The HOWL
https://thehowlmag.org
thehowlzine@gmail.com
@thehowlmagazine

The Running Man

Maddy Gelish

Of course, I don't mean that he's hard to get along with, or even a lousy partner. It's just that whenever I try to speak to him, I feel as if I'm visiting a prison and speaking through one of those glass partitions, where every word we say is down for the record.

I am running. I have traded my jacket and tennis shoes for chains and a jumpsuit, and I am running — just like I used to after class, with earphones in but no music. I never quite appreciated then how much easier it is to sprint with free hands. As the world blurs past, I wish to pump my arms, to swing them freely, but I cannot.

I wish to stop, but I cannot.

I remember one day I came home, and he still had a book open on the table. It was the same book he had been reading when I woke up. The same book he had been reading when I left. It was the samebook, and the same page, for the whole day. I wasn't even worth the effort of pretending.

With every step I jingle like a decorative tree. It is not pleasant to be running; I feel hindered; the insides of my thighs are chafing from the rough orange fabric, the kind they give you as a uniform. Funny how I never understood that word, *uniform*, until I had one to call my own. Years of public school and office work have caused me to neglect its very prefix — *uni,* as in one — and to forget just how cruel and restraining clothes can be. *Uni-Form*. One form, as in they appear to be in tandem, or one form as in it's the only thing you'll ever wear again.

Both can be true, but only one hurts like a mother.

Who does that? Who goes through such an effort just to send you a message, something he could've said in a text? I wish he had said something after that day, done something, anything with more weight than silence. A book, at least, is academic. Staring at the wall is what you do when there's nothing worth your attention.

I wheeze as I run. My breath is wearing thin, the result of so many years spent keeping words, like weeds, close enough to my chest that they take root and spread. With every inhale, the leaves crackle and burn, the place where my lungs should be spitting dandelion fluff into the void that is my heart. I sweat to think of anyone picking up the trail. In fact, I sweat to think of sweating. This jumpsuit isn't of the flexible, hydrophobic material I'm used to, and it does nothing to quell the blaze beneath my skin. Against the discomfort, I grind my teeth. I am itching to break out of myself. To emerge, like an ant out of an anthill, to go marching over picnic blankets and cake crumbs.

I suppose I don't really mean to be critical. Mostly I just wish our relationship was more linear, love equals three time, plus some. Gaining, not losing. It's a plushy way of viewing it, but I figure if my parents could do it, then certainly I can, too.

No. Stop thinking of cake. It will only make you hungrier, and you know where that

hunger leads. They may break you down, dress you up, create a uniform man — but inside, you will know that you stay out of necessity more than force. To be fed is a privilege. If you can't give up eating, you will never survive this run.

But what if I have it worse, simply because I have it better? What if all their hardships with money and children and cancer were what kept them stuck together? I know it isn't as if I can will catastrophe to come forth in the hopes it will cure me of this dilemma, but still I hope for an earthquake of sorts. Shake it up, they say, if you're ever bored. Revisit your earliest years.

Just don't think. Push forward, wheeze, remember the tallies. The ones I would carve into the walls, my only act of resilience, the ones that always had a certain illness to them. As I run, I think of their non-uniformity, and of the searchlights somewhere in the distance, hoping to strike me down. Why is it that every building I pass is infinitely tall? And each one nearly identical to the last? At this rate I am
tempted to give up, turn around, except to be lost is better than to be back where I started, counting days. Despite the breathlessness, despite the chafing, I persist.

What terrible advice. If we ever end up in court, perhaps I'll blame it on the stability of our house.

I run. I run. And I run. I run until — there. Is that — yes, oh sweet relief, there is an alleyway, somewhere I can duck into. As much as I yearn to be there already, wish to destroy my molecules and reform in the shade, some other part of me is disappointed. Near the big bins where residents store their trash is a nothingness. I am chasing nothingness. Why is it then that out of desperation, or perhaps it is
anger, that I pump my legs just to see it get closer? Enduring the pain and the heat, I wish to see it draw closer. If I can just run, just catch a break, I will be free.

This I tell myself instead of wondering.

I know we built something together. I truly believe we did. Every day, I pray for it to work out, and most days it does. It isn't as if he has done something to break us apart. We've done everything by the book but failed to read the fine print. That's all.

I begin to skip, to hurl, wishing for it to end. My focus shifts; I catch a glimpse of something colorful. If something about running for your life causes tunnel vision, then something about its gradual fade nearly costs me my momentum. Shapes crop up that weren't there before. Signs I should have been
paying attention to. Like the red one: *Caution*. You have entered unknown territory.

You might wish to turn back.

No. No turning back. That is not the purpose for which I run. These chains, this suit — *those* are why I run. They hold me because I asked them to. They keep me grounded because I made a decision, long ago, to uphold certain properties, and perhaps in breaking them I volunteered my freedom, of character and of polygamy, so that now I am uniformly in uniform and running from what I once wanted,
which was a life of uniformity.

A blue sign: *This is real*. Green: *You really made it happen*. Purple: *In sickness, and in health*. Just get to the bins. Just throw yourself away.

Red: *Caution*.

Blue: *This is real*.

No. Nonononono. Legs, do not fail me now; arms do not dare drag. I've finally gotten

away. I know what it is I want.

Red, blue, red, blue: *Police*.

"Come out with your hands up!"

Hobbling, hopping. Veering sideways into the alleyway. "We have you surrounded. Please exit with your hands up."

But I gave it my all, I wail into the noise. Please don't take me back; I really did try this time.

Burning rubber. "Police!" Something tracking mud on the sidewalk, slapping, one two, one two. I am dead before I ever hit the ground, and still I wonder why it is I must drive them away.

If it so happens that they ever find one of us running, I pray to God it is him and not me. At least then I will know which of us was truly suited for a life like ours.