



## ESSAYS

## ESSAY- The anti-zombies: These marathoners move among us

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Like zombies, they arise in the dead of night, while the rest of us are paralyzed in the lowest depths of sleep. Without so much as a smidgen of dawn to relieve the blackness, these creatures rise from their slumber, don their distinctive garb, and head for the frigid night air.

Once outside, they amass and move about in packs, in scenes that conjure the *Night of the Living Dead*. They lurch through the darkness, in thrall of an unseen force.

Who are these beings, and why are they doing this?

And how does it happen that I am married to one of them?

These are the runners of marathons. Whippet-thin men and women who engage in all manner of self-deprivation and physical abuse as they prepare for the Long Run. During daylight hours, you can discern their presence by their discreet bumper stickers, tiny ovals that simply state, "26.2"—the number of miles in a marathon course.

Lots of people are runners. You see them everywhere, all day long. Folks running for the joy of it, for the fat-burning and endurance-boosting benefits.

There is, however, a subset of these otherwise rational athletes who will succumb to the siren song of the Marathon. The moment arrives when a sensible, ordinary runner contemplates running 26.2 miles in one day, then swallows hard and says, "I can do this."

From that instant onward, nothing will deter the runner from adhering to the grueling training program that this race requires. Well, nothing short of the excessive heat of a sunny summer day. They recoil from heat, and blossom in the cold and the dark, like vampires.

At first, I thought my husband was the only person insane enough to arise at 4 a.m., in the dead of winter, to run. Turns out, he found a group of Charlottesville runners who, like Harry, are training for the marathoners' mecca: The Boston Marathon. In January, they gathered for a run at oh-dark-thirty when the temperature was five degrees below zero, and eyelashes turned to icicles.

The fact that Harry sustained a patch of frostbite on the side of his neck— as perfectly situated as a vampire's kiss— seemed totally fitting. A benediction from the dark side.

I assumed that my husband was just plain lucky that Charlottesville harbors a group of marathoners-in-training who are happy to arise at stupid o'clock in order to run.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, we were spending the weekend at a hotel in Roanoke. In the middle of the night, our travel alarm beeped me awake. A mistake, surely. It was, after all, 4am, and the conference I was attending wouldn't begin until 9am.

I drifted back to sleep only to be torn from my dream by the distressing sound of Velcro. That's when I remembered: My trailing spouse had dug up a group of marathoners-in-training in Roanoke, and they too, obediently flock in solid darkness in order to run 15 miles before breakfast.

The Marathon demands it.

So now I'm thinking that there must be thousands upon thousands of these herds of zombies all over the country, staggering through the darkness, in thrall of the Marathon. Who knew?

As someone who prefers her darkness activities on the earlier end— watching the Craig Ferguson show from my cozy bed, or losing myself in a good book at one or two in the morning— and who thinks it's inhumane for anyone to have to get up when the stars are still out, (and as someone who wouldn't even run out to her own mailbox) I find this behavior incomprehensible and more than a little disturbing.

You are now, no doubt, wondering how to recognize one of these zombie marathoners as they walk among us during the day. I suggest that you watch for the shank-of-the-evening bedtimes, the inordinate pasta consumption, and those wee bumper stickers that are intended to be noticed only by the chosen.

But when you let the dog out before dawn and see a pack of Spandex-clad undead lurching toward you, don't panic. No need for torches or barricades. It's not about you.

It's all about the Marathon.

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Janis Jaquith writes essays for NPR stations too.

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