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Run Because You Can, Not Because You Have To

You do not truly know what *rain* is, until you embrace *mud* as your own.

The clouds were frail and ominous, a colorless sky somehow gave a cerulean shade to the clouds. Then there was the endless music of rain that had started its song. But this was a good day. Lisa Cowan tightened her shoes and hydrated well---she was as prepared as one could be. The morning air fused a warmth, dew settled on the plants. It was a still morning disrupted by antsy racers. Lisa was filled with an unmatched readiness and determination as she grabbed her red mountain bike and positioned herself on it. Her dark hair pulled tight in a ponytail, tucked beneath a helmet, and her blue eyes aimed forward.

Now I sat in her living room, 32 years later. Her blue eyes dug into mine as she recollected her thoughts, her story.

“It was 1989,” she recollected her thoughts with a smile, “it was a mountain bike race in Lawrence, Kansas. I loved mountain bike racing.” her breathing slowed down slightly. “There were six races, and each race you finished contributed points. It was 18 miles total. Two miles into the race, I realized my seat was gone. The bar had broken and now I was sitting on a sharp edge of a pole. I biked standing for the remainder of the miles. Somehow, I still won the whole entire race.”

Lisa rode her way through the chaos of the trees and over logs and rocks that sprawled from the ground. The obstacles did not phase her, she raced this mountain bike race and won. Though her seat broke and persistent rain stole the course, this was a good day. A day she remembers not for the result of a gold medal, but because she endured. She never knew that this race reflected so much of what her life would look like.

“That was thirty-two years ago, but I can almost remember every part of it.”

I sat there in the serenity of her home for one last time. For four years, she was my cross country coach. Four years, she taught me immense wisdom and showed inspirational love. Because I was preparing to leave for college, this was a bittersweet goodbye. A goodbye that consisted of her sharing her story, her whole story.

She loved to compete in triathlons, mountain bike races, and anything that involved pushing her body. She was an *athlete*. Exercise was written on the back of her hands racing became ingrained in the creases of her palms. But life grew cloudy, and those clouds brought storms.

I saw her hesitation in the words she spoke, yet they came so fluently. Perhaps, she has told her story various times, but as she spoke with humble reflection, it felt as if her story had been buried away. I sat, eagerly waiting for the flow of her narrative to continue.

“I had just competed in a triathlon a week before. I was working as a counselor at a camp when I woke up and my legs were swollen. *Very swollen*. There was a lot of pain, and I had no idea what was going on.”

The next five months were full of appointments. Five months when walking became an excruciating task. Her day now consisted of 18 hours of sleeping and severe pain. Life sent rain in the form of sharded glass and she could feel it stab deep inside of her. I could hear it even in her ethereal voice. When walking becomes difficult, it becomes even more taxing to think about anything else.

“My doctor told me that this was how I was going to live the rest of my life.” The word sunk deep. “Five months went by, and I was finally given a diagnosis.”

Lyme Disease. The words sent vibrations through her ears and sunk into the depths of her mind. It all felt like a dream. What day would it be when she woke up? What time and how long had she been asleep? She hoped it would be 7 a.m. just in time to start her run before the sun's dial hand struck 90 degrees. There were moments she wondered this, but more than not, she remembered she had already been awake. Her days began to blend together.

“Eventually, I switched doctors. I took a risk, so I went to this Chinese alternative medicine doctor. They healed me with oxygen and botanicals. But I knew it was God who healed me. It was God's

hand orchestrating my life so timely, but it was hard to realize this until later in life. Most people settle when something like this happens. Some chose to be content with the decision that their life is their diagnosis. That was not me.”

She said this nonchalantly, but her tone consisted of hope. The mystery of the situation was resolved by the peace she had in Christ. She spent months wondering how this could have happened. ‘Why me?’ was a question stamped onto the roof of her tongue. I wondered this myself... *Why her?* I felt the urge to question God, plead for an explanation. Why is it that the aspects of life so dear to us can become abraded to dust? Portions of ourselves that are scraped away by the friction of life and worn down by affliction. I watched her clear blue eyes still searching for an explanation at that moment. I adjusted myself in my chair and listened as she continued.

In August of the year 2000, she competed in yet another bike race, 24 hours of riding through Portland, Oregon. This race was just the beginning. She laughed as she thought back to her doctor who thought his words were a tattoo, unchangeable, permanent, real. I sat there, my thoughts manifested in this idea that her life both ended and began every time it fell apart.

She waited for a moment, letting her thoughts untangle. “I can truly see God’s hand over my whole life. He gave me everything I loved to do and enjoyed and brought it into my life. I competed in many Runs Across Kansas; I ran across the Grand Canyon, and 12 years after my diagnosis, I completed an Ironman.”

Years after her diagnosis, she came across a cross country team with only one girl on the roster. After volunteering to run along with the girl a few times, she was asked to become the assistant coach. Most of her life she spent training and competing in sport but coaching was an interest she never knew she had. She knew she obtained knowledge to make a runner better and could help kids who didn't have courage gain it through the sport. It felt as if God had placed this opportunity in front of her. Before she knew it, she had taken hold and fully embraced his plan. Soon, Lisa Cowan became the head coach at Kansas City Christian School.

It was funny to her that she was coaching high school kids when most of her life she didn't even want kids of her own. But she loved every highschool kid she coached. She painted their eyes with possibilities, and excitement. For the ones that lacked courage, she helped them find it through their shoes that pounded the ground intensely, adrenaline that coursed through their veins, and the numbers pinned to their jersey that whispered to keep going, don't give up. Running and Cycling was an outlet, a way to feel power when the kids and herself felt none. To lace up their shoes and let the gravity of life weighing on their shoulders, only propel them forward.

But as my coach, she never ran with us. She coached me for four years and small pieces of her story were revealed in conversation. But now I sat in the midst of her home, the smell of serenity danced over me. I adjusted myself in my chair facing more towards her. Her life journey was no longer silent and revealed in her authenticity of her story.

"Every morning, before my kids would wake up, my friend who I had trained with for a long time and I would go on our runs." her words were coarse. "We went for a run one morning, and the next thing I knew my legs felt funny. There was a disconnection between my legs and brain."

Guillain-Barre Syndrome. Her body's nerves now turned against her, and the immune system became cloudy and confused. The doctor postulated a sixth month recovery. Once again, his words sunk deep. Six months turned into eight years. Dark embellished clouds filled a constant creme sky. The sofa engulfed her days with sitting, and walking became abruptly difficult. She could no longer run. Rain became frozen in the sky, the roads were an aimless trajectory. People need a melody to open their eyes, and when the sequence of rain becomes disassembled notes, days only feel *lagging*. Depression and heartbreak made itself a constant emotion that was hard to express but easy to feel.

Then in 2016, she started horse therapy. A therapy meant to aid in nerve disorders with the rhythm of their movement. She went to class once a week for one year. She laughed slightly at herself as she expressed the next event. I could tell her laugh was not all humorous, but had somberness in its echo as well.

“One day I went to class, my legs felt weaker than usual. I knew I probably shouldn't have gone that day. My horse stopped aggressively, and my legs were not strong enough to hold on.”

Two broken legs. She spent the next 3 months in a wheelchair, watching rain instead of running or riding in it. The storms grew bigger and stronger, she felt she could no longer push on. Her thoughts couldn't help but think, *Why me?* I was speechless and couldn't help but ask, *Why her?*

In January 2018, for the third time, she had to learn the pattern of walking. Small steps were millions of miles. Life built mountains in a path that once seemed simple. She could no longer run, riding and swimming was in question, walking was extremely difficult... her own body turned against her. But even through the colorless sky, she saw glimpses of hope and grew even more determined. Though the peaks of the mountains looked too far and impossible to reach, she was going to try anyway. Life was just a race that became more difficult to run. Pressing forward albeit rather slowly, through the obstacles.

“I never regained the strength I had before in my legs. Weight bearing and lengthy standing is difficult.” Her next words were the color yellow- they stood out in a world painted blue.

“If I would have given in, I probably would still be in a wheelchair right now.”

She reflected as the memories of her past grew prominent in her thoughts. *If* she would have given in. She spent days on an old blue coach that smelled of CDS and late night dinners, staring at a wall that once seemed colorful, and waited for things to get better. Her thoughts brought her back to the hospital rooms, a room devoid of sound. Hospital nurses and doctors breaking silence with words of sympathy. It was in these places she waited to see what God planned for her as she sat in a wheelchair, on a coach, in a hospital bed unable to do things for herself anymore- her own plan and desires seemed to be placed on hold.

“Exercise was a gift. I always felt that it was, and so as soon as I could, I started working out again. I started to regain some muscle. My drive was to not have more days spent dysfunctional.”

Her sentences flowed with gratitude. Everything she shared started and ended with ambition and appreciation. I sat there, listening to a story that truly made my voice unable to bear its own words. She sat there for a moment, her breath exhaled courage. Life came tumbling down like a waterfall, and she

stood to watch it fall, astonished by the beauty. Watching a mixture of light and dark become an alluring serenity of clearness. The sound of roaring music, yet her ears heard the stillness. There was a tranquility that surrounded her presence.

“I remember my two friends and I would run every morning. They continued to run and I no longer could. With two broken legs, I didn’t think it could be worse. I couldn’t use the bathroom on my own. I felt depressed for the first two or so years. But then I had an attitude shift. I just started to give thanks for everything. Today, I am still able to swim, and ride my bike so I continually give thanks for that. It took me a long time to understand that there are our wants vs. God's will. As I think back, I feel encouraged by knowing God’s will is always better.”

As she said these words, I thought to myself that her life was like graceful poetry. Through the discouragement and trials, the rhythm of fortitude keeps the sounds of struggle easy to hear. *Strength.* When her legs left her body with no strength, her heart kept her movement going. She was my highschool coach. I remember her always telling us “run because you can, not because you have to.” The words sometimes floated over me, as I was always focused on my own goals, but they’ve started to pour down onto my shoulders and melt down to my feet. Being one obsessed with the running culture, sports, triathlons, and pushing your body to its limits, I wondered how I would have been able to breathe without it. My thoughts cycled back to 1998, an 18 mile long mountain bike race and an unexpectedly broken bike seat. Would I have given up? Would I have stopped the race and asked for a new one? Or would I have finished the race despite the brokenness of my armory beneath and the downpour of water making the path unclear? I wondered how she endured the race through life that sent fog and mud like an army.

I felt the urge to share her story. The thought of her courage and motivation fascinated me. The touch of her words left fingerprints on my mind. In the remaining time we had to talk, she explained that before she knew Christ, she felt failure and lost in all situations. After Christ, hope, redemption, and blessings were revealed through the whispers of the rain. Of course, doubts and fear came and left when she sat for hours and days unable to bear the circumstances. Yet in every trial, she could look back and see the blessings she had acquired along the way. Encouragement leaked once more from her mouth to the

conversation. Her faith and endurance became a prominent theme in her life. It became a part of her every movement. I felt the urge to grasp her story, wisdom, and depth to store it in a place I'd never forget.

“That's why I always say, run because you can, not because you have to.”

My highschool cross country coach, someone I greatly look up to, I could understand on a deeper level. I sat up from my seat, knowing it was time to say goodbye. I made my way through her garage, breathing in the cold concrete and oak infused air. Her bikes hung from the ceiling like bats. They were asleep and awaiting to wake from their darkness. Pointing to a bike I rode on all summer, she told me that was her first mountain bike. The bike she used to propel herself up a mountain to win a race. I never noticed the antiquity of its exterior, and the freshness of the seat. As I was leaving, she was just getting ready to head out on her bike ride. Hill repeats.

She was more than just my coach. Her story is greater than her diagnoses. She is a mom, wife, coach, friend, and *athlete*. She endured obstacles and still finished. She walked through life with a winning medal engrained in her eyesight, knowing there were two options for life: to give in, or to run.