

The Running Life: Not Bad for a Girl

A Tribute

By Candace Karu

As featured in the April 2005 issue of Running Times Magazine

He is intricately tethered to machines of breathtaking complication. My father is entering his seventh week on the hospital's surgical recovery floor, intensive care for the most critical cases. Ordinarily this is a short-term way station for those newly restored to reasonable working order. My father has not been so lucky. The rhythmic rasp of the ventilator signals his tenuous hold on life.

My friends call him The Colonel. A veteran of both Korea and Vietnam, he is the product of a military education from age 12. Forged in a bygone era, his military experience included women in only the most limited and tangential manner. This was a man who commanded combat battalions with ease and confidence but who was, again and again, flummoxed by his three strong-willed daughters. He saw us as an alien species, unpredictable and unknowable, best managed with equal amounts of distance and discipline.

Unlike my two rebellious, confrontational sisters, who loved to challenge his complicated and sometimes arcane rules, I resolved to make his system work for me. Academic excellence was the most expedient way to win his approval. It was also my ticket to freedom. While my sisters languished in their rooms, restricted for transgressions large and small, I roamed the various army posts we called home, my liberty bought with compliance and stellar report cards.

The Colonel was an athlete. He was poetry in motion. He was a fierce competitor. A scratch golfer and a nationally-ranked squash player, he was of the Vince Lombardi school of competition: "If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score?" And perhaps more to the point: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." And so, contradicting my essential nature, I aspired to be an athlete too. I swam competitively in spite of an obvious lack of talent. I worked to hear those five precious words: "Not bad for a girl." This rarely bestowed compliment was my father's code for: "I am proud of you beyond words or description. Now get back to work."

And work is what I did best. Hard work was our common ground. Diligence was our lingua franca. One summer, weeks before my father would leave to serve a year in Vietnam, he decided our yard needed a fence. Although he was a brilliant tactician and an innovative thinker, my father was not handy. In those weeks, knowing he would be gone for more than a year, I helped him build the fence. I was a 14-year-old force of nature, proving to him that I could be not bad for a girl, wanting him to remember me like this while he was gone. I dug post-holes and held pickets while he nailed. That summer I learned the value of a strong back, a steady hand, and the elegance of the well-chosen, well-placed expletive.

In the hour before dawn, dressed in my running clothes, I drive to the hospital. The ICU is never closed to family members, and the dim stillness of the early morning hours suits our visits. I tell him about the weather, my children, my work, sensing it is the quotidian elements of life he misses most. Some days he responds to my chatter with a nod or a raised eyebrow, other days his eyes stay resolutely closed.

I leave the hospital and run. This is how I will be able to make sense of his fate. Running will allow me to put the machines and the pain and the helplessness in perspective. In good times and bad I sort things out on the road and the trail. And I remember.

I remember my first marathon. I was 36, a brand new runner. Giddy with love for my new endeavor, I signed up to run the Marine Corps Marathon. Everything about the event thrilled me. These were my old stomping grounds; I would start near the Pentagon Athletic Center, where my father taught me the rules of squash. The course wound through Georgetown, where I saw my first rock concert, and on to Capitol Hill, where I interned in college. And everywhere I looked there were the Marines. My youthful lullabies were Army cadence drills. "Sound off, one, two. Hit it again, three, four . . ." I ran much of the way with a group of soldiers in full fatigues, carrying the American flag. When I finished the race, surprisingly chipper and ridiculously proud, one Marine wrapped me in a Mylar blanket while another placed a finishers medal over my head. "Way to go, Ma'am," they said in unison.

I remember calling my father after the race, regaling him with tales of my ordeal, recounting the miles and landmarks, reminding him of my dogged preparation. "You don't even sound tired," he marveled. We talked about having found my niche, my finally becoming an athlete. "Not bad for a girl," he said before hanging up.

I have been a runner for 15 years. Running has come to define not only what I do, but to a certain extent, who I am. In those years running has also given me a completely unexpected gift. It has connected me in a new and profound way to my complicated, difficult, incomparable father. As his athletic abilities have declined, mine have improved, and that improvement is a testimony to our relationship. His parenting laid the groundwork for my becoming a runner. His lessons of commitment, determination, and hard work have paid off for me in running and in life.

I run and remember and, for a time, I am completely happy.

Not bad for a girl.

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