



A Thousand Miles

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A Thousand Miles

Ready...set...

He was gone.

Three days now, legs tiring, vision blurred, each town another smear at the edge of the world. And what was the world now?

The world was the road ahead stretching out towards the horizon he felt he might never reach.

But that's where the end was, right? The end of all this? If he reached that horizon, if he touched that blue sky, then finally his eyes would close and he would sleep.

That's how it was supposed to be.

That's how he'd dreamed this.

And the world was a dream now. A dream where you fell and knew you were falling. A dream where you waited to hit the ground and then...

Wake?

No, no, that was backwards. He had to fall back into the dream. Sleep again. How long could a man go without dreaming, truly dreaming anyway?

Three days so far. And how many miles, how many more days could he continue?

He walked on. Past the neon oasis gas stations. Through the empty rain, on, on towards that line drawn in the sand, that line across the earth.

Of course it was insane. Of course he shouldn't be doing any of this, but his mind and body weren't one any longer. The mind shouted for release, the body forged on. The body ignored all calls. The secret wish of muscle, tendon and blood had to be obeyed.

Where the body led, the mind followed.

And soon he was far from home, left behind the comfort of bed. Left behind the normal day and the normal night. Heading toward the eventual sleep.

But when, when would that sleep come? Could a man ever touch the sky? Could the horizon ever be reached?

The horizon was in the same place day or night, unreachable it seemed. There was no closer, only the same distance between him and the end of the road.

“Hey you there! Hey you.”

The voice drifted from the edge of the world. Another dream, perhaps?

No, a woman.

She was dressed for running, shorts, bands around wrists and head.

“You there, mind if I join?”

“Join?”

She jogged alongside him, arms pumping, a determined smile on her face.

“Now you’re the first I’ve ever seen around here,” she said, “thought I was the only one.”

She couldn’t be suffering the same bone and muscle madness that had driven him from his bed and out onto the endless road could she?

Had she had the same sleepless nights that led to stranger dreams that predicted even more sleepless nights in the future? Was she searching for that same blue imagined sky that once touched would bring sleep to the sleepless?

"The only one?" he asked.

"Better to power walk with someone else I've always thought, you know, more sociable. Sure, they say you can listen to music, fast music that keeps the tempo, the pace. But I like talk you see. Not that I like the sound of my own voice, but you know, just being with someone helps pass the time more... well you know."

"Oh," he said.

"You don't mind do you?"

"No, I don't suppose I do."

"I wasn't going to ask, you looked like you were in the zone there on your own. And I know once you get to that place it's hard to see anything else in the world. Don't I know that."

Her arms moved pendulum like, hypnotic. She was perfectly in time with every movement. Synced to the world around her.

But did that mean she suffered the same madness? Did they share the same destination?

Incredible to believe that his peculiar affliction could be duplicated anywhere else in the world. That anybody could share the same desperate drive.

But here she was, walking, just like him.

“How long...what I mean is—” he said.

“Me? Oh, since I was in college. Every morning at dawn I get up, stretch out, and then I’m on the road. Regular as a clock. More regular than a clock, I wake before that thing ever needs to beep.”

She was happy with that, and it got him to thinking about how insane it was to think they shared the same goals. If you got up at dawn every morning, then you got your head down on a pillow sometime before that.

You slept.

Still...

"Every morning?" he said.

"That's right," she said, "you know, blows all the tired out of your body, wakes you up better than coffee and a newspaper I tell you. How about you?"

It felt like a lifetime since he'd had the last dream, the one that gave him both the answer and foretold of his upcoming problems.

"Three days," he said.

"Ahh, you're new to it all then. Look like you've been power-walking all your life, good technique. Three days you say?"

"Yes."

"How many miles?"

How far had he come in the last three days, he wasn't sure. A hundred miles? A thousand miles? More?

"Not sure," he said.

"Not counting, I get it." She pushed a breath out. "You don't have to be in competition with yourself."

"I'm not."

"That's good to hear. No need to beat yourself up if you don't do enough. Just keep going, every day you'll feel better."

And yet every day he felt worse, more lost than ever before.

"Don't tire yourself out though. That's important. Got to pace yourself. Feel the burn one day but don't let it spread too far or you'll be useless the next day."

Or useless every day.

As he felt now.

"See I started off small, years ago, a mile one week, then two, until I finally got it up to the ten I do each and every day. That's the way to go, build it up slowly until you're comfortable."

There was nothing comfortable about this endless walk of his. There was no way to build up slowly, only to continue, on and on toward the horizon.

"But you already know that," the woman said, her voice apologetic. "Stupid of me to

think you'd be out here running like this with no plan in mind, no goal."

"I have a goal," he said.

"See? I knew you weren't an amateur, not with the technique you're showing. Amateurs are all over the place when they first start, no rhythm, no pace. Now you, you..."

"I think you've got me wrong," he said.

"Oh, how so?" She turned her head to him.

"His is not...I mean, this is not a...I'm not sure what this is..." he said.

"What do you mean?"

Now how did you tell a complete stranger of your madness when you didn't even understand that madness yourself?

There was no easy way.

So he told her what he knew.

"I can't sleep," he said.

"You can't sleep? Now what does that mean?"

"I don't know."

“You’re out here running and you don’t know why? That’s not the way you go about this, you have to plan and make sure that you’re fit for the job. And let me tell you, running is no cure for insomnia, if that’s what’s bothering you. Gets you pumped up, more alert, won’t ever send you off to sleep.”

“It’s not insomnia, it’s...”

And how could he explain exactly what this was? He knew deep down that once he’d reached that horizon, touched that sky, he would sleep. But that wasn’t something you could explain.

“I haven’t slept in three days,” he said.

She didn’t break her stride.

“You’re joking, right?” she said.

“No, not one minute. Before that I had a dream that I was walking, just walking, and then I stopped and fell asleep. Since then, well, since then I’ve not been able to sleep.”

She shook her head, which was incredibly in time with the rest of her body.

"Now that sounds impossible to me. Three days, you'd barely be able to walk let alone out here on this road and keeping the pace you're keeping. Are you sure you're not joking with me?"

"I wish it was a joke."

"Then it's for charity, right? Yes, that's what this is. You run one end of the country to the next, right?"

He wished there was someone who could benefit from this insanity, but the only benefit was to him, if he ever got to the end of the road. If he ever got that fabled land where he could sleep again.

"But now I'm confused," the woman said. She glanced over her shoulder. "Where are the cameras, the cars, and the other people? Isn't that how this is supposed to go?"

"It's not for charity."

"Come now, I wasn't born this morning, friend. What else could this be? Man running out here for three days without sleep, what else could it be but charity?"

"No, it's not."

"It has to be."

"Isn't."

But she wasn't backing down.

"Yes, I've heard of this before. People doing crazy things to raise money, should have seen it before. What is it you're walking for, what charity is it?"

"I'm not—"

"Don't be bashful. You're doing something good here, that's obvious. Walking for three days solid without sleep that might be a record, you know."

"I don't care if it's a record I—"

"Not concerned about the spotlight, I get it. But you should be. Publicity is good; you should get as much of it as you can. You'll raise more money that way. What charity did you say it was again?"

It was no use. He gave in.

"The terminally sleepless," he said.

"Is that a disease?"

Felt like one.

"More of a condition," he said.

"Well whatever, you should think about inviting some people along. Get this thing rolling properly. Can't believe you haven't done it before now. Three days you say."

"You're not the only one."

And then she stopped.

And he continued walking, staring at her over his shoulder.

She raised both thumbs in the air, but he wasn't sure why.

Then she ran away in the opposite direction.

He was alone again. Returned to the lonely, three day long dream. Alone again.

But not for long.

He wasn't sure of how many miles had passed, or how many towns were blurred on the edge of his vision, or what the time was exactly, but soon they came.

They came from all directions.

Mile after mile they joined him. She led them in his wake. They cheered, they carried banners, they rattled buckets full of donated and thrown away change.

They cheered him on.

They patted him on the back and told him how important all this was.

They gave him water, they gave him bread, they would not leave.

A trail of happy good doers and smiling disciples followed his madness all the way to the end of the road.

That end came a half a day later.

He could not believe that it was about to stop, but there it was in front of him.

A billboard painted with the sky and the ocean. Two blues, melting into one another. A mirror world.

He could no longer see the horizon.

Is this really it? The end of the dream, he wondered?

He wasn't sure, but he trembled as he reached out to the painted sky.

Could it really be over with now? A thousand miles and three days after the dream, would he sleep again?

"Is this it?" Someone in the crowd shouted.

"Where are the cameras?" another asked.

"They're probably hidden, that's what it is. They do that you know."

And the woman he'd first met it seemed a million miles away and in a whole different lifetime, the wrangler of misguided disciples, the believer in charities that did not exist, came to his side.

"Is this where we're supposed to be?" she said.

His trembling fingers were an inch away from the painted sky.

"I think so," he said.

"So what happens now? Do we meet with an official? Who do we give our money too? Will

you finally tell me what charity it is you're walking for?"

He glanced over his shoulder.

They waited, silent and wide-eyed for the great sleepless walking madness to end.

He touched the sky.

He smiled.

"Well?" the woman said.

"This is where it ends," he said, and closed his eyes.

Then he dreamed a dream of sitting in a couch with his eyes closed, his feet soaking in a warm bowl of water.

It was a long time before he woke again.

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