it will work.

I would only ask you to do the one thing she left out of her own pages, the thing she knew and did not write down, the thing the monks on their mountain never once forgot in seven years and a thousand days:

Have someone waiting at the finish.

That is the only part that matters.

— — —

AFTERWORD

Katie is thirty-three and has a daughter of eight months.

She lives outside the same city. She has her mother's way of ending a conversation by standing up. She did not name the baby Rudabeh and has said she thought about it and could not, and has not explained further.

She does not sleep. This is unremarkable — nobody with a baby that age sleeps — and her doctor said as much and she agreed with him and went home.

What she has started doing, in the last few months, is walking at night. The baby goes in the carrier against her chest and settles within about ten minutes, and Katie keeps going, out along the road past the school and the playing fields and onto the track that runs up beside the reservoir, where there are no lights. She has a headlamp now. She bought it in the spring and did not think much about buying it.

The walks were forty minutes at first. She has not measured them lately. She knows they are longer and she has stopped mentioning them to her husband, and she could not tell you when she stopped, or why, except that describing them out loud made them sound like something they are not.

Out on the reservoir track the world is a circle of light about six feet across, moving with her, and the baby is warm and heavy and breathing against her sternum, and there is nothing to look at and nothing to think about, and somewhere in the second hour the part of her that spends all day talking gets tired and goes quiet, and what is underneath it is enormous and calm and does not need anything from her.

She has never once connected this with her mother. She would tell you, and mean it, that she does not understand what her mother was doing and never will.

Last Tuesday she came back at ten past four in the morning.

The house was dark except for the porch, where the light was on, and her husband was standing in the doorway in a coat over his pyjamas, not angry, not saying anything, just up and dressed and waiting, the way you wait for somebody who is coming back.

Katie stopped at the gate with the baby asleep on her chest and started crying and could not stop for some time and was not distressed by it, and could not have told anyone what it was about.

GLOSSARY

dōiri DOH-ee-ree — Japanese, *entering the hall*. The midpoint of the kaihōgyō, undertaken after the seven hundredth day: nine days without food, water, sleep or lying down, spent reciting in the hall, with a walk twice a day to a well to fetch water — not to drink, to offer.

kaihōgyō ky-hoh-GYOH — Japanese, *circling the mountain*. The thousand-day walking practice of the Tendai monks of Mount Hiei, spread over seven years, undertaken on a vow to complete it or not to return.

Rudabeh Sarrafi crossed a border on foot at thirteen. Four nights. No route, no distance posted anywhere, nobody standing at the end of it. She got to the other side, let a school in America call her Ruby because it was easier, and was fine for thirty-six years.

At forty-one she started running. By forty-nine she was one of the small number of people in the world who could stay awake and moving for three days. Her daughter Katie crewed every race — the folding chair, the thermos, the rug from the house — and counted the hours, and watched her mother go out into the dark and come back a little further away each time.

Past hour fifty the commentary runs out of things to say, and what is underneath it turns out not to be nothing. Thirty-one runners in six countries were asked to describe that place. Nine of them used the same three words, and four of those said they did not know where they had got the phrase.

So did a woman on a cinder track in Sussex in 1978, in a ledger Ruby had underlined.

*"Have someone waiting at the finish.
That is the only part that matters."*

