

Mark's Race

"Three days left," Mark muttered as he checked his calendar. Three days until the marathon. Mark tied his shoes, thinking excitedly about the upcoming race. At fifteen years old, Mark was small for his age. Tired of getting flattened by all the larger kids in football, he had tried cross country during his last year in middle school. Mark found that he loved to run, especially long distances, and his light build made him a perfect distance runner. He wasn't the fastest kid on the team, but as far as he knew, no one else had ever run a half marathon, much less a full marathon like the one he was training for. Mark finished tying his shoes and went out the front door. Once he reached the side walk in front of his house, he began to run.

Mark's favorite place to run was a forest several miles from his house. It was there that he had done most of his training for the marathon last year, before catching a bad fever which forced him to miss the run. He had gone to the forest so many times before that he headed there without even thinking about where he was going. When he reached the forest he paused to take a deep breath of the delicious forest air. The trees grew thick along the path, as though the forest was just waiting for a chance to swallow it up.

As Mark jogged further into the forest, the trees grew taller and more gnarled. Like so many times before he didn't pay any attention to where he was going, just sub-consciously following the winding path. He wasn't even aware of the many turns he took when the path branched out. All he was aware of was the forest itself, a dark, mysterious creature, sprawled out across the landscape, its deep rhythmic breathing could only be heard in the deepest recesses of the imagination. The many smells of the forest permeated the air around him and the utter silence,

except for the steady pounding of Mark's feet on the dirt path and the occasional rustle of some unseen animal, blanketed the trees. This was why Mark loved the forest, the silence and the seclusion. Occasionally his solitude was interrupted by the friendly greeting of someone he knew, walking along the path, but for the most part he was completely alone.

Mark had been running for about an hour in the forest and it had gotten dark. Although he loved to run in the dark at least as much as any other time of day, he decided to head home. He gave a sigh. "Time to head back to chaos," He said to himself. Mark had six siblings, and each sibling it seemed, had an infinite supply of friends. Whenever one had to leave another two others would come to carry on the seemingly vital task of making as much noise as possible. His mom would be gone along with the youngest, Katelyn, and his dad would be sitting in front of the TV watching football with his buddies, and making more noise than all the kids put together.

As he headed back he suddenly heard a hoarse yell. Running faster he came upon an old man, sitting on the path clutching his right ankle. Mark ran up to help but suddenly heard an angry hiss and saw a flash of white. The snake barely missed his legs and Mark hastily took a step backwards. The reptile gave one last venomous hiss before gracefully sliding into the nearby creek. Mark saw a brief glint of black scales as the snake slid into the water. "Cotton mouth," he muttered. Mark turned his attention to the old man. He couldn't see the man's ankle clearly but it looked swollen. "Snake bit me when I sat on that log," the old man said suddenly, gesturing to a fallen tree on the side of the path, "Hurts like heck."

Mark didn't know anything about treating snake bites but he knew there was a road to the west. If he could just get to it he could probably flag down a passing car. But to get to the road he would have to leave the path and cut through the trees. "Stay here," he told the old man, trying to sound calm, "I'm going to get help. If you hear anything, make a lot of noise."

Throwing caution to the wind, Mark sprinted through the trees. The snake bite wasn't all he had to worry about. A mountain lion had been reported recently in the forest. Officials had said that even if there was a mountain lion, which they highly doubted, it would not attack a human. No matter what they said though, an old man in the woods alone, slowly dying from a snake bite, would make a nice meal. Wrapped up in these thoughts, Mark never noticed the log in his way. He fell hard and felt an explosion of pain in his chest. Getting up, he gingerly felt his ribs. One felt broken. He continued on, more cautiously than before but still maintaining a brisk jog. With each step he took his chest would explode again. He was bleeding. He could feel it soaking into his shirt, mixing with sweat and dirt. As he ran the branches became clutching claws, the trees continually blocked his way, and the sounds of the animals, invisible among the trees became the sound of something following him. Mark began to panic. *Am I going the right way?* The thought continually raced through his mind as he plunged ahead. It was so dark now that he could barely see. Mark was forced to slow to an urgent walk. Finally he forced himself to stop and listen. At first all he could hear was the sounds of the forest, but then he heard it. A clear sound of a car off in the distance. The sound faded away but Mark now knew for sure that he was headed in the right direction. He continued on, increasing his speed. Mark had been moving for a few minutes when the whole world seemed to burst into blinding searing light. Mark shrank back, an instinctive animalistic fear of some unknown terror clutching at his chest.

The light disappeared as suddenly as it came and with a jolt Mark realized it was a car. He had reached the road.

Mark stood at the side of the road, his sides heaving, the fear and pain in his chest finally dying down to a dull throb. Suddenly, he heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. He looked up hopefully but was forced to cover his eyes against the sudden glare of the headlights. Mark heard the car stop and the sound of a door opening.

“Are you okay?” Mark looked up. He could see the silhouette of a man against the headlights. “You’re bleeding.” The man suddenly said.

“I’m fine for now.” Mark said quickly, his voice sounding hoarse and scratchy. “But there’s an old man in the forest. Got bit by a snake. I think it was a cottonmouth.” The man strode up to Mark, who noticed the uniform the man was wearing.

“Are you a cop?” Mark asked. “Yes.” The man replied. “Where is this man?”

A few minutes later Mark was leading a group of medics to the old man. His ankle had clearly swollen but he smiled when he saw Mark. “Knew you’d get help,” he grunted. Then the medics were all over the man. Lifting him on a stretcher, bandaging his leg, and telling him to remain calm. Next thing Mark knew, he was on a stretcher too, being told it was going to be okay, his rib would heal in a few weeks. Mark felt a sudden burning disappointment. He was going to miss the marathon again. The feeling soon passed however, replaced by a sense of deep satisfaction. Slowly exhaustion took over. There would be more marathons later that year, he thought as he drifted off to sleep. But now, now he had finished his race.