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Contact! A Story about Running

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Contact!

A Story about Running

By Sara Bosworth

Contact!
A story about running

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By
Sara Bosworth

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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For Neno

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The Drive



The Racecourse

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PROLOGUE

During a March when three nor'easters hit New York, I went to Mexico looking for heroes. I flew southwest to Arizona, where I met two-dozen Americans traveling to a town in the Sierra Madres called Urique, where they would run a 50-mile race through the canyons alongside the Tarahumara Indians. I spent a week learning about the race, the canyons, and the runners who move through them.

I knew nothing about ultramarathons until I was deep into research for a paper on running. I posted on Facebook asking for runners willing to reach out, and I got a message from a counselor at a summer camp I'd gone to as a teenager. The subject line was "crazy ultrarunners," and when I googled the term, I found out there was a class of race even longer than the marathon. An ultramarathon is any race that extends beyond the standard 26.2 miles, and my old counselor had many friends that ran them habitually.

"I don't run them, but I know lots of people that do," he wrote to me. "Ultrarunning could be seen as a simple, crude coping mechanism for deeper psychological issues. This theory is a bit counter intuitive because it goes against the cultural narrative that running is healthy, adventurous, freeing etc etc. There is an element of self destructiveness. Your body is literally trying to shut down on you. There is pain, suffering, illness and some weird glorification of all this by spectators/spouses/friends etc. It's a crazy thing really when you see it in real life."

It was the extremity that captured me. I have toyed with the idea of running a marathon and have even completed a couple half marathons, but the idea that there were these races of even greater distances struck me as something almost grotesque.

I combed through the corner of the Internet devoted to ultramarathons, a corner I hadn't even known existed days before, and it was massive. I discovered the Caballo Blanco in the comment section on an article about the Tarahumara, a people indigenous to the Copper Canyon region of Mexico on the Western edge of the Sierra Madre and some of the best endurance runners in the world. A user named "perrocerveza42" had left a cryptic comment that read "if u r so impressed, come run with us. CBUM 2018 amigo."

CBUM turned out to stand for "Caballo Blanco Ultramarathon." A Facebook page bearing that name had a brief description of an annual fifty-mile race among Tarahumara runners and anyone else that wanted to join. I wrote to an email address included on the page, asking if I could come as an observer, and received a response within twenty minutes from a man named Michael who invited me to come spend the night on his couch in Arizona and make the drive down with him and his wife. He sent me a "suggested packing list" that included bullet points like "BYOE (Bring Your Own Electrolytes)" and was signed "Welcome to the family!" There was also a postscript: "Amateur or not, we'll convert you to a fifty-miler yet!" (They did not.)

*

I don't remember much about my first run except trailing my hand along the fence around a reservoir. It would have been in fourth grade, which was the year all the elementary schoolers were required to do "The Mile." It would have been in a suburb outside Boston, I would have

gotten there on a yellow school bus, I would have been wearing some sneakers that I felt ambivalent about — but I don't remember any of that. I only remember the fence and the way the metal slid under my fingers, cool and smooth.

I didn't run next to that fence at the reservoir again after that day, whenever it was. I didn't run at all those days, unless it was intermittently, dispassionately, after a ball of some sort during a game of some kind which I was, more likely than not, only willing to be over. I am not an athlete. I have never considered myself an athlete. I stuck with sports as a kid for a season, if that, and then only at the behest of my parents, determined to introduce me to the “team” mentality. I was terrified of the large rubber objects flying through the air towards my head, annoyed at constantly having to dodge them, and found a private joy at the team parties that marked the end of the season.

My family moved west to Seattle before I started middle school. I joined a jazz choir and the theater program, which seemed to satisfy the “team” quota for my parents, and never looked back at the afternoons spent avoiding incoming soccer balls.

I was sixteen when I went for my second run. An older boy I liked had tennis practice at a park a few blocks away from my house, and if I jogged a couple laps around the courts I might run into him — you know, by *coincidence*. I started going for these runs a couple times a week, applying eyeliner before tying my shoes and borrowing the tightest lycra top my mother's closet had to offer. These laps around the park never paid off, at least not in the way I'd expected, because the

tennis team practiced in an entirely different park on the other side of the city — but I kept running.

I liked the way it felt to get to the top of a hill. I liked messy runs after it had rained, when I kicked up mud with each step and it splattered across the back of my calves. I liked the feeling of stopping at a crosswalk and waiting for my heart to catch up with my breath, putting my hand over my chest and feeling it pump. I wasn't particularly good at it; I would have lagged far behind the slowest runner on my school's cross country team and could only hold a sprinting pace for twenty or thirty seconds. But my body settled into its own rhythm. I learned to breathe through my nose, to keep my elbows low, and that trendy running shoes gave me blisters.

It has been six years since my covert courses around park tennis courts. Since then, I've mapped out new routes in each place I've lived. After I gave up on the older boy, I would run down Lake Washington Boulevard. I'd park my car at the docks where the popular kids drank Mike's Hard Lemonade and smoked cheap weed during the summers, hide my keys under a pile of rocks, and run north. The best runs were in the summer, on the days when Mt. Rainier showed through the clouds and I felt like I was running straight to the mountains.

When I moved to New York, I cut across the pedestrian bridge at 6th Street over FDR Drive and ran along the East River on top of octagonal stones almost exactly the size of my feet. In some places, the path turned into metal bridges across bits of the river itself and I listened to the clanging noises my weight made as it fell on the metal grates. At first, I ran with a student from one of my classes who liked to see how many Italian words he could fit into one anecdote about

his Italian heritage: his cooking skills (stemming from his Italian heritage), his superior taste in film (on account of his Italian heritage), and his clingy girlfriend, who simply didn't understand that monogamy just wasn't in his nature (because of his Italian heritage), *che palle*. After a few weeks, I came to find I didn't mind navigating a new city at night by myself.

I left the East Village and moved to the Hudson Valley. I ran on streets flanked by pastures where cows and horses stood still and watched me as I passed. I ran alongside a cornfield where stalks rose and fell over the months, and across the grounds of an eighteenth century mansion.

Running has been a way to be inside my head as my body moves through a space that is very much not inside my head. That instinct lives in the same part of me that loves eating alone at restaurants or reading in a park, being with myself against a backdrop of a world that has nothing to do with me. I want friction between condition and surroundings, solitude in the throngs of Central Park, introspection as my body moves determinedly against external surfaces.

I always meant to make a loop on my runs, or to follow a simple out-and-back route, but it never seemed like the right time to turn around. I would finish a run along Lake Washington Boulevard eight miles away from my car and call whichever friend lived nearest to come pick me up.

Running became a way of inhabiting more space, maximizing my range of movement through the world. If I had been more patient, I would have been a hiker, but running just seemed a more efficient way to experience the world. I do hike sometimes, when I feel I want to pay attention to the ground I am walking on, when I need to feel small next to a mountain. Running, though, lets me move through many places as possible. I have no idea how many cows are in the pasture or

what sports are played in the parks alongside the East River, but I have a very clear memory of the purple right under the Manhattan Bridge at sunset on a freezing cold Tuesday.

I once read an essay by Annie Dillard where she writes of being a “collector” of moments.

“That’s a good one, I say, that bit of bank there, the snakeskin and the aquarium, that patch of light from the creek on bark.” I find these bits of bank on each run, pictures from the two-inch square frame I can make with my index fingers and thumbs. A child’s glove left behind on the metal of a mesh park bench overlooking the Brooklyn skyline. A kayaker with legs stretched out on the bow, paddle lying across her ankles, floating near the shore of the lake on a day when the top Mt. Rainier was visible above a single cloud. A discarded carton of boxed Chardonnay sitting in a deep puddle, and spreading from underneath it, reflected in the muddy water: the yellows and pinks that come right before spring sunsets.

I stash these scenes in a corner of my mind like some satisfied magpie. I do not analyze or inspect; there is no “zoom” on my two-inch frame. The moment simply becomes something I own. I once judged action hero collectors, seeing no point in the owning of objects forever encased in plastic, displayed but never used — but perhaps I am guilty of the same voracious consumption.

I run for the same reason I write. The notebook I kept in Urique is filled, like most of my notebooks are, with tidbits and morsels stolen from whatever present I found myself in at that moment. “February 26: Passed by a barber shop at the border with a chart of haircuts that looks like those charts of emotions you show kids when you are trying to teach them what ‘ANGRY’

looks like.” “March 1: He is red and sweaty and looks generally awful and he says ‘Won’t be an old man till I can’t do that anymore.’” One simply reads, “So easy to die.”

This is partly what drew me to a house in Scottsdale that freezing cold spring: a collector’s gut feeling. I knew there was something there for me — not a fifty-mile racecourse, but a promise of bits of bank, snakeskin, and patches of light.

The people that come to Mexico to run the Caballo Blanco Ultramarathon call themselves *los mas locos*, the idea being that you’d have to be crazy to think about running it, and even crazier to actually go through with it. The course is fifty miles long, with over 1,800 feet of elevation gain. When I wrote back to Michael telling him I was coming, I was hoping to pick apart that craziness. I wanted to know what it meant to be a Tarahumara whose land was descended on once a year by foreigners in singlets. I wanted to know why people sought out this kind of extremity, what it meant to be a person who packed a bag and drove to Mexico to pound foot on trail for hours upon hours, then turn around and return home.

I watched them, listened to them, ran with them, drank with them. It was rainy season that March, and the clouds rolled in and then out over the course of the week as we worked our way in vans from a house in Scottsdale to a hostel in Urique, across highways and train tracks and dirt roads, and finally, down the sloping walls of the Copper Canyons.

The Beginning

I met *los mas locos* in a orange-tiled kitchen in Scottsdale, Arizona. We were all gathered to spend the night before leaving for Mexico at 4am the next morning. The house was owned by Michael and Kimberly, impossibly fit grandparents in their mid-fifties referred to by everyone affectionately as “The Millers.”

The kitchen table was tiled, orange like the walls with a wooden border. As we fit ourselves around it, gathering to eat, the newcomers introduced ourselves while the old-timers traded stories about races past. Some had been making this trip for almost a decade. Others had never left the American Southwest. I sat next to a large man with white hair and skin so sun-damaged it resembled the folds of an accordion, who introduced himself as Charlie. He told me he was seventy-four years old, and that he was from a part of California “that the government uses to blow shit up.” This would be his tenth year running the race in Mexico and, like most of the (white) runners I would meet, he had a (white) given spirit name: *El Perro Cerveza*, the Beer Hound. “The name came from Caballo himself,” he told me.

“Caballo” is the reason that twenty American long-distance runners will pile into two vans for a twenty-hour journey south of the border. He is the reason that hundreds of Mexican citizens from around the country will take planes and trains to the Copper Canyons for a weekend in the middle of the rainy season. He is the reason that the Tarahumara will flock towards the center of one small town for the night, camping out on borrowed mattresses by the river. Caballo is the messenger, the prophet, the instigator, the race director.

*

There was a point before Caballo became Caballo. His name was Micah True, and he was a Northern Californian living in Boulder, Colorado in the late 1970s. At the time, Boulder was becoming one of the country's most active areas for endurance training. The jogging boom had hit, the marathon trend had set in, and Micah had found in the trails around Boulder a way to combine a love of extremes with a love of nature. In the late 80's he spent a summer living in Guatemala, camping near Lake Atitlan during the nights and running up volcanoes and through nearby villages during the days. His significant height (6 feet, 4 inches), long blonde hair (unruly), and big features (massive teeth), earned him a nickname among the villagers who watched him pass every day: *El Caballo Blanco*.

While in Urique, at the tiny Internet cafe in the center of town, I found an article from a mid 90's issue of a runner's magazine that told the story of how Micah first met the Tarahumara. In 1996, recovering from a bike accident and too injured to run himself, Micah signed up to be a pacer at the Leadville Ultramarathon in Colorado. The Leadville is a one hundred mile course at the highest point in the continental US. It is one of the most extreme events in an arena that is not already lacking when it comes to extremes.

This year also happened to be the first year that a group of Tarahumara Native Americans showed up to compete. The Tarahumara were all the crowd at Leadville could talk about that year. Their long-distance running skills were the subject of much wonderment and speculation in the ultra community and they had been sponsored by a promoter of sorts who wanted to see how they would stack up against the elite endurance runners of the US.

Micah ended up pacing a Tarahumara man for the final fifty miles of the race, almost completely in the dark of night. The two men shared no common language. I imagine them running together in silence for close to eight hours. Something about that run, maybe the darkness, maybe the silence, maybe the sheer difficulty of pushing the body on through the night at 14,000 feet, triggered something in Micah. He started making visits to the Tarahumara living near Chihuahua, creating a relationship with them based in something other than words.

After years of visiting and camping in the Copper Canyons, Micah began building his own home just outside the town of Batopilas. He used rocks from the river, cement, and adobe, and built a one-room house on a hill with two beds and a table. He cooked on a camping gas stove, kept all his belongings in a chest at the foot of his bed, and parked his old Nissan outside. He found an injured dog by the river and adopted it, naming it Guadajuko.

Micah created a life on the outskirts of the Tarahumara *pueblo*, leaving it every October and returning every March. He and Guadajuko would run the trails around the village, always making sure to keep a respectful distance from the Tarahumara. He didn't want to become an imposition, didn't want to run straight through their living space. He made a home alongside them, not quite among them, and this distance made him the subject of a lot of talk in the nearby villages, adding to the reputation he would later earn: Caballo Blanco, the lone wanderer of the High Sierras.

*

That first night at the Millers', there was no such respect for personal space. We sat crammed around the kitchen table on folding chairs and loveseats and piano benches, sharing Domino's Pizza and passing around a bottle of tequila, which struck me as a notably non-nutritious meal for a bunch of endurance athletes. Every second or third person seated at the table refused the bottle with a wave of a hand. I would come to learn that attitudes towards alcohol were very black-and-white. You either guzzled it like water, or abstained completely.

Many of them had met each other at an event called "Born to Run," which someone would eventually describe to me as "Burning Man for runners." I met Edder, an excitable elementary school teacher with a seemingly limitless tolerance for light beer, and Nadia, also a teacher (7th grade biology), with an entire closet full of race medals and a social media following in the tens of thousands. Later, I would discover that Nadia is a celebrity in the running world. Other runners would approach her asking for pictures. Throughout the week, she diligently updated all her social media channels with high-res photos, all practiced smiles and cocked hips.

The Millers would be returning to the Copper Canyons for the eighth year in a row, such seasoned old-timers they had taken it upon themselves to organize transport the past few years. They had turned the drive to the race into a one-week event, with an extensive itinerary consisting of three towns, four runs, and a lot of beer. The first leg of the trip would be the longest, 650 miles from the Millers' garage to Creel, a touristy town on the outskirts of the Copper Canyons. The next leg would take us from Creel to San Isidro, to a lodge perched on the edge of the canyons and owned by a Tarahumara man named Mario. After two nights at the

lodge, we would make the final descent into the mouth of the canyon, following the single one-lane road to Urique.

As the tequila (a “special,” tequila, Michael had told us; brought back from his last trip to Mexico) continued making its trips around the table, the runners traded battle stories. There was one about a race director who had been publicly disgraced after agreeing to a Nike sponsorship, “selling out” himself and the race he’d been organizing. Another was about the removal of a particular boulder midway up a series of switchbacks on a racecourse into which runners frequently carved lewd drawings in which stick-men relieved their bowels into the opening petals of a flower or committed rude acts to the hollow of a tree. Kimberly told us about the time Michael ran a race with a peg leg, and Michael told us about the time Kimberly had taken an accidental shortcut on a trail and finished her race first by three hours.

Everyone expressed appropriate hilarity or disgust or contriteness depending on the nature of each story, but there was no follow-up, no conversation. The next person would cut in with “That reminds me of a time in the Rockies when I took a shit in my sock on mile thirty,” or something along those lines. The telling of stories seemed more important than the stories themselves, an echo chamber of race folklore where every hill or spill or sellout race director became fodder for campfire tale.

Soon after the sock-receptacle story, it was widely agreed that it was time for bed. The tequila bottle was empty, after all. Sleeping bags were strewn across the living room floor, the furniture

pushed back against the walls. A shocking volume of snoring reverberated around the room as the runners slept, visions of peg legs and Nike sponsorships dancing in their heads.

*

In the early 2000's, as Micah True was settling into his new part-time home outside Batopilas, change began to come to the Copper Canyons. Local drug cartels, which had recently started operating in the area, saw the canyons and their occupants as an opportunity for growth. The long-distance running abilities of the Tarahumara had not gone unnoticed. Cartels began recruiting young Tarahumara men, offering them thousands of dollars to become drug mules, seemingly a much more profitable industry than cattle or corn.

The Tarahumara started trickling out of the canyons, trading traditional clothing for jeans and cowboy hats and their local dialect for quiet Spanish. Once in Mexico, I would hear stories about how the cartels would drop teenagers near the border with instructions to run drugs across, where they would meet cars driven by American drug traffickers who would take the packages and leave the Tarahumara behind. Many were arrested by the US Border Patrol, but even those who managed to return to the canyons didn't find the freedom they had thought the new job would bring. They found themselves somehow in debt to the drug gangs. Some stayed and worked; some ran.

The Tarahumara have been runners as far back as the late 1400's. Many begin to run at the same time they begin to walk. They live in small communities that are spread out across the Sierra Madres, and running proved to be the most efficient way to get messages from point A to point

B. Running was the glue that had held these communities together, and now it was a major factor in an industry that was threatening to tear them apart.

Later, in Urique, I would meet Manuel Luna, a Tarahumara man and good friend of Micah's. He had a sixteen-year-old son who left home to join one of the local cartels. After a few months, the boy tried return home, but he never made it back to the town of Batopilas. His body was found floating in Rio Urique less than five months after he had left his town, his head missing. I heard this story from one of the American runners while I sat in the shade of a grapefruit tree with my legs dangling over one of the peaks within the canyon, sweet fruit in my mouth and vast landscape at my feet. It is always hard to comprehend violence in the face of beauty.

The first race, according to *mas loco* folklore, was Micah's attempt to honor the history of Tarahumara running. I doubt he thought that holding a race would magically dissuade all the youth from joining drug cartels, but perhaps he thought it would nurture a sense of community pride that could, little by little, become an adhesive.

*

The figure of the message runner predates the Tarahumara by millenia. In early Sumerian times, men called *lasimus* served as message carriers for ancient kings, running official documents from one kingdom to another in exchange for small grants of land as payment. In the Old Testament, prophets jog from city to city, bearing news of death or victory or miracle. In Ancient Greece, the running messengers were called *hemerodromoi*, a Greek word that takes its form from the words for "day" and "road." Day-roaders. Day-runners.

Hemerodromoi were military men, tasked with delivering battle updates or asking for aid. They weren't necessarily athletes; this was simply their profession, just as a construction worker may not consider himself a weight lifter or an acrobat. It wasn't a desirable job. These were second-class citizens, tasked with arduous, lonely journeys that sometimes ended in death. The saying "Don't shoot the messenger" originated as a cautionary tale about a messenger, a hemerodromus who was killed upon arrival.

The story, written about in Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, dates back to 69 BC. Tigranes, King of Armenia, was so displeased by the information that his political enemy Lucullus was advancing on Armenian territory that he had the man who had delivered the message promptly executed. From then on, everyone was afraid to tell him any information that might upset him, so he spent most of the ensuing war in complete ignorance of what was going on.

In Herodotus' *Histories*, he tells the story of another unlucky hemerodromus called Philippides. In 490 BC, Philippides ran from Athens to Sparta with a message. The Persian forces advancing on Greece were growing larger and more intimidating and the Athenians were in desperate need of military backup. The Persians had been confined to the bay and the fields of Marathon but they were advancing and, even with their allies, the Athenians were outnumbered at least two to one. So they sent Philippides on a 150-mile run to Sparta, asking for help.

He reached Sparta after one day and one night of running, but upon his arrival, he was told there would be no aid coming to Athens, at least not at the moment. The moon was in the wrong phase

for going out to war, and the magistrates of Sparta felt they needed to wait until it was full. Of course, by the next full moon, the Persians and the Athenians would already be fighting in the plains of Marathon and any help from Sparta would come too little and too late. But in the moment, Philippides took the message and ran with it, back the way he had come.

*

Two millennia later, Micah was also running with a message. There was barely Internet anywhere in the early 2000's, let alone in the canyons of the High Sierras, and Batopilas was not on any postal service route. The only way to spread the word of his idea was on foot. In the weeks leading up to the race, Micah would run around the canyons from *pueblo* to *pueblo*, letting people know in his broken, heavily accented Spanish that there was going to be a race. The course would start in Micah's adopted hometown of Batopilas, and end approximately fifty miles northwest, in the town of Urique.

In each town, he would introduce himself as *El Caballo Blanco*. Almost a decade and a half later, when I asked a group of older Tarahumara men about Micah's foot messenger days, they would imitate the way he had said "El Caballo," tipping their heads back and whinnying for effect.

That first year, only a handful of runners came out: ten in all, including Micah. Two didn't make it all the way to Urique. Along the route, some spectators had offered them a couple ice-cold beers, which had seemed much more tempting than twenty more miles up and down the canyon trails. For those that made it all the way, Micah put them up in hotel rooms and made sure they had plenty of food and water. After two nights, the group ran together back to Batopilas.

I'd hear the story about this first race many times from many people. The older Tarahumara men, a woman who ran a restaurant in the center of Urique, foreign travellers heading to the race for the first time after reading about Micah in books and magazines. They'd debate the details, whether it was eight or ten runners who showed up that first time, if the two that stopped for beers ever made it to Urique in the end, if the group took the same route back that they'd taken there, or if they'd gone a different way. They would go over the cast of characters that showed up for that first race, where they were now, how many races they had run since. One of these original runners was Manuel Luna, the man who lost his son to the violence of the drug cartels. It seemed to be a story that everyone knew, regardless of where they were when it happened. The original runners are treated with reverence. All ten of them (it was ten, in the end — not eight) will run in 2018, and they will be the ones at the very front of the starting line before the countdown begins.

*

We left Scottsdale before dawn. Traveling southbound through Arizona the next morning, our two-car convoy passed buildings with names like Grandma Goodman's Factory and Tombstone Motel and The Cowboy Church. We drove through mile after mile of dry, flat expanse, dozens of shades of brown, light pink sunrise skies and stretches of highway where no other car would appear for twenty seconds, thirty seconds, forty. Trailers carried small herds of cows hitched up to the back of pickup trucks, and adobe-topped motels displayed half lit "V-CANCY" signs. Michael and Kimberly passed a bright green can of Monster energy drink back and forth ("Caffeine is my vice," Michael told us, sounding perhaps more defensive than he meant to), fiddling with the radio, flipping past more and more reggaeton stations the closer we drew to the

border. I was squeezed into the fourth and final row of seats, between Edder and a man named David, who carved totem poles on commission and called everyone “brother” and “sister.”

We crossed the border at Agua Prieta, where Nadia and Edder sweet-talked the border agents into giving us weeklong visas for what would technically be an eight-day stay. Among the fifteen runners in the two vans, fourteen lived within a four hour drive from the Mexican border and at least a third had made this trip multiple times, but only Nadia (who is Ecuadorian) and Edder (raised in Mexico) seemed to speak more than a couple words of Spanish. Once documented, we drove into the afternoon sun towards Creel, our first overnight stop.

Originally, Creel was supposed to be a cultural mixing pot into which the government wanted to toss the Tarahumara. The plan for its founding in 1907 was to populate the town with mostly Tarahumara families and a few dozen Mexican families, and to hope the Mexican population would “spread” their culture onto the Tarahumara. The Tarahumara, however, decided that they were perfectly happy with their own culture, and seeking more privacy, relocated down the canyon to the smaller, warmer town of Batopilas. In the end, the planned proportions of Mexicans to Tarahumara were reversed.

The town is one of the major stops in the path of “El Chepe,” the train that runs along the Chihuahua-Pacific Railway, a 418-mile route to Chihuahua from the city of Los Mochis, Sinaloa. El Chepe, originally intended to facilitate the building of a socialist colony in the late 1800’s, has become almost purely a tourism transportation system. Running all the way through the Copper Canyons, it dips in and out of one of the most beautiful parts of the country, making it the perfect

place for tourists to have the most “memorable” experience of Northwestern Mexico (according to the railway’s tourism website), without ever having to get out of their seat.

When we pulled into the parking lot outside of the Creel Best Western, it was dark. Edder started doing jumping jacks. “I’m fucking stiff, man.” “I feel you, brother,” said David, and he started doing jumping jacks, too. A young Mexican woman with her toddler daughter made a wide berth around the grown men hopping up and down, flailing their arms.

*

Fourteen years earlier, a man named Chris McDougal had pulled into the same Best Western parking lot. Years later, he would go on to write a book that almost everyone I would meet in Urique had read. At the time, he was a writer for a men’s health magazine on assignment, researching an article about the running men of the Northern Sierras: the Tarahumara. The assignment, however, was turning out to be more difficult than he had anticipated. He knew where to find the Tarahumara, but they were a very private people, not waiting with open arms for reporters to come into their communities armed with notepads and tape recorders. (This is unsurprising; since they were driven into the canyons in the first place trying to outrun the conquistadors, it hardly seems strange that they would be wary of white men.)

Time and time again during his efforts to set up a meeting with the Tarahumara, he heard from the people he talked to about a man called Caballo Blanco. “Go find Caballo,” people told him. But, just like tracking down the Tarahumara, it wasn’t as easy as that. A big part of the legend surrounding Caballo Blanco was the man’s evasiveness, how he was here one day and gone tomorrow, and Chris bounced from town to town in the Chihuahua area with no success. He

eventually reached Creel, and there, he stumbled upon Caballo Blanco where he had least expected to find him: in the lobby of a Best Western hotel.

The man was tall and bald, having shaved the mane of blonde hair that had inspired his nickname years ago. He appeared to be as forthcoming as the Tarahumara. His name was Micah True, and had been living in a small Tarahumara town called Batopilas at the bottom of the Copper Canyons. That was basically all he would say, until Chris figured out how to get him talking: join him on a run. The morning after they met in the hotel lobby, the two men jogged together along the trails outside Creel. Chris tried to mimic Micah's running style, sure that if he fell behind, the man wouldn't wait for him to catch up. The two reached an overlook with a panoramic view of the canyons below, and Micah started to tell him about an idea he had for a race.

Chris described the scene years later in the book he would come to write about that same race. Miles below them, at the bottom of the canyon, was a town called Urique. Micah told Chris that for the past few years, he'd been organizing a race among the Tarahumara, a course along the trails from Batopilas to Urique. Micah wanted to turn it into a more formal race, the starting line and the finish line both in Urique's town center, the course following a rough loop around the nearby canyons and pueblos. It was going to happen, he told Chris as they stood at the top of the canyon, and it was going to happen next March. This year, though, he wanted to spread the word North. Chris said he was in. "Go home," Micah told him, "and find some more people to come."

So he did. In March of 2006, Chris McDougall returned to the Copper Canyons, having assembled a group of runners, who would later appear as characters in his book. There was Luis Escobar, a photographer, and Barefoot Ted, a man from California dedicated to spreading the good message of shoelessness. There was Jenn Shelton and Billy Barnett, two young surfers from California. They had met and bonded at the beach in the late 90's, going for long, sandy runs at night listening to "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg on a Walkman.

Then, surprising everyone, there was Scott Jurek. Scott Jurek was one of the most famous endurance runners of the early 2000s, a man with dozens of ultramarathon records tied to his name, including three consecutive first place performances in the Spartathlon, the annual 150-mile race in Greece that mimics the route Philippides would have made between Athens and Sparta.

The fact that Scott was there was a little unbelievable to everyone. He told Chris he had been losing grip on the joy he had found for so long in running. It had become about winning. Winning against other runners, winning against himself, winning against the racecourse. He felt there must be something more than the competition and the ego, so when a man named Caballo Blanco had emailed him out of the blue with the idea for a whole new kind of race, he showed up.

At its inception, the race was called the Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon. That first year, there were a dozen runners: Chris's crew, Micah True, and five Tarahumara. The contenders for the inaugural record were undisputed: Scott Jurek, ultra marathon legend incarnate, and Arnulfo

Quimare, a Tarahumara man from Batopilas in his forties, the man who had won Leadville the year Micah worked as a pacer.

After almost seven hours of running, Arnulfo crossed the finish line first. The crowd, though small, erupted — the local boy had come through. Six minutes later, when Scott Jurek finished, the first thing he did was approach Arnulfo and the crowd of Tarahumara around him and sink into a deep bow. If the American man had been searching racecourses for a sense of meaning greater than winning first place, he found it in Urique.

*

Philippides doesn't come up again until 40 BC, in Lucian's *Slip of the Tongue in Salutation*.

Lucian, a Roman linguist and historian, tries to trace the roots of different greetings, and the story of Philippides comes in his tracing of the word "Joy." His account, unlike that of Herodotus, is not verified elsewhere, and belongs moreso to the world of running lore than to that of history.

Lucian writes that after the Athenians emerged victorious at the battle of Marathon, they sent Philippides from the battlefield back to Athens to spread the good news. The man took off, still in his armor, war wounds still bleeding. He ran across fennel-fields for the twenty-five miles from the site of the battle to the city itself, burst in through the doors, shouting victories — and promptly dropped dead.

The modern use of the word dates back to Philippides the dispatch-runner. Bringing news of the Marathon victory, he found the archons seated, in suspense regarding the issue of

the battle. 'Joy, we win!' he said, and died upon his message, breathing his last in the word Joy.

The idea that the word “joy” was first conjured up by a man finishing a twenty-five mile run is perhaps difficult to imagine, unless you are among the 2.5 million people who stand each year on Central Park West, watching the final mile of the New York Marathon, or among those who stand at the top of Heartbreak Hill in April watching the final push of the Boston Marathon, or the Chicago Marathon or the Los Angeles Marathon or really any marathon. People cry, mucus-laden, upon finishing, they wobble into the arms of friends and family, they pump fists into the air à la Judd Nelson in *The Breakfast Club*. The story of the Marathon run may be a myth, but endorphins are real, and they are tangible at the finish line.

Robert Browning, a nineteenth century poet and playwright, tells his version of this run in his poem “Pheidippides.” An excerpt from the poem in its cinematic penultimate stanza:

He flung down his shield,
 Ran like fire once more: and the space ‘twixt the Fennel-field
 And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire runs through,
 Till in he broke: ‘Rejoice, we conquer!’ Like wine thro’ clay,
 Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died—the bliss!

Browning adheres to historical precedent throughout much of the poem, from the fennel-fields described in Herodotus to the emphasis on “Joy” that so interested Lucian. But in the stanza’s last two words, he takes his poetic license. In Lucian’s telling of the story, the emphasis is on the

joy of victory and adrenaline, the winning of the war and the journey of the message. In Browning's version, the "bliss" comes right after the death. Here, it is not the bliss of bringing good news, nor even the bliss of victory — but the bliss of dying with "joy in his blood bursting his heart." The poem ends on a similarly triumphant note.

So is Pheidippides happy forever,—the noble strong man
 Who could race like a god, bear the face of a god, whom a god loved so well,
 He saw the land saved he had helped to save, and was suffered to tell
 Such tidings, yet never decline, but, gloriously as he began,
 So to end gloriously—once to shout, thereafter be mute:
 'Athens is saved!'—Pheidippides dies in the shout for his meed.

The Greeks had a concept called *kleos*, the type of glory and renown that came from having stories told about their lives postmortem. Greek heroes were often able to die with "bliss," knowing that their death would guarantee their immortality, that songs would be sung and stories would be told long after their time. Pheidippides did not die in battle on the fennel-fields of Marathon, but died instead, as Browning puts it, "gloriously," for "he saw the land saved he had helped to save."

*

Micah True died two weeks after the 2012 Copper Canyon Ultra. He had gone out for a quick twelve-mile morning jaunt in the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico. He left Guadajuko behind, since the dog had injured his paw on their run the previous day. That night, he didn't come back to the house where he had been staying. The Gila Wilderness is exactly what its name suggests: a

wilderness. Altitude ranges from riverbeds at 5,000 to peaks at 10,000 feet, and temperatures fall drastically after dark. Micah had a reputation among his friends for disappearing when he felt overwhelmed by the world. But he always took Guadajuko, and this time he had left the dog behind. A friend reported him missing the next evening. The following day, the police began a search.

Micah's obituary, published in the New York Times a couple weeks after his body was found, was a testament to the running community. After his partner, Maria, contacted Micah's friends about his disappearance, carloads of ultra runners began pouring into the area from New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Colorado. Chris McDougall, who happened to be at the LA airport, joined one of the carpools. Scott Jurek came, too. The police, recognizing these professional endurance athletes as an asset, agreed to let them join the official search.

A few of Micah's friends, frustrated by the methodological search method of the police, broke off from the search party. They picked a point along the route they thought Micah would have taken and headed off the trail. They found a creek, a desirable spot not just for its fresh water but also because it emptied into a pond a few miles away from the house where Micah was staying. It would have made an efficient shortcut. They spotted one footprint, an imprint left from the tread of sneaker, then another. Soon they were able to find a clear path of tracks.

Micah's body was resting about a mile down, propped up against the bank of the creek. From a distance, it looked like he might be just taking a break, but closer up there was no question. Flies were buzzing over his head. His water bottle, almost halfway full, was a few feet away from him.

Some bruising on his legs and what looked like a broken finger suggested that he might have taken a bad fall, but the final cause of death would be ruled cardiomyopathy, a condition caused by an enlarged heart. The group that found him rushed back to the search party; it was almost dark. The body was wrapped in a blanket and carried out of the Gila Wilderness on the back of a palomino: a white horse.

As a kid and well into his adult life, Micah idolized the Apache leader Geronimo. “He wouldn’t go to the plantation,” he would repeat, impassioned. “He ran free,” He told many people in his life, some close to him and some near strangers, that when his time came, he wanted to do what Geronimo did. “Run free,” walk off into nature and find a nice place to lie down.

By the time of his death, the race he had created in the canyons was a decade old and well established. Elite runners from all over the world were flying to Mexico to run, and he had been able to make sure the race entry fees they paid would cover the cost of food vouchers for the Tarahumara. Two weeks before he died, after the marathon had wrapped up, he had been able to give away over 500 pounds of corn in vouchers.

*

Six years later, sitting on the roof of Micah’s favorite restaurant in the center of Urique, Maria would tell me about all of this. We shared a bowl of guacamole, which she methodically spread onto each chip before placing on the plate in front of her, forming little rows as she spoke. When her story paused, she ate one, chewing slowly with furrowed eyebrows. She had a gap between her two front teeth and I noticed her almost imperceptible lisp when she told me about the “spirit name” Micah’s had given her: *la mariposa*, the butterfly.

She talked about Micah's childhood in Northern California and the first marathon he won where the waistband of shorts ripped halfway through and he had to tie them around his waist with one of his shoelaces. She talked about how they met, via Facebook. She had looked him up after reading Chris McDougall's book, asking him for advice on how to train for her first ultra marathon. "It's not my book," he had written back. "If it's an autograph you're after, you're asking the wrong guy."

"No, no," she responded. "I'm not a fan. I just want some advice on how to run an ultra."

"Oh. You are going to run a little slower, run a bit longer. And that's it really. I don't train, I eat some oatmeal, grab a coffee, get out the door and run."

She described the first time she had visited Micah in Batopilas, after they had been dating a few months. He had introduced her to the Tarahumara in his stunted Spanish that she, the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants, had found endearing. "Este," he said with an arm around her shoulder, "*es la mariposa.*" The Tarahumara quickly took a liking to Maria. Her mother's parents were Mexican, but on her father's side she was Chippewa, just under five feet tall with straight black hair, and she felt more at home in the canyons than she ever had growing up in the farmlands of Indiana. She and Micah started living together in Arizona, and they continued to split their years between Phoenix and Batopilas.

She told me about the year after Micah died. That March, she had stood on the main street of Urique as truckloads of Raramuri and visiting runners drove into town for the race. She waved at everyone, occasionally jumping into the bed of a pickup truck for a hug. Guadajuko was at her

side relaxing in the shade, unimpressed by the chaos. Only a couple things were different. The banners, proclaiming the name of the race, had changed. They now said, in big yellow letters: “Caballo Blanco Ultramarathon.” A silver plaque with a drawing of Micah’s face was mounted outside of his favorite restaurant, with an inscription: “Micah True, November 10, 1953 – March 27, 2012.” And at the bottom of the plaque: “Run Free.” “He died doing what he loved,” Maria said to me, “but he lived doing what he loved, too.” The race would go on. The trail would be picked up where Micah had left it.

The day before the race that year, in the heat of the late afternoon, Micah’s closest friends stood beneath a grapefruit tree at Los Alizos, a farm up the canyon from Urique. Prospero, a Tarahumara man in his late eighties who had helped Micah build his home in Batopilas, was delivering a eulogy. He held his cowboy hat over his chest. “*Estoy triste, pero tambien estoy orgulloso,*” he said. I am sad, but also, I am proud.

Maria, crying, hugged him, kissing his cheeks and whispering thanks. In her hand, she held one of Micah’s favorite running shirts. Off to the left of the circle burned a fire, where each person had placed something that reminded them of their friend. Kneeling, she put the shirt on top of the fire, taking care not to smother it. She watched as the flames began to lick at its edges. Then she turned back to the group gathered under the grapefruit tree. They all began saying their goodbyes to Prospero, heading back down from the peak, back to the bottom of the canyon.

As they walked, they traded memories of Micah, funny stories and sad ones, while Guadajuko bounded on ahead. Later, Maria would remember that part especially well: the dog bounding

around each corner, as if expecting to see Micah jogging on up ahead. Eventually, the chatter and the laughter faded, and the group found itself walking on in silence. Then, without anyone saying a word, as if this had been planned all along, as if there were nothing in the world more appropriate or more natural, they all broke into a run.

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In the penultimate book of Homer's *Iliad*, the Greeks, like the *mas locos*, begin a footrace at a funeral. There is a good deal of running in the *Iliad*, but most of it is the running of battle: the running and the running away. But here, almost at the end of the epic, the Greek soldiers take a break from war to run for the sake of running. Retreating from the casualties they have suffered, they reconvene to bury the most beloved among their dead and to strike up a raucous series of athletic competitions.

The joy and the activity in the second half of book XXIII follow the first half in stark contrast. The whole cast of Greek characters is present for the games, each getting his moment to shine as he competes. The book ends with jostling athletes, a busy, happy chaos, the pinnacle of livelihood and celebration — but it begins with a ghost. Before the burial, before the initiation of the games, Achilles is visited by the ghost of Patroklos, his right hand man and the sweetheart of the *Iliad*. Patroklos not only bemoans his own death, but warns Achilles of his own imminent end — and asks for a final favor.

‘And you too,
your fate awaits you too, godlike as you are, Achilles —
To die in battle beneath the proud Trojans’ walls!
But one thing more. A last request — grant it, please.

Never bury my bones apart from yours, Achilles,
let them lie together...’ (Iliad 23.96-101)

Achilles, though at this point he has brought his army almost to victory, has exposed and milked the vulnerabilities of the Trojans, still feels unmoored. The sight of Patroklos, even in ghost form, gives him hope for clarity, and he leaps up to embrace him; “he stretched his loving arms / but could not seize him, no, the ghost slipped underground, / like a wisp of smoke” (23.117-19). Unable to get his closure, humbled by the finality of death, there is nothing left for Achilles to do but to comply with Patroklos’ final request. He digs his friend’s grave while standing in his own.

The Greeks light a pyre to burn the body and bury the bones in a golden urn. Then the men walk away from the funeral to return to the business of war, but Achilles stops them, and with a stroke of inspiration, starts up the games.

Sports began as imitations of war. All the games at Patroklos’ funeral are parallels of the actions of battle: chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, archery. Even running began as a sort of battle against nature as humans ran towards prey and away from predators. But here it is newly contextualized.

There is competition involved, prizes and trash talk abundant, and the contests take the Achaeans away from the impact of battle into the thrill of sport. Homer gives as much gravitas to the efforts of Odysseus and Ajax in their footrace as he does to soldiers closing in on each other in battle. The spectating Greeks cheer Odysseus on as he gains on Ajax, “treading in his footprints

before the dust could settle there.” Suspense is woven into the poem. Homer describes how Ajax can feel Odysseus’ breath on the back of his neck. In some books, as many as nine men are killed in as few as three lines. In book XXIII, there are nearly fifty lines devoted to the foot race alone. The games are given as much detail and significance as the parts of war that bookend them; this is the beginning of recovery.

As in the death of Philippides, *kleos* hovers over and around this scene. Patroklos, too, “died in a shout for his meed,” and for this he is immortalized in poetry. The funeral games are a way for Achilles to pay tribute to his fallen friend, but also for Homer to emphasize the glory of dying the way you want to die.

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The *Iliad* started off as an oral tradition, bards traveling from city to city telling the stories of Achilles and Patroklos and the war. Messages moved as people moved, town to town, battlefield to doorway. In the times of Homer and Herodotus and Lucian, stories were carefully cultivated to form a national history, to build shared identity of Athenian or Trojan or Spartan.

The runners do something similar to this type of nation-building. Someone who is not accustomed to tramping up and down trails for fifty, sixty, one hundred miles will quickly lose interest in an anecdote about race directors or switchbacks — I did. But with every story that begins “One time, at this race,” they add to a shared folklore where whatever happened isn’t necessarily the important part. In a sport where people spend mile after mile alone and in pain, this is the net of the shared experience they can fall back on. Someone else will go up that same

switchback or notice the same carvings on the rock at the trailhead, and it becomes not about being alone but about being a part of a larger whole.

There is a different type of *kleos* in running an ultra. Likely, no one outside that niche world will know who you are. It's the promise of the story they tell about themselves, the ones that keep them rooted to this weird world. There is no Troy or Rome for ultramarathoners. Instead, they create a sense of place that travels as they do, race to race, starting line to finish line.

The Canyons

The San Isidro Ranch balances at the top of the Copper Canyons, about two hours south of Creel by car. The ranch is surrounded by pine trees and dirt trails, hidden away from the road by a long pothole-laden driveway. The rain had started that morning as we had milled around in the parking lot of a rest stop just south of Creel, and we were all slightly damp. A half mildew, half sweat scent rested in the air of the van. When we pulled in just before dusk, Mario, the owner, came to greet us, tailed by no less than half a dozen dogs that he kicked sharply when they got too close to his heels.

The lodge was made up of twenty different rooms across a couple of motel-style, low-roofed buildings, but the motel motif only worked when the rooms were looked at from the outside. Once inside, any comparison to a highway roadside motor court failed. The windows were made from the bottoms of recycled glass bottles, and when the sun eventually appeared and shone through, it gave the effect of blue and green sea glass infused with light. A woodfire burned in the corner of each room, and a handmade quilt sat at the foot of each bed, the quilt so heavy that any attempt to adjust it during the night required a two-handed tug. Roosters from the coop a few feet away would begin crowing around 5am the next morning, waking the families of cows and pigs in the next pen over. Past the pigpen, the pine trees opened up to reveal the vastness of the canyon below, green and red and brown and a mile deep.

I stood at the edge of the canyon just before sunset, after dropping my backpack on top of the heavy quilt and laying my clothes out in front of the woodfire to dry. The rain had not let up, and

I made a weak attempt to stay dry by standing underneath a pine tree. It seemed that giant hands had pulled apart the earth right before where I stood, exposing a new world of ridges and hills. A trail, tightly packed with dirt and lined on either side by rocks, zig-zagged along the edge of the canyon, tiny waterfalls created by the rainfall jumping between levels. I could see no bottom, just an endless spread of folds and crests and peaks.

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Water and wind have created a gargantuan, grotesque beauty in the Copper Canyons. Weirdly shaped spires, phallic points, and spikes rise from the ground. The canyon valleys are already 7,000 to 8,000 feet high, the peaks and walls rising an extra one or two thousand feet higher. Twisting trails making their way up and down valleys and peaks are lined by terrifying drop off cliffs. Fir trees, almost exactly like the ones I had grown up under in Seattle, spread across the top of the canyon, punctuated here and there by branching oaks. Towards the floor of the canyon the firs turn to cacti, and at the very bottom there are fig trees covered in pink flowers. On the evening I stood at the edge, the colors of the canyon were muted by the cloud cover, casting a grey-brown tint over the greens and blues and reds that would later emerge with the sun.

I saw the Grand Canyon for the first time during my last year of high school. I went with my older sister, who had already been, and when we got out of our car in the visitor's lot, she made me cover my eyes until we were standing right at the canyon's edge. Finally, she told me I could look. It seemed, at first, untrue. Not fake or manmade, just untrue; that this canyon could be a part of the same world where we had parked. There were more colors than I had ever seen in nature, more textures, more space than seemed allowable or conceivable. We hiked fifty miles

over the course of three days that trip, which seemed endlessly impressive. Now, in a couple of days I would be watching hundreds of runners cover that distance in a matter of hours.

The Copper Canyons look like someone put one hand on either side of the Grand Canyon and stretched them apart. Here, the sides are less steep, and there is a greater distance between rims. The Grand Canyon seems to be an exception to the world around it, but the Copper Canyons are their own universe. They gape, capable of swallowing everything in their orbit.

When the Jesuits filtered into the Copper Canyons in the early 1600's, they weren't quite sure what they had stumbled upon. A priest first riding on his mule through a canyon around Urique called it a "stupendous gorge." He dismounted his mare halfway down a narrow trail, "sweating and trembling all over from fright. For there opened on the left a chasm the bottom of which could not be seen, and on the right rose perpendicular walls of solid rock."

The walls in reality are only 300 or 400 feet tall, but packed so tightly with vegetation and so steep that they are all but impassable. Another Jesuit priest, almost a hundred years later, wrote that "to state properly, clearly and distinctly the distances, routes, and directions from one place to another, one would have to have a tame bumblebee or honeybee and watch the paths it followed."

There are infinite ways to feel about and talk about the canyons. I will hear them described as paradise and as hell, as unforgiving and as nurturing. There is no common language here, because to be inside a canyon is to grapple with your own feelings about heights, confinement,

space, and nature. But standing on the edge of one world and looking down into another leaves a lasting impression.

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Upon our at the San Isidro Ranch on Tuesday evening, Mario had instructed us to gather in the main lodge for popcorn before dinner, so this is what we did. Inside, the room was split into a dining area and a lounging area. In the dining area, multi colored tablecloths covered the two tables in bright pinks and purples, oranges and greens. Along one of the walls was a painted mural, charting the different types of peppers of Mexico, organized from mildest to hottest, with a painted thermometer serving as a key. *Feria De Los Chiles*, the heading read. The Chile Pepper Fair.

Filling the entire length of the perpendicular back wall, perhaps two feet tall and twelve feet wide, was a mural of the Copper Canyons themselves. Rio Urique twisted and turned through green hills, and a smattering of white dots off to the right showed the deep-down town of Urique itself. Different birds took flight or roosted across the mural: a parrot flew overhead while a red tailed hawk perched on a branch with a small rabbit in its talons. Running along the bottom of the painting was a border decorated with pine trees and deer, and all the way on the right side the steeple of a church pointed into a purple-clouded sky. To the left, a Tarahumara man sat on top of a rock. He had white paint speckled across his body, perhaps in observation of the Holy Week, and a blue scarf around his head. He wore a white skirt, an orange sash, and leather sandals whose straps made their way up his ankles in an intricate criss-cross pattern. I would later learn that these sandals, worn by almost all the Tarahumara, are called *huaraches* and are made from

tire tread. At the man's feet was a drum, sticks floating eerily beneath his toes, casting a shadow on the skin of the drum. He sat with his eyes cast down, as if surveying the canyon below.

Off to the left of the mural, the runners were gathered in front of another fire, twice the size of those in the bedroom, sprawled out over chairs and sofas in various states of use. I claimed a spot on the floor near the fire, savoring the warmth even as it became too hot. Edder was deep in conversation in fluent Spanish with a man sitting in a folding chair to my right. The man's name was Guadalupe and he wore a New York Mets baseball cap pulled down over his eyes.

He was telling Edder about how long it had been since it had rained. "The ground will drink it up, make it disappear," he was saying as I sat down. His Spanish was slow and languid, and I found myself able to follow along. "Give it one evening after the rain stops, and you won't be able to tell it was ever here."

Guadalupe lived in Urique, but he rarely spent more than one night there at a time. He worked almost full time as a tour guide, bringing passengers who had dared disembark El Chepe around the canyon to rivers and viewpoints and the trees that grow sweet grapefruits. I discovered later that Guadalupe is like many other citizens of Urique in that he is mainly Tarahumara. His grandparents had lived in small *pueblos*, but his parents had moved to the more developed town of Urique, interested in a modern lifestyle. He wore jeans and a denim jacket, but also *huaraches*, laced up underneath his cuffs.

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Anyone familiar with European western expansion into the United States could guess what happened when Christianity came to the Sierra Madres of Mexico. In the beginning of the 17th century, Spanish Jesuits set up *reducciones*, small Mexican settlements where they intended to herd the Tarahumara, hoping to smother native culture in Spanish-Mexican culture until the former was extinguished. Creel was one of these *reducciones*. But like they did in Creel, the Tarahumara retreated. Again and again, they withdrew east into wilderness — and again and again, the Jesuits followed.

As the century drew to a close, it grew more difficult for the Tarahumara to avoid Spanish influence. The late 1600's brought a rush for minerals into Northwestern Mexico, and many Tarahumara were forced into servitude, working in the mines for foreigners who slowly claimed more and more of their land. At the end of the century they revolted, and the violence of the Spaniards in command quickly turned cruel. One Spanish general killed thirty Tarahumara men and mounted their heads on spikes along the settlement's main road. That was the last attempt at revolution among the Tarahumara, and their defense tactics slowly turned passive. Today, the Tarahumara are known as withdrawn and aloof, and the history of abuse and disenfranchisement at the hands of foreigners makes this an easy character trait to understand.

Over the centuries, industries kept opening up in the Sierra Madre region that threatened to wipe out the Tarahumara cultural identity completely, setting the scene for forced assimilation. In the 1700's, it was the growing silver mining industry. In the 1800's, the Mexican government starting offering land grants for ranching to new settlers in remote areas, hoping to push Mexican culture further into Tarahumara territory. In the 1900's, the El Chepe railway was built, and

tourism began to take shape in the Sierra Madres. Each time, the Tarahumara withdrew further, until they had settled themselves in the heart of the canyons.

It's not as if Tarahumara culture remained completely untouched by imperial influence. Many native people disappeared into the lower class of rural Mexico; others took advantage of the encroaching industries without leaving their homes. In the late 90's, a tourist company took a busload of Californians into the canyons to watch the Tarahumara celebration of Semana Santa, the Holy Week. The tourists thought the celebration was a show being put on for their benefit, and the Tarahumara decided to go along with it, charging twenty *pesos* a head for observation.

In the 1930's, playwright Antonin Artaud visited Tarahumara land while writing a new play and detoxing from heroin. "This race," he wrote, "which ought to be physically degenerate, has for four hundred years resisted every force that has come to attack it: civilization, interbreeding, war, winter, animals, storms, and the forest." By all accounts, the Tarahumara identity should have slowly ebbed out into Mexican culture centuries ago — but it didn't.

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The rain kept us up all night, falling in sheets on the tin roofs. Our fire had gone out in the middle of the night, and I spent a wet, cold hour around midnight searching for dry wood. Thursday morning, the runners slept late, which for them meant until 9am. They sprinted from their cabins to the main lodge, skirting puddles and raindrops. If you ran quickly and efficiently, which they each did, the distance could be covered in less than a minute. Still, they came in dripping.

If the others spent time awake, cold or wet or listening to the pounding of the rain, it didn't show. Four days before the starting pistol would go off, the runners were already humming with energy.

After breakfast, Michael made an announcement that anyone who wasn't afraid of a little rain should join him for a run in an hour or so. He wanted to lead us down to a waterfall. It wasn't the rain that scared me so much as the abundance of wet, slippery rocks along the trails, but I have a penchant for waterfalls and my legs were feeling antsy after so many long car rides, so an hour later I headed towards Michael and Kimberly's cabana (they had bought property from Mario a few years earlier) with Nadia. The rain was light, more misty than anything else, but the sky was still layered with clouds.

Nadia and I jogged slowly along the trail, and after a while I realized I wasn't breathing. I remembered that I was about nine thousand feet higher up than I was used to. Briefly, the idea of waterfall lost its appeal, but then Edder ran up behind us. "LET'S MOTHERFUCKING GO," he yelled, directly into my ear, and sprinted ahead. I felt a bit like Chris McDougal might have felt trying to keep up with Micah as they ran the trails outside Creel. If I wanted to know these runners, I would need to keep pace.

Kimberly and Michael's cabana was made up of two rooms stacked on top of each other, with a bathroom balanced precariously over the edge of the first floor, which was itself perched a couple meters of back from the edge of the canyon. I asked Michael where we were running. "Down," he said.

We headed down, walking. As soon as the trail dipped below the rim of the canyon, it became immediately familiar. This may sound sacrilegious to an experienced hiker, for whom each trail is full of individualized character, but for a runner used to looking up and around while my feet pound against asphalt and concrete, many trails seem to blend together.

The path was mostly covered by falling leaves in various shades of reddish-brownish-orange, and was lined on either side by sparse alder trees with slim, mossy trunks and high-up branches. A hundred meters or so in, everyone was delighted by a small waterfall raging through a cluster of rocks, its stream generously emphasized by the past day's rain. Blindfold me and spin me around in a few circles, and this trail could run through the Catskills or the Olympics, would fit in perfectly in the Rockies or in the Adirondacks. But then again, I am a roadrunner. I'm used to the sidewalks of a city or the backroads of an upstate town.

Each of these runners probably had a trail like this back home, but to them, nothing about a new trail gets taken for granted. I watched them feel it out, watched them first try their tread on the sides and then down the middle, watched them figure out where the loose rocks were and which side held dirt packed more tightly. Soon, their feet found the familiar grooves as they made their way down the hill. The ground began to level out, and without any apparent communication, all seven of us broke into a run.

The pace was slow and careful, conscious of the slippery leaves and rocks along the trail. I brought up the rear and Michael led, with Edder close behind him. David trotted along behind Edder, and Nadia followed him, her long hair loose and swinging in rhythm with her pace.

The trail was mainly straight down with a few curves, not steep but definitely downhill. No one spoke for a while, not until the forest began to open up and suddenly we were on a ledge somewhere below the rim. The transition from narrow to open gave the feeling of being physically pushed out of the woods by the trail. The lowest clouds were almost at eye level, and the trees had morphed into shorter, more limbed versions of their rangier cousins at the top.

Within less than a mile, the climate had shifted. Gone were the reddish-brownish-orange leaves; varying sizes of squat cacti and shrubs had taken their place. Even the moss had changed; olive green now, instead of the seafoam blue-green further up. “Mossy green” now held the same vague meaning as “sunshine yellow” or “ocean blue,” the parameters of nature that twist and warp too quickly and frequently to allow themselves to be defined.

Continuing down the canyon, we went from walk to run to walk again in the same wordless way. I now tailed behind Edder, who ran like a rubber ball, bouncing between the rocky sides of the trail instead of the traditional up-and-down. He shot his legs out diagonally until they made contact with something hard, rarely looking down but more often up and to the sides, as quickly distracted as a small mountain animal.

“Fuck.” Michael, still in front, stopped in front of a rapidly moving stream at least twenty feet across. He reached for a branch, stuck it as far out as he could into the stream, and before it was ripped out of his hand by the current, took it out to measure the depth against his own body. The branch was soaked as high as Michael’s hips. He turned around and grinned at us. “Todos terrenos,” he said, only he actually said “Toh-dohs terr-ay-nez,” and charged forward into the river. All terrains.

Edder whooped and followed him in, launching himself from mossy rock to mossy rock until there were no mossy rocks left, and he, like Michael, stood waist deep in rapid currents, looking less bouncy. “It’s a little cold,” he said. It was unclear why the two of them were just standing there, backs borne against muddy water instead of making a dash for the other side, until David joined them, at which point it became a delivery line, ready to pass runner after runner safely and steadily between them and onto the other shore.

The water was more than “a little cold.” I took my shoes off and, tying the shoelaces together, draped them around my neck, determined to slice my foot open before running the rest of the trail in sopping wet shoes, thinking of every image of foot fungus I’d ever come across. Then I slipped on a rock, lunging ungracefully into the freezing water, and foot fungus suddenly seemed innocuous, three seconds too late. The line caught me before the current did, and passed me onto the shore. I watched, pitying myself wetly, as everyone else used the tread on the bottom of their shoes to make their way carefully across the rocks, each of them staying very much upright.

Running with wet shoes on is like trudging through a foot of snow in ten-pound boots, and after some considerable effort the group resigned itself to walking. Everyone was feeling sorry for themselves, and Edder was wondering aloud about how much shame there is, really, in just turning around and heading back, when we made a turn and the sun came out. Michael whooped, David said quietly “Thank you, Mother Nature”, and Edder started whistling the “doo-dn-doo-doo” bridge of “Here Comes The Sun.” Still uncomfortable, but newly encouraged, we squelched onwards.

When we arrived at the waterfall, Edder peeled off his shirt and shoes and dove in. David did the same, raising his arms silently into the thunder of the crashing water, closing his eyes. Nadia handed me her phone and began posing for pictures, more controlled smiles and cocked hips. Michael sat at the top of a nearby rock, watching silently, grinning.

We stayed for a few more minutes before the sun migrated behind a tall set of pine trees, and the water suddenly became much colder. More subdued, the initial magic of the sun bursting through the trees now fading, everyone pulled on their wet clothing. “Now,” Michael said, “we go up.”

Up was hard. Up was awful. We may not have been at 10,000 feet above sea level, but the air was thin and my body was tired. The others trotted along rocks and dirt ahead of me, mountain-goat-like in their adaptability to each piece of trail. I watched the back of Michael’s knees relax and then tighten, watched Nadia dig a thumb into the side of her thigh as if expelling a knot. The most unfamiliar space becomes navigable when explored with familiar parameters, and though the trail may have been new to them, they knew their legs intimately.

*

There are moments when it hits me very suddenly that I am connected to my legs. It seems like an obvious thing, but it's not, not really. So much of the time I find ways to separate myself from my body, even while becoming more conscious of it — obsessive, at times. Here is the consideration of the body as an outside entity, an object to be observed or critiqued or, more rarely, praised. In poorly lit dressing rooms, the clasp on a pair of trousers can force a reckoning, revealing once unfamiliar hollows or mounds in the flesh. I'll look at a photo on my phone of myself, taken mid-movement, and tap the screen once, twice, three times, zooming in on the space between thighs, the slope of a shoulder, the sickling of a foot, the pixels so isolated they no longer seem to be a part of a larger whole.

Once, I stood cramped between three female friends before the mirror in the confines of an Alphabet City bedroom. The contents of three different closets were strewn over space heaters and bedposts. We were getting ready for a birthday dinner or a Christmas dinner or some type of eating event during the wintertime, when skin is dry and moods are turbulent. We kept up a stream of commentary, meaningless yet constant like the back-and-forth of sports commentators during a particularly slow quarter.

“My ass looks so flat in this dress.”

“If I pull these sleeves off my shoulders, do they look less manly?”

“I wish my ribcage was as tiny as yours.”

“I feel like this shirt makes my collarbone look really good. Is that weird?”

We kept chattering, critiquing, discussing our limbs as if they existed somewhere outside our own bodies, framed or mounted instead of firmly rooted below the neck. We talked about our arms and our legs the same way we did the dresses and the shoes. The longer it went the further we drifted, until our bodies became as disconnected from us as the outfits we pulled on and stripped off.

In a ballet class I go to on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, the teacher makes us isolate each leg in turn from the hip, moving it around in space as if it is its own being, which only make me realize that it's not. In these moments, I feel my connection to these things, these limbs and muscles and nerves. It's something about bending from the waist over the ankle and feeling the pull all the way through my leg. Stepping out of bed in the morning and feeling the stasis of the past seven hours fall away or one foot up on the edge of the bathtub, mid-lotion application. Trudging up four miles of switchbacks in damp clothing and sopping sneakers.

Standing in front of a mirror or zoomed in closely on a photograph, the legs become more alien than grounding, but sometimes, in the middle of a run, I fit my fingers around the outsides of my thighs to feel the muscles working.

This is how I ran the final stretch back to the top of the canyon, advancing up the trail with my hand alongside my leg, getting to know its movements. I felt the muscles contract and loosen, felt the flesh of my thigh get firm and then soften, and all the while I kept moving forward, upward, carried by suddenly familiar, freshly beloved limbs.

*

The next morning, any evidence of the twenty-four hour rainfall was gone. Guadalupe had been right: the ground was thirsty. All that was left was the resting smell of the fires from inside the lodge and the cabins, the scent that lingers in hair and clothes after a night spent roasting marshmallows, only it was everywhere. That, and my running shoes were still wet.

Driving once more, we began our descent into the canyon. The van followed switchback after switchback in an endless swerving down a disturbingly narrow dirt road. I tried not to think about what would happen if another car was trying to go up as we were trying to go down. I failed, and asked, “It’s almost race day! Everyone is going down,” Michael said, but he also knocked on the wooden panel of the dashboard and moved the car over a couple inches into a nonexistent “down” lane. He liked to drive with one hand on the wheel and one cheek turned towards the backseat in conversation. We, the passengers, gave up on trying to hold ourselves upright and gave in to the swaying of the road. Nadia, impossibly, had fallen asleep.

On the millionth switchback, Kimberly made a purring sound and pointed out the window. “There she is. Urique.” She said. All at once, everyone crowded towards the left side of the car, which made it lean towards the dropoff of the canyon in an unsettling way, so we settled for craning our necks. There she was, at the bottom of the canyon. Urique. From above, the town was a cluster of white-ish roofs nestled into a pocket at the very bottom of the canyon, just like in the mural at San Isidro. It looked sleepy, unsuspecting of the thousands soon to be descending upon it. The houses and streets were dwarfed by the river, Rio Urique, which ran alongside them, appearing to go on forever. The river was thin, flat, and brown, and bore an uncanny

resemblance to a snake in motion, twisting and slithering along the floor of the canyon. The town appeared to have thwarted it, escaped its coils, and now they coexisted below the peaks.

*

There are sixty-seven municipalities across the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Tarahumara country, known as the Sierra Tarahumara, covers fifteen of them. Tarahumara settlements take one of two forms. One is a *pueblo*, which has churches and spaces where residents come together to talk shop, shop being anything from official town hall forums to local gossip. In some, where missionaries have moved in, there are schools and hospitals. Most *pueblos* are flanked by many *ranchos*, loose communities with enough land to farm, where the population can range anywhere between three and eighty.

Pueblos have names that sound like towns. Batopilas, Guadalupe, and Guadalupe (coincidentally, also the pueblo that Guadalupe of the New York Mets cap pointed out later as his family's ancestral home). The *ranchos* have names that are, by necessity, practical. In a place without Google Maps, it is much easier to tell someone you live under the walnut tree than to try and give directions through the twisting paths of the canyons. The names of *ranchos* I visited held a solemn quaintness, like Place of the Grapefruit Tree, Big Rock Down the River, and The High Place.

Tarahumara women wear colorful full-length pleated skirts and full-sleeved blouses, and the men wear white skirts in the style of loincloths and jewel-toned blouses that look remarkably like the full-sleeved style of the conquistadors. Families in both types of settlements are, more often than

not, nuclear. Those from *ranchos* are affiliated with a nearby *pueblo*, where they go for ceremonies, discussions about the land, and to barter.

Subsistence farmers, they raise livestock and grow crops at dizzying heights. When I asked Guadalupe what kind of crops people grew, he brought up the brim of his Mets cap and raised his eyebrows at me, pinching his fingers in front of his lips like he was hitting an imaginary joint. Passing through fields later on, I kept a lookout for marijuana plants, but only ever saw corn and wheat.

More than 2,000 *ranchos* and *pueblos* are scattered across the Sierra Tarahumara, which runs for over 900 miles down the western edge of Mexico. Then, there are towns like Urique that have emerged between them, where Tarahumara descendants like Guadalupe and his family have found a middle ground between Mexican life and the life of their ancestors.

If I had been looking at Urique from an airplane thousands of feet above, I would have seen hundreds of other clusters just like it dispersed across the canyons below. Traveling from one pueblo to the next meant creating footpaths and shortcuts foreigners would balk at. Any distance from A to B is doubled, even tripled, in navigating the steep walls and sharp drop offs. There is an intricate network of thousands of trails connecting the Tarahumara world. With no highways and barely any cement, the Tarahumara farmer is his own transportation system, his own traveling market.

Most Tarahumara speak Spanish, but they have their own dialect, a sort of pidgin Spanish. In this language, they have their own word for themselves. Rarámuri: the running man.

*

The distance from San Isidro to Urique is about sixteen miles, but it took us almost two hours to make it halfway down the canyon. When the dirt road turned into a rare stretch of paved road, it brought a joint sigh of relief from the backseat and a stream of disapproving muttering from Michael, who was of the opinion that *the money they spent on this goddamn pavement was a goddamn waste and what about some goddamn guardrails or some goddamn hot water infrastructure, don't you think, Kimberly?*

And somehow we were suddenly off the switchbacks, driving into the town of Urique. Eye level, there was nothing sleepy about the bottom of the canyon. Everything was saturated in color, every building a different bright hue of purple, orange, blue, yellow. Ladders were propped up against walls all the way down the road, and painters stood on top of them, coaxing out still more color with a couple more coats. Kimberly had said that to the town of Urique, the weekend of the ultramarathon was like “Christmas and Easter combined,” and the town looked holiday-ready.

A gigantic mural, one three times the size of the mural in the dining area at San Isidro, stretched across a wall marking the entrance to town. It depicted a Tarahumara man in three stages of life. As a child, he ran through a cornfield, laughing wildly. As an adolescent, he crouched over a flattened tire tread, constructing a pair of huaraches. As an old man, he ran again, this time across the river, tunic billowing out behind him, skirt flat against his thighs. A quote next to the figures read:

Somos de la tierra.

Somos barro, montaña, barranca, maíz, sal, río, aire.

Somos fuego, polvo de estrellas. Pies, almas y corazón. Libre que correr por la vida.

Pies ligeros que resisten a desaparecer su identidad y ese amor por la naturaleza.

Corre, corre, corre todo lo que puedas tras tus sueños y libertad.

We are of the Earth.

We are mud, mountain, canyon, corn, honey, salt, river, air.

We are fire, stardust. Feet, souls, and heart. Free to run through life.

Light feet that resist losing their identity, and that love for nature.

Run, run, run, all that you can after your dreams and your freedom.

The Runners

Urique reminded me of the small upstate town I live in, partly because it was just one street and partly because everyone seemed to know everything about everyone else. The main street, about a mile long, does not have a name because it does not need one. Along it, little pink flowers grow from fig trees and neither pedestrians nor cars distinguish between road and sidewalk. Groups of men in cowboy hats and tight Levis set up tables for card games that seem to change location every day.

Cell phone data service didn't work except between around 4am, something I found out my first night there when my phone let off a series of dings in the wee hours that startled me awake.

There is one Internet café right across from the liquor store. It hands out passwords for internet accent that are delightfully cryptic, like "*NoUnDedoDePie*" (not one toe on the foot), "*NoMeDigas*" (don't tell me) and "*v!ud@*" (*viuda* meaning widow). The liquor store hands out plastic cups with purchase, and past dark the Internet café usually ends up the rowdiest spot on the block. There are no bars. Instead, people sell beer out of the windows of their houses, and would-be-customers pull up crates to sit in the shade of the doorstep.

Just outside the center of Urique, up a rock path and through an unlocked gate, a woman named Maruca and her two daughters run a hostel called Entre Amigos. Maruca sometimes calls it "an experiment in communal living," or "a safe and happy place." Her daughter Julia calls it "a big-ass vegetable garden with tents."

Both descriptions work, but Julia's is better suited for practical purposes. The majority of Entre Amigos consists of plot after plot of flowering vegetables: kale and chard, tomatoes and zucchinis and carrots. Stooped over a plot, picking vegetables, it's easy to take a step backwards and accidentally trod on someone's sleeping bag, tucked beneath the shade of an avocado tree.

From April through February, Maruca and her daughters rarely see more than one or two guests per week. But during the month of March, the place is packed with runners from all over the world, setting up their tents and gathering around the firepit to catch up on the year that has passed since they last saw each other. 300 *pesos*, a little over ten bucks per night, gets you a spot to put your tent and unlimited access to the vegetable garden, with a full kitchen provided for food preparation.

When our van convoy made its final turn into the gate of Entre Amigos, there must have been at least twenty guests already camped out. Our group made that number over forty. A man with no shoes and a shiny bald head bounded up as we filed out, catching Michael in a bear hug. He had a leather strap with a silver monkey dangling from his neck, and I quickly surmised that this was Barefoot Ted, one of the original Caballo Blanco runners. When Michael introduced us, Ted pressed his hands together in a prayer position and bowed his head. "Welcome to the village," he said.

Following Maruca to the spot where I would set up camp for the next four nights, I saw groups of tan, lanky men and petite women with ponytails uprooting carrots or lounging in the sun. It felt like summer camp, but on a commune, and with lots of barefoot adults.

During the days, everyone at Entre Amigos ended up at some point at a restaurant in the center of town called Mama Tita's. I don't think this was the official name — the building was orange and in black paint above the doorway black lettering spelled out only "RESTAURANTE" — but Tita was the name of the owner. Everyone called her Mama Tita, regardless of their age or Spanish-fluency. She had a small hunchback, and the first time I met her she pinched my cheeks and told me that she knew we would get along, because I had a big nose, and this was indicative of strong character.

When the runners weren't eating or drinking, they were hiking. They would gravitate towards the climbing trails of the canyons in groups numbering two or twenty, seemingly nowhere in between. They would hike or run until the sun began going down, then they would jog back down into Urique for dinner at Mama Tita's or to cook at Entre Amigos.

After dark, everyone sat around the campfire, passing around a bottle of lechuguilla, alcohol made from an agave species found only in the Chihuahua area. It was explained to me as "Mexican Moonshine," "Hangover Juice," and "The Destroyer," depending on who I asked. It tasted like nail polish remover mixed with Splenda that had picked up the flavor of its plastic container and everyone loved it.

In the mornings, I'd meet Maruca and her daughters for yoga outside the kitchen. Once, Barefooot Ted came to sit on the ground next to us, humming loudly with his eyes closed. Other runners would come in and out, going through a few poses before becoming bored or distracted

and wandering away. I'd been curious to find out about the exercise regimens of the runners. Running coaches and marathon training programs emphasize the importance of cross-training, and I was expecting to hear debates about weight-lifting vs. swimming vs. Pilates, but no such conversations ever broke out. No one mentioned workout routines or muscle building or speed work.

Every now and then, mid-conversation, Barefoot Ted would flip upside-down into a handstand. One morning, I saw a woman boiling water for coffee absent-mindedly drop to the floor and do sit-ups until the tea kettle began whistling, and I remembered Edder's burst of jumping jacks outside the Best Western in Creel. Exercise seemed, for these athletes, not methodical or strategic, but a compulsion.

Not one of them worked in an office. They were teachers or engineers or builders. Some made a living floating around the country, stopping when they could find work for a few months, then taking off again once they'd saved enough money for another plane ticket. "I love Ecuador," someone would say. "I spent three months there a couple years ago working on trail restoration." "You're from Seattle? Great city. I was there for a few months crewing for an ad company."

*

Henry Thoreau wrote an essay titled "Walking" that I often thought of while watching and listening to the runners. He writes of what it means to be a "walker," how it feels and what it takes. Thoreau writes that he wants to regard man as a "part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." There is a weightiness to the choice of preposition here: "of Nature" as opposed to the less committal "in." Many of the runners seemed to consider themselves "of" not

“in,” parts and parcels that move to and fro according to season and terrain, independent of “jobs” and “commitments.” Early in his essay, Thoreau lingers on the aptness of the word *sauntering*, which seems to me a very good word for studying how many of the runners approach life.

“Some . . . would derive the word from *sans terre* without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea.”

There seems to be a crucial distinction between the saunterer and the vagrant; though both of them lack a permanent home, only the latter lacks direction. While the river twists and turns, it always finds a course to the sea. The runners don't seem to fit Thoreau's description of the saunterer, at least not “in the good sense.” For though they wander, though they seem to make a home for themselves wherever they can fit a tent and sleeping bag, there is no larger “sea” for which to seek route.

It makes sense that those who run the furthest distances have the most trouble staying put. These people run hundreds of miles every month on trails along mountains and rivers and streets through big cities and small town. With more ground covered comes a wider definition of home, perhaps, but also an abstraction, an alienation. It must get harder to feel content in one place

when you spend so much time in so many. Nadia told me once that most of the ultra runners she knew were single, divorced, or married to another ultra runner. “It’s not a life for everyone,” she said.

*

Come Sunday, the racecourse will take a Y-shape. Runners will start in the center of Urique and from there they head upriver, crossing a bridge known only as *el puente*, before continuing up to the town of Guadalupe. At the church in Guadalupe they will turn around, go back down *to el puente*, then turn northwest to climb up the steep trails to El Naranjo. Then it’s south, back to the center of town, completing the two arms of the Y. Then, they will go downriver, south to the town of Guadalupe. They will continue south, to Los Alizos, a tiny *rancho* with a population of five, the bottom tip of the tail of the Y. From Los Alizos, they will go back through Urique, all the way north again to Guadalupe, then finally, once more, to the center of town from where they began.

The “Y” opens to the northeast, as if nodding to all those who have traveled south to get here. Those who have run the race before can’t agree on which part is the most difficult. Some say El Naranjo, because of its steep slope. Some say Los Alizos, because the trails devolve into nothing more than vague footpaths in places. Some say that passing through Urique on the way back towards Guadalupe is the most brutal, since the finish line festivities will be in full swing by then, and the promise of a cold beer and a break is almost too tempting to pass by.

On Friday morning, someone had suggested a hike up Los Alizos, the tip of the Y of the racecourse. I was staggering behind the rest of the group, perhaps five or six fellow campers

from Entre Amigos. It was well over 90 degrees, and for two hours, I had been following switchback after switchback up the canyon. Patrick, one of the most seasoned Caballo Blanco Ultra Marathon veterans, was eager to visit a farmer named Prospero, the man who had delivered the eulogy at Micah's funeral. Prospero lived at the top of Los Alizos. He had a farm where he grew grapefruits and — according to Entre Amigos legend — a garden of cannabis plants.

At the top of the trail, Patrick introduced me to Prospero. The man looked to be well into his nineties, but still managed to do an impression of me dragging myself up the final switchback that brought the whole sweaty group into peels of laughter. I scanned the area for the rumored cannabis plants, but I just saw grapefruits everywhere. They filled tree branches, wheelbarrows, small stone caves that offered enough shade to act as mini fridges. The trail looked much different from the top, much gentler, less daunting. I felt affection for it, the very specific kind of affection that comes from conquering something high up. "We hug the earth—how rarely we mount! Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more," wrote Thoreau.

Prospero chatted with me about Micah, about the first race (he had been one of the spectators offering beer to passerbys) while he peeled grapefruits, which he tossed without looking into the group. The fruit was bright, red-orange, and sweet. By far the sweetest grapefruit I'd ever eaten.

A small boy appeared at the top of the trail from where we had just emerged. He looked to be around six-years-old, and carried a blue backpack. Prospero asked him how school had been, and it occurred to me that this boy, barely older than a toddler, took these trails to and from school every day. He wasn't sweating, and didn't look at all tired. Prospero ruffled his hair and handed

him a grapefruit, and the boy raced away towards unseen activity. Prospero told us he would see us at the race on Sunday, and waved goodbye, following the boy at a trot.

On the way down from Los Alizos, I stashed another grapefruit in my sports bra, which made for an uncomfortable descent. I fell into step behind Andrew and Patrick, who I had come to think of as a unit – The Guys. Andrew was from Georgia and was lithe and wiry, with long brown hair pulled into a ponytail and fast moving dark eyes. Patrick, who lived on a nudist ranch in Southern California with his girlfriend and as such had an impressively deep tan and a mane of blonde hair straight out of a “Sun-In commercial,” was taller and more burly. He had deep smile lines spreading from his eyes, and probably from his mouth, too, but those were covered by a bushy blonde beard. They were both extremely beautiful, but not in a way that inspired romance. I didn’t want to kiss them or date them; I wanted to be them. I don’t often feel a desire to be a six-foot male athlete, but watching The Guys run brought out an envy in me I didn’t know I had.

One of the first nights at Entre Amigos, a man smoking weed out of a hole in an apple at the campfire had hissed at me: “Do you know who you’re camping with? Those guys are legends, man.” It took me a while to find out what he meant, because The Guys were not braggarts. When Patrick told me he had only missed one Caballo Blanco in the past eight years, he wouldn’t add that he didn’t make it down to the canyon because he was running across the United States. I would come to discover that when Andrew said he “does a lot of barefoot running,” he meant that he holds the world record for most miles run barefoot in twenty-four hours. (I looked this up later: that record is 138.8 miles.) Between the two of them, they had run an easy two hundred ultras, checking off at least ten a year each for the past decade.

The trail down the canyon was steep and made of loose sand, and with most steps I found myself landing sharply on my heel, throwing my weight back so that I wouldn't tip forward. I was pretty sure this was poor running form, but I wouldn't be running fifty miles later that week so I wasn't too bothered. In front of me, Andrew and Patrick were having a conversation about veganism. Patrick was a vegan; Andrew was not.

"I eat a fuckload of avocados, mainly. Tortillas, potato chips, beer." Patrick ran like a bear, lumbering forwards with surprising agility for such a large frame. He moved his arms in small diagonal circles, like the "chugga-chugga-chugga" motion of a train. His paces were wide and full of power and intention, each footstep sturdy and purposeful. "It's cheap, especially when you live somewhere with produce like California's, and it tastes good. I think all that talk about protein supplements is kind of crap. Vegetables have a shitload of protein, so I'm good, for the most part. I can always stock up on beans."

Andrew was listening intently, which he did more often than speaking. He moved down the trail with balletic strides, straightening his knee with each step and springing gracefully back up. He gripped the arm-straps of his knapsack to keep it from thumping against his back. He wore nothing except a pair of black linen pants and thin *huarache*-style sandals. This was the first time I'd seen Andrew wearing shoes. Usually, he roamed bare-footed, splayed-toed and flat-arched, around Entre Amigos and the town center and even Mama Tita's, where there seemed to be a No Shoes, No Problem informality. He took most opportunities to go sans-clothing too, stripping off shirt and shorts to dive unencumbered into the brown waters of Rio Urique, making morning coffee clad only in a precariously wrapped towel.

Andrew started running when he was twenty-five, after he read Chris McDougal's book about Micah and the race. He has never owned a pair of running shoes and usually squeezes in two runs a day, one in the morning, and one around midnight after he gets off his bartending shift, racing across the fields of Southern Georgia with a headlamp. He made that bid for the Guinness Book of World Records four years ago on an indoor track in the middle of Alaska, where he ran from 11 AM on Saturday until 11 AM on Sunday, looping around the quarter mile circle again and again, stopping only to pee. He ate while running, bananas and packets of salted-watermelon flavored electrolyte gel called "Gu." On that Sunday afternoon after he finished, he got on a flight from Alaska to Ecuador, going to meet some friends for a week-long, kayaking/rock-climbing trip.

He didn't approve of this year's inclusion of the standard marathon race — the first time this other distance would be offered. "Why do half of something," he had muttered when Michael gave the overview of the course at breakfast that morning. Andrew ran marathons often, on both trail and road. But this was not a race for marathon runners. He worried that a marathon tied to the Caballo Blanco race would fill the Copper Canyons with swarms of marathon runners, whom he described as "fine, but a different breed." Even for Andrew, once so determined to sprint his way into the Guinness Book of World Records, this week was not about splits or podiums or personal records. Marathon culture, he said, was too competitive to be appropriate here.

"Marathons are winnable. Ultras, you just run."

He nodded while Patrick went over the financial benefits of veganism. "Meat is pricy as fuck," he said. Andrew spoke slowly, intentionally, his Georgia accent noticeable only in intonation,

not pronunciation. Though we were trotting downhill at a brisk pace, neither of them seemed to have any trouble holding a conversation. Vegan for a year at the beginning of college, I thought about adding my thoughts, but decided instead to focus on not losing traction with the loose sand and toppling over the side of the cliff.

The clouds that had blanketed the canyon the past few days were gone now, and the landscape was freshly watered and glorious. The walls of the canyon were covered almost completely in green, scrubby trees on the slopes and more lush ones below. Here and there, the reddish brown color of the earth peeked out, and the sky was that blue color you can only truly see when you put red next to it. I began to give into the loose sand, letting it carry me a few inches down with each step, falling with the trail.

Andrew was still working out his thoughts about food. “I don’t think food should be associated with money. In an ideal world.”

“In an ideal world,” Patrick agreed.

*

That night at the dinner table, excited by a basil plant in the garden bigger than one of my legs, I prepared a gigantic bowl of pesto pasta, and Andrew concocted the latest in an installment of experimental guacamoles. This one had some grapefruit juice in it. It was a quiet evening in the kitchen. Most of the tenants of Entre Amigos were at a birthday party at Mama Tita’s for a woman named Naomi. Naomi, who was from California, had run the Caballo Blanco every year for the past five years. This year, nursing a knee injury and sitting the race out, she made the trip anyway, to celebrate her birthday with the *mas locos*.

The rest of us were tired from the day's sun and trying to use up the huge amount of avocados that had ripened in the past few days. There was a satisfied, luxurious laziness after we finished eating, The Guys trading stories about memorable runs and playing ping-pong. Paddle in one hand, guacamole-loaded chip on the other, Patrick started to talk about his cross-continental run.

He first had the idea after meeting a woman who had walked barefoot across the United States. He bought a used van, sold ad space on it to running and outdoors brands, and packed it with some of his closest friends, who would meet him periodically in different cities he stopped in with food and clothing and encouragement. Then, he used Google Maps to chart a course from Los Angeles to Boston and hit "Walking Mode: 3,233 miles."

After spending a few days with people who habitually head out for a run from Midwest to East Coast or a 48-hour jog looping around and around a standard quarter mile track, I had started to learn how to take in stories like this. The big questions — what were you thinking, why would you do this, etc., — don't do much good. Runners don't know how to answer them. They shrug. "Sometimes I feel like running. Sometimes I feel like running far."

So instead, I asked the small questions. Where did he sleep? In churches, on couches of other runners, occasionally in the ad-packed van, one time in a tornado shelter. One time he had asked the mayor of a local town if he could sleep in a jail cell for the night, but the mayor had decided the tornado shelter would be a better idea. What did he eat? Tortillas, avocados, potato chips, and beer — the Patrick Sweeney diet. If he'd eaten healthier, he wouldn't have finished any faster.

Protein is a myth, he said, and there is nothing better after a 40-mile run across Route 180 through Texas than a cold beer. He started out at roughly a marathon a day, then bumped it up to around 40 miles. His longest day was a 52-mile streak through Tennessee. He told me he took it slow, since his marathon time is “only two hours and thirty-seven minutes.”

Once, Google Maps led him off the main roads onto a sliver of farmland backroad in Arkansas. It was about eight pm, the sun had just set, and Patrick was looking forward to meeting up with his support van later than night for a meal and a bucket of water to pour over his head, when a man came out of his house with a shotgun and took one shot into the air, then leveled the shotgun and aimed it in the direction of the large shirtless man loping through his property. Patrick ran faster.

Sometimes, people were more neighborly. Cars would slow down and pull alongside him on the freeway, drivers leaning out of windows, offering him a half-eaten breakfast sandwich or their son’s discarded soccer warm-up jacket. Patrick usually waved them off with a grin and a thank you, fueled by avocados and beer, content in his short shorts. Passing through northern Mississippi, a woman missing most of her teeth driving an old red beat-up Subaru Outback offered him a packet of baby wipes from the glove compartment. Those, Patrick took.

On dirt backroads of New Mexico, his skin turned a few shades darker, coated by the dust he kicked up as he went. On one stretch through Virginia, he went ten days without a shower. His friends in the van threw a mock celebration when he finally managed to find a public restroom in which to give himself a sponge bath. Often, people yelled out “Run, Forest, run!” and asked to

take a picture with him. The similarities were not lost on him. Patrick shaved his beard the night before he left, and by the time his run was over he had a beard to rival Tom Hanks'.

He ran out of California, through Arizona and New Mexico into Texas. Leaving the Southwest, he ran across Arkansas, dipping the slightest bit into Louisiana before taking a sharp turn north into Mississippi and cutting diagonally across Tennessee. He changed out his sandals for sneakers in Virginia but ran barefoot through its northern counterpart. He took on Washington DC and New York City in bare feet too, enjoying the obstacle course of broken glass and dog shit on city streets. He arrived in Boston on May 9th. There was no finish line, just a group of his friends waiting to take him out for drinks. He had left Los Angeles before sunrise on a morning in mid-January, starting the run on his 36th birthday.

This is a common practice, the birthday run. I met a man in the Internet café in Urique who gets a group of friends together every year, and adds a kilometer for each birthday to their route. Forty kilometers for forty years, and so on. They gather at the head of a trail along a cliff in Arizona, toast the honoree with half a bagel and some electrolyte-loaded beverage, and head out together along the bluff, trotting down the trail, reminiscing about the twists and turns of the past year. It makes sense to me that this would be the way the runners want to mark another year. With each year comes more extremity, every strike of the foot on the path another reminder of life. I thought of the races at Patroklos' funeral, the celebration of movement and vitality in the face of death.

Charlie, the man who goes by *El Perro Cerveza*, told me one night that he'd rather "take a bad tumble off the edge of a switchback" than live to see a day his legs couldn't carry him up a trail.

*

Running is both the craziest and the most natural thing we do. On the one hand, it's repeatedly jumping off the ground and slamming a force twelve times our body weight into the joints in our lower body with each landing. On the other, along with sleeping, eating, and having sex, it's one of the most basic human body functions. Running is how we caught and killed our prey and how we avoided being caught and killed by predators.

The animal kingdom could be split into two categories: runners and walkers. By all reason, it seems like humans should be walkers. We use two feet, for one, as opposed to the cheetah or the deer. We don't have a tail to use for balance. But when it comes to the distinction between running and walking, we have much more in common with species like horses and dogs than we do with pigs and chimps. We have arched feet, Achilles tendons, hefty butts, and even a little ligament between our head and our spine called a nuchal ligament that stabilizes the head during fast movement. Long limbs and high jumps make a good basketball player, but all a runner needs is something to propel her off the ground.

*

That night, Tarahumara from nearby towns had started flooding into Urique to spend the night before the race. I was walking from Entre Amigos to the Internet Café on the other side of town, curious to check the results of the previous night's Oscars ceremony. A toddler, maybe four or five years old, was peeing onto the asphalt of the street, smiling at me, daring me perhaps to

reprimand him or to wave over his mother, who was deep in a heavy gesticulated conversation with a friend a few feet away.

The air smelled like cooking pinto beans and that light coconutty fragrance of the fig trees. Huge spotlights had been set up underneath the municipal building, and the light shifted from purple to green to back again. There were pickup trucks lining the streets up and down, and from the bed of each truck, Tarahumara men and women eased themselves down onto the street. The white loincloth-style skirts that the men wore were short to the point of risqué, the kind of length that had gotten me sent to the principal's office in middle school. I am just over 5'4", and many of these men could not have been more than one or two inches taller than me, yet it somehow seemed if we were to stand side-to-side their legs would be miles longer than my own. Their legs had that rippled look of bodybuilders' arms, toned in places I hadn't even known there were muscles. I realized I was staring and tried to look at something else.

I couldn't see the women's legs. Their skirts hung down around their ankles, flowery and colorful and pleated to the point of excess. They were smaller than the men, maybe up to my shoulder, but lifted children out of the trucks with ease.

They filed into a single line stretching around the back of the municipal building. Those leaving the line carried large rectangular objects above their heads, which turned out to be small, thin mattresses, each almost exactly the size of a fully-grown man.

Mama Tita was pulling the gate down over the door of her restaurant, closing up for the night. I asked her where the mattresses had come from, and she told me that every family in the town donated at least one so that the visiting Tarahumara could set up camp in a nearby field. The field was across from Entre Amigos, and by the end of the night, over 500 Tarahumara would be camped out on the banks of the river.

Earlier that day, as we had been running down from Los Alizos, I'd seen a few paths leading off the main trail, steeper and more direct. When I'd pointed them out to Patrick, he'd laughed. "Those are the Tarahumara shortcuts," he said. Throughout the racecourse, mainly on the steeper parts, there were dozens of little paths like these. There was an understanding, Patrick told me, that these were only for Tarahumara use. Foreign runners — *gringo* runners — stuck to the trail. I asked him if that gave the Tarahumara an unfair advantage, and he looked back at me. "It's their canyon," he said.

*

In 1846, Thoreau tried and failed to summit Mt. Katahdin, the highest peak in Maine. A treacherous fog hid the trail, and he and his companions were forced to give up and begin their descent. On the way down, they stumbled across an area called the "Burnt Lands" that seemed to be completely untouched. For Thoreau, accustomed to the tame farmlands of Eastern Massachusetts, this place was transformative. He later wrote about it in his essay "Ktaadn" in a wrenching epiphany:

This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor

woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor wasteland...Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific...rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth!
 the *actual* world! the *common* sense! *Contact! Contact!*

We — and by “we” I mean “Thoreau,” by “we” I mean “I,” as well as runners and hikers and walkers and *saunterers* all over the world — we have become so abstracted from nature, have created such a barrier between “us” and the “*actual* world” that to see an off-trail area untouched by man caused in Thoreau this type of revelation. Man *is* associated with all parts of the Earth; Man is the one that defines what is “garden” and what is “unhandseled globe.” Ponca chief Standing Bear once wrote that “only to the white man was nature a wilderness.” The Tarahumara made their lives on the canyon slopes that shocked and unsettled the Jesuits. They make no distinctions between home and wild.

Yet it would be wrong to say I have never felt as Thoreau felt when he stood in the “wilderness” halfway down Mt. Katahdin. Running down the trails of Los Alizos, heels sliding in the loose dirt, it seemed I had made contact with an earth that was somehow *more*. “More” here could mean so many things: a deeper history, a greater distance from industrialization, bigger — but it isn’t a concept that can stand on its own. It is only something that can be observed in contrast; in the same way wealthy tourists visiting a foreign culture can be so often found touting the values of a more “simple” life. Perhaps just as black is nothing beyond the absence of color; “more” in this context is nothing beyond the absence of line between “wild” and “tame.”

*

The mood around the campfire Saturday night was ceremonial. The runners gathered earlier than usual, anticipating an early wake up call and fifty miles the next day. There was no bottle of lechuguilla. Patrick and Andrew were playing a game of tic-tac-toe in the dirt by their feet. Edder and Nadia were arguing about the similarities between Mexican and Ecuadorian food, and Barefoot Ted was talking to me about the running community. “It’s like...” he trailed off, trying to find the right metaphor. “It’s just like, PAH! You know?” He widened his eyes and splayed his fingers, trying to communicate the explosiveness. “Like suddenly, you’ve found a place. Like you’ve got a home now, brother.”

He was sitting next to me, and turned so that our faces were inches apart. “The sweat coming off your body when you’re running — it’s like the womb. It makes you warm and wet like the womb. We’re all brought back to our mothers, and at the same time it’s like we’re making this connection with this other mother — Mother Earth.” Barefoot Ted often liked to compare things to the womb. Running, the canyons themselves, but most of all: the *temazcal*.

The tenants of Entre Amigos had put on a *temazcal*, a Tarahumara traditional sweat lodge, the night before. Michael Miller had officiated, playing the role of what one of the runners described as “spiritual guide.” We were all anointed with lemon juice and poked at with some type of pine branch before entering the lodge. There had been eight of us, and we sat shoulder-to-shoulder, naked in a small, dark hut made out of loosely stacked rocks, sweating profusely as Kimberly passed an oven-mitt-clad Michael burning hot coals one by one to put into a hole in the center of the hut.

Every single part of this setting made me very uncomfortable, but mainly the nudity. It wasn't so much the seven strangers sitting around me that made me wish I had clothes on, but more so the coals sparking with fire that Michael haphazardly tossed towards the middle. "I've never done this before!" he said, gleeful.

First, said Michael, we had to all go around and say who we were and where we are from. I was first, because I was sitting to Michael's left, and apparently the energy travels clockwise in *temazcales*. "I'm Sara," I said. "I'm from New York." Barefoot Ted was next. He took a deep breath in. "I AM SON OF THE EARTH," he said, loudly. "I AM FROM THE TRAIL AND THE TREES AND THE ROCK AND THE RIVER. I AM FROM THE BLOOD AND THE SWEAT AND THE TEARS AND THE LOVE AND THE PASSION. I AM FROM ALL OF YOU." Everyone murmured in assent.

This went on for some time, with people taking different variations of Ted's introduction, swapping out "rock" for "stone" or "river" for "water" or "passion" for "fire." As they went around in the circle, Kimberly kept passing in hot coals. A *temazcal* is supposed to last for an hour, but I got out after twenty minutes. This was partly because it was hot, but also because I felt genuinely guilty that I wasn't as into the ritual as the rest of them, and was worried that somehow my skepticism would become tangible in the small dark space.

There is a love of spiritual ritual here that is surprising for a group of people that often describe themselves as "atheists." One morning, David, the totem pole maker, had come bounding up to me, asking if he could he could "smudge" me. This turned out to mean waving what looked like

a nug of marijuana but was actually sage around my body in the same fashion as a TSA agent uses a metal detector wand at airport security. He said it was supposed to ward off negative emotions. It smelled like feet. I had expected to find a certain degree of spirituality among a group of people who spend so much time in nature, but this was a different type of spirituality than I had been prepared for. It felt off. This group gathered in the *temazcal* seemed deeply invested in the concept of another culture's traditions, but not as interested in learning about the traditions' deeper significances. It was like watching white people in New York City clubs trying to dance to *bachata*.

*

“It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker,” wrote Thoreau. “You must be born into the family of the Walkers. *Ambulator nascitur, non fit.*”

The same often seems true of the runners. While they came from Mexico City and Albuquerque and the Netherlands and Denver and the UK, they shared so many characteristics that I often wondered if there was some kind of shared script being passed around Entre Amigos. I discovered that I could find a place in any conversation by saying something along the lines of “The simpler the better!” or “Thanks a lot, global warming.”

Whereas the bulk of marathon-running crowd usually attracts people in their mid thirties, here thirty-two-year-old Andrew was often referred to as “the baby.” Many of the runners were in their mid fifties and sixties. I asked Edder, another “baby” by ultra marathon standards, why he thought this was, and he said simply: “This shit takes grit. The older you are, the more grit you have.”

I often heard people comparing sobriety journeys. “Four years,” David of the sage smudging once said after rejecting a pass of the lecheguilla. It seemed that almost half the runners were recovering addicts. I thought back to that initial email from my old counselor. “There is an element of self destructiveness,” he had written. It did seem that former addicts were well-suited to ultrarunning. Ultras seemed to require that same mixture of obstinacy and risk, the same certain disregard for societal standards of safety and a greater-than-normal willingness to push the body beyond its limits.

Thoreau’s walkers belonged to a different branch of person. They hung out on the outskirts of society, by nature and by necessity.

[We] take pleasure in fancying ourselves knights of a new, or rather an old, order—not Equestrians or Chevaliers, not Ritters or Riders, but Walkers, a still more ancient and honorable class, I trust. The chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to have subsided into, the Walker—not the Knight, but Walker Errant. He is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People.

These runners, too, belong to an estate all their own. “Chivalric” and “heroic” may still apply, but those who run may be even more isolated in their new class, even further from the heart of society. Marathoners and track stars are touted for their perseverance, even through-hikers are admired, even if in a more quizzical way. Their daily diets are published in health magazines, their workout routines made available for any aspiring racer. But when it comes to ultra running, the question asked more often than “how” is “why.”

Many of the ultrarunners I met seemed to take pride in this alienation. Even within the moniker “*mas loco*” is an inherent self-satisfaction in hovering just outside the boundaries of normalcy. Alienation is built into ultras; runners could go hours without seeing another person on the course. More often, though, they end up falling into pace with someone else for five, ten, fifteen-mile stretches. Just as Micah True was so affected by the fifty-mile stretch he spent with the Tarahumara man he paced during Leadville, runners who keep stride together for mile after mile on a brutal course are linked by a brand of human connection born from a mix of trauma and triumph that I imagine bears some resemblance to the bond between war veterans.

There also seems to be a connection to the earth unique to the ultra community. Each ultra forces a reckoning between runner and ground. She has to think about grade and terrain in ways that the pedestrian may never need to consider. Uphills and downhills require a manipulation of weight distribution and footfall; sand and cement need different types of strides. There is a whole set of slang used to talk about trails here, “benches” and “kicks” and “scree.” Hikers may feel a deeper connection to the earth — there is a sort of trail-tourism inherent to the pace with which the ultrarunner moves — but the runner’s feet strike the ground with greater force.

Every now and then in the Copper Canyons, while we’d be pounding down some trail or another, one of the runners would say something like “There’s history under our feet!” These trails had been around for centuries before we had driven twenty-odd hours to come run them. They had held up under the impact of generations of runners: message-carriers, corn growers, cattle herders, marijuana farmers, schoolchildren.

The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common* sense! Contact! Contact!

The Race

The alarms start going off at 4am. Their beeps and rings and trills bounce around the walls of the rooms, bounce in between them, bounce down the stairs and into the kitchen, and from my bed I picture their owners beginning to follow them, muting the beeps but sleepily heeding their calls. But when I get to the kitchen, there are only two silhouettes in the room. Andrew is cooking an egg, which he says is a superstitious thing. He hates eggs unless it's race day. Patrick is eating oatmeal and drinking a light green drink that he reveals upon inquiry to be pickle juice, which has been gifted to him by a company that will pay him \$500 to post a single photo of himself midrace, pickle juice in hand. He is running "just the marathon" as a "warmup" for a twelve hour race he'll run six days from now.

By 4:30, most of Entre Amigos is crowded around the stove, the tabletop, the sink, the cutlery drawer, weighing the pros and cons of eating a second banana and trading brief supportive shoulder rubs. A mouse has chewed its way into Andrew's drop bag during the night and eaten part of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Nadia, Edder, and David of the smudging are not in the kitchen. I assume they have gone to the starting line early for photo ops. Someone spills the pot of boiling water all over the floor, and that seems to be the cue for everyone to leave the kitchen and begin making their way towards town. Patrick grabs another few mini bottles of pickle juice to stash in his pockets, and presses one into my hand, too, urging me to try something new today.

I follow close behind those with headlamps as we walk, pack-like, towards the center of town. It is now 4:45 and the sky is delivering no hint that morning is coming soon. The mariachi music has already begun, and we can hear the accordions from the stage outside the municipal building as we get closer.

In the darkness outside of the reach of our headlamps, I hear someone call my name. It's Guadalupe, New York Mets cap pulled down low over his eyes. He looks almost giddy as he tells me about how his truck almost fell off the side off the canyon driving down to Urique. "*Voy al puente*" he says. I'm going to the bridge. From there, he'll be able to see the runners when they cross over towards his namesake town, less than three miles into the fifty. He tells me he will save me a good spot.

As we draw closer to the center of town, people are emerging from buildings on all sides, summoned by the rattle of maracas. An ambitious man in spandex runs laps up and down the block. "What's the point in warming up?" Andrew asks. "It's a fifty mile race. You've got, like, forty-nine miles to warm up."

The municipal building is illuminated on all sides by a spotlight that switches between green and purple, shades that make the mariachi band look alternately ill and psychedelic. I turn to wish Patrick and Andrew good luck, but they've already taken off towards the crowd of runners underneath the banner. I climb up one of the posts of the municipal building gate, and perch on top, gargoylian. I can't see the back of the pack at the starting line. The purples, pinks, blues, oranges, and greens of Tarahumara clothing stand out against a sea of lycra. The Tarahumara are

given the first few rows at the starting line. Citizens of Urique stand right behind them, while other Mexican nationals are assigned to the middle. Foreigners, *los gringos*, bring up the rear.

Michael is patrolling the front line like an officer surveying his troops. He has some official title, “administrator” or “coordinator” or something, that allows him to be up here; although the organization seems pretty lax so he probably could have gotten away with it even without the badge around his neck. I have one of these badges, too. It says “Press,” which gives me an enormous sense of importance.

Michael has cut the sleeves off his rust-orange Caballo Blanco 2013 t-shirt, which is just barely darker than the color of his skin and gives the impression from far away of a dramatic inverted tan line. Nadia is far off to the left, adjusting her earphones and shifting the weight between her legs, committing to only the smallest of movements as she tilts her head to take a starting line selfie. Edder is in the middle of the crowd, talking excitedly to Barefoot Ted, who seems to be doing a one-legged yoga pose and not registering a word.

A man from Urique wearing an ankle-length white skirt scales the gate right in front of me, holding his iPhone aloft. I shift backwards to make room, now perilously close to the edge of the post, though this doesn't seem to cause the man any pause. As he settles directly in my line of vision, I notice that he is wearing a rabbit puppet on the hand not bearing the iPhone, which is recording a video. He pumps the rabbit puppet up and down, silently and energetically, smiling at the pulsing crowd below.

In the fading darkness, an endless number of people give speeches. First it's the director of tourism, then it's the mayor, then it's some famous actress who doesn't seem to know quite why she is there. Then the announcer deems it prudent to shove the microphone in front of the faces of the runners up front, Tarahumara runners who shuffle aside, out of the spotlight. Those from Urique, right behind the Tarahumara, jump towards the microphone, shouting “¡*Gracias a Dios!*” and “¡*Vamos!*”

Then, suddenly, someone — probably the announcer — yells: “*CORAZON POR URIQUE*” into the microphone at a dangerous volume, and the runners surge forward like the crest of a wave. This wave, though, just keeps on cresting. One thousand and forty two runners jog slowly forward, inhibited from an exciting breakaway by the dense mass of the crowd around them. The wave rolls on and on and on, until finally, with a few American women walking hand in hand bringing up its rear, it has crested.

The director of tourism and the mayor and the actress descend from the stage, and the man with the rabbit hand puppet stops filming and jumps down from our shared perch. The spectating crowd ambles away, towards a spot on the main street where they can assure a good view, into restaurants to nurse a cup of coffee, or back to their beds. It will be hours before the runners pass through the town center. The announcer checks his watch and sinks into a folding chair next to the aid station. “*Empecemos,*” he says, to no one in particular. We begin.

*

Sunrise, in a canyon, doesn't happen all at once. The light hits the rim first, then slowly makes its way down the walls. Almost an hour can elapse between the first glimpse of light and that light

actually finding its way to the canyon floor. It starts a pale, washed pink, getting brighter and more orange as it falls over switchbacks and spires.

As I walk to *el puente* to see the runners on their way back from the town of Guadalupe, the rim glows with that pinkish hue of first light. By the time I'm standing on the bridge, it's around 6am and the canyon seems to be encircled by a halo of light, not yet quite touched by it. The air has that simple and clean smell of early morning, before the day has had time to work up a more complex scent.

At the *puente* I see Guadalupe the man, but he seems too concentrated to talk. His nephew is running in the race, and Guadalupe thinks he has a chance at winning the whole thing. I am surprised to see a huge crowd of spectators. I had thought I was clever, leaving the town center. I expected most of the crowd to stay near the municipal building where the action was, but it appears that I was not alone. I take a seat next to a woman wrapped in a blanket — it is cold, and I regret wearing a t-shirt. She tells me she is from Denmark, that her daughter's boyfriend is running the fifty miles. She offers me some of her blanket.

When the first few runners appear at the other side of the bridge, cheering breaks out. A few Tarahumara children have gotten their hands on kazoos, and I am reminded of every birthday party I attended between the ages of four and eight as they blow into them ecstatically. The runners come in twos at first, still packed so closely that as many as a hundred runners pass by over the span of ten minutes.

The first woman to cross the bridge is Tarahumara, and she wears a long-sleeved purple floral dress that swishes back and forth across her ankles as she runs. She has *huaraches* on, and her hair tied back with a blue kerchief knotted under her chin. As she gets closer, I recognize her as Lorena Ramirez, the most well-known female Tarahumara runner in the canyons. Edder and I had seen her standing on the street from the roof at Mama Tita's a day earlier, and he had confessed to having a "major running crush" on her. He told me that she has gone to Europe a few times to compete. "Oh my god, I think she just looked up here," he said, ducking behind me. "Do you think she saw me staring?"

Ultra running has its own celebrities. Lorena Ramirez, Arnulfo Quimare, the man who beat Scott Jurek in Urique in 2006, Scott Jurek, Nadia. Then there's the celebrity surrounding Caballo Blanco. Charlie, *El Perro Cerveza*, has tattoos of Micah's quotes on both arms. The left reads "Run Free;" the right: "If I get hurt, lost, or die, it's my own damn fault," which has become a sort of mantra for all the *mas locos*. The Guys, Andrew and Patrick have been profiled in runner's magazines. Patrick once did a commercial with Red Bull. But outside online running forums and race registration lines, the celebrity fades. To all the drivers Patrick passed on his cross-country run, he was just a big bearded guy jogging alongside the interstate.

Lorena Ramirez passes over the bridge and stops at the aid station, one of a dozen or so along the route. Many of the gringo runners and Mexican nationals run with hydration packs secured tightly to their backs, straws flopping over their shoulders in a way that I would find infuriating. Some Tarahumara run holding a plastic water bottle, but many just stop at stations for a few sips from a plastic coated cup. Soon after she passes by, starting up the long trail to El Naranjo, a

Dutch woman from Entre Amigos jogs past and high-fives me. She was wearing big brand name clothing, high-tech shoes and a sleek hydration pack. I do some quick math in my head and decide her outfit probably costs over \$300.

The American and European women here are either petite and brunette or leggy and blonde. There seems to be no in between. They are all white, too, as are the men. I don't see a single black person the entire time. The women all seemed to have children, which is surprising, giving Nadia's comment about the unattached life of an ultra runner.

Most of the Tarahumara women are mothers, too. That is why most of them come to the race. Over five hundred Tarahumara participate, and more than half of them are women. True to Micah's vision for the race, families get vouchers for corn for each aid station they reach. They run for food, they run to feed their families.

*

On my way back from *el puente* I stop at the hostel to pee. I calculate that it will take the first runners at least an hour and forty-five minutes, probably two hours, to run the twelve miles up to El Naranjo and back into town. I'm sitting on the toilet when I hear the cheering from the street below. *No way.*

I charge down the hill and out the gate, where I almost run directly into the path of a pickup truck driven by a man with a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. “¿Qué pasó? ¿Quién era?” I ask as he slams on the brakes, not registering that I've almost been killed, just chastising myself for missing the first runner. “Miguel Lara!” He points towards town, indicating that the man has

come and gone. I check my phone — it's been an hour and twenty minutes. I start sprinting towards *el centro* before realizing that of course, I'm not going to catch up.

I show the man with the wide brimmed cowboy hat the photos I took of the first few runners to cross the *punte*. “*Quién es Miguel Lara? Cuál?*” He points to the man in the first photo, and I recognize him. The first time I met him was up in San Isidro; he was heating up the rocks for a *temazcal* for some of Guadalupe's clients. He had been wearing jeans, one of those fleece-lined zip-up hooded sweatshirts, and a baseball cap pulled so low down over his face it looked like it might fall forward and off. He's twenty-seven, but has a face that could be as young as fourteen. He's got one of those frames that thins as it reaches the earth: broad shoulders, square torso, thin hips.

Back outside the *temazcal*, I'd introduced myself. He didn't say much, but the others told me that was normal. “Don't be offended. He's shy.” I had sat next to him as I watched the Americans I'd come down with be anointed with scent from a pine branch as they entered the *temazcal*. He watched, impassive as they went in, one by one, kneeling on the ground before the entrance and pressing their foreheads to the earth, asking permission to enter. I wonder how many times he has watched tourists gush at the novelty of his history. “Oh, you have to try the tay-maz-cal,” a man from California had told me that day at breakfast. “It's like a total rebirth. Like a spiritual ejaculation.”

The center of town is packed by the time I get there. Everyone gives me a different time estimate as to when Miguel Lara passed through. “*Hace cinco minutos.*” “*No, no, hace quince.*” No one

can agree on the timing, but everyone is vibrating with excitement. This is surely the fastest anyone has returned from that first peak. I see Guadalupe. He's not sure how much time has passed, but he's not as impressed as the people around him. "Going too fast," he says. "He will not finish like this." I ask him if he knows what Miguel's time was at the checkpoint, but he's not paying attention anymore. His nephew, Ignacio, is heading towards us now, dirt smeared across the side of his face.

The cheer goes through the crowd "*El segundo!*" "*Animo, animo!*" Guadalupe runs towards him, and falls into step with his boy as they pass through the checkpoint. Guadalupe's head is bent, and I can't tell if the words he is offering are encouraging or disapproving. He keeps pace easily with Ignacio, and I remember again that he's run this race before. Ignacio looks like he's hurting. His shoulders are hunched over, the front of his shirt is streaked with dirt and sweat, and his knees barely bend with each step. It's as if he bent them further, he wouldn't have the energy to spring back up. Heading towards *la laja*, he's still got over thirty miles to go.

I try to find a ride towards Guadalayna to catch Miguel Lara as he heads back towards the town, but my heat-of-the-moment Spanish is not as good as I thought it was. I will later realize that, in my excitement, I had been asking passer-bys for un *peso* instead of a ride, un *paseo*. It ends up being for the best that I fail, because only an hour later, Miguel Lara is passing through *el centro* yet again. His approach gets radioed in to the announcer as he gets closer to town. You'll never believe this, the announcer tells the crowd, but Miguel Lara is three kilometers away.

People start pouring out of restaurants, pushing so far into the street that the police have to push them back, lining the street with yellow “Precaución” tape. One man has brought his entire lunch spread out with him, beans and guacamole and chicken and tortillas and soda arranged on a piece of cardboard he holds in front of him. His wife holds a basket of chips, and every now and then tries to guide one into the bowl of guacamole without taking her eyes off the bend where, any moment, Miguel Lara will appear. He’s almost here, the announcer screeches over the noise of the crowd, almost, almost...

When he arrives, he has a pacer with him, but the pacer can barely keep up. Lara’s head is up, his arms are low, and his strides are short and bouncy. I scan the crowd for Guadalupe’s face, eager to see his reaction to the runner’s tenacity, but I can’t find him. A gaggle of children discard their soccer ball in order to flank Miguel, a miniature escort. A woman next to me with chemically bright orange hair is trying desperately to orient the view of her phone camera so that she can show whoever is on the video chat the spectacle on her end. She seems to have the camera view toggle stuck on the front-facing camera, and can’t figure out how to switch it back. The voice on the other end is trying to give her instructions on how to do this, but she doesn’t seem to be registering them. Finally, she gives up on flipping the view and does a full pivot, holding the phone way out in front of her in order to capture the full scene of her face and everything that’s happening behind it. *¿Y ahora puedes verlo?* she yells at the rectangle. “ANIMO, ANIMO,” yells the crowd, but Miguel doesn’t seem to register it. He keeps his eyes ahead; chin tucked, shoulders leaning slightly forward.

And then as soon as he came — he's gone. He runs towards Guadalupe, at which point he'll turn back and make the final bid for the finish line. My phone tells me that five and a half hours have passed since the beginning of the race. “¡*Ya se fue!*” The orange-haired woman yells at the presence on her phone, who seems to have missed the whole thing and is very put out about it. A stream of angry audio pours out of the phone's speaker, but the woman tucks it into her pocket, still blaring, and turns to shoulder her way to a more optimal spot in the crowd.

Miguel Lara, with less than nine miles to go, is on track to set an all time record for the Caballo Blanco Ultra Marathon.

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Ultra-marathons, for being so extreme, are a lackluster spectator sport. In a marathon or at a track, racers come in neck-and-neck. I once watched a video of Usain Bolt running the 200, and barely had time to hold my breath in anticipation before the race was over. At an ultra marathon, ten, fifteen minutes, even thirty minutes can pass between runners. Many people in the town center have made up for this by drinking copiously and dancing to the mariachi music. The children blow loudly into their kazoos and start up brief games of soccer to pass the time.

Miguel's finish seems endlessly exciting to me, but as the afternoon drags on, I seem to be one of the only viewers who feels this way. Patrick and Michael finish the marathon before noon. I rush to tell them about the Miguel's historic pace, but they don't react like I expected. “Wow,” says Patrick. “Well I'm gonna head back and grab a shower. Maybe I'll be here to see him finish.” Michael ambles off to find Kimberly. This seems shocking. A basketball player uninterested in watch Steph Curry break the NBA record for three-pointers in a season. A swimmer uninterested

in Michael Phelps winning the most Olympic medals in history. But it seems that ultra running is not about who finishes first. Each runner participates in his own race, the “endeavor of the day,” as Thoreau would have it.

It seems that any runner that slogs fifty miles up and down canyon footpaths on a ninety-degree afternoon must have some mantra that pushes them through. But when I ask the runners what they think about mid-race, they shrug. “One foot in front of the other.” “Water soon.” “Beer.” Marathoners use target times. Sub three hours is the one I hear of the most often. Ultra runners don’t try to set goals in the same way; infinite things could go wrong during 50 miles on rough terrains. It’s not competition, either against others or against themselves, that gives them the next mile.

Perhaps it’s the thought that there are people waiting at the finish line for them. The contrast between being alone in the canyons or the desert or the forest, and knowing that however many miles away there are people who are thinking about you.

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When Miguel Lara finishes in 6 hours and 18 minutes, I let out an involuntary shriek. He has broken the race record by almost fifteen minutes, running an average pace of seven minutes and thirty seconds per mile. This is almost a full minute faster than I could run one mile, let alone fifty.

As soon as he crosses the finish line, he slows to a walk, face solemn. A gaggle of reporters and photographers surround him, and he offers a few serious nods and low words. The crowd in the

town center, mostly drunk and thus very excitable, whoops loudly. The mariachi band plays louder. The woman who had been struggling with her phone earlier taps me on the shoulder and gestures points at my “Press” pass, then at the reporters. “*Vas a hablar con él?*” The thought electrifies me. One does not simply approach a champion, but perhaps I can ride this wave of “Press” self-importance a little longer. I hesitate too long. By the time I decide to join the cameras and microphones, Miguel Lara has disappeared through the crowd.

*

Andrew finishes sixteenth, the first *gringo* overall, running in *huaraches*. He passes me a few feet before the finish line and grins, shaking his hand at me in a “hang loose” gesture. “*Animo,*” he drawls, and I can hear his Georgia accent. After he gets his medal, he joins me and Nadia, who had live-streamed her finish as she won second place among the women in the marathon course. They go to Mama Tita’s for a beer, and I stay at the finish line.

As the runners embrace at race’s end, they debrief about the course, fallen branches and steep inclines. I listen to the language of post-race war stories.

“That loose sand after *la laja* killed me.”

“Man, I fucking whooped El Naranjo’s ass.”

Now, after the race, it seems that running an ultra is a battle against course. The runners use words of combat; the trail is “conquered” and “slaughtered,” unless the trail is winning — then it is “a sneaky motherfucker,” as an Australian man grumbles to no one in particular. The *mas locos* have come, they have seen, they have conquered. They will get back in their vans and drive home, off to the next race weeks later. For the Tarahumara, today was just a long run through the canyons. Tonight, they will collect the vouchers they have earned for food. The next day, they

will file out the way they came in, hopping into the beds of trucks or taking off on foot. Miguel Lara will return to the town of Batopilas, where he farms corn with his uncle. Lorena Ramirez head back up the hill to Guadalupe, her children trotting behind her. The people of Urique will set to cleaning the streets; they will take down the finish line banner and pick up discarded wristbands and beer bottles.

But right now, the mariachi band is still playing and the children are still blowing into their kazoos. Two Tarahumara girls in matching long pleated skirts race each other around the base of the municipal building, cackling wildly. Mama Tita has begun grabbing unsuspecting men and waltzing them up and down the block in front of her restaurant. Edder finishes in just under ten hours, and Maria finishes dead last even though she did “just the marathon.” She tells me she got distracted chatting with people at the aid stations and lost track of time. The light fades in the canyon just as it came in: slowly, then all at once.

*

Early the next morning, I take a walk through the center of town, stepping over discarded banana peels, empty electrolyte packs and beer bottles. The carnage of ultras. I find myself on the edge of the Tarahumara camp — but they have gone. The borrowed mattresses have disappeared back to their original homes.

The only bits evidence they were ever here are a few forgotten kazoos sitting by the bank of the river.

EPILOGUE

I got a letter from Andrew a few weeks after I left Urique. “I’m curious about your perspective as an outsider to running culture,” he wrote. “We frequently espouse the value of what we learn from the Tarahumara — the contentedness of a simplistic lifestyle centered around family and the rhythms of the natural world without putting much consideration into what the Tarahumara are learning from us. I suppose the encroachment of monetarily driven global economic culture is inevitable though — our world is the smallest it’s ever been. Even the deepest most secret places are being added to Google Streetview as we speak.”

He’s right. On Google Maps, I found I could drop a virtual self into the Copper Canyon and the screen would fill with the twists and drop-offs and those red phallic spires against blue sky. In some ways, this felt like a betrayal. It no longer felt as if I had been tucked away into the secret folds of the canyon; I could now navigate the path from Urique to *el puente* with my keyboard and mouse. The Tarahumara, though, were still hidden. I couldn’t find the *pueblo* of Guadalupe on my map, let alone the *ranchos* of Place of the Grapefruit Tree and Big Rock Down the River. There was another layer to the map on the screen, one accessible only to the people that knew this place more intimately.

Writer Robert Moor, while studying the indigenous cultures surrounding the Appalachian Trail, learned about a particular structure of Cherokee grammar: “Cherokee has seven cardinal directions that continually situate speakers in space: *north, south, east, west, up, down*, and

(hardest of all for us outsiders to grasp) *here*.” I don’t know the local dialect of the Tarahumara, but their naming of their *ranchos* seems to get at a similar idea: that the person is not the axis on which the rest of the world rotates. *Here* is hard for outsiders to grasp because in much of the world, people are the center and place is the periphery. For Thoreau, being “here” was being “of Nature,” and not just in it. His walkers saunter around a world in which they are not the center, but “part and parcel.” This concept of “here” is present in every storytelling culture. In these cultures, “stories don’t unfold abstractly,” Moore writes. “They *take place*.”

Place was vital in the storytelling of the ancient Greeks. There was not just some war in some far-off land; the war was at the gates of Troy. In Herodotus’ account of the run of Philippides, the messenger didn’t just run; he ran over the mountains above Tegea.

For the runners, every story was deeply tied up in the context of place. In the stories I heard my first night with the *mas locos*, sitting around that orange-tiled kitchen table in Scottsdale, each anecdote had a firm root. “That reminds me of a time in the Rockies when I took a shit in my sock on mile thirty,” the story would begin. Mile thirty during the TransRockies Ultra Marathon: a concrete place. These places conjured up that shared experience, the sum total of what it meant to be part of this weird, extreme family. Someone else had gotten to that same mile on that same trail in the same mountains.

“No particular home,” wrote Thoreau, “but equally at home everywhere.” The volume of folklore built up over decades of ultras has built a culture that is both deeply rooted in place and transportable, a shared geography.

Around the campfire one night, passing around the bottle of lechuguilla, that geography gradually simmered and shrunk until the runners were just listing places; ultras they had succeeded to run or failed to run or wanted to run.

“Badwater,” someone began.

“Leadville,” someone else answered.

Western States...

The Barkley...

Mont-Blanc...

Old Mutual...

The list continued until a sleepy silence set over the group, each of them lost in their own private dream about sweat and aches and finish lines.

“Shit,” Barefoot Ted said after a minute, breaking the silence. “Did I ever tell you guys about the year at the Farmhouse Naked Mile when there was a blizzard?”

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And of course — to all the *mas locos* and citizens of Urique that shared their stories with me — thank you.

