

McFilthy

There he is again. I can practically smell him before I can see him. McFilthy. I have to make up his name because I don't know it.

I keep jogging towards where he sprawls on the bench like a pile of dirty rags. I jog slowly, trying to conserve my energy. Trying to look anywhere but at him.

He doesn't have the same problem. He looks directly at me through the same bloodshot, black-chip eyes as every morning. Bleary, yet focussed, cloaked by masses of thick, dirty flesh that seem to have migrated from his cheeks. I hear him drag up a throatful of phlegm. It sounds like a watermelon going through a mulcher. His eyes stay on mine as he spits on the ground. The phlegm slaps on the footpath.

Come on McFilthy, you can do better than that.

He shuffles some more mucous around inside his sinuses and wills himself into a sitting position, upsetting the pile of miscellaneous muck that he seems to have attracted over night. He runs a grubby palm over his face, over his dirty grey beard. Somewhere inside his head is a rampaging hangover, wrapped around his brain like shrink-wrap. But despite it all he'll stand up soon.

Any second now.

Any—

There. Same as every morning. A little shaky, like one of those knock-em-down clowns, but up none-the-less.

An empty bottle of Old Crow clinks to the footpath and rolls to the grassy edge, a victim of his first uncooperative step. It gives me hope. Maybe today's the day.

He takes another step, a little more controlled, and then unfurls himself, reaching for the thin spring sky. Some sort of childish, improvised stretch. I can imagine his scrunched joints strongly voicing their displeasure.

He finishes his stretch and waits.

For me.

I look at the heart rate monitor on my wrist through a burst of breath, vaporised white by a frosty morning. Damn! Ninety-six beats per minute. It should be eighty-eight. It was at eighty-eight yesterday.

I force my shoulders to relax. Got to be efficient. Not an ounce of energy to waste.

As I get closer, he starts to shuffle on the spot. He wears a pair of scuffed old Bata Scouts. Probably fleeced some school kid of them years ago. Pretty soon he'll have them working at something resembling a jog. It's so feeble, pathetic even, but I don't feel sorry for him. That stopped long ago.

I close in and now I *can* smell him. The offensive funk of body odour, alcohol, vomit, urine... God knows what. It stunts each breath I try to take. Hundreds of thousands of haemoglobin cells go unsaturated, not delivering as much oxygen to my legs as they should. At least until I get used to the smell. It shouldn't take long, though. It never does.

I'm almost right on top of him when he finally begins to move. His worn out brown cords begin chirping and his matted beard parts to let in the first of what will be many heavy breaths.

Watch out McFilthy, I've got a good feeling about today.

I'm slightly in front of him when we leave the footpath, but that doesn't mean anything. Any five days out of ten I'm in front when we leave the footpath. It hasn't changed the result yet.

The dirt track is slipperier than the concrete, loose gravel snap frozen by the frost. His old school shoes aren't faring so well. Shrnnnnch... shrnnnnch... shrnnnnch. But it never slows him down.

He gives me a shove as he catches up, maybe to even the score a little. Maybe not. He often shoves me. I respond by swinging my elbow. Not hard. But hard enough. I often use my elbows.

We wind around the corner side-by-side and the trees get thicker quickly, the air fibrous and earthy, the shadows cold and long. Whatever heat that's managed to encroach on the day hasn't reached this far yet.

The cooler air burns my throat to the rhythm of my breathing. McFilthy sends another melon of some sort through the mulcher, before spitting on the composted leaves off to the side of the track. He wipes the tendrils of spit that didn't make it past his beard with what's left of his cardigan sleeve. He coughs a wet cough. My heart rate is back down to ninety-two. We keep striding.

The first hill is a big one. Not that steep, but long; long enough to set my legs on fire every time. But I'm feeling good today. I have expensive amino acids and creatine supplements pushing me along.

You hear that Mcfilthy? I'm feeling good today!

He's fuelled by hard-won McDonalds scraps and bourbon.

Maybe the old man is telepathic. His cords suddenly chirp a little quicker and he gets out to a couple of metres in front. But then again, this is nothing I haven't seen before. He often makes his moves on the hills.

Slowly, stride by stride, I reel him back in. When we crest the hill, the chirping is back to normal. Maybe even a little slower. Small, white explosions erupt frequently from his dry lips. The vapour contrasts nicely with the nicotine-yellow in his moustache. He looks at me and grins; I'm breathing hard too.

Lounge dwellers will speculate that the downhill is the easiest part of a run. Runners know the truth. Gravity is like a big dumb friend unaware of its own strength. It forces my quadriceps to burn, my knees to jam painfully as I attempt what can only be described as controlled falling. The sudden increase in speed makes my eyes water and my arms wave about like those of a novice drummer. I catapult back into the lead, but McFilthy is close behind. Even through the rush of air in my wind-chilled ears, I can hear his cords singing along to my chaotic drumming.

Level ground is welcome. My arms stop flailing and for a second it feels as good as stopping. But then my legs feel dull again and his wet rasping creeps back up to my shoulder. Still, it feels better than yesterday.

We run stride for stride now. Long strides, but not all that quick. Bata Scout and Nike Air Zoom Elite® striking in metronomic unison. The middle section is the mental section. Usually it's where he breaks me, but today it's where unspoken negotiations take place; 'McFilthy, I know what's coming up and you know what's coming up. What say we conserve our energy?' The old man coughs up more thick phlegm. He bangs hard on his chest. Never once does he lose stride.

The hill appears as it always does, from around the corner like a thug. It doesn't need a qualifier. It's not the 'next' hill, or the 'second' hill, or even the 'biggest' hill. To use such words merely insult it. It is THE hill. My heart rate jumps ten beats before I've even set foot on it. McFilthy's rasping quickens. And going up isn't even the worst part.

McFilthy's cords chirp quickly again and our rubbery metronomes lose their sync. He puts five metres between us, just like that, and spits to the side in between disturbingly fast breaths. Consider our unspoken pact broken.

I have to respond but my legs don't like the idea. At one hundred and twenty-

eight, my heart's not too keen either. But fuck it. I feel good today.

My breathing speeds up exponentially with my shoe strikes. I can feel my head beginning to loll from side to side. But up ahead I can see McFilthy's hardly exercising the poise of a catwalk model either.

Here I come McFilthy.

Tacky spit is now forming at the sides of my mouth and a needle-like pain has developed deep in my right shoulder, like a sadistic maths teacher has me with his pincer-like fingers. I've switched from burning fat to burning glycogen. This means hydrogen ions – lactic acid – and my nerves are asking difficult questions. Through it all though, amongst the watery, rolling scenery, I can see him. And he's not far.

We break out from the trees at the top of the hill. It's a magnificent view over the ocean, so I'm told. He's so close now. I could reach out and get a handful of that tatty old jumper. Surely he can hear me, the bagpipe wheezing coming from my constricted chest.

Here... I am... McFilthy!

I've never been this close before. Never this late into the run. Of course I've

caught him up a bit towards the end, but never enough. Maybe today *is* the day. Surely, today is the day. Blood is throbbing under my scalp, my eyes have stopped focusing properly, but I put in a bit of a dash anyway. Just to say hello.

Hello McFilthy. I'm... still... here!

One hundred and sixty-eight beats per minute.

The old man looks surprised. Not worried, but genuinely surprised. He shoves me. I elbow him. Sweat is running freely across his forehead, forging clean little trails amongst the grime. I can see it running into his eyes, stinging them. My Nike dri-fit® headband spares me the same problem. He shoves me again, harder. It's all about positioning now.

The entrance to the steps is narrow. The steps themselves are narrow. In fact, for the rest of the run, there will be very little side-by-side action.

He reaches them first. His cords start chirping a new song with a much faster beat. Zjip...zjip...zjip...zjip...zjip. The whole downhill section is a goat track of steep steps and short zigzag paths connected by hairpin corners. It's the jogging equivalent of the Monaco Grand Prix. And like racetracks, it's easier to stay in front than it is to pass. He knows this.

With each tight, switchback corner he blocks my path. On the straight sections he blocks my path. It's impossible to get into a rhythm as he constantly changes direction and speed. And all my burning legs want is a rhythm. All my racing heart needs is a rhythm. He knows this.

I shove him from behind. It's fair! It's what he'd do to me.

This seems to shake him. An inside track opens up, coming into a tight corner. Come on legs, don't die on me now. I put in a spurt. I can't believe he's left this open. Of all the—

Whaggump!

Just like that, I'm folded over the steel handrail, trying to keep my feet. McFilthy is laughing (until it turns into coughing). I walked – well, ran I suppose – right into his trap. If my legs weren't so heavy, I'd kick myself. And now he has five metres on me again.

Of all the mental challenges in running, none is more taxing than having to stop and then begin again. Even stopping just for a second. In fact, it's worse when it's just a second. But this is exactly what I have to do, convince my leaden legs to start moving again. Do battle with inertia.

And then he runs past me as the path doubles back below. And grins.

My legs start turning over like a locomotive starting up, but with a lot less potential. Slowly I gather speed, and gravity (my big dumb friend) does its bit.

My legs are numb with fatigue, but I am back up to pace. It's hard to tell how far ahead he is. He reaches some stairs and I close the gap. Then I hit the stairs as he reaches the path, and the proverbial elastic band between us stretches again.

It all changes, though, on the next hairpin.

I'm not sure if his Bata Scouts gave out or whether the pressure got to him. Maybe he just slipped on a badly aimed ball of phlegm. Either way, I watch as he goes down, and given his clothes and his smell, I've never felt more compelled to say, 'like a sack of shit'.

The rough cement grabs at the available skin on his forearm and speckles it with blood. One of his shoes comes off. He lies face down, not moving except for the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

I slow down as I get to him. His left leg begins to twitch.

"Keep fucken going", he grunts through the pain. It's the only thing he's ever said to me.

I don't look back. There are only six or seven corners left and then a sprint across the grass, back to his bench. A full circle. I stare straight ahead and convince my brain to ignore the pleas coming from all over my body. Today is the day.

By the third corner I can see him again, two levels up and charging like an ill-bred mongrel for a tennis ball. Blood runs down his forearm and his cords have lost any sense of beat thanks to his missing shoe. The bastard's catching up.

By the second last corner, he's on the same level as me. All I can do is try to go faster. It's not about pain any more, it's about physical limits.

By the last corner, I can hear him laughing amidst his dog-like breaths. And as we spill out onto the grass I catch my first glimpse of him without having to turn my head.

I'm making noises now too, delirious mumbles and moans as he takes up

even more of my peripheral vision.

Not... today... McFilthy. Today is... my day!

I can feel the tension in my shoulders, tense as bridge cables. My fists are clenched, my jaw prized open only by the unmeetable need for oxygen.

Not... today... McFilthy!

We're a whirr of arms and legs, shoulders rubbing, barely able to stay upright.

The bench sits motionless up ahead as the rest of the park flies past.

Somewhere a dog is barking. Barking its head off. McFilthy's cords aren't singing so much as humming.

Not... today...

As we pass the bench, spent and dazed, the only thing I am truly conscious of is McFilthy's laugh. His triumphant, hacking laugh.