

Fourteen Years in the Wilderness

“Promise Land doesn’t smell like Spring; Spring smells like Promise Land.” The observation reveals the perspective of the one who uttered it—a veteran Promise Land runner—a true repeat offender. Runners with name tags come and go on Friday night, the number under their name indicating how many times they have run this grueling and deceptive ultramarathon. This will be my 4th—if I make it. But it’s been over a decade, fourteen years to be exact.

As a teenager, this one had been my very first ultra. Then in college, I joined dedicated groups of local runners for on-course training runs that devoted themselves to no mercy for the weak. I ran phoneless and mapless with a cheap timex watch, 20-ounce water bottle, and a few snacks. The high altitude streams were the points of hydration. The front runners were part gazelle, part mountain goat. And even the back-of-the-pack runners were still moving at a good clip. No one waited at the turns or intersections for the dazed and confused. You simply kept up, stayed “found,” finished the run, picked up fried chicken at a country store, and went home thinking about an early bedtime.

Friday night by 9:30, runners are in their PJs and ready to attempt sleeping. The highest point of the bonfire no longer is considered “elevation gain.” Tents and cars sprawl out in the field as polka dot stars bedeck the faithfully clear Virginia skies of Spring. Amiable conversations become whispers as the final tentpoles of the night are raised in anticipation of a hard-won victory to come.

I had completed my first 27 mile training run on this course when I was 18. It didn’t dawn on me that I had run more than a marathon until someone triumphantly exclaimed it in Pony Express fashion as I galloped down the final descent to join the finishers. I had not considered the marathon distance a goal of mine because I was chasing an achievement that was literally loftier. At this age, most of my peers were hung over and failing Western Civ. And here I was, kicking dirt and taking names.

At 4:15am or earlier, the moon hides perfectly behind the side of the mountain, emanating a vivid semicircle of glorious light. The sound of a man’s voice on a loudspeaker fills the crisp air with indistinguishable words of enthusiasm. The admonitions meet tired ears, piercing through the shortcomings of every nearby pair of ear plugs. The field is filled with moms, dads, employees, business owners, elites, and no dearth of college students. We are all just humans who have realistically had another busy week of work, kids, life, and driving to this event during pothole season. We have trained to various degrees for this race. And that will show. We exist and thrive with a schedule harmonizing both life’s demands and a motivated passion for trail running.

One of the finest assets of the Promise Land race course and its neighboring trails was always the cool, plentiful, crystal streams. Growing up in the area, I remember swimming, dunking, and polar-plunging into them every month of the year. After all, you would occasionally find a 70 degree day in January here on the sunny side of the Appalachians. Nothing beat washing off a run in the bubbling and icy swimming holes of these mountains.

We take off at 5:30am on the dot. The gravel road gets steep enough to make you marvel, then the single track welcomes its prey, beckoning all to climb and climb and climb. This portion of the race is an opportune time to a) mooch off other people's headlamp beams and b) make friends with them in the process. The course takes away your social media status, your cell phone's signal, and your ability to picture any one of these people in a pair of jeans. But you do not have to. That is the gift. It is a day in which you focus on each present step, looking only as far into the future as the finish line.

I remembered that this race had trees and flowers in bloom;
I remembered the flowering redbuds,
but I forgot about the pink trillium with its trinity of perfect pink petals,
cascading down the back side of the brilliant mountain as reliably as the stream that fed its roots.

I remembered the spring green color
bursting with life from the trees at the bottom of the mountain,
but I forgot the barrenness of their branchy brothers near the summit
that stood upstaged by remarkable outlines and miles of distant mountains.

I remembered the guarantee of a spring sunrise,
The riches of coveted sun rays when it is still winter in many places,
but I forgot the way it would set again on the early downhill descent,
Affording us the blessing of watching it rise a second time.

I remembered the meadowy sections of trail,
Softer than imaginable to one who runs often in Rocksylvania,
But I forgot what it was like to marvel at the colorful valley views
Without fear of stumbling on sharp stones.

I had forgotten the Light Side.

I remembered the rocky descent and the obscure backend loops
to be run in anticipation of the large climb ahead.
But I forgot how long these unsteep miles were,
Prolonging the elusive ascent to come.

I remembered the stream crossing,
the year it was waist high,
but I forgot that people swam there mid-run
like I saw a man do this year.

I remembered the awesome waterfall,
the cascading stream it fed for 2000 vertical feet,
but I had forgotten how meticulous the climb really was,
its switchbacks hardly afforded an understanding of “gradual.”

I remembered the historic stairs,
almost a relief from stone-induced strategizing,
but I forgot how far into the steep climb they were,
and how time flew by while mileage stood still.

I had forgotten the Dark Side.

I remembered the long downhill that lurked in the last 5 miles,
with its false promises of ease,
but I forgot what it was like to run a 50k
with so many mandatory Horton miles.

I remembered so many details for 14 years
even in the wilderness of life—
but there were so many details that I forgot
until I entered the promised land.

I will run here again soon.
I will remember the Light Side.
I will not forget the Dark Side.

-Skunk Girl (Becky Walters)