The First Run

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Author Bio
Darcie Connors is a senior from Cumberland, Rhode Island, where the story takes place. She is a Mathematics major and Spanish minor who enjoys creative writing but not running. This essay describes the first of a total of about three runs that summer.

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The First Run
Darcie Connors

The two-mile loop around my house seems like a good place to start my newfound quest to become a runner, or, that is to say, to become capable of running. Not too long, not too short, and a nice long downhill section to end the route, at which point I will surely be wishing I had stopped running about 1.8 miles earlier. I've been feeling inspired in my long uneventful summer days to start a new hobby and exercise more, and because running outside costs less than the gym, I've convinced myself that this time I'll get into it.

The preparation for my journey is lengthy; I rummage through my drawers for the yoga pants and tank top I bought freshman year, when I thought wearing actual workout clothes would somehow make going to the gym more bearable, lace up my barely worn-in pink and grey Puma sneakers, and braid and re-braid my hair until it is tucked perfectly into a neat line down my back. I have checked the schedule of my personal trainer and motivator, my fourteen-year-old brother, Kevin, to ensure our first big run will not conflict with his daily summer routine of playing tennis, socializing, and following the male lifeguards he idolizes around at the pool club. As an avid member of the North Cumberland Middle School running club, he has acquired some strategies that he guarantees will prove successful in this seemingly impossible mission. Right on schedule, I see him turn swiftly into the driveway on his bike and he enters the house a minute later, face still pink from the day in the sun and eyes covered by his bangs, haircut long overdue.

We begin in the driveway, where Kevin leads us in some opening stretches. All those years of stretching before swim practice as a kid have prepared me for this part. Left arm over right arm, pull. Switch. Balance on one foot, stare at the ground, try not to fall. Switch. Jog in place. Shake it out.

Kevin begins the pep talks.

“Now, the one thing to remember is to never stop running,” he instructs me. “Whatever you do, do not walk. Got it?”

I laugh and brush off this bit of advice, not quite ready to commit to not stopping for two miles.

“Yeah, okay, I don’t think so—”

“What’s the number one rule?” he barks back at me.
“Yeah, no walking. Got it.”

We start the first leg of the trip, up the slightly inclining driveway, which never seems quite as long when I drive up it in my car. I’m only slightly out of breath by the time we pass the mailbox and round the corner, turning onto the main street and officially beginning the run down the hill. I turn my head back to try to catch a glimpse of the sign in front of the vibrantly blue church across the street, regularly updated with a witty pun about religion, often corresponding to the season, much to our enjoyment. This one, appropriately summer themed, reads, “Need a lifeguard? Ours walks on water.” I make a mental note to bring it up for discussion at the dinner table as I hear Kevin calling my name and refocus my gaze forward.

He continues to share his running wisdom as the loose gravel of the downward sloping sidewalk rolls under our feet. I am questioning whether these suggestions will be helpful, very doubtful of the idea that “the pain is all mental,” but focus on my breathing as he has instructed me to: in through the nose, out through the mouth. We have only been running downhill for a few minutes but strands of my hair have already managed to slip out of my once perfect French braid and are now plastered to the sides of my face with sweat, the weather proving to be too humid for my choice of cotton leggings. I try to focus on something to distract me from the burning sensation that is slowly beginning to develop in my calves, the heat of the late summer afternoon, the stitch crawling up my side; now I remember why I don’t do this running thing. I can see the stop light at the end of the hill where we will turn for the next portion of the run. I look down at my feet as they maneuver around old bags from fast food restaurants and tattered receipts that have been abandoned on the side of the road. I wonder what sales are going on at the neighbors’ craft store as we pass it, and look up to see that yes, the green street sign reading “Pine Swamp Rd.” in bold white letters that went missing and miraculously appeared in our living room has indeed still not been replaced. The screeching sound of brakes tells me that we have reached the stoplight at the end of the hill and I look at Kevin expectantly, hoping for a water break, and get only a sarcastic chuckle in return. We jog in place as we wait for the light to change.

Turning the corner, I groan as my future comes into view: the first dreaded hill. I’m not even sure how cars are able to drive up a hill that has to be at a ninety-degree angle. The view of the acres of open fields to the right of the road and the newly built houses with perfectly trimmed lawns and thriving hanging plants on their porches to the left is a bit deceiving; I know that only pain awaits me ahead.

My running partner has specific instructions for this portion of the trip.
“Don’t look up,” he says. “Don’t look at how much of the hill we have left.”

That much I can do. Eyes glued to the pavement a foot in front of me, I focus on my breathing again. In through the nose, out through the mouth. A man passes with his dog and he gives us a friendly nod and smile, but something about his perfectly crisp polo and forehead free of sweat seems like he’s taunting me. We start passing the cemetery where I learned to drive for the first time and I forget about my breathing pattern for a second, greedily gulping the hot air as I shuffle along. I hear Kevin’s voice reminding me of the breathing pattern again and I repeat the instructions over and over in my head: In through the nose, out through the mouth, don’t look up, don’t – oh god, I looked. Oh god, that’s far.

“Don’t look, I said!”

It seems as though at least twenty or thirty minutes have passed, if not more, once we finally make it to the top of the hill and turn right onto the next street. Kevin is talking to me, but I’m having trouble focusing on his words because there is a pebble lodged between the side of my foot and my sneaker – how did that get there? – and the pain just below my ribcage is starting to feel like a knife through my flesh and this has got to be the hottest day of the entire summer.

“I like to talk while I’m running. Do you like to talk while you’re running? Kelly hates it when I talk to her while we’re running.”

I think about my sister’s warning about our brother’s incessant chatter during their runs as the sharp pain begins to morph into a dull nausea, which seems to intensify with every bouncing step.

“I’m not sure I can do this,” I say, looking at the winding road ahead and knowing that I’m only about halfway to being back comfortably in my driveway. The nauseous feeling is getting worse.

“Look behind us. Look how far we’ve gone!”

“I think I’m going to be sick, I think I’m going to throw up.”

“It’s all mental. It’s all in your head.”

“I don’t think this—”

“Whatever you do, don’t walk.”

“I can’t—”

“Keep running!”

I disregard my brother’s final command as I search desperately for somewhere to collapse, a discreet place in case I need to vomit on the side of the road. I sit with my head between my knees on a damp log under a nearby tree, staring at the Puma logo on my sneakers, and demand that Kevin call our mother, insistent that I can’t make it a step further.

Four minutes later, I watch Kevin continue his jog down the road from the front seat of my mom’s car, who, upon receiving my brother's
reluctantly made phone call, has come to save me, though the pain has subsided now that I have been rescued. When the car pulls into our driveway, I feel myself fall out of the front seat onto the lawn with the intention of doing post-run stretches but instead I let my aching body rest against the cool, freshly watered grass. I imagine the inevitable lecture I will be getting when he returns but despite this, and my earlier determination, it feels infinitely better just to lie here. A few minutes pass before I hear the sound of the ends of my brother's shoelaces rapidly hitting the pavement. It stops and he's standing looking down at me sprawled out facedown on the grass.

“What time tomorrow?”