

Perspective of an Ignorant

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When I divide the course into six, one-mile long stretches, it helps to keep my mind occupied. My legs pump up the hill that inclines for approximately 1/8 of a mile after the bridge signifying the end of mile 1. The second mile in the run is a psychological battle, and I try to focus on my breathing and not the five miles remaining.

As I reach the top of the 1/8 mile rise, my breathing slows, and I am once again thankful for the woods surrounding the trail, protecting me from the merciless summer sun. A clearing appears ahead, and I bound out onto the wooden planks of the rusty old bridge. The green algae-covered water of one of Big Creek's coves is below, and I sound like a train as I clack my way across the bridge.

The second mile ends, and so does the cover of trees. The forest around me is replaced by tall prairie and a large, grass-smearred bluff looms off to the left. The morning heat starts to creep through my body and makes a ring of sweat around the collar of my shirt.

I look down, blinking back salty sweat from my brow and see my shirt-covered stomach fluctuating, in and out, with every step.

One day, if all goes according to plan, I will be good looking enough to run shirtless, but my absence of a shirt, at present, would only provide other bikers and runners on the trail with visions of un-tanned skin and bouncing flab.

With that thought in mind, my feet race faster and a small pain develops below my armpit, in between two of my ribs. I don't really like to run. The running is just a means for me, a means to an end that I have been trying to reach since middle school.

Ever since around fifth grade, I have been a fat kid. Even though I have shed of some of the fat as I've grown taller, much of it still remains. Accordingly, I have decided that this summer – before I become a senior in high school – will be the summer when I cleanse myself from the title of “fat.” I've been working at it for almost six weeks.

Pathetic as it may sound, I have not had a significant other in my entire life. For starters, I am quite shy and my fatness greatly hinders my ability to speak to members of the opposite sex. Not to say that I have not improved over the years, because I have. In fact, there is this girl that I have spent the last six months falling madly in love with, one that I probably will never have, but am desperately trying for all the same.

Her name is Bethany, and, my God, she is perfect. Right away, she is absolutely gorgeous. She is really short and has these giant blue eyes, and this amazingly cute little round face; but it's her smile that makes her beautiful. When she laughs or grins it makes the world a better place.

We work together at the local grocery store, and have been joking around with each other for several months. She laughs at my stupid little stories and jokes, and we get along well, but I have this sinking feeling she will never consider me more than a platonic friend; however, I truly believe she might consider going on a date with me if I were handsome, and I am working on that. The first step in this process is to get thin.

As I reach the third mile marker, I turn around and begin to head back the other way. Patches of perspiration saturate my shirt, and my legs are starting to feel a little strain. Three miles. All I need to win today's battle is three more miles.

After the run, I have about twenty minutes to shower, change, and drive to work. I rinse off quickly under a spray of lukewarm water, throw on my blue dress shirt with the grocery store's logo on it, and sprint outside. The humid summer day, mixed with the scorching interior of my Chevy Cavalier station wagon, makes the sides of my light brown hair slick with sweat, and I can feel small beads of moisture forming on my stomach and chest.

I drive the eight blocks to work in a few minutes, do a bad job of parking on the edge of the parking lot, and quickly jog towards the entrance, vaguely aware of the perspiration dripping from my body.

Once through the two sets of automatic doors, I wave to my manager who is chatting with a customer at one of the four registers positioned at the front of the store. One of the elderly female cashiers smiles at me as I walk past the checkout stands into the office. I select my long manila timecard from my manager's desk and let it drop into the gray time-calculating machine on the wall. The old contraption burns my entrance time on one side, grunts, and spits the manila sheet back out to me.

Tossing the time card on the desk, I quizzically examine the handwritten schedule lying next to the pile of manila cards. Sadly, Bethany is not working tonight, and I probably will not see her until we work together next Saturday. It is okay, though, I am very tired from the run, and I don't think I have the energy to make her like me today.

Walking out of the office, I look down and see that the front of my shirt is drenched in sweat. That looks attractive. Frantically, before any of the employees at the cash registers can see me sweating like a pig, I dash down aisle seven towards the back room.

Quickly, I pull open the large airtight door to the walk-in freezer. The cold air hits me and steals some of my heat, causing my body to shudder and relax. I tiptoe to the back of the freezer, letting my body absorb the frigidness, and grab three of the 6-pound bags of ice with penguins of the package. Hugging the ice bags to my shirt-clad stomach and chest, my body instantly cools down to

a reasonable level. Leaving the freezer and closing the giant stainless steel door behind me, I grab several of the ice filled bags.

Cradling the ice bags in my arms like a child, I slowly walk to the ice chest in front of the cash registers, covering the patches of sweat on the gut of my shirt with bits of frost and wetness. Quickly, I thank God that my minor-embarrassing moment is over, but then I run head long in to a much worse circumstance. As I look up I see Bethany waltz through the automatic door, stopping me dead in my tracks. Please, not now.

Twirling quickly on my dusty dress shoe, I barely dash down the frozen food aisle in time to hide from the girl of my dreams. Fronting the hard-to-reach Hungry Man frozen dinners becomes my distraction, but I peer nervously between the twirling pantyhose display and the ice cooler to gaze at my reason for paranoia.

Shit. She is wearing cutoff jean shorts and what looks to be a swimsuit top, a pink one. She talks to the manager and laughs; her arms make an X across her chest, elbows partially covering her tight stomach and forearms obstructing her small, yet beautiful...Shit! Why the hell is she here right now?

Just when I start to maybe conjure up delusions that she will one day like me, she has to visit the store in a bathing suit. A freaking bathing suit! Now, if I go over there, I'll probably stare at her the whole time and mutter stuff like "going swimmin', huh?" Then, unconsciously, she will picture my fat ass in a bathing suit, the thought of which will probably make her either faint or run screaming out of the store. Okay, maybe it won't be that extreme, but the one in a million chance that she possibly likes me will turn in to zero in a million.

Like a coward, I continue slowly bringing the Hungry Man dinners to the front of the shelf and stare at my petite temptress out of the corner of my eye, hoping that she did not come to the store to get ice cream or frozen peas or something. I feel the sweat starting to roll down my stomach as she walks closer to me. Soon she will be within ten feet of where I am hiding.

The slightest hint of abdominal muscles appear as she giggles at one of the manager's stupid jokes, causing me to dump frozen dinners all over the floor. They hit the ground making a finger-pointing ruckus. Fight or flight reflexes take over, and I scoop up the frozen boxes and beeline for the back room.

Shoving aside the swinging door, I collapse on a giant box full of toilet paper and wait for reality to catch up with me. Naturally, I can't go back out there, without the risk of making an even bigger fool out of myself. Lord, why do you put me in these situations? Why must you bolster a loser's confidence, only to crush it with your wicked laws of physical attraction? Am I doomed to hide back here for an hour and wait until I am sure that she is gone? Am I destined to be that pathetic?

The answer is yes. For the next hour, I combine the half-full boxes in the

back room to make full boxes and throw the empties in the crusher. It is true. I am pathetic.

My name is called over the loudspeaker for a carryout, and I return to the cash registers in the front with my tail between my legs. As I suspected, the angel has departed, leaving me with bitterness in my mouth and an ache in my chest. Maybe I should have talked to her, as she seems very approachable and friendly towards me, but maybe this is the problem. She's friendly to me. Like a friend. Kind of like the story of my love life, or lack thereof.

"What's up, main man?" says my manager from behind the register. "Are you all right? Your face is all red."

I put my hand to my flushed cheeks, not sure why they feel so hot.

"I'm fine, I was just in the ice freezer," I lie.

"How about I get this carryout?" he offers, "You grab a break, okay?"

"No," I say, "I'm perfectly fine."

I take my place at the end of the register area and begin to sack an elderly lady's groceries into paper bags, making sure to keep them very light.

"And she also wants a yellow bag of softener salt," my manager says.

I place the bagged groceries on a two-level wire mesh cart and wheel it over to the exit where the bags of softener salt are stacked. I grip the forty-pound parcel of salt with both hands and lift it off the pile. Immediately, my arms give out and the bag of salt crunches to the floor. My manager looks up sharply at the noise with concern in his eyes.

Why the heck was that so heavy? I've always been able to lift those before with no problem. It must have slipped. Bending at the knees, I grab the bag again and attempt to throw it onto the bottom compartment of the carryout cart. Pain snakes through my back and my arms, and it feels like I am lifting three of the damn things. Slowly, the bag inches up on to the cart and I push with my knee until its center of mass is fully loaded. I can feel the perspiration sliding down my body again.

My manager runs over and grabs the cart from me.

"I think you need a break, I'll get this," he says. "Are you sure you feel okay?"

"I'm good," I say, "I just went running before work, and I'm a little tired."

"Go grab a break," he insists. "I'll hold down the fort."

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I walk down the frozen food aisle to the milk cooler and grab my lunch and dinner for the evening. My favorite meal: a carton of orange juice and two cups of yogurt – blueberry and strawberry vanilla.

Up front, I pay for my food and go sit down in a red booth in the deli area beside the store entrance. With a plastic spoon, I tear the tin foil lid off the

blueberry yogurt and start to sadly scoop the purple mush from the cup to my mouth.

Bethany. She looked so beautiful today. Great would not even describe the feelings I would experience in getting to be with her. I cannot even imagine how cool it would be if she came in to the store to see me. She didn't even say "Hi" to me. Maybe I should just crawl into the ice cooler and die. I think I would be doing humanity a favor by giving it one less obsessive teenager who feels sorry for himself.

Perhaps, in some far-fetched twist of reality, there will be a girl that I am attracted to that will find this ugly body and face the slightest bit acceptable, but in the land where Bethany walks in wearing that cute little swimsuit and looking so good, the chances of that happening are about as high as the chances of me finishing this nasty yogurt.

Stabbing my plastic spoon into the half full cup of purple mush, I stand up with the rest of my dinner and shove it in to the garbage can. It is time to go back to work.

When I get home, I am very tired. I don't say hello to my parents, who are downstairs watching television, but instead go upstairs and lay in my bed.

It was not a bad day, as far as I should be concerned. It cannot be a bad day, because I ran today, and any day that I run and don't eat a lot of junk is a good day.

Bethany, though, made my day suck. I try not to admit this to myself, but the back of my mind knows its truth. The girl makes my life crazy, and she doesn't even know that I have feelings for her. I sense some sort of bitter irony here, but I can't quite figure it out.

Maybe life is just messed up. Oh well, I am too tired to care anymore.

My digital alarm clock reads 3:14 A.M. when I wake up drenched in sweat. The front of my boxer shorts are soaked through in wetness.

I don't understand why I keep having wet dreams. I've been having them twice a week, at least, and I can't even remember who was in the dream, let alone what it was about. Maybe, at most, I used to have them once a month.

Rolling out of my bed, I drop my boxers and stuff them to the bottom of the hamper in my closet. The room is dark, and I can't see very well as I slide into a pair of silky soccer shorts that are lying on the floor next to my shoes. By turning a small knob on my dresser lamp I cause dim light to flood into the room, and my eyes blink at the sudden change in brightness.

I ease myself down on the white carpet, next to my full-sized bed. Lying on my back, with my knees thrust upward, I begin to do sit ups and crunches. As I exercise, thoughts of Bethany drift over my consciousness and I find myself losing count.

My eyes drift slowly shut, and, instead of counting, I mutter, “Bethany,” over and over again each time my stomach muscles pull me up off the carpet. I imagine that she is sitting on my bed, smiling and patiently waiting for me to finish. As she sits there, the pain drifts away and all I feel as I exercise is pleasure and comfort.

Today is a day to remember. I stand at the end of my six-mile course for the 42nd time, six weeks straight of running six miles a day. Sometimes, I do another two at night if I feel up to it, but now, for the first time in my life, I have truly accomplished something. My moisture saturated shirt clings to my body and my legs are tingling slightly.

This is the best part of the day, right when I get done, and I have the rest of my waking hours to be satisfied with my accomplishment. My side hurts dreadfully from the side-aches I ran through, but the run is over and I can relax and be content.

For some reason, however, this does not feel right. Cautiously, I peel my shirt off my flesh and peer down at the white mound of my stomach. No change. Six weeks of running for only minimal effects on my appearance. It’s not fair. Where is my washboard stomach? Where is my loss of fat? Where are my god-damn results?

As I walk dejectedly away from the wooded trail in to the suburban housing development where I live, I resolve to keep trying. I will not give up. I will do another six weeks of running, and I will go on a stronger diet, too. I will run as hard as I can until I reach my goal. I will run until I look presentable. Then I can rest. Then my troubles will be all gone.

I should have eaten dinner last night. Instead of getting up and running like I am supposed to, I sleep in and eat peanut butter and ice cream in bed for breakfast. I could not help myself, I was so hungry and it looked so good.

By doing this, I trade the only time I have for running with time spent getting fat. I’m supposed to drive myself to my grandparents’ house to celebrate the 4th of July in about forty-five minutes, and I don’t have the time or motivation to run. I am such a loser.

I can do this right now. I can put on my shoes, run out of my room, and get on the trail and get 3 miles before I have to leave, but I cannot force myself to do this. The fat me has taken over and I am powerless to stop him from being lazy and apathetic.

You stupid, fat idiot. You can’t even get up and run three miles, you are that weak. Six weeks straight, and then you give it all up so you can eat some freaking ice cream and sit in bed like a freaking cripple. You are pathetic.

Violently throwing aside my covers, I jump out of bed and rip my shirt

over my head in one fluid movement. I stalk towards the door where my full-length mirror displays my hideous reflection and I glare down at what I have become with eyes filled with rage and destruction. Fat clings to my body everywhere: my stomach, my sides, my chest. All the exercise and dieting was for nothing. I am still the same. Not one goddamn change.

Do you think that you can win a girl like Bethany with a body like this? Do you think that she will even look at you, you pathetic thing? The answer is no. She will never go for a nothing like you. Never. She's so much better than you.

Before I realize it, I am screaming at my reflection.

"You can stop pretending that you could ever be with her! She doesn't like you!"

I grab a wad of the loose skin on my stomach.

"Do you think she is going to think this shit is cute? You are fat. You are ugly. You will always be fat and ugly because you are too weak to try to change it. You sit in your little bed, and you eat your ice cream like a pig. Like a greedy fucking pig!"

"Keep on eating, you glutton, go down to the kitchen and fix yourself a goddamn buffet. Why can't you just be thin, for once in your life? No! It's okay. You'll just give up, again, like you always do. I hate you. I fucking hate you, you fatass fuck!"

I rip the mirror off its hooks and throw it on to my bed. Gritting my teeth, my head whips back to the door, which so previously contained my hideous reflection. My left hand shoots out from my side and slaps against the wooden surface. This blow is immediately followed by one from my right fist and then another from my elbow. The door becomes the source of my fury, and I unleash attacks readily on its structure. The wood is hollow, and my blows only sting slightly. I cannot truly injure myself in this manner.

"Fuck you, you fucking asshole! I can hurt you if I fucking want to!"

Driven by the force of my agony and hatred for my body, my life, and myself, I reach back with my leg and bring it forward with all my strength. I feel wood giving way under my knee and heat radiating from my striking flesh. The crunching sound is horrible.

Like a baby, I fall backwards and crawl for the space between my bed and the wall. All too real blood trickles slowly from my cut knee, and a grapefruit-sized dent of sharp wooden teeth growls at me from across the room. I hide my frightened tears from the world as I pull my bed's comforter over my body, curling up in to a fetal position.

"What was that," I whisper slowly to myself. "Lord, what was that?"

Choking on sobs, realization, and disbelief, I do my best to breath slowly as I close my eyes and try to find a safer reality. That was so scary; I've never done anything like that before in my life. What was I doing? Was I trying to kill myself?

Why won't I stop shaking? I can't let this happen to me. I *hurt* myself. I hurt myself on purpose. Does this mean I need therapy? I won't go to therapy.

I want to be thin more than anything in the world. Why can't I just be thin? I try so hard to make myself look good, but nothing seems to work, and here I am putting a hole in my door, like a homicidal depressive. God, what if I am a homicidal depressive? Please, God, don't let me be that way, I don't want to be that way. I just want to be normal.

Lord, I'm so scared. It doesn't matter if I don't get to be with the girl I want to be with, I just don't want to hurt myself. Don't let me hurt myself.

Why don't my diets work? How could I run so much, and not see any results? I haven't been eating anything, and I still look the same. That's all I want. Just some change, that's all.

I think I have something inside of me that needs to be dealt with, immediately. I think there is something that is slowly destroying me, and only I can stop it. I have a problem that I need to fix. I have a problem. And I need to fix this.

After thirty minutes of hiding under my comforter, I muster the courage to get up and go in to the bathroom. The small cuts on my knee have stopped bleeding, and my tears have dried.

I strip my boxer shorts off, and stand naked in front of the mirror. Turning away from my reflection, I step on to a small white scale, watching the wheel of numbers whirl past the red indicator.

I am six feet tall.

The red indicator comes to a halt between the numbers 129 and 130.

I bite my lip and slowly nod.