

Dear Hellgate Diary,

December 2024

The race start was gorgeous, don't you remember? Shooting stars, full moon, and all the mysterious attributes of beginning one minute after Friday the 13th. The patriotism billowed through the almost-frozen air as runners sang the Star Spangled Banner by the glow of headlamps.

At night, you first get to experience a refreshing slice of Terrapin and an invigorating dash of Promise Land. You get to look out and see a long mountain range one minute, and then you jet around a corner and see them all in 3D like intimidating giants both cheering you on and making you wonder which one you'll climb next.

Before dawn, everything is cold and you're skiing down frozen, leafy and rocky downhills. No one around you wants to chat. However, the next aid station provides smiles and warm French toast sticks and other miracles, and you crush the next 2 miles before spiraling back into despair for the panicked remaining 5-6 miles of that stretch. As you leave each aid station, you kick yourself for not saying enough thank yous to the frozen saints that have been working the night shift for your sorry hustling butt.

You dream of seeing your pacer one day, but you know that is not likely to become a reality. Every runner here is sponsored or lives in a van and runs all the time, you tell yourself. It's not like other races you've done. These people here aren't hurting as bad as you are, you're convinced. Surely, their caffeine is stronger than yours.

The cold air penetrates your lungs with the force of a thousand micro-icicles, these daggers seeming to prick at you until you cough the little frosty specks back out and find relief from your lifting up your face gaiter like a shield. Why is the East Coast so cold in winter? It's not shockingly cold when you look at it from a numerical standpoint, but the "feels like" temperature can send a grown man to his knees, shaking his double-gloved fists at the sky.

Victims become really hungry by morning. Then again, it's been morning for 7 hours. These potential casualties know they must eat to survive, but no one wants to be the first one to barf.

You finally get to see your crew, and then you know that you are loved in the world, so you have the gusto to run a few more gradual uphill. 0.8 Miles later, your stomach is growling and you've forgotten that you are loved. It's a loooooong time before you will reach halfway and by then, it might not even be worth celebrating. But to get there, you must eat a snack that you've carried for this very purpose.

When you make it to the bottom of another something-something, you're at mile 31ish. This is nowhere near halfway. You start climbing yet another mountain to get halfway, and you watch your pace suffer. At 33.5 miles, you say "meh" and you try to fathom doing that whole thing again starting that very instant.

40 miles never appears on your watch, but more French toast sticks do. So you accept that as tribute. In the stupefaction of syrup-infused simple calories, you remember you're allowed to have your pacer at mile 42. April Fools! It's actually mile 47.5. So you wait another few hours for that moment. But mile 45 presents a really big problem for you. There are insurmountable rocks covered by insurmountable leaves. The rocks are pointy and unstable. Some will not move and you'll become bruised by them. Some move the wrong way when you land on them, they twist your feet in the direction of tendonitis. But

on still others, you just slide down sideways on the leafy covering and you feel really graceful and collected and accomplished and instantly consider taking up surfing as your new sport. That hobby would get you out of ultrarunning, at least. This futile daydream lasts 1.2 seconds and is instantly replaced by the panic of falling and the dire need to keep moving fast so you don't perform a DNF, which is to you both a menacing verb and a nightmarish noun of an acronym.

After 30 minutes, congratulations! You've completed mile 45. And your pacer is still almost 45 minutes away from you. You're dizzy, losing feeling in your hands, hungry but without an appetite, confused, filled with regret, and have a bunch of cold weather boogers.

Your pacer is doing fine, though.

Finally you meet her in all her glory. How did you do that? No one knows. How did she agree to this? No one cares. She's beautiful, and she comes bearing gifts from afar. Some poles. Some Ritz crackers. And some pop tarts. And she's ready to run really, really slow with you because you suck.

After chugging a cup of Coke, you no longer are convinced that you suck. But you're filled with thankfulness, speed, and simple calories. You take off knowing a friendly conversation is in store because there haven't been too many deep conversations with the other zombies out here who are all of different paces at different times and register at different levels on the "morning person" scale.

Your pacer tells you of the Old World. Where there are frivolities like sofas and movies and hot chocolate. You remember such things, of course, but cannot imagine experiencing any of those ever again. Circumstances are different now, and you have to climb to Bobblets Gap.

Before leaving the aid station, a newsflash alerts you of a recent act of fairweather local officials. Some governmental curmudgeon has decided, much like an overprotective great aunt with the tendency to nag and control those around her at all times, that the Parkway is now closed. You know what this means. People can't bring you Coca Cola Classic at the place where there's normally an aid station. Your climbing will have no immediate reward after all. Basically, Big Brother doesn't want cars slipping on imaginary ice, and they implement all their plans 20 hours before the forecast of any moisture as they always do, and cancel everything, and probably nothing will happen anyway because it never does.

You remember reaping the bittersweet benefit from this type of fickle behavior when a week in middle school got cancelled for flurries that never stuck, and your cousins in New York laughed at you. But things are different now. And you simply want a Coke. Santa is drinking the stuff, and it always helps *him* get *his* job done. Oh well, plan on wishing for something different this Christmas. Not a Coke. Not a Hellgate finisher shirt.

Surprisingly, what you find after climbing for what feels like a year is that some people in trucks—probably part angel, part human— found their way up some back gravel roads to get to you and bring you your Coke even though there's only like 8 people left in the race. (Probably fewer once they heard the news and/or saw their moms at an aid station. That's why I sent my mom to the finish line.)

At the sighting of angels, you marvel then chug. You don't know how many actual miles are left. That's the real kicker. Math is absolutely impossible at a time like this. There are too many unknown variables,

making the equation impossible. You always did well in math in school, but now simple estimation produces terrifying results all equalling out to the letters D.N.F.

In the midst of such contemplation, you do recall one thing aloud as your pacer has put up with your negative babble while remaining cheerful: that there are more downhills than ups! A Christmas miracle! Your quads should be able to withstand the impact because you remembered Dr. Horton's timeless reminder, "*Don't blow out your quads on the downhills! Don't do that!*"

Down the mountain you will go. (Mountain number 6, perhaps, but hill number 78,005 if you've counted correctly.) Down you go. Down your pacer goes. Valuables bounce right out of your pack for the first time all day and no one knows why, but it's ok, your pacer can still physically bend down and reach the ground, so she picks them up and returns them to their rightful owner.

Out of the blue, you see familiar faces in a miraculous location. It's your kids and husband. Huzzah! How did they get here? By truck, of course. Holding back eye droplets to conserve trace amounts of both hydration and sodium, you run and hug each person, not getting too excited to linger, but saying, "Love you, gotta go!" They understand because you trained for ultras and changed their diapers at the same time. Your ex-mil husband shouts highly motivational language at you to not give up or slow down, and you're still sobered by the thought of how much is left and how it feels like 10:00 pm to your soul.

After this delightful greeting, you enter the fondly-named Forever Section with great apprehension and a fierce feeling of regret. Surely, you'll never do *THIS* race again. Nonsense. Preposterous! The musing of fools! This will be a one-and-done. No one ever comes back to repeat *this* thing (except for everyone).

Once you survive uncountably many rocky ups and downs and swear off Hellgate and Math for the next decade, the Forever Section is almost over. Perhaps you've passed almost all the way through Hell, and you'll be in Heaven soon. But that'll probably be a different "forever," you reason. You cool off your Hades-temperature feet in a few final streams. They've been tantalizing your ankles since mile 1. Good thing it's not 10 degrees today. But blisters are the least of your worries—even the kind where your skin folds in half and begins sizzling and permanently reshaping itself like a newly grilled baby quesadilla.

You just need to get to Day Creek before nightfall.

You nurse your side stitch and arrive at the last aid station and chug the only bubbly beverage you deem ultra-worthy in this moment. It's time to head up The Mountain once more. With a newly-cafeinated outlook on life, you think that you've got it in the bag. You have two hours to go 6 miles. Stuff could still hit the fan in a detrimental way, but for the first time in 20 miles, you're feeling encouraged.

You toothlessly gum down your applesauce like a 1 year old, and space out while persevering through the last mile of climbing. There's a truck at the top on the parkway, of course. How did he get up there and evade the anti-snow authorities? No one knows, but the guy is cool. You shout your race number out of habit. Perhaps it's meaningless to him.

On the downhill, your pacer is displaying signs of an addiction to crack cocaine. It's probably just that she has more energy than you, but things are getting pretty exciting up here. Your walk breaks, she says, are 30 seconds. You know that they are five. But at this point you'll take what you can get. You

reach the gate. You joke that you've made it through hell, and here's the gate. It's a stupid joke. People laugh out of pity for you. But the joke is on them because you have got 1.5 miles left.

The rest is history. You stomp up to the finish line made of bleached, enriched white flour with more than 20 minutes stashed in the bank. Everyone finally figures out who you are at the last second in the dim and faded light, and they roar a cheer that's just for you as you slump over and grab your knees.

With hugs and high-fives, you hobble to what looks like a newly designed innovation just for runners of Hellgate. But then you realize it's just a chair. You haven't seen one in so long. You haven't sat in one and even longer. You throw on your Patagonia finisher quarter zip long sleeve that is the color of dreamsicle. Hours earlier, you reasoned that *that was a great flavor but a stupid color* and you should go ahead and just quit the race while you were ahead. You didn't need more jackets. But now, it's your favorite possession, and it feels like Christmas came early. You knew all along that it would be IMPOSSIBLE for Christmas to arrive if you didn't finish this race in under 18 hours.

The celebration for the next 20 minutes feels like it lasts 7 seconds, and all the official runners are now in: the ones with broken toes, the ones who threw up all night and day, the ones who didn't train enough but still made it, and the ones who have run it every single year despite overwhelming obstacles.

And it's at this point that you remember what this race was all about.

This race was an event that you were a sweeper for back in one of the snowy years before 2010. You couldn't keep up with the guy sweeping the course with you, so you just held the Walmart bag full of streamers and ran for dear life. The 14 miles of sweeping were so difficult, you couldn't imagine doing the whole thing. People were frozen, and grown men were crying.

When you moved away and had three kids, you had numerous reasons to forget this race and run others. You always wanted a guaranteed finish, a doable cut off. You made it through a 100 miler, but Hellgate was still out of the question.

Your dad got cancer this year. It's pretty serious. With so many unknowns, reliable training time didn't seem feasible.

But then you watched him go through surgery. Then start running races after recovery. He had to start radiation, but was determined to play in his birthday pickleball tournament and ramp up his miles and train for another half marathon during radiation therapy. All the nurses and doctors told him he would definitely be too tired to go through with it.

You mentioned Hellgate to your husband. He said you *could* do this race. This was your year. You never believed yourself, but for some reason, it was so easy to believe him. You signed up, half hoping not to get in.

You got in.

And this race would be for your dad.

You couldn't fall short on any training, and had to give it everything you've got. It's what your dad was doing, after all. On Thanksgiving week, your dad ran a PR in his 10k, coming in first in his age group at the finish line a quarter mile from the cancer center where he receives treatment.

You were at his finish line.
He would be at yours.

Race day came, and every time you thought about sitting or quitting, you think of your dad. How he walks into a room of depressed and exhausted cancer patients every single day and encourages and motivates them in their journey. To the waiting room, he exclaims, "You can do it," and they say something like, "It's not looking good for me." To this, my dad replies with an arm around their shoulder, "They said exactly the same about me."

On Saturdays, he laces up his shoes for a long run. He just did 10 miles, unthinkable to nurses, neighbors, and family friends. He has already proven them wrong.

My mom has encouraged him every step of the way, and picked up all the slack back home, working tirelessly and never with a complaint. She has never left his side, would never leave his side. *She is his pacer, after all.* And the best one at that.

If these are my parents, then I can train for Hellgate.
If I come from people like this, then I can finish Hellgate.

And that is exactly what I did.

Until Next Time,
Becky Walters