

Beyond The Wall

A Short Story: Racing Past the Past Can Produce a Runner's Low.

BY MICHAEL J. GREENWALT

“Coop! You dirty dog!”

Jack Cooper looked around for the source of the voice but saw no one he immediately recognized. He was sitting, back to the gymnasium wall, trying to relax, but his senses were being bombarded from every angle. Hundreds of runners, family members, friends, and assorted race officials were milling about yelling at each other over the “Boss,” who was rocking on about being born to run. Sight and sound blended into a swirling whirlwind of commotion that was completely disrupting the meditative state he was trying to achieve.

“Coop!”

He looked up, finally recognizing a face bobbing on the sea of humanity in front of him. Robert Norton pushed through the last of the crowd, a grin the largest feature adorning his diminutive figure. The smile was so infectious that Coop’s face broke wide open as he got to his feet.

He and Robby were great friends, and although they communicated quite frequently via e-mail and by phone, it had been months since Coop had last seen him in the flesh. The two of them went back a long way. Once high school buddies, they had attempted, without success, to walk on to their college cross-country team but hadn’t let that failure dampen their enthusiasm for a good run. Coop remembered one outing in particular, a run that was rapidly becoming legendary—in his *own* mind.

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Immediately after finishing the last exam of their senior year, Coop and Robby had headed out to the lake for a final run together. They had warmed up over the two miles through campus even though not much warm-up was necessary that balmy spring day, the sun high and bright in a cloudless sky. Lean and tanned, they had relaxed through the initial miles, cracking jokes and talking about their summer plans.

Once at the lake, though, all focus had been on the effort. The lake’s perimeter was about four miles, and as they entered the surrounding forest, Robby had taken control and begun to press the pace. This was certainly not unusual since he had

always been the stronger, the faster of the two, and Coop was used to it. But the air temperature was an invigorating 10 degrees cooler under the trees, and Coop had found a gear that he never knew he had, one that he hadn't been able to engage since. Entering the woods a half step behind Robby, he had hammered through the weeds trail side in order to take the lead, branches thrashing him as he did so, leaving bloody streaks on his face and arms. The gauntlet had been thrown.

During the four-mile tour of the lake, both Coop and Robby had jockeyed for the lead position, pushing hard to be first, to be the one to hold the advantage over the other. Their training run had become a race, and both wanted to be the first to break from the trees on the other side.

The trail's width pulsed as they ran, at first so constricted they had been forced to run single file. Then, when it widened, both had pressed the pace to see who would be in the lead before it once again narrowed and they had to run one, two. Sweat flying, elbows colliding, they had taken turns in the lead.

First Robby.

Then Coop.

Then Robby again.

The miles flew by, the pace dictated by the one in front. It was quiet under the trees, footfalls and heavy breathing the only sounds except for an isolated expletive or grunt of exertion.

Fortune had smiled on Coop that day. As they neared the straightaway that led to the trail's end—their finish line—he made his break and took the lead for the last time. As Coop sprinted the final hundred yards, he actually put some distance on Robby and was first to shed the trees for the sunlight.

God, the memory of his triumph on their last run together was one he still cherished and looked to for inspiration.

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"Robby, how the hell are you?" Coop managed over the din as he grabbed the hand Robby offered. "I was just visualizing that run around the lake. You know the one I'm talking about!"

"Man! You'll never forget that will you? I *let* you take that one. Call it a graduation present. But there's no chance for you today. I'm gonna spank you good!" Robby laughed.

Coop's smile was huge, thinking it would be great to re-create that sprint finish and beat Robby again. "Yeah, right. You *let* me beat you. I felt the energy then, and I feel it again now, Robby."

"Hey, eight miles is way different than 26. Bring it on, Coop, my man. Bring it on!"

"Let's go then, they're calling everyone to the start. Time to eat my dust. Again!"

* * *

The trail was spectacular. Fall colors were bursting out all over. The few leaves that remained on the trees went from vibrant golds to burnt oranges and reds; a light breeze was stirring those already on the ground. The sky was a deep azure with only a few high white clouds marring its clearness. The forest itself was dark and woody, its earthy tones a stark contrast to the river of runners flowing along the silvery gray trail, their T-shirts a rainbow of color. The air was blissfully clean, each athlete's exhalation a wisp of vapor quickly disseminated.

This was autumn in all its unadulterated glory. Perfect marathon weather.

* * *

It surprised Coop how quickly he had resumed his traditional place to the left and half a step behind Robby. Out here in the clean air, remembering all of the miles he had put in during training, he felt that he could run forever. In fact, he really was feeling the same energy, the same hair-raising, finger-tingling rush that made their last run together so memorable. He vowed to use his strength to press the pace, to once again throw down a challenge and make this a race to remember. Increasing his tempo, Coop sped up until he was a half step ahead. Robby smiled and came even.

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Exhilarating mile after mile flew by, and Coop was startled to see the eight-mile marker. They had been running for almost an hour, and he didn't feel like he was racing, hadn't really even broken a sweat. They were shooting the breeze, catching up on all the issues in their lives that required face-to-face interaction—issues that e-mail messages and the occasional phone call just couldn't cover—all at under seven-minutes-per-mile pace.

Robby went on in detail about his plans for grad school, more about a girl he had met and thought he might be serious about, his parents, his brother Mark. During this recitation, Coop had maintained a mostly interested silence. He had acknowledged Robby's news politely, respectfully, and responded when required, but he didn't open up about his own life, simply concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other as fast as he could.

Finally Robby looked over and said, "What's the deal, Coop? I'm doing all of the talking here. Saving your breath?"

"No, man. I'm just a little preoccupied, that's all. Sorry."

But Robby wasn't going to take that as an answer. "Come on, give. I always could tell when something was bugging you. Let me in, will you?"

Coop let up a little, and they slowed. The other runners around them eased ahead, and the gap developing between them gave him the confidence to get it out. "I broke up with Alicia," he said, his gaze forward. He couldn't look at Robby.

"You got to be kidding me! You guys have been together since high school! You just got engaged, for Christ's sake!"

For Coop, the next words out of his mouth were the hardest part. “She cheated on me, Robby. I found her with Jeff Pugh, out here on the trail. I was on a run just a couple of weeks ago and found them, you know, together. I just couldn’t figure out how to tell you.” He somehow felt smaller by what he had said, as if he were the one to blame for her infidelity.

Coop looked over at Robby and shrugged, a sheepish, embarrassed grin on his face. He didn’t say anything else. He was sure that once the race was done they would talk more about it. He could cry in his beer then. Coop’s leg turnover increased as he upped the ante a little. He was gratified to hear Robby’s breathing become more labored as their conversation ended, and he followed suit.

It wasn’t long before the two were engaged in their own private race within a race. Cat and mouse, each took turns forcing the pace, lungs bursting before backing off. While Robby’s need to reestablish his place in their running pecking order was palpable, Coop’s desire to shake off his anger, his embarrassment at what Alicia had done to him, and maintain bragging rights over his buddy was overwhelming.

Motivation would not be a factor.

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Coop saw the jumble of ruins to the right of the path just ahead through the trees, lost focus, and slowed a little, trying to bring his strained breathing, his racing heart, under control. Robby’s lead became one, two, then three steps as Coop struggled to pull his concentration back to the race. But the closer they came to the burned-out structure, the more it affected him. What had once been a solid stone building had been reduced to nothing more than the foundation, a jagged jumble of blackened rocks and charred timbers poking fingerlike through the weeds. The roof itself could barely be seen, having fallen behind what had once been the back wall. Coop’s highest heights and deepest depths intersected right over there, just off the trail and behind that crumbled wall.

Without realizing it, Coop weaved as far to the left side of the trail as possible, almost colliding with a couple of other runners. Excusing himself but maintaining his position on the far side of the course, he fought off the impulse to sprint past the site and instead forced himself to gradually pick up speed. He found that while his breathing had returned to normal, his heart was still hammering at a rate for which his pace could not account.

Slowly, methodically, Coop was one, two, then three steps closer to Robby, once again even but no longer as light on his feet. His preoccupation had become a burden, and the pace that had just moments ago been so easy now demanded the effort of total concentration.

A quick glance back over his shoulder told Coop that the ruins would soon be far behind. But because of the out-and-back nature of the course, he realized

that he would have to come this way again in order to reach the finish line. Good, something to push him during the race's latter stages, he thought. Although a nervous chuckle escaped his lips, Coop remained consciously aware of his pounding heart over most of the next mile down the trail.

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Coop and Alicia had been hiking on the trail that midsummer Saturday morning. It had been hot, the sun a merciless golden orb determined to reduce them to nothing more than sopping smudges of human residue. As such, hiking the trail had seemed like a great idea since the surrounding trees were full and leafy and provided cover from the unforgiving heat. The incessant humidity, however, attacked them even there in the shade.

They had been out for a couple of hours looking for a quiet spot to picnic, when Coop, T-shirt soaked with sweat, eyes stinging and socks squishing, stopped and dropped the pack from his back. He offered Alicia a water bottle, but being merely moist around the edges, she declined.

"A little heat and humidity and you're a dripping mess already. I knew coming out here with you was a bad idea. I'll probably have to carry you *and* our stuff back to the car! Some marathoner you're turning out to be."

Coop, his manhood challenged, drank deeply and then turned the bottle on her, dousing her with its contents. Alicia grabbed at him, and during the ensuing struggle, Coop caught a blast of water in the face. Their horseplay continued, and before long the bottle was empty and the two found themselves soaked and laughing. Finally, they stood face to face, breathing hard and completely caught up in each other.

Just off to the side of the trail, in a dense copse of trees and amidst the high weeds, they found a jumble of rocks and stones, apparently the foundation of an ancient, burned-out building. Alicia took Coop by the hand and escorted him from the trail. Once in the deep shade, he opened the backpack and, without a word, removed a blanket and laid it next to the charred wall. Then he reached for her, and soon they were enjoying nature as they never had before.

Afterward, they lay on the blanket and stared up at the sunshine sparkling through the canopy of branches overhead. The warm day and their lovemaking left Coop feeling dreamy and a bit sentimental. He had recently purchased an engagement ring, and the two of them had dinner plans for that evening where he had planned on proposing. But even without the ring in hand, Coop felt that the right moment was upon him. He couldn't wait until dinner to ask her.

"Alicia?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you and want us to be together—will you marry me?" Coop got it out, but just barely. He was sweating again and not just because of the heat.

Alicia had been lying with her head on his chest. The question made her sit up. “Are you kidding me? More of your jokes?”

“Nope. I was going to ask you tonight. At dinner. I even have a ring, just not here.”

“God, Coop! Yes, I will.”

Later, after they had eaten and gathered their things together, Alicia leaned against the low, crumbling wall and joked.

“You know my family has a history?”

Coop was sitting on the ground, legs stretched out over cool forest floor, back up against the even cooler stones. “What are you talking about?”

“*This* place. This is where my great, great, ad infinitum aunt was killed by my great, great, ad infinitum uncle.”

“What?”

“You know. The murders?”

Coop nodded then, remembering some old ghost story he had heard as a kid.

“This is where it happened. You know this trail was an old rail line? Well, this building used to be the place where the mail was transferred.” Alicia stood, pointed to a rusted metal hook they had passed coming through the trees. “That’s where they hung the mailbags.”

She stood and ambled around the low wall. Turning, she placed her elbows on the stones and, leaning out over the lounging Coop, gazed into the forest, perhaps conjuring up visions of the past.



“My aunt was married to a guy named Amos Zucker. He killed her *and* her lover right where we are now. Killed their baby, too, before burning everything down and hanging himself. Just imagine him swinging right over there.” Alicia looked down as Coop stared up at her.

“Creepy, huh?” She grinned and said, “Just what you wanted to hear after proposing, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. Just don’t let me catch you fooling around. I may be skinny, but I could be as mean as old Amos. When provoked, that is.”

Coop stood and caught the slight breeze that had just kicked in. An unsettling, prickling sensation began at the base of his neck and moved down his back as if a thousand creeping, crawling insects were trooping down his spine. He shuddered and thought his T-shirt, still damp and clammy, was giving him a serious case of the chills. Coop shouldered the backpack and made his way for the trail.

“We’ve got to get going,” he told Alicia, taking her hand as they made their way back. “We have dinner reservations tonight, remember?”

* * *

The two friends continued to match each other stride for stride over the next several miles. The early morning chill was starting to disappear, leaving behind a warmer but still wonderfully cool, clear day. They hit the halfway point side by side, but then a mile farther down the trail, at the turnaround, each struggled to be the first around the marker. Robby took an inside tack and with a slight elbow and a bark of laughter, just inched out Coop. Two steps later, they were once again running side by side.

Cat and mouse, they surged, slowed, and surged once more. Coop was feeling the effort and realized that he was just hanging on. He was close to the edge of exhaustion now. Soon he would be hanging from that cliff by nothing more than the finest of threads. He sensed he wouldn’t be able to maintain their fevered pace much longer but was loath to quit.

Sweat stinging his eyes now, Coop set his jaw, determined to shift into another, higher gear. If he could run Robby into the ground now, once and for all, then he might still be the first to cross the finish line. He was going for broke. This was for all the marbles. Time to do or die.

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A couple of weeks before the race, Coop had been out on the trail for his last long run. The morning had been cool but not cold, the sky clear, the sun still low on the horizon. His pace had been solid, strong. All of his training was coming together nicely, and with a planned two-week taper coming up, he had been visualizing how he would take it to Robby during the race.

Coop had a couple of hours of running already behind him and had hit the turnaround when he spotted the burned-out shell. Slowing, he smiled, remembering the day he had proposed to Alicia, how nervous he had been, how schmaltzy

the moment—and how glad he was that his impromptu proposal had been so well received. Alicia’s saying yes had just about made his year.

While the crumbled foundation had almost been hidden by the lushness of the foliage back in August, it was easily visible between the mostly leafless trees, now that autumn had arrived. Coop had jogged on past, and as he was about to resume his original pace, he heard a muffled giggle and then someone shushing someone else. His grin got wider as he thought about how much action that old house must have seen over the years.

Coop took one last look back over his shoulder, and what he saw brought him to an immediate standstill. There, peeking over the crumbled stone wall, was Alicia. His eyes were drawn first to a few small twigs clinging to her mussed hair and then to her eyes, which were wide open and scared. He heard a whisper—someone else was behind the wall asking an urgent question.

Coop had turned, his face lifeless. He took a few jerking steps—like a zombie just learning to walk—toward the ruins. He was about halfway into the trees when another head appeared: Jeff Pugh.

Anger had then exploded in him like a Fourth of July firecracker. Coop literally saw red as he clawed his way through the brush to the rubble. Looking down at them—at their nakedness, the sleeping bag, and other evidence of the party they had had the night before—he stood speechless, aghast. Neither Alicia nor Jeff said a word.

Coop’s eyes locked on Alicia’s. He saw her through a crimson haze. They were still as statues.

After what seemed an eternity, Jeff had broken the silence and tried to explain. Coop forced his attention away from Alicia and focused on her lover. His raw fury took over, and he bent down and picked up a dead tree branch a couple of feet long. He had never felt like this before in his life. He found he was somewhere outside of himself, looking on, taking direction from his anger as if he were an actor in a movie. Coop had murder in his heart as he lifted the stick, preparing to crush Jeff’s head with it.

Alicia’s scream brought him back to reality. “Coop, it’s my fault not his. Put the stick down! Please!”

Coop stepped away from them then. He threw down the stick and turned his back on Alicia and Jeff. Without a word, he made his way toward the trail.

He still had a ways to go to get back to his car and wasn’t sure his legs would be able to carry him that far. He felt spent beyond belief. Shock and anger, and an overwhelming sadness, conspired to deprive him of any motivation he had to go on.

Coop had started to cry as he stepped out onto the trail and began walking back the way he had come. A few steps later he broke into a slow jog. Then, tears still falling, he lengthened his stride and was soon running full out.

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Coop shook off the ugly memory and then, as he and Robby approached mile 18, his stride broke. Coop had failed in his relationship with Alicia and now had nothing left for the marathon but failure as well.

“Robby, we’ve been hammering too hard, too long. I can’t keep it up.” It was a struggle for Coop to get the words out. He found he couldn’t breathe and talk at the same time, couldn’t breathe and do anything at the same time for that matter.

As he slowed, so did Robby. But Robby still had it, could still race, and although he hated to do it, Coop had to cut him loose. He had to accept his failure graciously and hope he could get himself through to the finish line without a whole lot of added misery.

“Coop, you OK?”

“Yeah, Robby. Don’t slow down. Just go on. I’ll get there when I get there. You ‘da man.” Coop wheezed, slowing to a jog. Robby smiled and accelerated down the trail, flicking his fingers in triumph. Rounding the bend, he was out of sight.

The seclusion for Coop was complete then. He took a look around and saw that he was running alone, an empty trail in both directions. He continued to slow and wondered if he could control his slide to exhaustion long enough to finish the race running.

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Soon, clouds that only an hour earlier had provided such a striking contrast to the deep blue of the fall sky were beginning to gather. Air that had seemed so crisp and refreshing had become dull and dank. His fatigue, along with the slow, subtle breakdown of the weather, hastened the dissolution of his form. He was flat worn out and still had over six miles to go.

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Coop was another mile down the trail, and thoughts of walking began to intrude. With every runner who passed him, he thought, damn that Robby anyway! He knew it was his own fault, though. He had tried to run Robby into the ground but had only succeeded in destroying himself in the process. Humbled, he hobbled on.

The day had become dark. The cloud cover was complete, and dampness seeped into his muscles, chilling and tightening them. The progression to a disastrous finish had begun.

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Rain began to mist gently down as Coop achieved the 20-mile marker. The weather was crashing and so was he. He stopped running and began to walk.

* * *

Coop didn’t get a half mile before the misting rain transformed itself into a thick fog. The air seemed to squeeze him, exacerbating his struggle. Now he was wet,

cold, bone tired, and having trouble breathing. Hands on hips, he kept walking, hoping to get even a little rest. His head was beginning to feel about as foggy as the trail around him. He leaned toward the left as he went, every third step lurching to the right to maintain his position on the path. He didn't worry about bumping into anybody. The numbers of runners passing him had dwindled to the point that he felt he must be out on the course alone.

Knowing that any time goal was shot, he made his way to the edge of the trail and stopped. He let out a nervous laugh as he saw the burned-out shell that miles earlier had been his center of attention. Even disoriented and as fatigued as he was, apprehension surged inside of him. Coop leaned over, hands on knees, and breathed deeply for just a minute. He longed for a little clarity of mind, didn't get it, and started walking again. He hoped that someone else would catch up to him soon, maybe spark him to run.

The fog continued to swirl about the trail. Its denseness seemed to make him work harder, contributing to his weariness, his dark mood. Not a single runner had passed him in a while, and he was lonely. Looking back over his shoulder, he listened for the telltale footfalls that would announce someone coming from behind. He heard nothing. The only sounds were those of his own breathing, his feet scuffling on the trail, and the hollow, desperate moan of the breeze—*Amos had just returned from town. The weather had deteriorated, and the rain was freezing on the muddy road. He was tired and wet and cold. It was dark, and he was glad to see the welcoming glow from the windows, already anticipating the warmth of the fire even as he put the mule in the barn. But as he opened the door to go inside, he knew something was wrong.*

Coop shook his head. He was exhausted, losing it. His legs ached, begging him to stop, but the wind's ghostly voice chilled him, inspiring him to run once again.

* * *

Coop thought that he should be near the 21-mile marker. He continued his hunched, feet-barely-off-the-ground shuffle run for a few more minutes and began to watch the side of the trail for the marker. He couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction because of the fog, but so far, nothing.

Another 10 minutes and he stopped. Still no marker. He began walking again, trying to stretch out the tightness in his legs, knowing that even if he could, he had nothing left. The last five miles would be hell, and he had no recourse now except to keep moving. The urge to stop and lie down began to tug at the very root of his psyche. Even the wind seemed to call out to him—*Amos heard voices coming from across the great room, one unfamiliar and very male. What he saw completely overwhelmed him. There, by the hearth, he found his wife with another man. They were both naked. Amos suspected that this couldn't have been the first time but decided that it would definitely be the last. In his fury, Amos took the shotgun that was kept near the door and shot first his wife, then her lover. The*

noise of the blasts woke the baby up, and he started crying. Mouthing a silent prayer, Amos reloaded and emptied both barrels into the baby as well.

Coop put his hands to his ears, horrified, and tried to drown out the echoing violence of the wind. What was his problem? Trying to expel the morbid visions, he forged on.

* * *

He ran some.

He walked some.

He ran some more.

Definitely confused now, his senses dulled by monstrous fatigue, he took in only his footsteps, his breathing, and the ever-present wind that was building to a shriek—*Amos dumped the contents of an oil lamp over the bodies and used coals from the fire to ignite the place. As the house burned, Amos went to the barn and opened a mailbag. Using paper from one of the packages, he scrawled a note and placed it into his coat pocket before he set the barn on fire, too.*

Coop desperately needed to put an end to these horrible fantasies. But he was suffering desperately and knew he couldn't just stop, no matter how much he wanted. He had to get to the finish.



It was with these thoughts that he began to chant, “I will finish . . . I will finish . . .” Each syllable coincided with a step forward, a step closer to being done. He staggered on as if hypnotized, seemingly attempting to run away from Amos Zucker and his murderous rage.

* * *

Reality reasserted itself when Coop tripped on a stick—a *crumbled, blackened stone?*—and fell. He hit the trail hard. Groaning, he rolled onto his back and looked up at the sky, but all that he saw was the grayness—*smoke?*—that he had been running through—for what? Looking at his watch, he saw that his elapsed time was over four and a half hours. He sat up and looked at the time again. How could that be? Even walking, he should have finished already.

Coop got onto all fours, reached out, and used a tree to help him stand. He brushed off his hands, checked for damage, but found only a few bruises, a few scrapes. Disoriented, he looked left and then right, trying to figure out which way to run.



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It was then that Coop saw the ruined, burned-out stones through the trees. Apparently, he hadn't outrun Amos. He felt the top of his head get tight, tear open, nerves tingling all the way to his very core. Swaying, overwhelmed by vertigo, he dropped to his knees. His vision swirled for what seemed like several minutes before he felt the dizziness depart, allowing him the wherewithal to again stand.

"Hey!" He yelled out, praying that another runner, volunteer, someone—*not Amos*—would answer. "Help me! Can anybody help me?"

Nothing.

And yet, not nothing.

Listening to the groaning wind, sensing its evil—"Finish what you started!"—Coop felt raw fear envelop his chest and squeeze tight. Terror fought to take control, and he trembled in the chill air, trying to stem the rising tide of his panic.

The cold, the dampness, the complete exhaustion penetrated all the way to his bones. Coop felt an ache there that would not recede. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest, sleep, perhaps even to die, anything that would put an end to this fear, this suffering.

Instead, he staggered back onto the trail and began to retrace his steps yet again. He could make it if he just kept going, if he just ignored the ghostly voice of the wind telling him to—"Kill them both!"—and rest once and for all.

"I must finish . . . I must finish . . ." Coop mumbled as he lurched down the trail, away from Amos and into the swirling fog.

* * *

Five hours! Almost crying now, Coop found that he could barely walk, let alone continue running. He stepped from the trail and collapsed onto a mound of fallen leaves. When he found himself once again next to the blackened stone foundation, all rational thought evaporated, and utter desperation blanketed his soul.

Coop thought, my God! What was happening?

And as if in answer to his question, the wind began to bluster, a moan no longer but rather an angry growl—*Looking to Heaven for the forgiveness he knew would never be his, Amos threw a rope over the mail hook and hanged himself dead. The next train through found him. 'I am damned to Hell,' written on the note he had stuffed into his pocket, was Amos Zucker's last message to the world.*

Coop burrowed his head under folded arms and gave up.

* * *

"Coop?"

He opened his eyes. A face was peering down out of the shadows.

"Robby?" Coop began to sit up. Every muscle in his body screamed for him to stop. He was dizzy and had to use his arms to help ease his legs off the cot on which he found himself. They were in the aid tent.

"Ah, back to the land of the living," a third voice said.

Coop looked around. “What happened to me?”

The paramedic, a young woman with short, shaggy dark hair said, “Your friend here got worried when you didn’t show. We found you out on the trail, incoherent, dehydrated, and exhausted. You took a liter of fluid.” She pointed at the IV attached to his left arm. “How do you feel now?”

“I don’t know. Better, I guess. OK. Just a lot of weird stuff going on in my head,” Coop puzzled. “Thought for a while there I was going crazy, hearing ghosts.”

The paramedic removed the IV and helped Coop stand up. “You look good to go.”

With Robby’s assistance, he tottered out into a beautifully clear, wonderfully sunny, late fall day. He shook his head, trying to disperse the nightmares still swirling about in there.

“Robby, you ever get so tired running a marathon that you hallucinated?” Coop asked, looking over at his buddy.

Robby laughed, “No, can’t say that I have. Guess you didn’t just *hit* The Wall, you went all the way through it head first! Come on, Coop. If you think you’re OK, let’s go. The next shuttle bus is about ready to go back to the gymnasium.”

They walked slowly, one friend helping the other. Coop stumbled frequently as they made their way across the gravel, his legs tight and aching. Just as they

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approached the shuttle, he tripped yet again and bumped into the last person in line for the bus. A girl.

“Alicia.” Her name escaped him, a gasp of pain.

“Hi, Coop. I came to see you finish. Maybe get the chance to talk to you about what happened. But with you getting sick and all . . . I think it’s best if I just leave.”

Her eyes got big then as she watched Robby help him straighten up. For a second, she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “Coop, tell me this is some kind of a joke!”

“What are you talking about?”

The guilt she had been feeling dissipated, only to be replaced by anger and then fear. Alicia pointed. Robby took a step back and followed the track of her finger. Coop had no trouble reading the words, even upside down. He knew even before he looked what he would see.

There, scrawled almost illegibly across the front of Coop’s race number were the words, “*I am damned to Hell.*”

“I didn’t dream it!” he said, amazed by the revelation.

He glanced over at Robby and then back to Alicia. “Something definitely weird happened to me out there today. I saw what Amos did, and I know what he *wants* me to do. All in the family, huh? Like aunt, like niece, Alicia? Maybe it’s better if we just leave well enough alone for now. I know *you* know what I’m talking about.”

Alicia backed away as if Coop were diseased and contagious. She turned, then hurried around the back of the bus and was gone.

“Coop?” Robby was looking for an explanation that wasn’t going to come, at least not for a while.

Coop looked at him and just shrugged. He was going to have to think long and hard before he told this story out loud to anyone.

“Come on. Get on the bus. We can go get a couple of beers, relax, and you can rub my face in how bad you kicked my ass.”

Robby nodded and climbed up the steps. Coop took a last look around, amazed at what he had experienced, at how far *out* there the world could be. Robby’s right, he thought, I didn’t just hit The Wall; for a while there I was *beyond* The Wall.

Then, surrounded by the gorgeous autumn afternoon, Coop followed Robby onto the waiting yellow bus.



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